

Education Behind Bars: Understanding Educational Access in Ontario's Juvenile Detention Centres

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental right and a key pillar of personal development, social inclusion, and long-term success. For youth placed in juvenile detention centres, education should remain a vital part of their lives, providing structure, opportunity, and a pathway toward rehabilitation. Whether awaiting trial or serving a sentence, youth placed in juvenile detention centres in Ontario are still entitled to learning environments that support their interests, reflect their needs, and prepare them for reintegration into society (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services of Ontario, 2024). Given Ontario's clear legal and policy commitments, one would expect that the education delivered in youth detention centres would be fairly standardized and accessible across the province. However, as this research demonstrates, this is not always the case.

Depending on which juvenile detention centre a youth is placed in, their educational experience varies drastically. In one facility, they may have access to certified teachers, a mandatory in-person or hybrid full-day class schedule, skilled trades programs, and summer school. In another, they may be handed worksheets to complete in isolation, with optional educational programming attendance and limited access to technology or instructional support. Despite having the same rights under provincial and federal laws, youth in different facilities receive different educational opportunities. These differences significantly impact a young person's ability to progress in their education, earn their Ontario Secondary School Diploma, develop essential skills, and rebuild their future (Foley, 2001; Ahmed Shafi et al., 2021; Loriggio, 2021b; Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021).

This paper answers three questions. Why do educational experiences for detained youth in Ontario, in grades 7-12, vary widely from one facility to the next? What are the differences in education delivery across the province? What does access, or lack of access, look like regarding i) French-language education, ii) vocational programs, iv) online learning, and v) access to students' school records?

Incarcerated youth often face complex and intersecting obstacles: histories of trauma, learning disabilities, institutional barriers, and disrupted schooling. Studies show that youth who remain enrolled and engaged in their education during custody are less likely to re-offend, more

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likely to return to school post-release, and more likely to access employment opportunities (Foley, 2001; Houchins et al., 2009; Blomberg et al., 2012).

Education can be a transformative experience for youth, an opportunity to catch up on missed learning, build confidence, and plan for the future. For many youth, education while in custody is their only chance to re-engage with school meaningfully. But even when programs exist, short stays, missing school records, and facility transfers can make it hard to create learning environments that feel stable or supportive. These youth are often trying to catch up academically while also dealing with the trauma and disruptions that come with incarceration. When programming is fragmented or minimal, it doesn't just stall their education but can reinforce feelings of failure and disconnect (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021; Loriggio, 2021a).

The right to a publicly funded education for youth in custody is a legal entitlement enshrined in domestic and international frameworks. Ontario's *Child, Youth and Family Services Act* (2017) affirms that every child in care has the right to an education tailored to their aptitudes and abilities, ideally delivered in a community setting when possible. The *Education Act* recognizes the need for treatment and support, through Section 23 classrooms, for students who cannot attend their local school, including those in detention. The *Youth Criminal Justice Act* emphasizes the importance of effective programs that support rehabilitation and reintegration, recognizing education as a key component of that process. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Section 23) further protects the right to receive instruction in one's official language of choice, either French or English. Internationally, Canada is a signatory to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which mandates that secondary education, including vocational training, be available and accessible to all children. While these legal commitments are clear, ensuring they are fully realized in practice remains an ongoing obstacle. Refer to *Appendix A* for the relevant legal frameworks on the right to education.

Although strong legal rights exist, educational access for youth in detention remains inconsistent across Ontario. Rather than being guided consistently by provincial standards, access often depends on a facility's location, available resources, and partnerships, raising significant concerns about equitable implementation. Certain facilities, like the Cecil Facer Youth Center in Sudbury, demonstrate what's possible when education is prioritized: structured

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programming, skilled trades courses, summer school, and individualized support. Others lack the staffing, resources, or partnerships to provide consistent education. Youth with French-language education rights, particularly girls, are often left without access to education in their preferred official language. Additionally, student records and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are frequently delayed or inaccessible, particularly for youth from rural communities or Indigenous backgrounds, undermining individualized learning plans as soon as they are placed in a detention centre.

In this paper, “youth” refers to individuals aged 12 to 17 who have either been sentenced or are in custody awaiting trial. This means youth as young as 12 years old can be incarcerated and placed in a juvenile detention centre. According to Ontario's *Education Act*, all youth under the age of 18 are required to attend school. However, detention can interrupt that journey in ways that are difficult to repair, especially when educational services can vary so dramatically from one facility to another.

This paper argues that despite Ontario's legal and policy commitments, education delivery in juvenile detention centres varies across the province, creating inequities that affect students' learning, rehabilitation, and future opportunities. Through a literature review and interviews with professionals across the sector, this research aims to uncover differences in educational programming and what it may take to create consistent, impactful education in custody, regardless of where a youth is placed.

Background

Every youth has the right to a public education that meets their aptitudes and abilities (*Child, Youth and Family Services Act*, 2017), supports their rehabilitation, and prepares them for reintegration into society as law-abiding citizens (*Youth Criminal Justice Act*, 2002). For youth either incarcerated or awaiting trial, many have experienced significant disruptions to their schooling; however, education can serve as a critical bridge to rehabilitation, reintegration, and future opportunities. Ontario's Ministry of Education developed the Education and Community Partnership Program (ECP) to serve students who cannot attend regular schools due to their need for care, treatment, or rehabilitation services, with the goal that all students can succeed if given the proper educational support. (Government of Ontario, 2024b).

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The ECPP was established under the *Education Act*, ss.171(1), para. 40 (1990), which authorizes school boards in Ontario to provide education programs in government-approved facilities such as youth justice centres, hospitals, and mental health institutions (Government of Ontario, 2024b). School boards that develop partnerships with ECPP facilities receive funding from the government under the Special Education Grant (SEG) envelope (Government of Ontario, 2024a). The youth detention facilities deliver care, treatment, and rehabilitative support in these arrangements, while the partnering school boards provide education programs. These programs, often called Section 23 classrooms, aim to offer students a supportive learning experience which accounts for youths' needs and preferences (Government of Ontario, 2023b).

However, these programs are not obligatory for school boards to participate; these agreements are formed based on voluntary agreements between school boards and youth justice facilities, and their delivery varies widely across the province. The voluntary nature of school board partnerships under the Education and Community Partnership Program introduces significant variability in education delivery. When access to education relies on voluntary agreements rather than guaranteed provisions, detained youth risk experiencing inconsistent support across facilities. This would mean that if a school board chose to terminate their partnerships, the facility would have to try to form a partnership with another board. Although this is unlikely, this type of uncertainty creates a gap in legislation where the province must provide education to youth, including those in detention centres. Depending on where they are placed, this creates significant variability in how education is offered to detained youth. While certain programs provide rich, structured learning environments, others are limited in resources and staffing, often affecting the quality and consistency of education received (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021).

Youth held in custody in Ontario are either placed in open custody or closed/secure detention facilities, depending on the nature of their offence, their sentencing, and perceived risk. Open custody centres are typically smaller, community-based facilities that can allow supervised access to outside programming and are run by private agencies funded through provincial transfer payment agreements. Closed custody facilities, also operated by transfer payment recipients, are more restrictive and do not allow youth to leave the premises. Direct-operated facilities are run by the provincial government and house youth with more serious charges under

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stricter security conditions. All direct-operated centres are secure custody environments (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021).

Ontario's youth detention framework has undergone significant restructuring in recent years. Between 2012 and 2025, the province closed several youth justice facilities as part of a broader plan to reduce reliance on detention settings. In 2021, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) closed 25 youth custody and detention programs, citing a desire to reallocate nearly \$40 million annually to community-based services (Eñano, 2022). However, these closures were implemented with little warning and limited consultation. According to Ontario's Ombudsman's office, the Ministry "deliberately avoided transparency" during the planning and implementation stages, leaving staff, local communities, Indigenous groups, and justice stakeholders unprepared (Ombudsman of Ontario, 2022).

While the number of youth in custody declined by more than 85% between 1997 and 2022, and fell by half between 2018 and 2022, there has recently been a modest rise in incarceration rates. In 2021-2022, there were 9,654 youth in custody across Ontario, rising to 10,960 the following year (Evans et al., 2024). The long-term reductions reflect a positive shift toward community-based justice, but the recent uptick signals ongoing volatility. Please refer to *Appendix B* for a graph illustrating youth admission rates by type of detention from 1997/1998 to 2022/2023, along with a second graph depicting youth admission rates by gender and type of detention from 2017/2018 to 2022/2023.

The closure of facilities has significantly impacted Northern Ontario, where several sites were shut down. Advocacy groups such as Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Grand Council Treaty #3 have warned that these closures disproportionately harm Indigenous youth, who already face structural barriers and are overrepresented within the justice system (Evans et al., 2024). The closure of facilities in Northern Ontario has disproportionately affected Indigenous youth, disrupting ties to family, community, and culturally relevant education. While intended to streamline services, these closures have had unintended consequences that warrant closer attention to matters of equity and accessibility.

As of 2025, Ontario runs five direct-operated secure custody facilities, each with drastically reduced capacity compared to a decade ago. For instance, the Cecil Facer Youth Centre in Sudbury, which once held up to 140 youth, now operates with just a 12-bed capacity. In

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addition, 21 transfer payment facilities – 14 open and 7 secure custody – continue operating across the province. This reduction reflects a broader policy shift toward decarceration and greater reliance on community-based alternatives to detention (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021). While these shifts aim to reduce reliance on incarceration, they have also led to youth being placed further from home, which can disrupt access to culturally relevant education and continuity in learning. Refer to *Appendix C* for maps of each type of facility in the province, including direct-operated facilities, open custody transfer payment facilities, and secure custody transfer payment facilities.

Together, these developments provide essential context for understanding how education is delivered in Ontario's youth detention centres today. Although the legislative intent is clear, education should be a rehabilitation tool; delivering that promise remains uneven. Where a youth is placed, rather than what they need, often determines what kind of education they receive.

Literature Review

In Ontario, laws like the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act* (2017) and the *Education Act* (RSO 1990, c.E.2) state that school-age youth in care, including those in detention, are entitled to an education suited to their needs. But what that looks like in practice varies depending on where a youth is held, how long they are in custody, and what kind of resources are available at their facility.

Ontario's legal and policy framework provides the foundation for the education that youth in custody receive. The *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (2002) identifies rehabilitation and reintegration as key goals of custody, with programming – especially education – being essential to that process. Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protects the right to instruction in either official language, a provision that remains difficult to enforce in detention settings. Other legislation, including the *Education Act*, the *Child and Family Services Act* (RSO 1990, c. C.11), and O. Reg. 156/18, outlines the requirement to provide appropriate services to children in care.

Yet, the reality for many youths doesn't reflect these legal protections. As the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2021) and others have pointed out, these rights are often poorly enforced. There is no province-wide standard for the amount of instructional time, curriculum

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quality, or access to support services. This makes it possible for youth in one facility to receive a full school day while others in another are limited to just a few hours.

Organizational Disparities in Education Delivery

The province introduced the Education and Community Partnership Program (ECPP) to meet this responsibility. These programs are meant to provide education to youth who cannot attend a regular school due to care, treatment, or rehabilitation needs. Through partnerships between school boards and youth justice facilities, ECPPs aim to give detained youth access to education that resembles what they would receive in the community. But there's a catch: these partnerships are voluntary on the school board side.

This inconsistency is often tied to how facilities are operated. The provincial government directly operates a portion of centres, while others are run by non-governmental organizations that receive public funding via transfer payment agreements. This split creates different standards and expectations regarding education. Direct-operated facilities are subject to the same government policies and regulations, while organization-run centres each have their own policies to abide by. Although there are set guidelines and policies that all facilities have to follow, each facility functions independently, which causes significant variation in how facilities are run. While certain facilities can offer robust programming, others do not. And without clear accountability measures, youth pay the price through missed opportunities and non-standardized support (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021).

Teachers face their own set of hurdles. Educating in custody settings requires more than a teaching degree; it demands a deep understanding of trauma, behaviour management, special education, and youth engagement. Unfortunately, many teachers receive little or no training specific to this environment. These gaps can make it harder to support youth effectively, especially when paired with high staff turnover and limited institutional support (Houchins et al., 2009).

At the facility level, administrators and school boards must navigate tight budgets, competing priorities, and a lack of centralized guidance. Without provincial mandates or standardized oversight, they are left to interpret legal obligations independently, often resulting in wide variations across the province (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021).

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Education as a Turning Point: Reducing Recidivism

Research consistently supports the relationship between educational engagement and reduced likelihood of reoffending. Youth who engage in meaningful learning while in custody are more likely to return to school or find employment after release, and less likely to be re-arrested. Blomberg et al. (2012) found that academic success while incarcerated significantly lowered the likelihood of recidivism. Similarly, Foley (2001) emphasized that access to GED programs and vocational training increases employment outcomes, a key predictor of long-term success.

Beyond academics, education also offers youth something just as important: purpose. It helps them envision a future, build confidence, and reconnect with the idea that they are capable of learning and growing. Houchins et al. (2009) found that education, when tailored to a young person's abilities and needs, contributes to higher self-esteem and stronger reintegration outcomes. Programs that provide individualized support grounded in care, not control, are the most effective in breaking the cycle of custody and reoffending (Development Services Group Inc., 2019).

Unique Needs of Incarcerated Youth

Incarcerated youth often have unique education-related needs that must be acknowledged to ensure effective learning. Many arrive with histories of learning disabilities, behavioural difficulties, trauma, and long-standing educational disengagement. According to the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2021), youth in custody often perform well below grade level literacy and numeracy, with many reading at an elementary level despite being high school aged. Development Services Group (2019) reported that many incarcerated youths exhibit intellectual deficiencies and low academic achievement compared to their non-incarcerated peers. Foley (2001) also noted that incarcerated youth often have significant problems in various intellectual and academic performance areas, including reading, math, and language skills.

Acknowledging these critical needs requires tailored educational approaches that consider the diverse backgrounds and difficulties of incarcerated youth. Effective programs must provide individualized support, incorporate special education services, and create learning environments responsive to this population's mental health and behavioural difficulties

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(Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021). Furthermore, educators in detention facilities must be trained to recognize and be conscious of the specific needs of these youth, ensuring that they receive the appropriate support and resources to succeed academically (Kipfer, 2017).

Foley (2001) and Ashkar and Kenny (2009) similarly highlight how mental health needs and emotional regulation difficulties impact academic performance. Development Services Group Inc. (2019) emphasizes the importance of individualized education plans (IEPs), special education services, and trauma-informed instruction to meet the diverse needs of detained youth. Without these supports, many youth are simply set up to fall through the cracks once again.

The education of incarcerated youth is a complex but crucial endeavour that requires addressing various barriers and meeting the specific needs of this vulnerable population. By providing consistent, high-quality education opportunities, this can significantly impact their rehabilitation and reduce recidivism, ultimately contributing to their successful reintegration into society.

Variations in Educational Programming

Educational programming in youth detention facilities varies significantly, often reflecting the underlying principles of the institution. Certain facilities adopt a structured, student-centred approach, focusing on rehabilitation through education. These programs emphasize individualized support, engaging curricula, and academic and life skills development. For example, certain facilities in Ontario have been noted for their therapeutic orientation, where education is integrated with rehabilitative treatment and relationship-building efforts (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021). These environments prioritize the needs of the youth, viewing them as students deserving of growth and development opportunities.

In contrast, other facilities adopt a security-focused approach, where education is secondary to maintaining order and safety. In these settings, youth are often treated as security threats rather than students, leading to reduced schooling hours and limited access to quality programming. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2021) highlighted instances where educational hours were significantly cut due to security concerns, with youth from different living units being segregated and attending school in shifts. This approach disrupts the continuity of education and undermines the rehabilitative potential of educational programs. Although we

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can see the importance of ensuring a safe environment for these individuals, education should also be considered a priority, and alternate methods to allow proper education should be implemented to account for various security efforts.

The York Detention Centre, as described by Davey (2017), presented a different perspective. While it aimed to provide educational opportunities, the focus often shifted towards maintaining security and order, resulting in limited educational programming and a lack of continuity in students' learning experiences. Davey (2017) highlights the hurdles educators face in such environments, where the emphasis on security can hinder the delivery of effective educational programs.

Section 23 schools at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) provide an example of a structured, student-centred program. These schools cater to students who require intensive support due to behavioural, emotional, or mental health difficulties. Gang (2015) notes that these schools focus on creating a supportive learning environment that recognizes each student's needs, emphasizing individualized education plans and therapeutic interventions.

Brampton's Roy McMurtry Youth Centre offers another example of the variation in educational programming. Spencer (2016) and the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (2013) describe this facility as having a more rehabilitative focus, with efforts to provide comprehensive educational and vocational training programs. However, they also note the hurdles in maintaining consistent educational quality due to resource constraints and varying staff training and commitment levels.

Structural & Institutional Barriers

A wider web of structural and institutional pressures shapes the reality of education behind bars. These factors often make it hard to create stable, meaningful learning environments for youth. One of the primary obstacles to implementing effective educational programs in youth detention facilities is the structural and organizational barriers that disrupt the continuity and quality of education. Short detention periods often result in frequent interruptions to the educational process, making it difficult for youth to achieve meaningful academic progress. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2021) highlights that many detained youths experience fragmented educational experiences due to their short stays, which can range from a few days to

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several months. This inconsistency is further exacerbated by the lack of comprehensive educational records, which hinders the ability of educators to tailor instruction to the individual needs of each student (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021).

Another significant difficulty is the high turnover and inadequate training of teachers working in detention facilities. Houchins et al. (2009) point out that the challenging environment of these facilities often leads to high teacher attrition rates. Educators in these settings face unique hurdles, including managing behavioural hurdles and being conscious of the diverse educational needs of incarcerated youth. However, many teachers received insufficient training to effectively handle these barriers, resulting in a lack of continuity and quality in the academic programs offered (Houchins et al., 2009).

Cultural and institutional barriers also play a crucial role in undermining the effectiveness of education programs in youth detention facilities. An overemphasis on security often precedes educational goals, creating an environment that is not conducive to learning. Gang (2015) notes that strict security measures can restrict educators' ability to implement engaging and participatory activities, essential for effective learning. This security-focused approach can lead to an unproductive and punitive atmosphere, further removing youth from education.

Racial and gender disparities in access to education and outcomes are also significant barriers. Davey (2017) and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (2021) highlight that marginalized youth, particularly those from racialized communities, often face additional difficulties in accessing quality education while detained. These disparities are reflected in these groups' lower educational outcomes and higher recidivism rates. Tackling these inequities requires a concerted effort to ensure that all youth, regardless of their background, have equal access to educational opportunities that support their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Vocational Training

Implementing evidence-based interventions, such as personalized learning plans, vocational education, and life skills training, can significantly enhance incarcerated youth's educational experiences and outcomes. Vocational programs offer detained youth the chance to gain tangible skills and credentials to help them find work and stability after release.

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Strnadová et al. (2017) highlight the benefits of vocational programs that provide practical skills and certifications, increasing the employability of youth upon release. Life skills training, which includes financial literacy, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities, equips youth with the tools they need to navigate the realities of everyday life (Houchins et al., 2009). Programs that include training in fields like carpentry, food handling, or automotive repair have been linked to lower reoffending rates and increased post-release employment (DelliCarpini, 2010; Harer, 1994; Jenkins, Pendry, & Steurer, 1993).

Hands-on learning is key for youth in detention to gain practical skills. The 'Taking Responsibility and Developing Employable Skills' (TRADES) program offers certifications like WHMIS, First Aid, and Smart Serve, which provide valuable, transferable skills (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021). These industry-recognized credentials boost employability and help youth reintegrate into the workforce after release, opening doors to future opportunities (Moody et al., 2008; Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021).

Still, these opportunities are not universally available. Certain facilities do not offer vocational training, and access is often limited to specific groups of students. A lack of qualified instructors and equipment, along with strict facility rules, can prevent programs from running or from reaching those who need them most (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021).

Methodology

This research was guided by the social justice branch of the transformative paradigm, as described by Mertens and Wilson (2019). This approach emphasizes the importance of situating research within its broader social, political, and cultural context. It prioritizes evaluations assessing policy effectiveness, aiming to address inequality and promote human rights. Central to this paradigm is the inclusion of voices often marginalized in traditional policy research. In this case, that means amplifying the experiences and insights of educators, service providers, and those working directly within Ontario's youth justice and education sectors.

At the core of this study was a desire to better understand how education programs for youth in detention function and what role various actors (government ministries, school boards, etc.) have in these programs across Ontario, not just what policy says should happen, but what's happening on the ground. Using the social justice branch of the transformative paradigm helped

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frame the research with that purpose in mind. This approach encouraged a deeper look at how power, access, and institutional decisions shape the educational journeys of a portion of the province's most marginalized youth. The study aimed to uncover the differences between facilities and what factors may be causing these differences. By speaking with professionals who work directly in these environments, the goal was to highlight the gaps between policy and practice and offer insight that has the potential to help build more equitable, consistent and impactful education for young people behind bars.

Primary Data Collection

This is a qualitative study grounded in rich, experiential data. Primary information was collected through semi-structured interviews with professionals working across sectors involved in delivering education to youth in custody. Participants included representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), school board personnel, and staff from youth detention facilities.

Participants were recruited through existing professional networks and by referrals, where one individual recommended another within their organization or with knowledge of the study's focus. Please refer to *Appendix D* for the recruitment and introduction email sent to participants. This method of recruitment allowed for a diverse range of perspectives across institutional roles and geographic locations in Ontario. Eight interviews were conducted in either French or English, depending on the language preference of the participants. Each participant was assigned a number and described using non-identifiable characteristics to protect confidentiality. A table listing the participants and their descriptions can be found in *Appendix E*.

Before each interview, participants were provided with a consent form (*Appendix F*), outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and how the data would be used. Only those who signed the consent form were included in the research. In one instance, a participant responded via email after receiving approval from their organization's ethics committee, ensuring compliance with internal policies while allowing their input to participate in the study. Please refer to *Appendix G* for the core questions used to structure the interviews.

To support accuracy and allow for thorough analysis, interviews were recorded using the Voice Memos application. This made it possible to revisit conversations and ensure that essential

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insights were not missed. In addition to recording, Microsoft Word was used for note-taking during interviews and transcribing responses. For interviews conducted in English, Microsoft Word's built-in transcription tool efficiently captured participants' words clearly. All recordings, transcripts, and notes were stored in a password-protected file on a secure device. In line with ethical guidelines and privacy commitments made to participants, all data was permanently deleted on the study's end date of April 25th, 2025.

Secondary Research

A wide range of secondary sources was consulted to complement the primary data. These included peer-reviewed literature, legislation, government reports, and news media. The literature review, which forms a core part of this research, helped provide historical and policy context for the study and highlight perspectives on education in youth detention.

Research tools included York's Omni Library, Google Scholar, the Government of Ontario website, and Ontario e-Laws. Keywords used during the research process included *education, incarcerated youth, juvenile detention, youth justice, school, Ontario, Canada, vocational education, and rehabilitation*. Studies from the United States and other international contexts were reviewed to better understand how Ontario's situation fits into global trends. These sources helped situate the obstacles and successes in Ontario's detention education programs within a larger policy landscape.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was necessary given the sensitive nature of this research, particularly its focus on youth and institutions that serve vulnerable populations. Before the start of primary data collection, approval was obtained from York University's School of Public Policy and Administration (SPPA) Research Ethics Committee. The approval letter from the research ethics committee can be found in *Appendix H*.

Additional ethics clearance was required to engage with individuals affiliated with school boards and government ministries. In several cases, interviews were only able to proceed after participants received written approval from school board superintendents or ministry ethics committees. This added step helped ensure that participants were fully informed of the study's

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purpose and the questions that would be asked ahead of time so that they were able to prepare and provide approved responses.

In one case, a participant's employer required that the response be submitted in writing and reviewed by an internal ethics committee before being shared with the researcher. This ensured organizational transparency and participant autonomy, aligning with the social justice paradigm's emphasis on respect for institutional protocols.

Primary Data Findings

Eight interviews were conducted with individuals representing various roles within Ontario's youth justice and education sectors, including government staff, principals, educators, and administrators. While each participant brought unique perspectives based on their professional context, a shared commitment to improving the educational experience for youth in detention was clear. Through their insights, common themes emerged around inconsistency in program delivery, access barriers, cultural and linguistic inequities, and the need for targeted policy and resource investment.

Organizational Disparities in Education Delivery

Several participants highlighted that education delivery varies widely between facilities across Ontario. While all centres are expected to follow provincial standards, differences in facility type, school board partnerships, and local resources lead to inconsistent delivery.

For example, Participant #2 described Cecil Facer Youth Centre as offering a full-day school schedule with diverse academic and vocational opportunities, including summer school and trades. In contrast, Participant #1 explained, "*Each program has to have a school program or be able to ship kids to school,*" yet confirmed that students in certain facilities are offered only limited instruction, such as working on paper booklets in their rooms. "*It meets the minimum requirements, but it's not what anyone would call meaningful education,*" said Participant #1.

Participant #3, a retired official from the Ministry of Education, noted, "*In principle, every youth should have access to school, but in practice, access can depend on the facility they're in, who's available to teach, and how long they stay.*" Participant #5, a principal from Northern Ontario, echoed this: "*There are youth who find school to be the only stable part of*

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their day. But not all of them experience that because their education starts and stops with every transfer."

A significant factor influencing access to education is the structure and operation of the facility itself. Participants described key differences between direct-operated centres (run by the province) and transfer payment (TP) recipients, which are operated by non-profit or private partners and funded by the Ontario government. The type of facility, whether direct-operated or transfer payment recipients, plays a key role. Participant #6 noted that even under the same standards, *"what a youth received depends a lot on the facility's leadership and capacity."* Participant #1 explained that TP facilities function with more autonomy and variability: *"They're kind of like private schools, you have one doing something really well, and another struggling to meet basic standards."*

These inconsistencies are compounded by the fact that each facility partners with a different local school board with its own policies, resources, and educational priorities. Partnerships with school boards also vary, affecting program quality. Participant #3 explained that *"some boards are deeply involved, others not at all, and youth are the ones who lose out."* Participant #8 expressed, *"We should be giving these students the very best to give them their best shot at rehabilitation and getting back into that educational headspace."*

Participant #8 also described the reality of their school board, which partners with four open-custody facilities, *"three of the four facilities we have partnerships with have their youth bussed to a school, each facility group are placed in separate classrooms, and three teachers are shared between those three classes to allow for students to get the most out of their schooling."* However, this type of coordinated relationship is not the norm, as many school boards maintain fewer or more fragmented partnerships with facilities.

This decentralization creates gaps and overlaps. Participant #6 emphasized that *"standardizing curriculum delivery may not always meet the complex needs of justice-involved youth, but without some form of coordination, we end up with youth across the province receiving completely different experiences."*

Additional inconsistencies include access to hands-on programming, teacher availability, and whether school is mandatory or optional within the facility. Participant #7 shared, *"We've*

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had youth arrive from facilities where school was optional, and they resist participating here."

Such differences affect motivation and continuity of learning.

The data suggests that despite legal and policy requirements, a youth's education in custody is often shaped by facility standards and values, not the youth's needs. As Participant #5 summarized, *"It shouldn't matter where the student is staying. But it does."*

French-Language Education

The interviews revealed deep concern over limited access to French-language education (FLE) for youth in custody, particularly for French-speaking girls, who have no access to FLE in any current facility in the province. Participants #2 and #4 confirmed that only two sites, Cecil Facer Youth Centre in Sudbury and William E. Hay Centre in Ottawa, offer French-language instruction, both in male-only settings.

Participant #8 stated, *"Due to overcrowding in detention centres in Quebec, we get Quebec youth being placed here and most of them only speak French. We often have to assign one of our French immersion teachers to try our best and accommodate these youth, but they don't often stay very long so it doesn't justify creating a partnership with a French-language school board."* The participant had also identified that due to privacy and confidentiality concerns, they can't reach out for support from French-language school boards for help when these types of youth come into their facilities.

Participant #3 remarked, *"It's a Section 23 failure. We're talking about a Charter right, and we're not even pretending to make it accessible for everyone."* Participant #6 notes that although youth are legally entitled to French-language education, *"there is no mechanism to guarantee that right once they're inside a facility."*

Even where French programming is technically offered, resources are limited. Participant #4 shared that skilled trades courses at their facility are *"offered in English, but not French, because we don't have the staff."* Several participants described CAVLFO, Ontario's online platform for French learning, as functionally inaccessible to detained youth, since most are de-enrolled from their home school boards and no longer qualify to use the online resource.

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Cecil Facer Youth Centre: A Model Facility

Cecil Facer Youth Centre in Sudbury emerged as a model of what strong educational programming can look like in a detention setting. Participant #2 described the daily schedule: *“It mirrors a mainstream high school, four periods of 70 minutes, a mix of academic and hands-on courses, and even provincial testing when students reach that level.”*

Courses at Cecil include woodworking, music, welding, cooking and nutrition, and gym, alongside standard academic curriculum subjects. The school also offers summer school, which few other sites can provide. Despite its strengths, Participant #5 highlighted that the facility's small capacity (12 beds) and declining enrollment pose their hurdles: *“We used to serve over 100 youth. But with facility closures and our facility being forced to reduce capacity, now we have 12. Around seventy percent of the time, we only have one French-speaking youth in the facility.”*

Even at Cecil Facer, obstacles such as delayed access to student records, especially from rural communities, persist. *“Sometimes it takes weeks to get records, if at all,”* Participant #5 noted. *“Meanwhile, you're trying to build a plan for a student who doesn't know what courses they've taken or what academic level they are at.”*

Variations in Educational Programming

Program quality and content vary widely across the province. While certain facilities, like Cecil Facer (Direct-Operated) or William E. Hay (Transfer Payment), offer hands-on vocational learning and extracurricular activities, others do not have the staff or funding to support such offerings. Other facilities in the province provide Indigenous-focused learning and courses to engage Indigenous youth and rehabilitate them to return to such communities. Participant #5 explained, *“Some sites don't have tech programs because they don't have the machines, and others don't even have gym classes.”*

A single teacher is required to simultaneously manage multiple grade levels, subjects, and learning needs in smaller or underfunded facilities. Participant #2 described having *“one full-time teacher in charge of teaching all mandatory curriculum courses as well as any extracurricular or vocational courses.”*

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When asked what kind of learning youth are most drawn to, Participant #7 responded, *“Trades and real-world skills. That’s where we see them light up, when it’s something they can use after release.”*

Structural & Institutional Barriers

Across interviews, several persistent barriers to education were identified. The short and unpredictable nature of youth stays was one of the most frequently mentioned difficulties.

Participant #6 explained, *“Some youth are there for as little as 24 hours. Others are in and out for weeks on remand. It makes planning next to impossible.”*

This instability affects both engagement and progress. *“If you don’t know how long you’ll be in custody, why invest in your education?”* was a point brought up by Participant #7, which is a question many youth in detention face. *“Many youth just assume they’ll be released soon and disengage completely.”*

Participants also described delays in receiving Ontario Student Records (OSRs), especially for youth from remote or northern communities. Participant #3 stressed, *“Without access to records, you’re either starting from scratch or making guesses. Either way, it’s not fair to the student.”* Participant #8 shared, *“All student records are on paper files, and when a new youth comes into the facility, we have to try and figure out what school they were previously in to request their file be mailed over. This causes a delay in being able to help them complete credits or retake credits they may have previously failed, which delays our teachers from being able to effectively assess their education needs.”*

Language barriers further complicate this. Participant #7 shared that many youth *“come in with English as their second language, or without English proficiency. They speak dialects we don’t always have translators for, especially Indigenous languages from isolated communities.”*

Online Learning & Vocational Training

The province’s online learning program, accessible to students in secure and open custody facilities, is widely regarded as valuable. Participant #5 outlines the logistics: *“We have 36 courses, up to 240 students, and eight teachers delivering instruction mostly asynchronously across any ECPP facility.”*

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Despite its potential, access to online learning and resources remains unequal. Participant #6 emphasized that French-language students *“are shut out of online learning if they're de-enrolled from their board, which most are.”* Currently, no French-language online learning platform is available for students in youth detention centres, leaving it up to individual school boards to address this gap.

Even among English-speaking students, engagement with online learning can be limited due to screen time restrictions, lack of digital literacy, or preference for hands-on learning. However, innovative approaches like virtual reality (VR) for trades-based courses show promise. Participant #7 explains: *“It's safer, more engaging, and gives students a broader skill set without needing physical equipment or a qualified in-person teacher. This could be a game-changer if implemented properly.”*

Participant #8 shared, *“Some of our students really dive into committing to their education, and some request to take additional online courses and complete additional work once they are back in their rooms at the facility. But this is not available everywhere and is a luxury open custody facilities may be able to facilitate easier than in closed detention.”*

Online learning is not an obstacle but a powerful tool that has yet to be fully utilized. Expanding access to technology-enhanced learning presents a promising opportunity. However, realizing its full potential will require careful planning, adequate funding, and sustained commitment to equitable implementation across all facilities in the province.

In addition to online learning, several participants highlighted the importance of skilled trades and vocational training programs as a critical element of education in youth detention. Participant #2 described how facilities like Cecil Facer Youth Centre offer courses like woodworking, cooking, and auto mechanics, noting that *“these hands-on programs really spark engagement among students who might not otherwise connect with traditional academics.”* Participant #7 emphasized that vocational training provides youth with tangible skills they can use upon release, helping them imagine a future beyond custody: *“Trades courses give them something real to work toward – it's the first time many of them see success in a classroom setting.”* However, access to skilled trade programming is not consistent across all facilities. Participant #6 pointed out that many centres lack the staffing, equipment, or funding to offer these courses.

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Solutions and Pathways Forward

Despite the significant obstacles outlined across interviews, participants offered practical, actionable solutions to improve educational delivery in youth detention centres.

A centralized digital student record network was one of the most widely supported suggestions. Participants #3, #5, #6, #7, and #8 all emphasized that delays in accessing student records, especially for youth from remote communities, frequently disrupt education. Participant #6 explained, "*Without quick access to records, we're losing time, and students often have to start from scratch.*" A centralized network was considered essential to ensure smoother transitions between facilities and support the development of accurate learning plans.

Participants also highlighted the need to expand access to French-language and culturally relevant education. Participant #2 stressed the lack of French programming for girls, while Participant #6 confirmed that only two male-only facilities currently offer French-language education. Participants #4 and #7 added that Indigenous language instruction and cultural programs can help students feel more connected and respected during their time in custody.

Participants #1, #4, and #7 saw skilled trades and hands-on learning as particularly impactful. These programs, such as woodworking, cooking, and welding, help youth develop tangible skills and increase engagement. Participant #7 shared, "*Trades are what they're drawn to. It's where they start to see a future for themselves.*"

Several participants also pointed to the potential of technology-enhanced learning, including online platforms and virtual reality (VR), especially in facilities that lack space or equipment. Participant #5 described current VR pilot programs as promising, offering safe, immersive alternatives for trades education. Participants highlighted that a VR learning approach stands out from traditional virtual learning because it includes simulations that allow youth to perform actions similar to those in regular trades courses. This method removes the need for security clearances and additional qualified teachers for in-person vocational courses.

Lastly, Participants #3 and #5 called for improved teacher training specific to the detention context. They emphasized that educators must be prepared to support students with complex needs, including trauma histories and behavioural difficulties. Participant #3 explained, "*The teachers who make a difference aren't just teaching, they're creating trust and building a bridge for these students to re-engage.*"

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Analysis

This section analyzes how the interview data findings align with, expand on, or differ from the existing literature regarding education in Ontario's youth detention facilities. A central question guiding this research was: Why do education programs vary from facility to facility? The literature and interview data consistently point to structural inconsistency, resource variation, and gaps in oversight as major contributors to this disparity.

Organizational Disparities in Education Delivery

The primary data findings revealed that a key factor shaping educational differences is the local partnerships between a facility and a school board, typically formalized through a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Participants #1, #3, and #6 described how each facility – whether direct-operated or a transfer payment recipient facility – relies on a separate MOU with a local board to deliver education. Participant #6 also explained that each facility operates with its own policies and procedures, which allows for variations in facility operations and education program delivery across the province. This detail did not appear in the literature, which speaks more broadly about access and variation but does not explore the mechanics of school board relationships.

These MOUs determine the types of courses offered, the availability of online learning, and the teacher supports available. For example, Participants #2 and #5 noted that Cecil Facer's strong programming is directly tied to its strong partnerships with *Rainbow District School Board* and *Conseil scolaire du Grand Nord*. In contrast, Participant #4 shared their knowledge regarding the partnership between *Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario* and the William E. Hay Centre, having a more delicate and under-resourced facility-board relationship leading to a struggle to maintain staffing and French-language course variety. This illustrates how educational quality depends not just on policy or facility type but also on localized, and sometimes fragile, institutional arrangements.

French-Language Education

The literature and interview data strongly align in their findings on French-language education, namely that it is severely limited in practice. The literature cites legal foundations for

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French-language education under section 23 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, while interviews provide on-the-ground examples of how that right is not being upheld. Participants #2, #4, and #6 confirmed that only two facilities – Cecil Facer (Sudbury) and William E. Hay (Ottawa) – offer the option for French-language education, and both are male-only centres. No facility currently provides French-language education for girls. Youth often refrain from requesting a transfer solely for that reason, not wanting to risk being placed farther from their families or communities.

Participant #6 explained that while youth technically retain the right to education in their preferred official language, “*there is no process in place to ensure that right is realized in custody.*” This echoes the literature’s broader concern that policy does not translate into equal educational opportunities (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2021).

Variations in Educational Programming

The literature and interview data highlight deep educational inconsistencies across different youth facilities. The literature broadly outlines that academic quality, hours, and access to programming vary by site, and interview participants heavily supported this. For example, Participant #2 described Cecil Facer as having a full day academic schedule, with four 70-minute periods, summer school, trades programming, and extracurriculars, meanwhile, Participant #1 described facilities where students were completing isolated worksheets with little support. Participant #7 noted that a few facilities don’t require or encourage their youth to attend school while in the detention center.

Such variation is not due to a lack of policy framework, but rather the absence of firm implementation. The interview data suggest that the structure of the facility (e.g., whether it is direct-operated or a transfer payment recipient facility), the strength of its school board partnership, facility policies and mandates, and available staff and funding all contribute to whether a youth experiences education as rehabilitative or merely as a basic requirement.

Structural & Institutional Barriers

A recurring theme in the interviews was the lack of timely access to student records, significantly disrupting education in youth custody. Participants #5, #6, and #7 noted that

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educators often begin working with students without access to previous report cards, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), or credit histories, particularly for youth from rural or remote communities. Participant #5 shared, *"We sometimes wait weeks to receive any documents, if they come at all."*

Without these records, educators are forced to reassess students from scratch, often relying on informal assessments or student memory, which can be inaccurate and time-consuming. This not only stalls academic progress but also prevents the assignment of appropriate supports or PLAR credits. Participant #6 noted, *"Each facility is on their own,"* resulting in duplicated efforts and inconsistent learning plans.

The literature briefly mentioned this concern (Development Services Group Inc., 2019) but did not explore it in depth. Interview data highlight that the absence of a centralized, province-wide student record network is a core barrier to educational continuity. Transfers between facilities only compound the problem, as student files rarely follow the youth promptly, if at all.

The impact is particularly severe for students with learning needs, as educators may be unaware of required accommodations or past assessments. Participant #7 explained that many youth arrive with undiagnosed or unsupported learning disabilities, and without documentation, *"you're building a plan blind."*

While mobility and short stays already present difficulties, the inconsistent access to academic records creates institutional barriers that undermine the right to continuous and impactful education in custody.

Online Learning & Vocational Training

Both data sets emphasize the importance of hands-on and practical learning, particularly for youth who have previously disengaged from traditional education. The literature points to vocational training as key to reducing recidivism and promoting skill-building (DelliCarpini, 2010; Foley, 2001). Participants #1, #4, #7, and #8 echoed this, observing that students are more engaged when programs are relevant and connected to real-world outcomes.

However, while the literature frames online learning as an accessible alternative, interviews revealed barriers to its effectiveness and accessibility. Participant #5 explained that

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only some students have access to e-learning platforms, and that de-enrolment from home school boards cuts off access to resources like CAVLFO for French-speaking students. Participant #6 noted that these frameworks aren't set up for mobile, high-needs students, *"They're built for students who are stable, and that's not the reality here."*

In summary, the interview data largely support and enrich the findings from the literature, offering detailed insight into how structural and logistical barriers often undermine policy commitments. While the legal right to education is clear, its delivery can be unequal, shaped by local decisions, resources, and partnerships rather than any provincial standard. Without meaningful enforcement or coordination, youth in Ontario experience education in detention very differently depending on where they are placed, despite being under the same provincial legislative frameworks.

Research Limitations

While this research offered valuable insight into the educational experiences of youth in detention, several limitations shaped the scope and depth of the findings. These constraints highlight the obstacles of conducting research within government-regulated sectors, particularly when the study involves vulnerable populations like incarcerated youth.

One of the most significant limitations was restricted access to government employees, especially those working within the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. Due to internal policies, many individuals were not permitted to participate in interviews or sign consent forms, particularly during the writ period of a provincial snap election. The election not only delayed the ethics approval process, since no government research approvals were processed during that time, but also led to increased caution from ministries regarding participation and information sharing.

In addition to limited access to participants, there was also difficulty accessing publicly available information about educational programming within youth detention facilities. Unlike typical school settings, data on youth in custody, such as program types, delivery models, or student outcomes, are not consistently published or centralized. Since this population is both youth and justice-involved, privacy considerations often restrict what information is made accessible to the public. As a result, the research had to rely heavily on first-hand interview data

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and government reports. To provide additional context and comparative insight, the scope of the literature review was expanded to include international sources, particularly studies from the United States and other jurisdictions with similar youth justice frameworks.

The interview process itself presented several obstacles. It was often difficult to identify individuals with the necessary expertise who were both willing and permitted to participate. Several potential participants, particularly those in government roles, were not able to participate due to restrictions on sharing program-specific information. Additional steps were often required to secure the involvement of those who did participate. This included obtaining ethics approvals from individual school boards and seeking formal permission from government supervisors or ethics committees, which extended the timeline for data collection and limited the number of voices included in the study.

These limitations meant that the research was shaped by the perspectives of a relatively small number of participants. While their insights were rich and informative, a broader participant pool, including frontline government staff and facility-based educators, would have further strengthened the analysis. Despite these constraints, the research identified significant trends and raised critical questions about the consistency and equity of education in Ontario's youth detention facilities.

Conclusion

This paper sought to answer three critical questions: 1) Why do educational experiences for detained youth in Ontario vary across facilities? 2) What are the differences in how education is delivered across the province? 3) What does access – or lack of access – to French-language education, vocational programs, online learning, and students' school records look like?

Through a comprehensive literature review and interviews with professionals working in education, government, and youth justice sectors, this paper has highlighted the ongoing disparities in the delivery of education to youth in detention centres in Ontario. Despite clear legislative and policy frameworks that affirm the right to education for all youth, including those in detention, the quality and availability of educational opportunities remain inequitable across the province. Factors such as the facility they are placed in, the strength of local partnerships, and available resources play a significant role in determining the educational outcome for these

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young people. While the *Education Act*, the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act*, the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*, and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* provide strong legal rights, these are not consistently realized in practice.

The differences in educational opportunities are striking. Facilities like Cecil Facer Youth Centre in Sudbury offer comprehensive programming, including skilled trades courses, French-language education, online learning, and individualized support. Others, by contrast, provide only minimal instruction, often through isolated paper-based work with limited teacher interaction and limited or no vocational programming. These variations extend beyond curriculum offerings, including differences in school hours, mandatory attendance, access to vocational training, online learning availability, and timely access to student records. This inconsistency directly affects the educational engagement and success of detained youth, hindering their potential for rehabilitation and reintegration.

Language rights, as protected under Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, further highlight the disparities faced by youth in juvenile detention centres. Although French-language education is a constitutional right, it is only offered in two male-only facilities, leaving French-speaking female youth without access to this essential educational provision. Additionally, access to online learning is highly inconsistent, with significant gaps in resources for both English and French-speaking youth: English-language online platforms or resources are not equally available, while French-speaking youth face even greater barriers, often losing access to these resources altogether after de-enrolment from their home school boards.

Vocational training programs, an essential aspect of rehabilitation and post-custody reintegration, are similarly not universally available. While some facilities with sufficient staff and resources offer rich vocational programs, others do not, depriving youth of critical opportunities to gain real-world skills that have the potential to support their transition back into the community. The lack of such programs limits the prospects for future employment and self-sufficiency, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

These disparities in educational programming are not the result of a lack of policy but of inconsistent and fragmented implementation. Variations in school board partnerships, staffing levels, facility leadership, and access to resources reflect a broader problem that affects the quality of education these youth receive. While many dedicated educators and staff work

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tirelessly to support detained youth, they are often constrained by institutional constraints that prevent them from delivering equitable and high-quality education.

Ultimately, this research highlights that youth in detention across Ontario do not experience education equally. The quality and accessibility of educational opportunities are significantly influenced by the facility in which a young person is placed. Given the critical role that education plays in rehabilitation, reintegration, and long-term success, these disparities have lasting implications for the futures of detained youth.

To fulfill the legal and moral commitments outlined in Ontario and Canada's legislations and international agreements, Ontario must move beyond its current fragmented approach.

Education for youth in custody should be recognized not as a privilege based on geography or institutional factors, but as an essential, rehabilitative right guaranteed to all young people, regardless of their circumstances. Until that happens, the promise of equitable education for all youth in Ontario will remain unmet.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence gathered from the literature and the interview data, this section outlines key recommendations to improve the consistency, accessibility, and effectiveness of education for youth in Ontario's detention centres. The recommendations reflect a need for individualized support, comprehensive coordination, expanded access to resources, and a more holistic vision of what education should offer justice-involved youth.

1. Implement Evidence-Based & Individualized Education Approaches

As outlined in the literature and echoed by participants in this study, incarcerated youth often present with complex educational profiles, including significant learning gaps, limited formal schooling, and unaddressed learning disabilities (Foley, 2001; Houchins et al., 2009). The interview data also revealed that many students enter detention reading well below grade level (Participants #5 and #7), requiring relevant, adaptive, and impactful instruction.

To address these realities, education programs in youth custody should adopt highly individualized and trauma-informed approaches. This includes:

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- Specialized training for educators in trauma-informed practices, cultural responsiveness, and behavioural support strategies.
- Life skills education – such as communication, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation – delivered as part of the curriculum, not just in separate treatment programs.

As supported by the literature (Foley, 2001; Houchins et al., 2009; Strnadová et al., 2017), these strategies have been shown to improve engagement and post-release outcomes, helping youth see education as relevant to their future.

2. Establish a Centralized & Confidential Student Record Network

A key barrier identified in the interviews and literature is the lack of timely access to student records when youth enter or transfer between facilities. Participants #5, #6, and #7 shared that the delays in receiving Ontario Student Records (OSRs), IEPs, or credit histories severely limit educators' ability to assess needs or deliver appropriate instruction.

To improve continuity of learning and reduce unnecessary reassessments, the Ministry of Education and its partners should:

- Develop a province-wide digital platform for securely housing student records, including academic credits, assessments, and support plans.
- Create clear protocols for intake assessments, so youth can be placed in the right courses and receive necessary accommodations immediately upon entering custody.

This recommendation directly addresses gaps in record sharing identified in the analysis and would allow educators to provide level-appropriate instruction from day one, reducing disengagement and repetition.

3. Expand Use of Technology & Modern Learning Tools

In the literature and interviews, technology was identified as a tool that has the potential to enhance access to education, especially in facilities with limited course offerings or staffing. Participant #5 described the potential of online platforms, while the literature highlights virtual learning as a way to diversify curriculum and promote engagement (Eizadirad & Gopal Chambers, 2023; Steele et al., 2016).

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To meet the needs of students in secure environments, the following should be prioritized:

- Virtual vocational courses and VR simulations for trades like welding or woodworking, offering safe, hands-on learning.
- Access to bilingual digital content (e.g., TVO and TFO) for students without access to in-person French-language education instruction.
- Investment in French-language education e-learning courses, similar to the virtual English-language education model, to allow for access to French-language education for all youth across the province.

These tools are particularly important for facilities that lack teachers in specialized subjects or cannot safely provide physical trades workshops. They also align with students' interests and prepare them for jobs in the skilled trades or other technology-driven employment.

4. Ensure Equitable Access to French-Language & Indigenous Education

The current state of French-language education in custody is deeply inequitable. As confirmed in the interviews and the literature, only two facilities (Cecil Facer and William E. Hay) offer education programming in French, and both are male-only sites. First in custody, and many Francophone youth are excluded from instruction in their first language, which violates section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

To close these gaps, the Ministry of Education and school boards should:

- Expand access to CAVLFO or similar online French-language platforms so that all Francophone youth, regardless of location, can access instruction in French.
- Encourage regional partnerships between English and French school boards to provide virtual French-language courses when in-person teachers are unavailable.
- Develop Indigenous language and cultural programming, particularly in northern and Indigenous-led facilities, to support youth identity, belonging, and engagement.

This recommendation builds on the findings in both the literature and the interviews, which highlight the structural and legal hurdles in ensuring equitable language-based education.

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5. Adopt Holistic & Career-Oriented Programming

Participants described education as most effective when it helps youth imagine a future beyond custody. The literature and interviews both point to the importance of vocational training, co-op placements, and real-world skills as a way to increase engagement and support reintegration (DelliCarpini, 2010; Moody et al., 2008).

Facilities should:

- Integrate job readiness into the curriculum, including resume writing, interview prep, and financial literacy.
- Offer co-op or volunteer placements within the facility, such as cooking, auto repair, or maintenance, that can lead to credit attainment and practical experience.

This approach moves education beyond worksheets and basic credit accumulation toward rehabilitation and reintegration, aligning with both youth interests and the goals of the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*.

These recommendations are grounded in the realities observed through interviews and supported by existing literature. Implementing them would strengthen the educational experience for youth in custody and advance broader goals of equity, rehabilitation, and social justice in Ontario's youth justice framework.

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Appendix A – Right to Education

Legislation	Right to Education
Child, Youth & Family Services Act (2017) Section 13(2)(e)	<i>“A child in care has a right to receive an education that corresponds to their aptitudes and abilities in a community setting whenever possible”</i>
Education Act (1990)	<i>“To provide treatment and support, within a Section 23 Classroom, for children and youth who are unable to attend a local school due to their identified social, emotional, behavioral and/or mental health needs.” “Each child/youth will have a current plan of care that reflects an assessment of needs and preferences. The plan of care will identify the specific services/supports received by the child/youth, the expected outcomes and be based on the principles of person - centered planning, self-determination, and choice.” (Government of Ontario, 2023b)</i>
Youth Criminal Justice Act (S.C. 2002) Section 83(1)	<i>“The purpose of the youth custody and supervision system is to contribute to the protection of society by: (b) assisting young persons to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into the community as law-abiding citizens by providing effective programs to young persons in custody and while under supervision in the community.”</i>
Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Section 23)	<i>Language of Instruction: 23. (1) Citizens of Canada (a) whose first language learned and still understood is that of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province in which they reside, or (b) who have received their primary school instruction in Canada in English or French and reside in a province where the language in which they received that instruction is the language of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province, have the right to have their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in that language in that province.</i>
Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN) (Article 28)	<i>“(a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all; (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child...”</i>

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Appendix B – Youth Admissions to Correctional Services (Ontario)

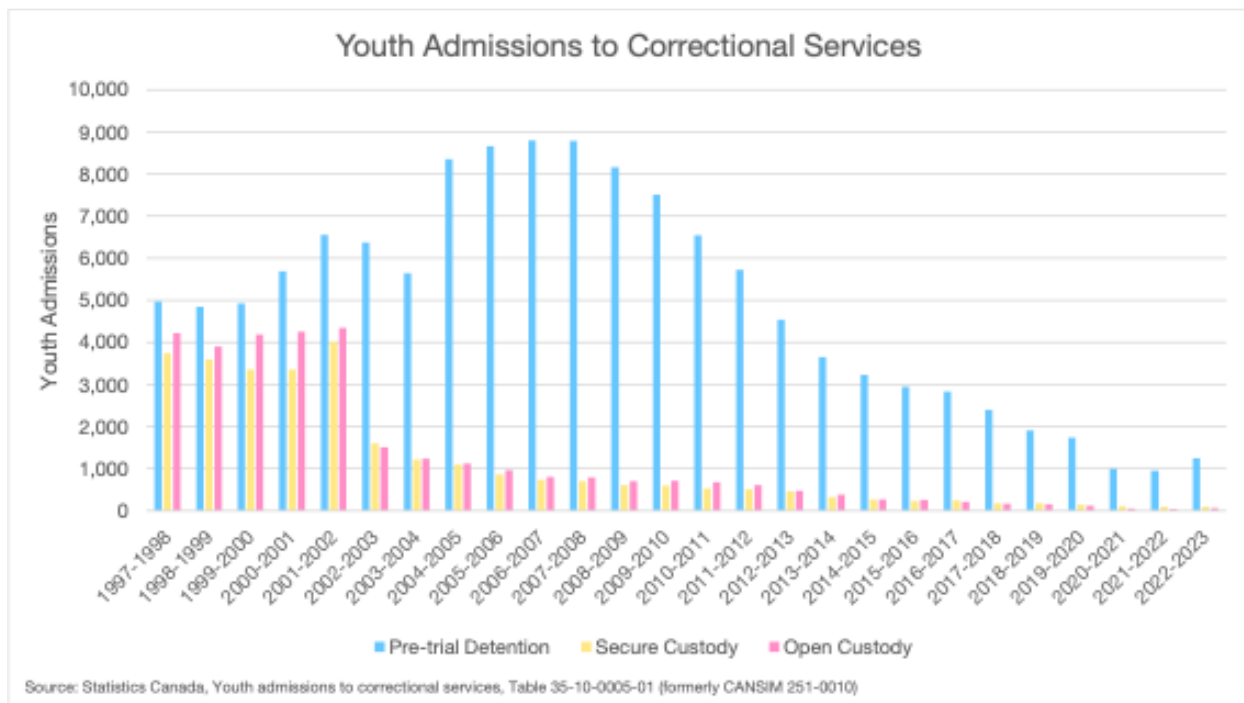


Figure 1 - Youth admission rates based on type of detention from 1997/1998 to 2022/2023

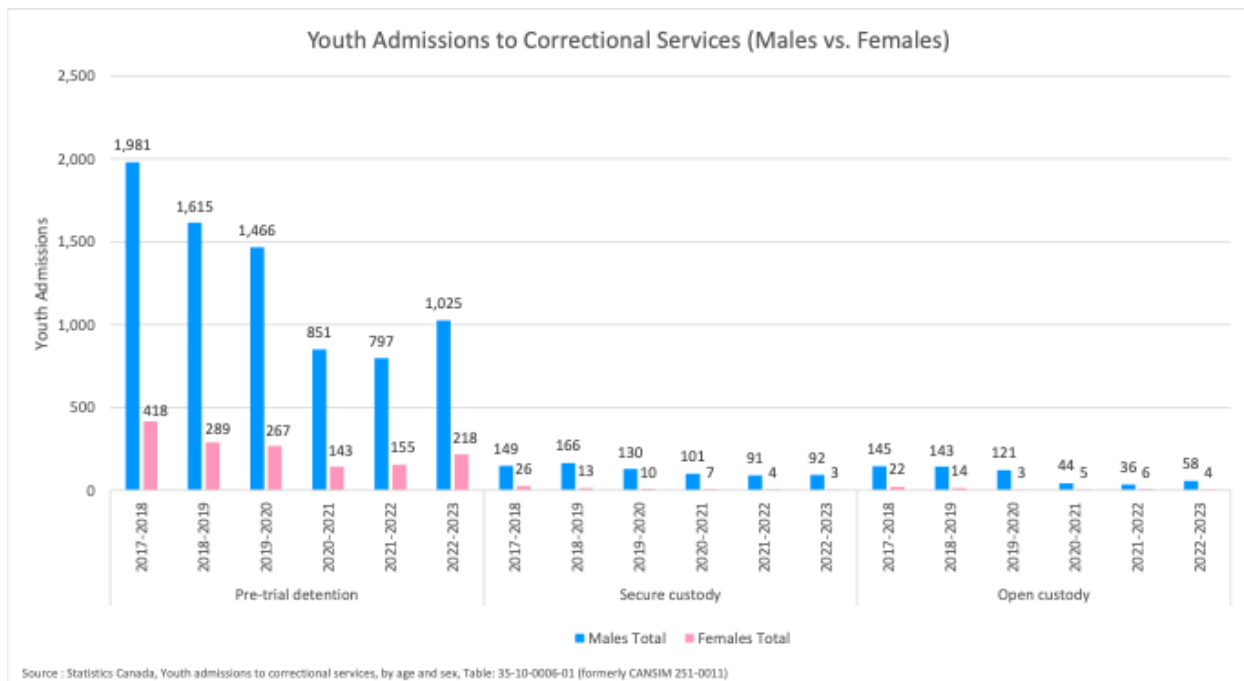


Figure 2 – Youth admission rates based on gender and by type of detention from 2017/2018 to 2022/2023

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Appendix C – Juvenile Detention Centres Ontario

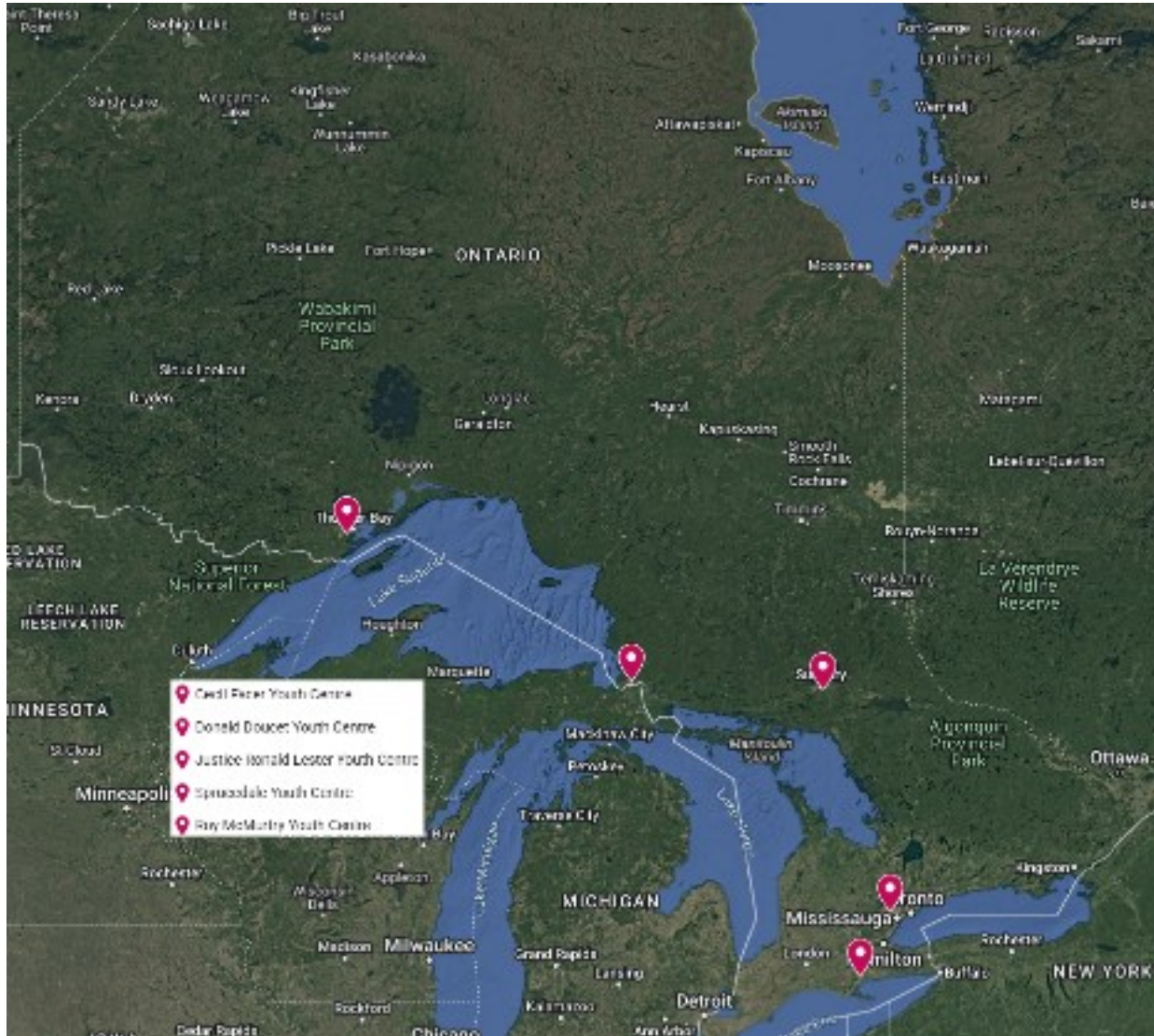


Figure 3 – Direct-Operated Secure Custody Youth Centres (5)

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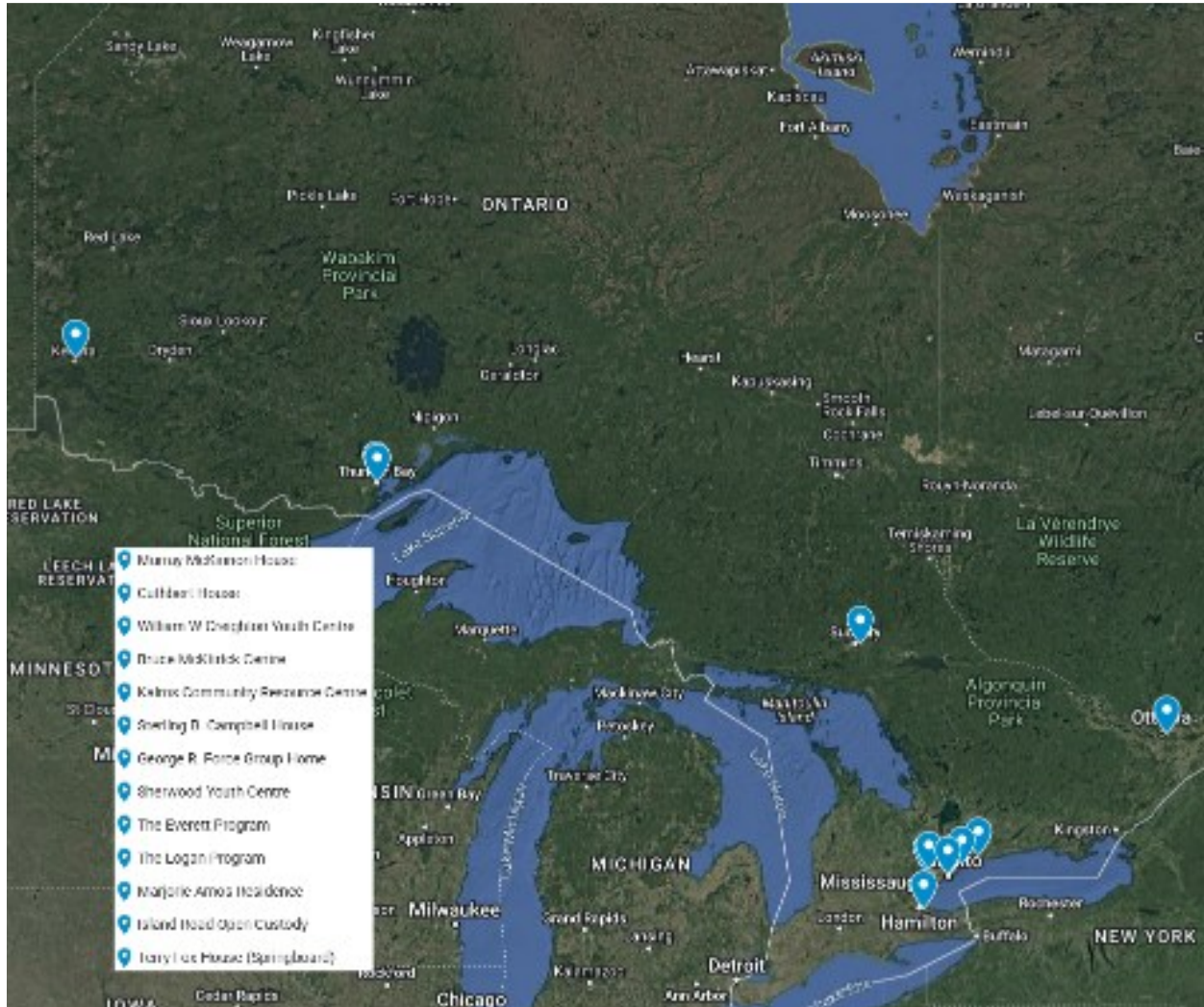


Figure 4 – Open Custody – Privately-Run Transfer Payment Youth Centres (14)

*One facility is missing from the map due to the lack of a publicly available list of open custody facilities.

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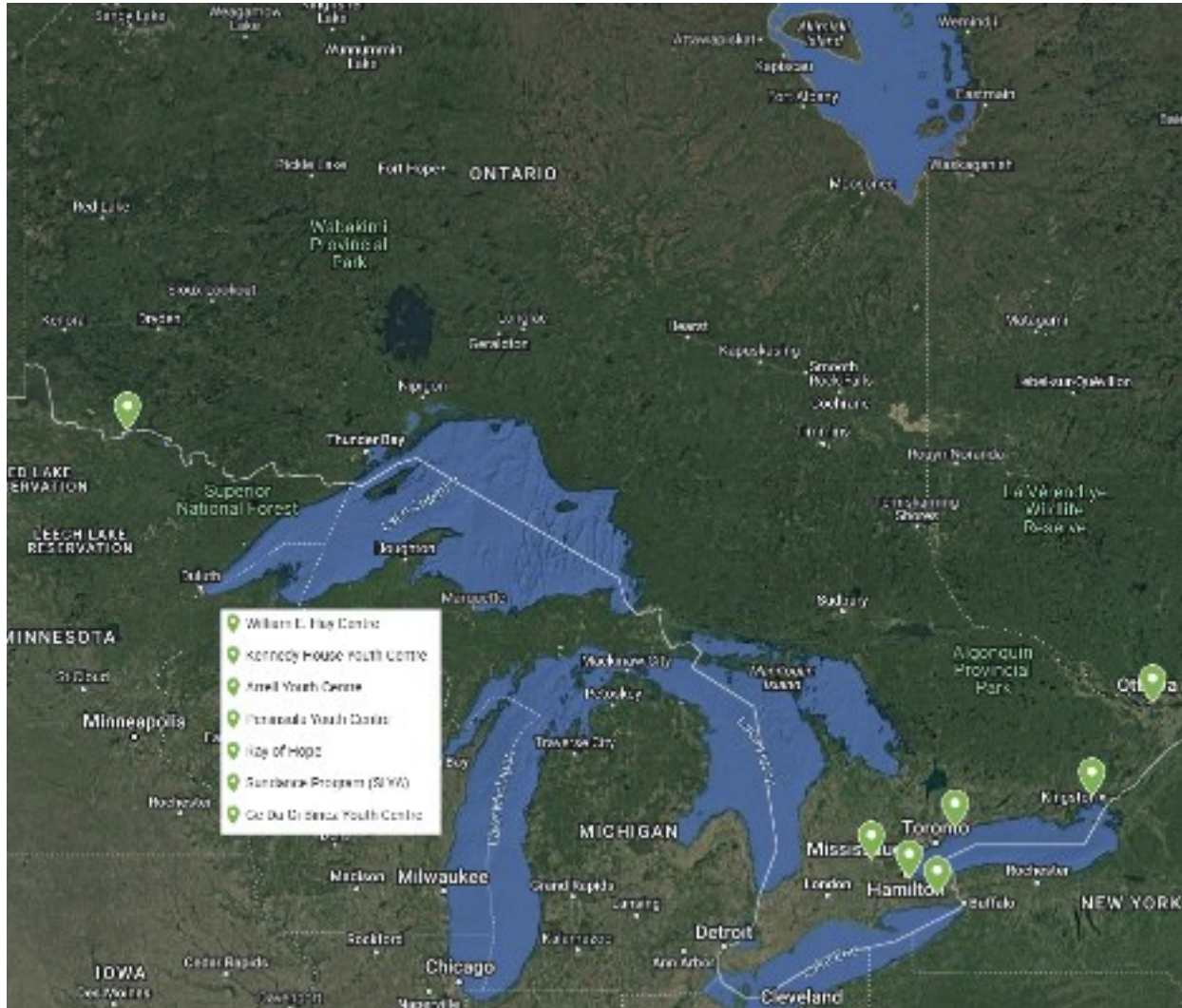


Figure 5 – Secure Custody – Privately-Run Transfer Payment Youth Centres (7)

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Appendix D – Participant Recruitment/Introduction Email

Hello [name],

I am a student at York University pursuing a Master's degree in Public Policy, Administration, and Law (MPPAL). Currently, I am working on a research paper focusing on education programs for youth in juvenile detention centers in Ontario. I am looking to interview individuals with knowledge in this area who can provide valuable insights into the realities of these programs and the related government policies. I got your contact information from [name] as they recommended I reach out to you for help with my research.

If you are willing to meet with me, I would be happy to schedule a meeting with you and can send a few dates/times along with a consent form. Please sign the consent form and return it to me via email (as a photo or PDF) before the interview. All information collected throughout the interview process will be kept confidential and anonymous. Also note, the consent form is simply a formality required by my university in order to include information from meetings in my final paper without requiring a public source as a reference. All information will be anonymized, and no names or position titles will be used in my final paper.

If you would prefer an intro meeting to start before a formal meeting/interview, I would be happy to do that as well!

I am looking forward to hearing back from you.

Thank you,

Chelsea Chaput
Master's in Public Policy, Administration, and Law (MPPAL) Candidate
York University

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Appendix E – Participants

Participant	Description
Participant #1	Senior public servant – Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services
Participants #2	Principal – French-Language School Board in Northern Ontario
Participant #3	Retired public servant – Ministry of Education
Participant #4	Principal – French-Language School Board in Eastern Ontario
Participant #5	Principal – English-Language School Board in Northern Ontario
Participant #6	Senior public servant – Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services
Participants #7	Superintendent of Education – English-Language School Board in Northern Ontario
Participant #8	Principal – English-Language School Board in Central Ontario

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Appendix F – Consent Form



Informed Consent Form

Date:

Study Name: A Deeper Look at Education Provided to Youth within Juvenile Detention Facilities in Ontario

Researcher name: Chelsea Chaput, Master's in Public Policy, Administration, and Law, York University. The principal investigator can be reached at chelsea-chaput@hotmail.com

Purpose of the Research: This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the education provided to incarcerated youth in detention facilities in Ontario. It will involve online interviews, and the data will be integrated into a final research paper.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: Research participants will be asked to answer a series of interview questions and discuss the research topic. Interviews can take about 30 minutes with a follow-up email to confirm the information provided by the participant was correctly interpreted by the researcher.

Risks and Discomforts: I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research. All participation is provided voluntarily, and participants may retract one's participation at any time.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: This research would allow for an increased awareness of the education provided to incarcerated youth. The insight and information provided could allow for future program improvements.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff or the nature of your relationship with York University either now or in the future. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality: Unless you choose otherwise, all information you supply during the research will be held in confidence, and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Data will be collected in the form of notetaking and an audio recording throughout the interviews. All emails sent to and received from the participant will be saved as a PDF document while removing the name and email address of the participant. It will then be deleted from the researcher's inbox and deleted folder to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Your data will be safely stored in a password-protected electronic folder, and only the researcher and the researcher's academic supervisor will have access to this information. The data will be stored until April 25th, 2025 and will be destroyed and erased from the computer's hard drive. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

This study will use Zoom and MS Teams to collect data, which is an externally hosted cloud-based service. Participants will be asked which platform they prefer to use for their interview. When information is transmitted over the internet privacy cannot be guaranteed. There is always a risk your responses may be intercepted by a third party (e.g., government agencies, hackers). Further, while York University researchers will not collect or use IP address or other information which could link your participant to your

Student Version 08.09.17

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York University

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computer or electronic devices without informing you, there is a small risk with any platform such as this of data that is collected on external servers falling outside the control of the research team. If you are concerned about this, we would be happy to make alternative arrangements (where possible) for you to participate, perhaps via telephone.

Please note that it is the expectation that participants agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content of a meeting/data collection session.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me at Chelsea-chaput@hotmail.com or my supervisor, Thomas Klassen at tklassen@yorku.ca. You may also contact the Program in Master's in Public Policy, Administration, and Law (MPPAL) at mppal@yorku.ca and/or 416-736-2100 ext. 77528.

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Research Committee of the School of Public Policy and Administration, which is delegated authority to review research ethics protocols by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I <<fill in participant name here>>, consent to participate in *A Deeper Look at Education Provided to Youth within Juvenile Detention Facilities in Ontario* conducted by Chelsea Chaput. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____
Participant

Date _____

Signature _____
Principal Investigator

Date _____

Additional consent (where applicable)

1. Audio recording

I consent to the audio-recording of my interview(s).

Signature _____
Participant Name:

Date _____

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Appendix G – Core Interview Questions

1. What is your experience with education programs provided to incarcerated youth in detention facilities in Ontario?
2. What is the role/implication of your organization (MCCSS, EDU, school board, etc.) in education programs for youth in detention centers in the province?
3. What can you tell me about the realities of these education programs in youth detention facilities? What are some of the potential shortcomings?
4. What does a typical 'school day' look like for incarcerated youth? OR What does a typical school day look like in the facility where your board provides education programs to?
5. What policies are in place to ensure education programs are provided in these facilities? What guarantees are there to ensure education is given to these youth?
6. How are teachers assigned to education programs at a detention facility? What does a partnership between an institution and a school board look like?
7. Do you think there would ever be a possibility of standardizing the education programs from one facility to another?
8. What are some of the most significant barriers or obstacles when it comes to providing education to youth in detention centers? (either personal opinion or common complaints/observations within your organization or the broader public)
9. Please specify the type of facility to which your board is providing educational services. Is it a direct-operated or transfer payment facility? Is the facility open or closed custody?
10. In your opinion, how can the education provided in youth detention facilities be improved?

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Appendix H – Ethics Approval Letter

SPPA Research Ethics Committee Delegated Review

Course Name: Topics in Public Policy
Course Number: PPAL 6230
Course Director: Prof. Thomas Klassen
Student Name: Chelsea Chaput
Project Title: A Deeper Look at Education Provided to Youth within Juvenile Detention
Facilities in Ontario

Approval Date: December 9, 2024
Expiry Date: April 25, 2025

Dear Chelsea Chaput,

I am writing to inform you that the SPPA Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your research project "A Deeper Look at Education Provided to Youth within Juvenile Detention Facilities in Ontario" and determined that it conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines and is hereby approved.

Please note that approval is granted until April 25, 2025. Ongoing research – research that extends beyond this date – must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process by submission of an amendment application to the HPRC prior to its implementation.

Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Chair of this Committee (sppagpd@yorku.ca), copying the Course Director as soon as possible.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email at: sppagpd@yorku.ca

Thank you.



IAN STEDMAN, BA (Hon), LLB, LL.M, MA, PhD
Of the Ontario Bar
Associate Professor, Canadian Public Law and Governance
Graduate Program Director, MPPAL
York University, School of Public Policy & Administration
Website: <https://profiles.laps.yorku.ca/profiles/istedman/>
<http://sppa.laps.yorku.ca/> | *Education for Good Governance*