

# Youth facility's failings on par with disturbing trend



[By Jacob Stilman](#)

[Recent reports of problems at the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre](#), while disappointing to those of us who work in the youth criminal justice system, ought to come as no real surprise.

Our history of building penal institutions, going back to the construction of Kingston Penitentiary in the 19th century, is replete with the declarations of politicians of the time that this new edifice will be progressive, transformative, and represent a step forward in our treatment of inmates. Each and every time, these promises, however well-intentioned and sincerely made by their declarators, seem to fall short, and ultimately degenerate into farce.

Prison facilities are the embodiment of institutionalized punishment. The most state of the art, modern, progressive design will still be run and operated by individuals whose very job description embodies a power imbalance. This fact is incontrovertible.

This brings us to the issues that have now surfaced in the media about the failings of the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre to deliver on its promises of being a progressive, rehabilitative facility. As reported in the *Toronto Star*, there has been a history of complaints issuing from the centre since its inception. Complaints range from the adequacy of the food, to denial of access to medical treatment, to outright abuse and excessive disciplinary actions. In short, the [provincial youth advocate's report](#) has found that the "Roy" is at risk of subverting its own mission goal of "relationship custody."

While it is not possible to evaluate the legitimacy or accuracy of each and every complaint, and certainly some of the complainants may have other agendas, the trend has been disturbing.

The problem is perhaps less a function of the failings or deficiencies of the facility, as it is with the simple fact that a penal institution is always going to trend in that direction, for the reasons cited above. A further problem is due to the supply of inmates: too many youths are being subject to detention orders, and the system becomes quickly overburdened.

The oversupply of inmates, a problem which extends far more dramatically to the adult facilities, is perhaps in part a paradoxical consequence of the well-intentioned motives behind the creation of the "Roy" in the first place: simply put, if there is a narrative out there that there is a wonderfully progressive facility where misguided youth can be housed and rehabilitated pending trial, then the courts may be more inclined to order their detention. One can see how this could quickly result in a strained and over-extended penal environment.

The result? The same old narrative which has played out since the first prison opened for business: overcrowded, over-authoritative, cruel, and abusive institutions.