

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Barriers to Timely Transfer out of Structured Intervention Units

*Inmate preference for SIU accommodation and structural population management factors impede timely transfers out of SIUs.***Why we did this study**

Structured Intervention Units (SIUs) were established in the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) on November 30th, 2019. SIUs are intended to provide an appropriate living environment to individuals whose accommodation within a mainstream population could threaten the security of the institution or others, the safety of the offender, or the integrity of an investigation¹. Legislation² holds that “an inmate’s confinement in a structured intervention unit is to end as soon as possible.”

What we did

As part of a larger study examining SIUs, analysis was conducted of factors impeding timely transfers out of SIUs. Findings are based on data collection at four SIU sites (Millhaven Institution, Atlantic Institution, Kent Institution, and Stony Mountain Institution) and rooted in a mixed method approach (over 200 hours of observation, 90 inmate interviews, and 90 staff interviews).

What we found

A key factor impeding timely transfer out of SIUs is inmate preference for SIU accommodation. While different considerations were emphasized, safety factors were most often cited. Specifically, inmates often situated their desire to remain in the SIU within the context of the perceived violent and unsafe environment associated with mainstream units (particularly within maximum security settings). Many indicated they were not amenable to mainstream integration either due to safety factors (e.g., incompatibles), as well as perceptions of generalized violence. SIUs were viewed as affording greater safety.

Staff likewise explained that the SIU was often perceived as a venue to avoid the risks associated with mainstream units, noting how the potential of violence within mainstream security ranges contributed to a population of “refusers” (i.e., inmates unwilling to leave the SIU). It was explained that these individuals were sometimes stigmatized, vulnerable, or otherwise did not hold high status within the inmate population.

Along with safety concerns, some inmates expressed that the conditions of mainstream units precluded the advancement of their case and personal goals, insofar as “inmate politics” and subculture activity were difficult to escape. As a result, the SIU was perceived to be a steppingstone to advance case

objectives (e.g., several inmates indicated they were “waiting out their medium” or “waiting out release” in the SIU).

Staff members often expressed that asymmetries in conditions and resources also prompted refusals to leave the SIU, citing examples such as one-on-one interventions, frequent contact with case management staff and institutional management, daily visits from healthcare and management, access to special programs, as well as amenities not provided in mainstream. Some inmates noted these asymmetries prompted instrumental requests for SIU status (e.g., to access certain amenities/services).

Beyond inmate preferences for/refusals to leave SIUs, staff indicated that there are structural challenges that render it difficult to identify viable transfer out options. Staff described growing complexities within the federal inmate population, marked by layers of incompatibles tied to shifts in the areas of inmate politics, Security Threat Group (STG) dynamics, and drug subculture. Limited maximum security sites/bed space, combined with lack of coordination across regions, were also described as factors precluding timely mainstream integration.

What it means

Individual and structural factors impede timely transfer out of SIUs. Recognizing that the SIU model is relatively new within CSC’s organizational history, staff are currently exploring strategies to contend with systemic operational challenges that impede timely transfers out of SIUs, including complex and evolving population dynamics, resource pull towards SIUs, and inmate accountability factors. These initiatives are taking place alongside organizational strategies to enhance communication, coordination and synergy to improve SIU results.

For more information

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¹ Section 34.1 of the [Corrections and Conditional Release Act](#) (CCRA).

² Section 33 of the CCRA.