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# Research Review

## IMPACT OF THE YOUTH CORRECTIONS ACT

### Abstract

Research concerning the impact of the Youth Corrections Act (YCA) on the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is reviewed. Overall, several patterns of findings emerge. First, studies of individuals with age-related eligibility for YCA sentences suggest that typically, adjudication has met the intent of the YCA, with YCA sentences given to the younger eligibles with less extensive criminal histories and more substantial needs for rehabilitative programs. Second, the YCA population in the BOP has decreased steadily in recent years and will continue to do so since the YCA was repealed by Congress in late 1984. Third, YCA prisoners have proven to be violent, especially when housed exclusively with other inmates sentenced under YCA statutes. Fourth, YCA inmates comply with prescribed involvement in educational and vocational training programs, but, in comparison to non-YCA counterparts, they are less motivated to participate in the programs. Finally, data from the survey responses of staff demonstrate the deleterious impact on job satisfaction, morale and turnover of working with volatile populations of YCA prisoners. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for population age-blending and maintaining inmate family ties.

### INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the 20th century, the rehabilitative movement reached its zenith in the U.S. in the form of the medical model, which assumes that crime is a product of defects in personal characteristics, attitudes, or behavior that can be restructured with correctional intervention. Derived from the medical model, the Youth Corrections Act (YCA) was enacted in 1950 to provide specialized treatment for youthful offenders that would result in their rehabilitation. In October, 1984 the YCA was repealed by Congress as part of a growing movement against the medical model and indeterminate sentences. However, persons arrested prior to the date of repeal, if convicted, can still be sentenced under the YCA. Furthermore, approximately 750 federal prisoners are serving YCA sentences and their legal status will not be affected by the repeal.

The YCA implicitly assumes that younger, less criminally sophisticated offenders would be more responsive to rehabilitative programs than older, "hardened" prisoners. During the last decade, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and others have conducted a variety of research projects concerned with the YCA including YCA offender population trends and background characteristics, as well as the impact of the YCA upon prison functions involving both inmates and staff.

December, 1985

The Federal Youth Corrections Act (YCA) became effective in 1950 and was repealed in 1984. Much like the so-called "medical model of corrections," the intent of the YCA was to provide an environment in which young offenders could strive to improve their future by participating in education, vocational training, work, counseling and other programs. Judicial interpretation also required that YCA offenders be incarcerated in inmate populations that do not include older, more criminally sophisticated non-YCA prisoners who it is believed would further corrupt the youth.

In 1982 the BOP consolidated all YCA prisoners into three separate institutions. While research had previously evaluated questions regarding YCA offenders, the 1982 consolidation yielded an opportunity for initiation of an intensive study of the YCA offender, including several related studies of the performance and attitudes of inmates, of staff working with YCA prisoners, and of institution functions.

The research results suggest correctional administrators reconsider the notion that housing young offenders together and separate from older, more criminally experienced inmates will facilitate rehabilitation. On the contrary, pure-youth populations did not encourage disciplinary adjustment or the motivation to prepare for return to the community upon release. In fact, the evidence showed that a mixture of younger and older inmates was less volatile than a population of all young prisoners, and that inmates in the institution composed of all young offenders (YCA's) were less willing to participate in rehabilitative programs than older, non-YCA counterparts.

Norman A. Carlson  
Director

### RECENT POPULATION TRENDS

The decision in *Watts v. Hadden*, 651 F. 2d 1354 (10th Cir. 1981) required the separation of YCA offenders from adults, consequently, three institutions were set aside to house the YCA prisoners in custody beginning in November 1982. Since that time, the total YCA population has decreased at a rate of approximately 1.5% per month (See Figure 1). The three YCA facilities were initially populated at capacity. However, as the YCA population has gradually decreased, the YCA prisons have been under-populated, whereas, the typical adult BOP institution has been significantly overcrowded. Hence, the requirement that the shrinking YCA population be incarcerated separately from adult prisoners has created disparities in population densities of YCA and non-YCA federal prisons.

## POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

Studies of YCA inmate characteristics reflect the extent to which adjudication has satisfied the intent of the YCA to identify young, less criminally sophisticated individuals for rehabilitative treatment. Furthermore, information gathered by probation officers for Pre-Sentence Investigation reports regarding educational or employment deficiencies is available at the time of sentencing. Hence, research on offender characteristics would also indicate whether YCA sentences have been assigned to offenders with greater employment- or education-related treatment needs. Several studies (Singleton & Kane, 1984; Gottfredson, Chandler, & Cohen, 1983; and Vanyur, 1981) have examined the characteristics of YCA prisoners. Each one has demonstrated that individuals given YCA sentences are

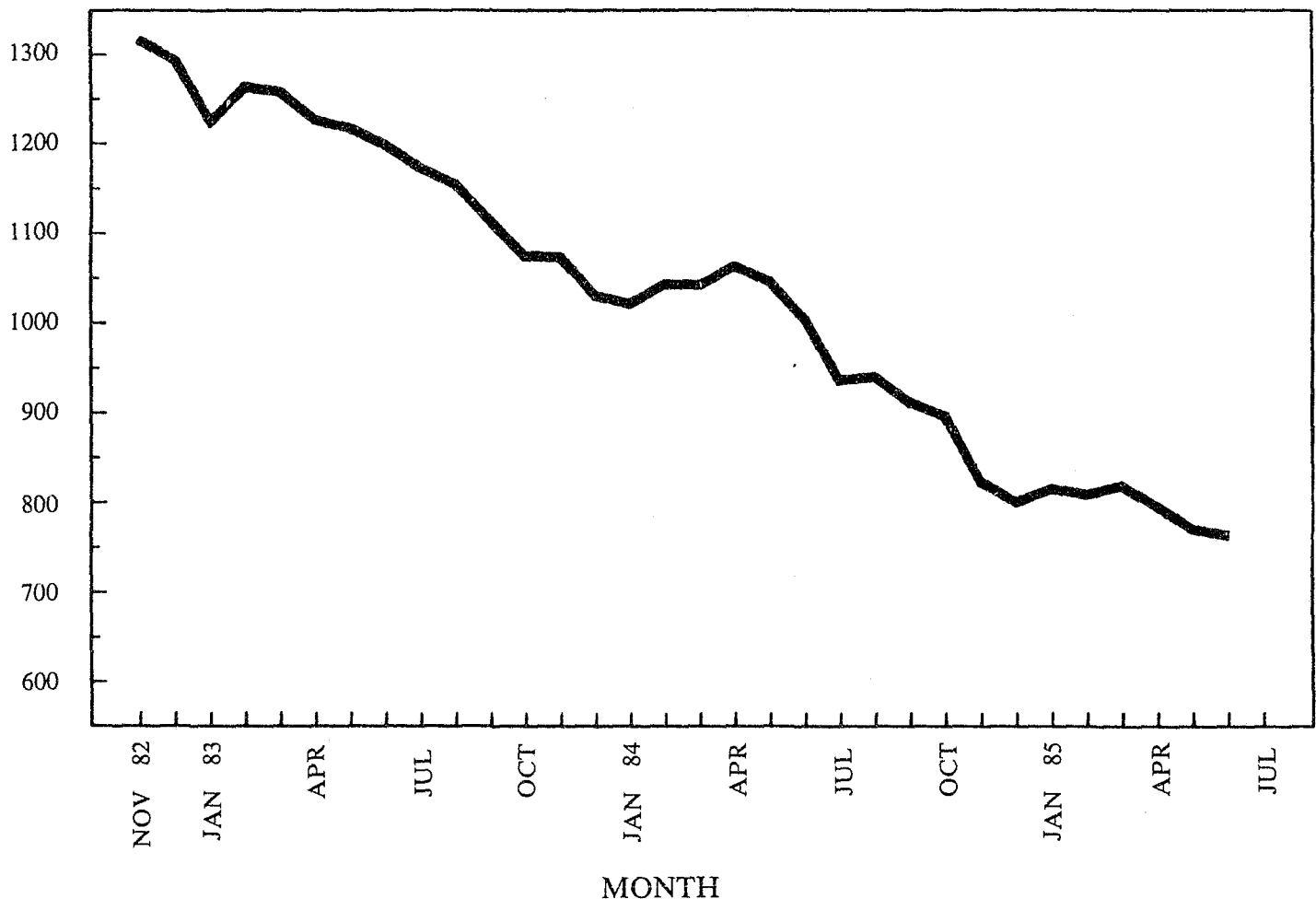
generally younger than non-YCA inmates who were concurrently eligible for a YCA sentence at adjudication. However, the findings on criminal sophistication and program needs are mixed.

## Criminal Sophistication

For purposes of analysis and discussion, an individual's criminal sophistication has been represented by elements of criminal history such as prior convictions or commitments. The three relevant research projects (Vanyur, 1981; Singleton & Kane, 1984; and Gottfredson, *et al.*, 1983) revealed that YCA and non-YCA offenders are similar in terms of some indicators of criminal history, however, each study also revealed significant differences. Over the approximately fifteen years covered collectively by

FIGURE 1  
**YCA POPULATION TRENDS**  
MONTHLY COUNTS FOR NOVEMBER 1982 - JUNE 1985

## AVERAGE DAILY POPULATION



these studies, a pattern unfolds: in comparison to non-YCA prisoners, YCA offenders have less extensive criminal histories in terms of indicators including, numbers of prior arrests, convictions and commitments, and the amount of time served on previous felony convictions.<sup>1</sup> The pattern in these findings suggests that judges have adjudicated young individuals in accordance with the intent of the YCA: to assign YCA sentences to young offenders who have less criminal sophistication and weaker ties to crime and who, therefore, are more likely to benefit from rehabilitative treatment.

### Treatment Needs

There is some evidence to suggest that in deliberating a YCA sentence, judges have considered not only criminal sophistication but also information that reflects treatment needs. Research data indicates that in comparison to the crimes of non-YCA offenders, the instant offenses of YCA prisoners tend to be more serious, involving violence (Vanyur, 1981; and Singleton & Kane, 1984). Plausibly, judges infer from the violent activity that a treatment environment is most apt to remediate aggressive tendencies, hence, the assignment of a YCA sentence. Furthermore, two studies have examined the education and employment histories of YCA offenders. The research on commitments of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Gottfredson, et al., 1983) indicated that YCA prisoners were better educated but had greater deficiencies in work experience than non-YCA counterparts. In data on commitments during the early 1980s (Singleton & Kane, 1984), greater deficiencies in both prior employment and education were found in the histories of offenders who received YCA rather than regular adult sentences. While only the latter study indicates the significance of educational deficiencies, both confirm the importance of employment problems in the assignment of YCA sentences.

To summarize, available research provides evidence that; in comparison to non-YCA commitments YCA offenders have been: significantly younger in all time periods studied; less criminally sophisticated, despite a tendency toward violence in their instant offenses; and more deficient in prior education in one of two studies and in prior work experience in both studies reviewed. Overall, research findings on the characteristics of YCA versus non-YCA commitments suggest that young offenders have been adjudicated in accord with the intent of the YCA.

### YCA PRISONERS

Several studies have documented the behavior and attitudes of YCA offenders while incarcerated, with the focus on behavior ranging from misconduct to involvement in treatment programs, and the measurement of attitudes including such issues as YCA sentences, program involvement, and post-release adjustment.

### Behavior

Following the Watts v. Hadden, 651 F. 2d 1354 (10th Cir. 1981) decision that required the BOP to incarcerate YCA offenders in separate institutions, much research attention was directed toward the hypothesis that younger inmate populations become more volatile as they approach age homogeneity.

The BOP developed a research program (Vanyur & Nacci, 1982) to monitor the effects of consolidating YCA inmates into homogeneous populations. In one study (Weber, Kane, & Miller, 1983) inmate behavior and institution functions were recorded at six facilities before, during and after the consolidation. The study institutions included the three becoming homogeneous YCA populations and three from which a large proportion of the YCA complement was being transferred. Findings revealed that the proportion of YCA inmates in population is directly related to management problems including increases in escapes, inmate/inmate assaults, serious misconduct overall, administrative detention orders for protection of inmates, and reductions in visits from family and friends; and to positive outcomes involving increased enrollments in educational and vocational training programs.

In a study involving inmates at a single institution during the late 1970s, Saylor (1983) examined trends in misconduct rates before and after the population changed from homogeneous YCA to a mixture of YCA and significantly older non-YCA and continued the analysis through and beyond a later period when homogeneous YCA living quarters were established within the context of the mixed youth/adult population. Misconduct rates were significantly inflated among YCA offenders in homogeneous youth settings, whether the setting is the population as a whole or living quarters within a mixed population.

In an earlier single institution study (Cavior, 1978) spanning a shorter period of time than either of the above projects, findings also indicated that misconduct rates are higher as the proportion of YCA offenders in population grows larger. In summary, BOP studies of the behavior of YCA offenders have consistently demonstrated the propensity of this group for involvement in prohibited acts, including violence. The pattern is corroborated by other BOP research substantiating the relationship between age (youth) and misconduct, especially violence (Kane & Saylor, 1981; Kane & Janus, 1982; Gaes & McGuire, 1983). The research already reviewed comparing the criminal histories of recent YCA and non-YCA sentenced youth (Singleton & Kane, 1984; Kissel, 1985) revealed that YCA offenders are more likely to have a violent instant offense as well. An implication is that the high rate of prison violence among YCA inmates may be due not only to the greater physical capacity of youth for altercation, but perhaps also to some personal disposition common to the YCA subgroup of young prisoners.

## Attitudes

Based upon survey research (Kane & Miller, 1985), a profile of YCA inmate attitudes complements much of the earlier behavioral research.<sup>2</sup> A random sample of approximately 33% of the inmates at each of the three all-YCA institutions was surveyed during the spring and summer of 1984. A non-YCA comparison sample was also randomly selected, including inmates whose ages at the time of conviction made them eligible for a YCA sentence. Survey responses were made confidentially by participants.

Violence and Danger. Respondents' attitudes toward violence were measured. Findings revealed that both YCA and non-YCA inmates endorse an eye-for-an-eye rule of thumb in response to violence done to them. However, YCA prisoners are significantly more likely than non-YCA counterparts to use aggression strategically to dominate in conflict situations ranging from verbal arguments to physical altercations.<sup>3</sup> The latter disposition plausibly underlies the behavior patterns reviewed above: that YCA offenders are more likely to have a violent instant offense in spite of indications that they are less criminally sophisticated; and homogeneous youth populations are more violence-prone than mixed youth/adult populations. Furthermore, YCA survey respondents held stronger beliefs than non-YCA prisoners that their current institution was not safe for an average or weaker inmate to inhabit. Therefore, it is not surprising that in their responses 62% of YCA inmates said they "would feel safer in a regular adult institution" and 68% believed that "housing only younger inmates together causes more problems for inmates."

Program Involvement. In response to the rehabilitative intent of the YCA, the BOP has made available a variety of programs through which YCA offenders can pursue personal development. Prisoners can complete Adult Basic Education, pursue a General Equivalency Diploma, or enroll in college level courses. To develop job-related skills, YCA inmates can participate in education or vocational training programs in a wide variety of specialties; for example, air conditioning and refrigeration, auto mechanics, business education, carpentry, commercial photography, computer programming and technology, drafting, offset printing, plumbing, and welding. Self-development programs include group efforts in such areas as assertiveness training, career planning, chemical abuse, conflict resolution, parenting, self-image enhancement, and stress management. Finally, a variety of psychological therapies are provided, and paying jobs are available in prison industries (UNICOR).

The Weber, et al. (1983) data showed that rates of program enrollment increased as YCA populations approached homogeneity. The survey responses are congruent: a greater percentage of YCA than non-YCA prisoners reported being involved in education and vocational training. Nonetheless, data on prisoners' motivations for program participation

are less positive. The responses of YCA prisoners revealed that, in comparison to non-YCA inmates, they are less committed overall to participation in programs that even they sense they need; and specifically, their involvement in education and vocational training programs is less voluntary than that of the non-YCAs. Under the prescriptions of the YCA, program involvement is mandatory for inmates. Therefore, these data on prisoners' attitudes indicate that the high rate of YCA program participation is motivated less by a personal sense of need than the courts and prison administrators would hope, and more by the requirement to demonstrate for the classification team and the parole board that rehabilitative progress is being made.

Family Influence. The expectations and values that a prisoner's family conveys may have a significant impact upon the individual's adjustment both in prison and after release, if the family is important to the inmate. Survey findings indicated that YCA and non-YCA inmates do not differ in this regard. In particular, approximately 80% of YCA respondents said that it is important to them that their families stand by them currently and after release, indicating the significance of family relationships. Furthermore, on many other survey items, respondents showed a strong awareness that their families expect them: to adjust during incarceration by taking advantage of rehabilitative programs and staying out of trouble; and to adjust after release by maintaining employment and a stable residence, and by abiding with the law and avoiding involvement with wayward peers. Prior research suggests that the maintenance of inmates' family ties is an important factor in preventing involvement in institution misconduct (Nacci & Kane, 1982) and contributing to success on parole (Glaser, 1964; Ohlin, 1954). Unfortunately, the Weber, et al. (1983) data indicated that the centralization of YCA inmates in special institutions led to a reduction in visits between prisoners and their families. On the other hand, separate research on federal inmates (Nacci & Kane, 1982) shows that prison line staff can exert a positive influence on prisoners' attitudes and behavior, actually reducing involvement in prohibited acts. Therefore, the quality of staff-inmate interactions is also of paramount importance.

## STAFF WORKING WITH YCA INMATES

Before the data on inmate behavior and attitudes was gathered and analyzed, researchers' discussions with a small group of employees revealed a conventional wisdom asserting that YCA populations are more violent and difficult to manage than older or mixed-age populations. A research project (Kane, Weber, & Miller, 1983) tested whether YCA staff in general experienced the difficulty reflected in the conventional wisdom of a few and whether job satisfaction and morale were affected by the responsibility of supervising YCA prisoners. Thus, approximately five months after the consolidation of the YCA population in three facilities, surveys were administered to staff at those institutions, and

at three comparison facilities to record the experiences and morale of staff who supervised young non-YCA inmates. The comparison institutions were the same ones used in the research on inmate behavior—facilities from which a substantial portion of the YCA population was being transferred. Therefore, most of the comparison group at the non-YCA facilities did have prior experience with YCA offenders.

### Experiences

In comparison to non-YCA staff, YCA staff recalled a greater number of inmate-on-staff assaults through the prior year, during and after consolidation. Also, they expected more fights, inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff assaults, and misconduct overall in the upcoming year. Clearly, the data on inmate behavior reviewed above corroborate the experiences and expectations revealed by employees. Furthermore, the YCA staff found their jobs to be more frustrating, less challenging, less satisfying, less interesting, and less worthwhile than the non-YCA staff.

### Ramifications

Additionally, a causal model was tested only for YCA staff to examine causal effects of working with YCA inmates on job satisfaction, morale, and considerations of quitting. Results indicated that experience with YCA inmates and their misconduct, and reduced safety in the environment negatively affected job satisfaction and morale and increased the pursuit of alternative employment—turnover.

In summary, findings on inmate behavior indicated that the consolidation of the YCA population yielded greater supervision problems for line staff. Staff survey data demonstrated that these management problems deflated morale and increased the potential for staff turnover.

## CONCLUSIONS

Data on the background characteristics of young offenders eligible for YCA sentences who were committed under YCA and non-YCA procedures revealed that, during the most recent period of study (1980–1984), judges have sentenced in accord with the YCA: the individuals given YCA sentences are less criminally sophisticated in terms of their criminal histories than persons sentenced under non-YCA procedures, and have greater needs for treatment programs including education, vocational training, and counseling to deal with problems reflected by the tendency of YCA offenders to be involved in violent instant offenses. However, research on the attitudes of YCA inmates indicated that the inordinately difficult job of program managers in dealing with the treatment needs of the YCA population is made more difficult by the fact that YCA prisoners are less willing than non-YCA counterparts to be involved in treatment programs. This motivational problem

is especially revealing since YCA prisoners must meet the program plans set forth in classification to demonstrate progress toward rehabilitation to the satisfaction of their classification team and the parole board.

Negative outcomes also follow from attempts to insulate YCA inmates from the corrupting influence of older prisoners by housing the youth in centralized, homogeneous populations. Prior research suggests that the expectations of family and friends can enhance both institution and post-release adjustment. However, geographic centralization thwarts contact with family and friends that otherwise should enhance the prisoner's awareness that good institutional behavior and post-release adjustment are important to the significant others. Additionally, research on pure populations of young inmates has clearly demonstrated that such groups are volatile: YCA prisoners assert attitudes that endorse the aggressive use of coercion to resolve interpersonal conflict, and their willing use of violence has been demonstrated by the inflated assault rates among pure YCA populations. Furthermore, population volatility demoralizes line staff responsible for supervising inmates and increases the likelihood of employee turnover. Staff under such conditions are less likely to be motivated to exert the positive influence on inmate attitudes and behavior that prior research indicates is possible. The major implications are two. First, since mixed age populations are less volatile and deleterious to institution functions, blending younger with older inmates is desirable. And second, geographic proximity to family and friends is preferable because it can facilitate inmates' institution and post-release adjustment.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Despite a problem with considerable missing data, one sample (1978–79) in the Vanyur (1981) project revealed an exception to the pattern—higher numbers of prior convictions and commitments for YCA than non-YCA offenders.

<sup>2</sup> The authors wish to thank several analysts for significant contributions to the construction and administration of this survey, including, alphabetically: Laure Weber Brooks, Susan Czajkowski, Marshall Haimes, Peter Kissel, John Meacham, Melissa Sickmund, and Ed Singleton.

<sup>3</sup> Statistical analyses showed that this difference in attitudes is not based on a difference in chronological ages of the group.

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