

# Erie County's Census Management Project:

## A Successful Alternative to Juvenile Detention Overcrowding Seven Years After Implementation



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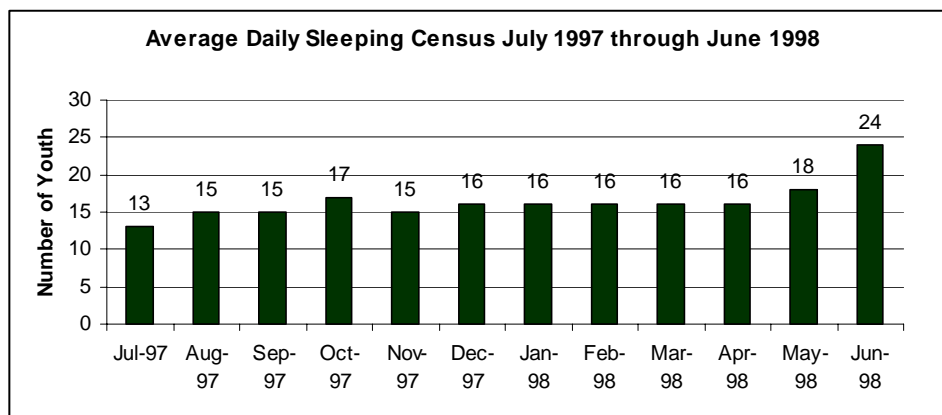
## OVERVIEW OF DETENTION

### Detention Overcrowding

According to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (1998) the number of youth being detained within detention rose by 72% from 1985 to 1995. This increase led to severe overcrowding, resulting in roughly 39% of detention centers being overcapacity (Sickmund, 2002). Erie County was no exception.

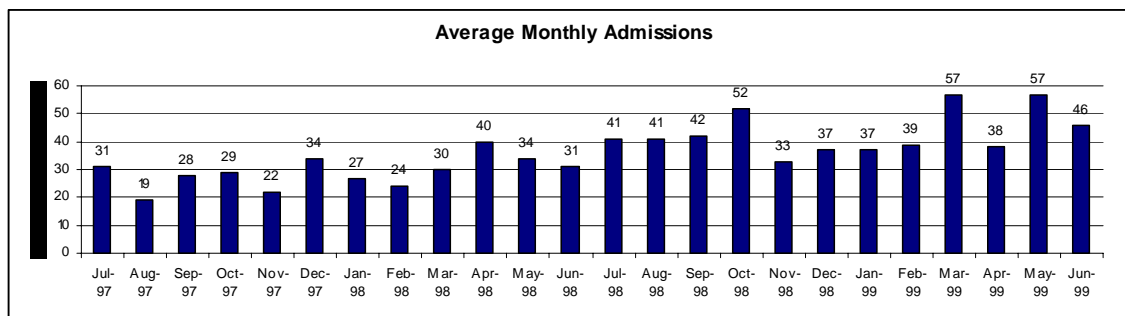
The Edmund L. Thomas Detention Center is the only secure juvenile detention facility in Erie County with a capacity of 20 beds. The average daily census increased from 13 juveniles in July 1997 to 24 juveniles in June 1998 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.



Overall admissions increased from an average of 29 per month during July 1997 through June 1998 to 43 per month during July 1998 through June 1999 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.



Many counties in Pennsylvania chose to construct new detention facilities to accommodate the rising numbers. The Erie County Office of Children and Youth made the decision to embark upon a new initiative, in conjunction with the Mercyhurst College Civic Institute, to reduce the number of juveniles in secure detention while avoiding the cost of building a new, larger detention facility. The census management project was seen as the only feasible immediate response to overcrowding, but also was a project that supported the philosophy of juvenile justice, which is to provide youth with the least

restrictive setting as possible while not to compromise safety and security. The census management project assures that this philosophy is applied to youth who require detention.

### **Research on Alternatives to Secure Detention**

In 2000, OJJDP funded efforts to reduce reliance on secure detention in 16 states and territories. The efforts included victim and offender mediation and rehabilitation, workshops, peer courts, electronic monitoring, and home detention, among others. Very few of the efforts conducted outcome evaluations to measure program effectiveness and non-secure residential programming for juveniles awaiting their adjudications were less studies than the other alternatives.

Risk assessments have become a more common practice at various points of contact in the juvenile justice system; however, the census management project is unique in that it provides detention options other than secure detention to those youth already identified as needing detained. The components to a successful risk assessment instrument include: 1) an objective scoring process, 2) utilization of measures that are reliable and consistent, and 3) utilization of items that are statistically correlated with criminal behavior (Austin, Johnson, & Weitzer, 2005). Such factors include the number and severity of the current charges, age of initial arrest, prior success/failure with community supervision programming, and stability factors such as prior court appearances, prior offenses (Johnson, Wagner, & Matthews, 2002; Hardyman, 1999).

To implement the census management project, the Mercyhurst College Civic Institute developed the “Mercyhurst Level of Security Screening Instrument” (MLSSI) to help make decisions about which youth admitted to detention are eligible for transfer to shelter services. The screening instrument attempts to assure that those youth transferred pose less risk to community safety, less risk of absconding and less risk of harming themselves and re-offending than do ineligible youth.

## **ERIE COUNTY’S DETENTION CENSUS MANAGEMENT PROJECT**

### **Criteria for Transfer**

According to the Mercyhurst screening instrument, for a youth to be transferred from secure detention to private shelter services, the youth must meet **all** of the following criteria: **1)** not be detained for a violent offense (including criminal homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, kidnapping, and any felony in which the juvenile is in possession of a firearm or explosive), **2)** have never been adjudicated delinquent on the basis of a violent offense, **3)** have never absconded from a court-ordered placement, **4)** is not subject to a court-order requiring secure placement, and **5)** is not a chronic juvenile offender (youth with at least three prior delinquency adjudications arising from separate incidents, where at least one was serious enough to have led to court-ordered residential placement). Risk assessments should permit a certain level of discretion through the availability of overrides based on the professional judgment of staff and the MLSSI also incorporates an override process. The

Erie County Juvenile Probation Department can authorize approval for the transfer of this youth to a staff secure facility in the event the youth fails the MLSSI.

### **Transfer Protocol**

Once it has been determined which youth are eligible for transfer, administrators from the ELTAC review behavioral observations and try to select the most appropriate residents for transfer. Simply because a resident is eligible according to the risk assessment does not guarantee that he or she will be moved to a less restrictive program. After it has been determined that a youth is appropriate for transfer based upon the risk assessment and behavioral observations, the administrators at ELTAC contact the service providers who either gather needed information via the phone or formally interview the eligible residents. Based upon this information, the service providers accept or reject the adolescent. If a youth is accepted for transfer, probation supervisors, as well as the youth's parents, are notified. A transfer information checklist is completed by the ELTAC's administrators and staff, and a security sheet is faxed to the probation department to verify the daily census. Finally, the ELTAC transports the youth to the new facility, following the Erie County Juvenile Probation Department's transportation policy.

### **MLSSI Data**

The census management project of Erie County has been operating and formally tracked since October 1, 1998. The following report outlines the procedures of the project and data collected pertaining to the youth that participated and outcomes of the program.

During the period from October 1, 1998 to December 31, 2005, 3,122 screenings were conducted with youth entering the Edmund L. Thomas Detention Center. Fifty-four percent of those screened were identified as white and 34% black. Seventy-nine percent were male. Twenty-two percent were sixteen years old and another 22% were seventeen years old at the time of the screening. The most common reason for detainment was identified as probation violations (12%) followed by burglary charges (9%), aggravated assault charges (7%), and electronic monitoring violations (6%). Seven percent of youth had an outstanding bench warrant at the time of detainment. Thirteen percent of those screened were identified by probation as having a history of attempting or threatening suicide, and 50% were identified as having a history of a drug and/or alcohol problem.

Of all the youth screened, 61% were eligible for transfer based on the MLSSI. Those youth **1)** were not detained for a violent offense (including criminal homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, kidnapping, and any felony in which the juvenile is in possession of a firearm or explosive), **2)** never had been adjudicated delinquent on the basis of a violent offense, **3)** never absconded from a court-ordered placement, **4)** was not subject to a court-order requiring secure detention, and **5)** was not a chronic juvenile offender (youth with at least three prior delinquency adjudications arising from separate incidents, where at least one was serious enough to have led to court-ordered residential placement). An additional 12% were eligible for transfer through the override process. As a result of the census management project, 1,431 transfers were transacted (46% of youth screened) moving youth from secure to shelter care between October 1, 1998 and December 31, 2005.

### **Characteristics of Youth Transferred**

Of those youth transferred, 56% were white and 30% were identified as black. Seventy-four percent of transfers were male.

The most frequent reasons youth transferred were initially detained included probation violations (14%) and electronic monitoring violations (8%). Other reasons included charges for: burglary (9%), aggravated assault (6%), simple assault (6%), terroristic threats (6%), and theft by unlawful taking (6%). Those youth transferred with aggravated assault charges were transferred through the over-ride process, requiring authorization from the probation officers.

The number of juveniles transferred through the census management project on account of override scores was 14% of all youth transferred, which is within the standard (5%-15%) according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2005).

Of those transfers, 1,431 transfers (98%) were identified as being successful. A transfer was deemed successful when the youth transferred: **1**) did not commit any new delinquent acts during the alternative placement, **2**) did not abscond from the alternative placement, and **4**) attended all scheduled hearings.

### **Transfer Facilities & Impact on Detention Census**

There are a number of staff secure facilities used to receive youth transferred from secure detention to staff secure facilities. The most frequently utilized facility between October 1, 1998 and September 30, 2005 was Perseus House receiving 950 youth (66%) followed by Hermitage House receiving 231 youth (16%) (see Figure 3). The Edmund L. Thomas Center Shelter received 120 (8%) youth from detention.\* Harborcreek also accepted 59 youth (4%) and Abraxas received 42 (3%). Other shelters accepted 2% of all transferred youth, each shelter individually receiving less than 1%.

Figure 3.

<b>Shelter</b>	<b># of Transfers</b>	<b>% of Transfers</b>
Perseus House	950	66.4%
Hermitage House	231	16.1%
Edmund L. Thomas Shelter	120	8.4%
Harborcreek	59	4.1%
Abraxas	42	2.9%
Other	29	2.0%

The census management project was spurred by the increase in admissions at the ELTAC in 1998. Since the project's implementation, admissions have fluctuated, but have not significantly decreased. However, the average daily sleeping census has remained relatively stable with quarterly averages between 15 and 20 youth (see Figures 4 &5).

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\* The six shelter beds were converted into secure detention beds in December 1999.

Figure 4.

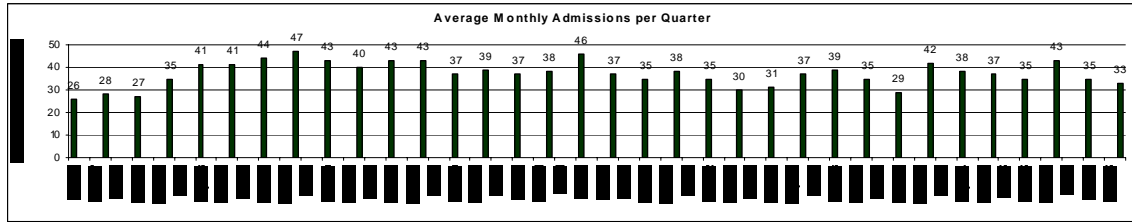
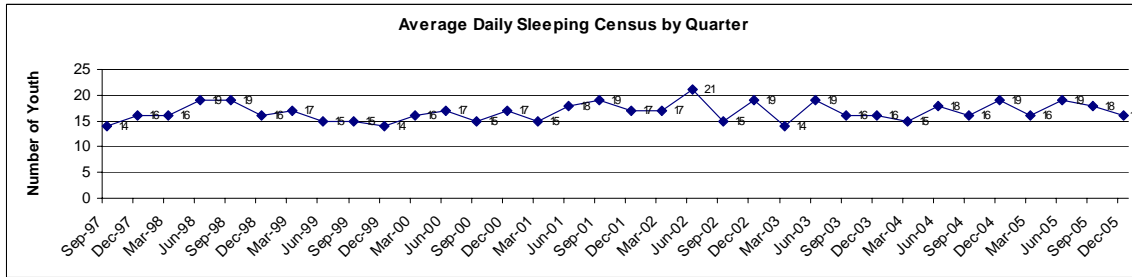


Figure 5.



**Cost-Benefit**

Detention is the most expensive route in the juvenile justice system, costing on average \$250 per day and only receiving a 50% reimbursement rate from the state. Shelter stays cost on average \$190 per day and receive a rate of 90% reimbursement from the state. Due to TANF funding covering the county costs for detention beds, the savings from the census management project may not currently be recognized; however, as of January 1, 2006, TANF is no longer available to reimburse costs associated with detention stays. Between July 1, 2001 and September 30, 2005, 784 transfers were transacted, totaling 15,963 days youth were outsourced to safe secure shelters from detention. During that time period and in the absence of TANF, the county would have saved roughly \$1.7 million through the census management project.

**Conclusions**

The census management project continues to maintain its success.

- 98% of youth transferred from October 1, 1998 and September 30, 2005 were deemed successful.
- In the absence of TANF funds, during the period of July 1, 2001 and September 30, 2005, the project saved the county roughly \$1.7 million.
- The county has saved a significant amount of money by avoiding the need for a new, larger detention facility.
- The elimination of TANF for detention costs further emphasizes the need for options outside of secure detention.

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