

EDITORIAL:
THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD FROM CARE IN CANADA

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Abstract: This introduction to the special issue provides an overview of the status of transitions from care in Canada. Currently, few statistics are collected on youth in and from care and regional disparities contribute to a comparatively low level of services overall, as well as a fragmented approach to policies outlining the rights of those who have grown up in government care. The contributions in the issue exemplify the growing interest in care leaving research and theory building in Canada, as well as the significant advocacy provided by care-experienced youth leaders, all of which augur well for the future of care leaving across the country.

Keywords: transitions to adulthood from care, care leaving, Canada

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About 6,000 young Canadians leave substitute care every year when services end (Bowie et al., 2021). Indeed, that number may be an underestimate, as neither federal nor provincial governments in Canada consistently collect data on youth in and from care (Trocmé et al., 2016), and even when data is collected, reporting methods differ (Saint-Girons et al., 2020). Young people in this country are placed into care when their biological families have been judged unable to care for them by the standards of provincial and territorial youth protection legislation. They end up in kinship care, foster homes, group homes, or residential placement, but only until they “age out” of placement services as mandated by age thresholds that are in force in each jurisdiction. While overall statistics are lacking, it has been well documented that Canadian youth from care face enormous obstacles as they transition into adulthood. Up to 80% of these young people have special needs and face housing insecurity, early pregnancy and parenthood, poor health and mental health, and criminal justice system involvement at much higher rates than their age-mates (Kovarikova, 2017). Youth from care are half as likely as other Canadians to attend post-secondary school (Bounajm et al., 2014), and are significantly overrepresented among homeless youth in this country (Nichols et al., 2017).

Every province and territory in Canada has its own system of care and its own child welfare legislation (Doucet & Mann-Feder, 2021). The age at which youth can no longer stay in care varies among jurisdictions, as does the extent of available after-care support (van Breda et al., 2020). Young people leave care in Canada between the ages of 18 and 21, and while some are entitled to help well into their 20s, others receive virtually no support even if they have been wards of the state for most of their growing-up years. In this way, the transition to adulthood from care in Canada is marked by significant territorial injustice. Of concern is that both Indigenous young people and visible minority groups are grossly overrepresented in the Canadian care systems (Bowie et al., 2021); Sukumaran, 2021), and Canada has been subject to criticism from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child for its poor track record in relation to child welfare (Bernstein, 2016; Bounajm et al., 2014).

How Does Canada Compare to Other Countries Regarding Youth Transitioning From Care?

In 2019, Canada was one of 36 countries that participated in an international comparative survey, conducted by Strahl et al. (2020), that documented programs and policies in relation to the transition from care to adulthood. The results were concerning. While Canada was the fifth richest country in the sample, regional disparities contributed to a comparatively low level of programs and services overall, and a relatively fragmented approach to policies outlining the rights of care-experienced young people. The majority of the countries surveyed (68%) provided extended care for young people so they can remain in placement until 21 or older. In Canada, extended care is only officially possible in Newfoundland, in Nova Scotia, and for some youth in foster homes in Quebec (van Breda et al., 2020), although there is some evidence of informal arrangements whereby some foster parents keep youth in their homes even in the absence of compensation.

Likewise, the extent to which care leavers are entitled to transitional housing, education and employment support, and therapy varies greatly across Canada, and services and programs are often subject to restrictive eligibility criteria that cannot be met by all youth transitioning from placement (Sansone et al., 2020). Some other countries in the Global North, however, have defined these programs and services as universal entitlements for all who leave care (Strahl et al., 2020). These entitlements are increasingly framed as rights and make provisions for a full range of supports and services that youth leaving care need and want, without exclusions or special application processes. In addition, a significant percentage of other countries have adopted legislative frameworks at the federal level to define entitlements for youth leaving care, so that in other places where youth protection is administered on a regional level, as it is in Canada, legal frameworks are in place to ensure equity for all care leavers (Strahl et al., 2020).

The Current Status of Research and Publication on Transitions Out of Care in Canada

In part due to the absence of reliable baseline data on children and youth in care, and the poor level of documentation of programs and services that do exist across Canada, there has been little research “on the efficacy of child welfare services ... and limited evidence of new policies and programs” (Trocmé et al., 2016, Abstract). Ongoing research tends not to be published in peer reviewed journals: as much as half of the research on transitions to adulthood from care in Canada is accessible only through the grey literature (Shubert, 2019). While this reflects a strong interest among community-based organizations and government departments in using research to promote better services for youth leaving care, many have documented the need for developing a “research agenda to move the Canadian research on youth in and out of care forward in a cohesive fashion” (Shubert, 2019, p. 5). To date, much of the advocacy for youth leaving care in Canada draws on statistics and findings from the United States and the United Kingdom (Kovarikova, 2017).

At the same time, prior to the early 80s, little attention was paid to youth leaving care in Canada (Sukumaran, 2021). One hopeful sign is that the number of academic researchers engaging in the study of transitions out of care in Canada has grown rapidly over the last 30 years. A summary of 75 reports issued between 1987 and 2020 yielded 435 different evidence-based recommendations for improving outcomes for youth aging out of care in Canada (Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2020). As of this writing, Canada has the largest group of members in the International Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care (INTRAC; van Breda, personal communication, 2022), a 20-year-old consortium that brings together care-leaving researchers from across the world to promote collaboration, dissemination of research, and advocacy in relation to policy and program development (Storo, personal communication, 2022).

In This Issue

The development of CANTRAC, the Canadian chapter of INTRAC, provided the impetus for this special issue. This group of researchers from across the country is actively engaged in knowledge creation in relation to youth transitions to adulthood from care in Canada, and it is their work that is primarily featured here. This issue provides an excellent representation of the diversity

of methods currently in use and the range of topics that merit investigation in relation to youth leaving care in Canada. The researchers featured here are part of an emerging generation of scholars who are at the forefront of research and advocacy promoting positive transitions to adulthood for youth in care in Canada.

The issue begins with a literature review by Leal-Ferman, Weight, and Latimer that brings together accounts from both the academic and grey literature to summarize the current state of programs and services for youth leaving care in the four largest provinces of Canada: Quebec, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia. The second article, by Sundly, Keating, Effiong, and Saif, provides an overview of the neuroscientific and economic analysis that has served to minimize investment in supports for the transition to early adulthood. The authors suggest that findings from neuroscience provide strong evidence for extending substitute care well into early adulthood. In the next contribution, Marion, Rozefort, and Tchuindibi explore, through biographical interviews, the critical role of youth aspirations in promoting educational advancement. They present current research findings regarding interventions that encourage young people in care to invest in their education, in turn promoting better outcomes in adulthood. The fourth article, by Keller, builds on the author's clinical experience with youth from care to document the struggles many face in making good financial decisions, and provides a strong case for developing both more individualized approaches to intervention in relation to financial anxiety, and more research into a domain that has a role in determining multiple levels of well-being in adulthood. Turcotte and Lanctôt report on a qualitative study that expands our understanding of the stigma faced by care-experienced individuals and documents the strategies they employ to manage this stigma, with significant implications for practice. The following article, from Nichols and Malenfant, documents young people's experiences of housing precarity and homelessness and employs an institutional ethnography that explores the lived knowledge of participants regarding various public sector organizations and processes, and makes recommendations for how our overall approach to supporting youth transitions from care needs to go beyond individualizing and consider structural factors. Lastly, Doucet, Bach, and Christian provide a report from the field that describes an innovative, Canada-wide advocacy initiative by a group of young leaders with lived experience: the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates. In a relatively short time, the Council has disseminated their *Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care* report across the country, with a built-in evaluation model that promotes accountability and quality assurance in relation to policies, programs, and services for youth transitioning to adulthood from care in Canada.

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