

Aging Out Without a Safety Net - Executive Summary

The day she turned 18 and aged out of the child welfare system, workers at the Winnipeg shelter where Courtney Law had been staying handed her a couple of bus tickets and told her she was on her own.

Huddled at a bus stop with the garbage bag full of the only clothes she had left after multiple moves in Manitoba's child welfare system, Courtney was in tears.

"What am I going to do?" she thought.

She spent that night, and the next month, at a Salvation Army shelter.

Courtney, now 28, is one of approximately 6,000 young people who age out of Canada's child welfare system every year.

For the last four years, the Adoption Council of Canada has led a project collaborating with 107 young women who identify as female, gender-diverse or non-binary to learn more about their experiences after aging out of care. The project is called Aging Out Without a Safety Net: Addressing the Economic Insecurity of Young Women+

Together with this group of young women+, we worked with child welfare stakeholders and other community partners, surveyed the literature, surveyed provinces and territories, undertook three surveys with young women +, and engaged in workshop-based focus groups and journey mapping. We wanted to understand the experiences of young women+ as they aged out without permanence and economic security.

We are releasing two reports from this project.

The first report summarizes the findings of the surveys and interviews with child welfare stakeholders and community organizations, as well as the experiences these young women+ related. The report offers insight into some of the social determinants of health, wellbeing for this group, and offers recommendations.

The second report provides a deeper and more textured understanding of the lived experiences of young women+, obtained through focus groups and journey mapping.

Together, these reports advance recommendations to improve the economic circumstances, services, and outcomes for women+ aging out of care.

Once they reach the age of majority in their province or territory, unless they're able to sign extended service agreements, youth in care lose their financial support and other resources.

A few weeks before she turned 18, a social worker had helped Courtney open a case file to enroll in social assistance. In the weeks leading up to her birthday, Courtney had asked her social workers what was going to happen to her. "They said 'We don't know – I guess since you are going to be 18, you can apply for welfare'," she remembers.

When child welfare authorities removed Courtney from her family, the system promised her a better life in care. But when she aged out, Courtney faced similar challenges and barriers to the ones that brought her into care:

She was homeless. She relied on social assistance for support. She hadn't completed her high school. She struggled with mental health challenges. To support herself, Courtney sold drugs. She was arrested, charged, and convicted, receiving a six-month sentence and spending a month in jail.

Lonely and disconnected from the First Nation in the Northwest Territories from which her mother was separated from as a child under the 60's scoop, Courtney had no one to help her navigate her new life.

"Child and Family Services never really helped me maintain those family connections," Courtney says. "I really had nobody to ask for help. So it was really tough."

Like Courtney, who is a member of the Liidlii Kue First Nation, about half of all children and youth in foster and group care in Canada are Indigenous.

Report 1

Report 1 presents the findings from three surveys of a total of 107 women+ aged 16 to 32, all aging out or recently aged out of care across Canada, and their recommendations for change. The report includes the perspectives of stakeholder organizations and a survey of provinces/territories. The results present a range of adversities these young women+ face, and what we can do to improve their lives.

Despite the many strengths and promise of these young people, they and their peers encounter many inequities as they age out of care.

We wanted to know how their experiences related to their economic security. This report shares insight into how being in care, and aging out, has shaped their trajectory through life and may impact their future. We asked what effect aging out of care without a permanent family had on their ability to go to school, to hold a job, to parent, and to earn a living.

We asked provinces and territories how many young people and how many young women+ age out every year. We asked what supports and services they offer them. We interviewed representatives from 16 organizations working in the child welfare sector and in the community about the barriers they believe the young women+ they serve face.



Our Findings: Report 1

Almost all the young women+ we surveyed reported mental health challenges and contact with the justice system. The vast majority had been homeless for periods of time, both before and after aging out of care. Most were living with a visible or invisible disAbility.

A quarter reported childhood sexual abuse, and being survivors of human trafficking.

These young women+ were more likely to be unemployed than their peers in the general population. They earned half as much as their peers. The median income bracket of our participants is \$15,000-\$20,000 annually, compared to \$30,000-\$40,000 for Canadian women, according to a 2019 estimate from Statistics Canada.

Report 2

Through more in-depth interactions with a subset of young women+ across Canada, we delved into their experiences and to understand their social contexts and life course while within, and after aging out of, the child welfare system.

Thirty-eight women+, aged 16-32 years old, shared their experiences in nine focus group-based workshops across Canada. During these focus groups we also conducted journey mapping, where participants were invited to write and/or draw their responses, feelings, thoughts, experiences, and policy recommendations onto a journey map.

Journey-mapping allows a group to explore life stories and experiences from beginning to end, highlighting “moments that matter,” or points of contact within broader systems and contexts. As part of our analysis, we worked with an artist to synthesize these journey maps into two maps that explored the lived experience of young women+ in past, present, and future; and policy recommendations young women+ made.

Our Findings: Report 2

Qualitative analysis of the focus group transcripts highlighted youth experiences at individual, interpersonal, and systems levels that affected their experience of economic security during their transition to aging out of care.

We took a contextual, holistic approach to understand the barriers/ challenges, and facilitators/ strengths experienced by these women+, across time, along with their multi-level recommendations for the future.

Barriers and adversities the young women+ faced during and after their transitions from care included:

- i) individual level: impacts of abuse and trauma; poverty; mental health; and substance abuse, among others;
- ii) relational or interpersonal: loss of connections; interactions with workers and health providers and unsafe living and neighborhoods; and,
- iii) systems level: access to safe and subsidized housing; lack of access to trauma informed care and mental health supports; and, separation from culture and language, among other barriers.

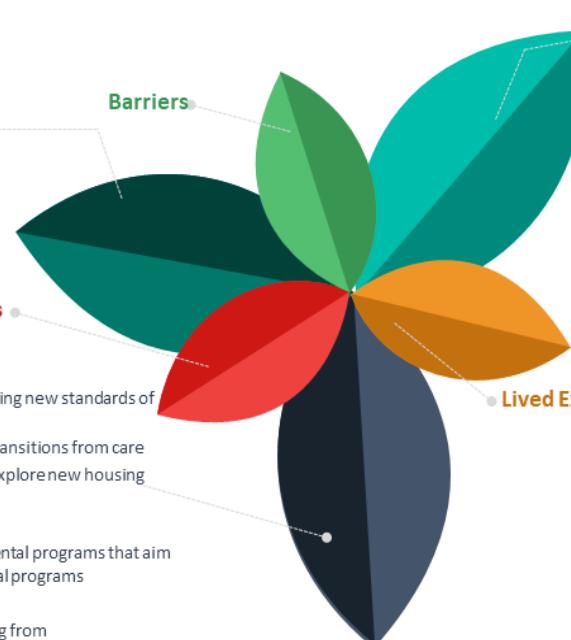
Along with understanding their strengths and protective factors (facilitators) at individual, relational, and systems-levels, these barriers prompted the participants to recommend ways to improve services, outcomes, and equity at all levels. We summarize these in the figure below.

Individual level

- Improve programs that focus on life skills and preparation for independent living
- Create opportunities to learn from living experience and contribute to change
- Develop programs that support (re) connection with cultural roots
- Facilitate access to personal files
- Raise awareness about available supports

Broader systems

- Enhance training and support for social workers, including new standards of practice
- Provide wrap around supports and services for youth transitions from care
- Revamp social and subsidized housing programs, and explore new housing models such as communal living programs
- Revisit the curriculum and educational policies
- Implement universal basic income and other governmental programs that aim to alleviate poverty and replace other need-based social programs
- Actively challenge systemic racism and discrimination
- Expand health benefits programs for youth transitioning from
- Develop national standards for aging out of care



Relational and interpersonal levels

- Create networks and pathways for mentorship
- Access to counselling and therapy for all (therapy for first families, youth in care, youth who have aged out of care) Educational/schooling (Additional supports, flexible schooling, consistent education and curriculum)
- Promote consistent and sustained connections with workers
- Develop structured supports for reconnecting with first family
- Introduce new standards for screening and monitoring foster parents
- Develop parenting skills program and resources to guide youth in and from care who become parents
- Cultivate trauma-informed approaches and sensitivity training in hospital and other healthcare settings

For a system designed to provide care, many youth questioned the actual benefit of being in the child welfare system.

"I feel like they set you up to fail," said one young woman+. "You leave at 18, you're either going to be homeless or just completely struggling and so that sets you up for if you do have children, you are going to be having that exact same cycle, of just poverty, community, CAS (Children's Aid Society)."

Like Courtney, they told us they weren't prepared to live on their own.

"Nobody taught me any financial literacy, nobody taught me how to save money. Nobody taught me what credit cards were. Nobody taught me how to just be a person – how to live. Nobody taught me to regulate my emotions," Courtney says. "It was nearly impossible."

Others described their loneliness and lack of connection after aging out.

"There was a point in my life where I went to bed for three months and nobody noticed," another participant said. "That's not an exaggeration ... there wasn't a single person who noticed until I ended up trying to commit suicide and ended up in a psych ward."

They told us about the trade-offs they made to have a place to live.

"For myself, I just stuck with what I guess was easiest, and that was using my body for housing. Which is really unfortunate," one individual told us.

Another described the links between the lack of a permanent full-time job, and homelessness.

"These past three years I've been almost homeless way too many times," they said. "I ended up with almost being homeless within two months of not receiving funding ... because the job I was getting couldn't give me the hours."

Many said the child welfare system didn't prepare them well enough before they were forced out on their own.

"I just got my social insurance number ... but I didn't even know where to go and get that, you know?" one young woman+ said. "I guess things are online. You could always teach yourself stuff I guess, if you're determined to do something But when you don't even know what those things that you don't know are, then it's hard to find them, you know?"

Despite their struggles, the young women+ who participated in this project have not given up their dreams.

They want stable employment, secure housing, and financial security. They want to own their own home, and to have the warm, happy family most never experienced growing up.

Young women+ also shared more specific career goals: becoming a sales manager, a social worker, lawyer, paramedic, safety worker, registered nurse, business owner, counsellor, group home operator, or, more generally, an agent of change who could support other youth in and from care.

They also want to be good parents, and to avoid repeating the trauma they experienced.

Most of all, they want the young women+ who come after them to have what they do not: support, connections, access to mental health services, mentorship, stable housing, and better lives.

ADOPTION COUNCIL OF CANADA'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Young women+ aging out of the child welfare system would benefit from a combined effort by federal and provincial governments, child welfare stakeholders, and lived experts to implement all six proposed recommendations.



Invest in Accessible, Long-term, Trauma-Informed Mental Health Services

Provincial/territorial governments must provide accessible, long term, affordable mental health services and support designated for these young women+ who are aging out of care.

01



Build and Fund Safe Affordable Housing and Wrap Around Services

Governments should work with child welfare agencies and non-governmental organizations to develop holistic hubs containing wrap-around services that include housing for young women+ aging out of the child welfare system.

02



Invest in Permanent Connections and Relationships

Provincial/territorial governments must mandate permanency planning for young women+ aging out, and connect them to at least one safe, loving and permanent connection.

03



Invest in the Economic Security of Young Women+ Aging Out

We recommend the creation of after-care funds and matched saving programs young women+ can access when in crisis. An after-care fund would increase their economic security, acting as the safety net families might otherwise provide.

04



Collect National Outcome Data on Young Women+ Aging Out

We recommend a federal department or agency such as Statistics Canada be mandated with building a child welfare database and management system that collects and publicly disseminates national outcome data on young women+ aging out of the child welfare system.

05



Extend Transition Services and provide After Care

Provincial/territorial governments should extend service agreements to all youth exiting care until they reach 25 and offer after-care support until they reach 30. They must offer extended care and services without restrictions or regard to a young woman+ status, i.e., whether or not they are in school or working.

06

PROMISING PRACTICES

In other jurisdictions, promising programs and practices, including wrap-around services, exist to make sure youth do not age out of the child welfare system into homelessness, poverty, and isolation. We point to several of them in our report:

- The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a local, state and national systems-change initiative in the United States designed to meet the needs of youth 14 to 26 who are aging out of the child welfare system. The program provides wrap-around services focused on permanency, stable housing, education success and economic security, as well as pregnancy prevention and parenting support.³
- In Vancouver, the Lu'ma Native Housing Society reserves 13 housing units for Indigenous youth who have aged out of care, and offers an Aboriginal Youth Mentorship Program. There is an on-site medical clinical, and the program provides connections to counselling, cultural, education and employment services, as well as to adult and community allies. Lu'ma's Youth Mentorship Program is intentionally set up to act as an extended family for those who do not have one.⁴
- Transitional programs that offer wrap-around services are also recommended best practices in Australia. To improve the overall health outcomes of youth aging out of the child welfare system, O'Donnell et al. (2020) recommend incorporating more mental, physical and social elements into transitional planning.⁵
- The Opportunity Passport IDA program, which the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative runs, is a U.S. best practice model Canadian provinces/territories and the federal government should adopt. U.S. states finance the program. It provides financial literacy training and incentives for youth aging out of care who contribute to their savings and use those funds for investments, education, housing, building their own businesses, buying vehicles, or paying for insurance and medical costs.⁶
- Young women+ could also benefit from tuition waivers, such as those British Columbia and Manitoba's Futures Forward offer. Under the Futures Forward program, any youth who was involved with the child welfare system, for any period, can access support for their education or workplace training programs. The program offers tuition support for up to six years, with no age caps or time limits for pursuing a first degree. Youth also receive \$250 per week to cover other expenditures including childcare, medical costs, computers, or tutoring. Youth receive a tuition waiver whether they are on an extended service agreement.⁷

These and other promising practices that we highlight give us hope that there are better ways to support young women+ in the child welfare system who are aging out of care, and which show promise for scaling across Canada.

NEXT STEPS

We need more research to ascertain whether our findings generalize to a larger sample of young women+ who age out of care, and to investigate whether the experiences of young men+ who age out are comparable, or in what ways they differ.

We know enough, though, to know that we can already act on the recommendations in this report. Action will involve putting pressure on federal and provincial/territorial governments to prioritize improving the lives of young women+ in the child welfare system.

Voters can establish priorities. We urge everyone reading this report to reach out to their elected representatives to let them know it's not acceptable to allow young women+ to age out of foster and group care into homelessness.

Politicians and policymakers must understand that homelessness and housing instability, mental health challenges, contact with the justice system, the intergenerational cycle of care, high unemployment levels, poverty, sexual exploitation and human trafficking, and the other experience we document in this report have roots in the child welfare system.

Act now, so the next 6,000 youth aging out of care in Canada do not have to undergo what Courtney and her fellow alumni of the child welfare system have survived.

"Nobody offered me an extension of care ... I turned 18 and they just tossed me to the curb like trash and I kind of had to figure everything out on my own," Courtney says.

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