



“HALF THE TIME I FELT LIKE NOBODY LOVED ME”

THE COSTS OF ‘AGING OUT’ OF STATE GUARDIANSHIP IN ONTARIO

A report prepared by,

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This report is part of Marsha Rampersaud’s larger PhD research project, *To Protect or To Punish: Illuminating Pathways from Care to Criminalization*, completed in the Department of Sociology at Queen’s University. This research project received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Marsha is currently appointed as a Postdoctoral Fellow on the *Rights for Children and Youth Partnership* in the School of Social Work at Ryerson University.

This report was co-authored by Linda Mussell, PhD, a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow (2021-2023) at the University of Ottawa in the School of Political Studies and Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies.

The quote in the title of this report is by Riyad, a 22 year old youth from Toronto interviewed for this research project.

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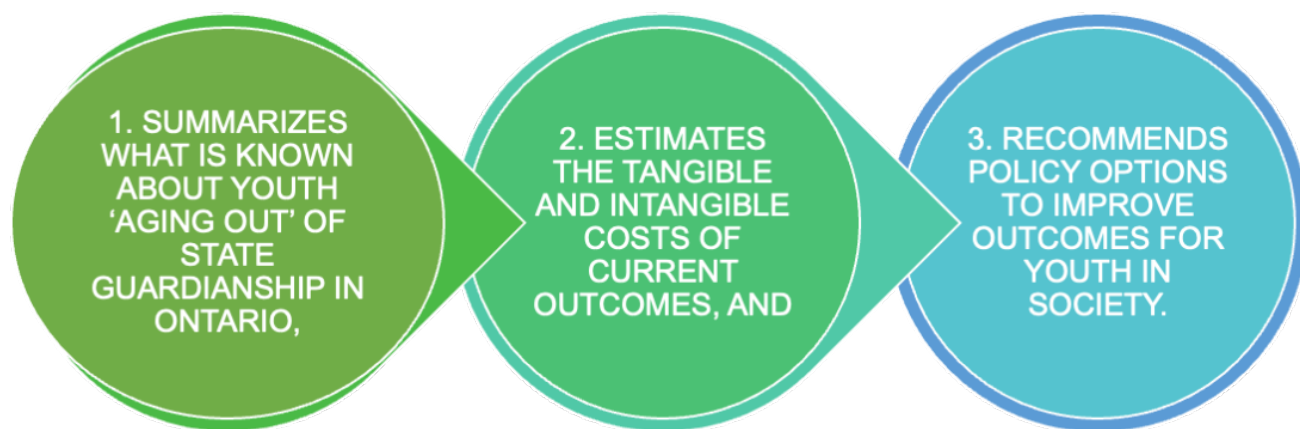
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	3
2. List of Abbreviations	13
3. Introduction	14
3.1 Land Acknowledgement	14
3.2 Youth Leaving State Guardianship in Ontario	14
4. Methods	17
4.1 Stakeholder Interviews	17
4.2 Analysis of Available Literature	17
4.3 Theoretical Orientation	18
4.4 Statement of Positionality	18
5. Findings: Key Issues and Areas for Intervention	19
5.1 Education	19
5.2 Employment, Poverty, and Income Support	26
5.3 Housing and Homelessness	31
5.4 Criminalization	36
5.5 Mental and Physical Health and Wellbeing	42
6. Conclusion and Recommendations	49
7. References	55

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2020, there were 2,762,885 children and youth, ages 0 to 17, in Ontario (Varrella, 2021). Approximately 11,700 (0.4%) of these children and youth are under state guardianship (MCCSS, 2021). Data available from 2011 shows a quarter of all Canadian children and youth in care live in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2011).¹ Almost half of these young people are in extended society care (formerly known as Crown Wards in Ontario), meaning they have been permanently removed from their homes and families. For these youth, the province has assumed formal responsibility as their “parent” (Kovarikova, 2017). This report draws on interview data with 25 young people who have ‘aged out’ of state guardianship and 10 Youth-in-Transition Workers. The interviews are synthesized with available data and research to identify the strengths and challenges young people face after leaving care and analyze the costs to society when youth experience adverse outcomes after ‘aging out.’ This report highlights the systemic failures that underscore the adverse outcomes common among youth leaving state guardianship. Specifically, this report:



Findings

Our research illuminated five issues that have significant impact on youths’ future prospects and quality of life in adulthood, which form the focus of our analysis: education; employment, poverty, and income support; housing and homelessness; criminalization; and mental and physical health and wellbeing. These issues are interrelated and structural, and present opportunities for intervention. The cost of adverse outcomes in these five areas for youth ‘aging out’ of care are high—between \$222 and \$268 million for the cohort of 1,000 youth ‘aging out’ each year—plus other intangible costs (Shaffer et al., 2016). Intangible costs are significant and include the trauma and suffering experienced by youth. Increased support for youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship from age 18 up to their mid to late 20s is required to help meet living costs, pursue further education, and connect with their communities for personal, cultural, and social support (Shaffer et al., 2016). Providing more time would reduce the costs of adverse outcomes and generate intangible benefits as well. Furthering a goal of readiness that shifts away from age cut-offs and instead focuses on supporting young people to leave care when they feel *ready* is needed. Meaningful systemic change in Ontario will transform the lives of children and youth in and leaving state guardianship.

¹ In Canada overall, there were 47,885 children and youth in care in 2011; 11,455 of whom were aged 15 to 19 (Statistics Canada, 2011).

ISSUE # 1 EDUCATION

Young people under state guardianship encounter a number of barriers that can make it difficult for them to be successful in school. Frequent moves between foster homes and group homes, often resulting in lengthy absences from school, are a significant barrier to high school completion. Past traumas contribute to higher rates of substance use, mental health issues, learning disabilities, and behaviour labelled as “criminogenic.” These factors can further erode young peoples’ potential to achieve educational success. Some fall significantly behind in their studies and may find it impossible to catch up. In these tough circumstances, some youth are held back for a year in school and most are hindered in meeting their academic potential (Liljedahl, Rae, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2013). Importantly, 56% of youth under state guardianship in Ontario drop out of high school. Few youth leaving state guardianship continue with post-secondary education.

Finances are a significant barrier for many youth to attend post-secondary studies. With financial support, approximately 60% (n=264) of eligible youth report accessing resources to attend post-secondary school straight from high school (CAFC, 2018). But many youth ‘aging out’ have to prioritize employment for survival, which may mean placing educational goals aside. For youth who do want to pursue post-secondary studies, many have little support when it comes to researching schools, visiting campuses, and applying for post-secondary programs. Among eligible youth who do apply for post-secondary studies in Ontario,² the majority (84%) enrol in apprenticeship programs or college, rather than university (16%) (OPACY, 2012a).

Information about the post-secondary graduation rates of Ontario youth who were previously under state guardianship is not publicly available. However, in their research with youth leaving state guardianship in British Columbia, economist Marvin Shaffer and his colleagues (2016) reported youth graduated from university at a rate that is one-sixth that of their peers who were never under state guardianship. If we apply this rate to youth in Ontario, of the 42³ youth who enroll in university each year, we can expect only five (12.8%) will graduate.⁴ These five Ontarian youth represent 0.5% of young people leaving state guardianship annually who graduate from university.⁵ For youth who experience challenges and do not attain their educational goals, this can have a direct impact on future life opportunities and employment prospects.

Importantly, 56% of youth under state guardianship in Ontario drop out of high school. Few youth continue with post-secondary education. Among eligible youth who do apply for post-secondary studies, 84% enrol in apprenticeship and college programs rather than university (16%).

Estimated Costs

- The cohort of at least 560 youth (the number is likely higher) leaving care who do not finish high school each year in Ontario stand to lose a combined total of lost earnings between \$394,800,000 to

² Approximately 44% of youth leaving state guardianship complete high school annually. Data is not available specifying the precise proportion of youth within this group who are eligible to attend post-secondary school.

³ This number is based on approximately 264 youth leaving care who access resources to attend post-secondary school, 16% of which (n=42) attend university.

⁴ Youth leaving state guardianship graduate university at a rate one sixth that of Ontario youth (77%), which amounts to graduating 12.8% of the time. If 42 youth enroll in university each year, we can expect approximately five will graduate, based on this rate.

⁵ The university graduation rate for Ontario youth is on average 77% per year, with negligible fluctuation across cohorts (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2021).

\$1,052,800,000 over their lifetime. Shaffer and colleagues (2016) estimate that at least 30% of this cost is borne by governments in foregone tax revenues alone.

ISSUE # 2 EMPLOYMENT, POVERTY, AND INCOME SUPPORT

Low educational attainment significantly impacts youths' future career prospects and many 'age out' to poverty. Without a high school diploma, the possibility of finding meaningful work that provides more than basic needs is significantly reduced. In previous generations, a high school diploma was adequate for most jobs, including many well-paid jobs. More recently however, "The growing complexity of work in the global knowledge economy and the rising rates of post-secondary completion in Canada...have reduced the relative value of a high school diploma" (The Conference Board of Canada, 2021). In an increasingly credentialed society, it is now commonplace for employers to specify post-secondary education as a minimum qualification for employment, even when it exceeds the actual skills required of entry-level jobs. As a result, employment opportunities available to young people who have not graduated high school are limited, less secure, and lower paying than other careers that young people qualify for with post-secondary training. These circumstances have devastating impacts on the majority of youth who 'age out' of state guardianship in Ontario without completing high school.

Employment opportunities available to youth who have not graduated high school are limited, less secure, and lower paying than other careers that young people qualify for with post-secondary training.

To mitigate potential financial hardship for youth leaving state guardianship, nearly all youth receive the Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY) benefit, administered by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. This benefit provides an average of \$850 to youth monthly and expires when youth turn 21. While CCSY is certainly helpful, the current amount provides little financial security for youth in the face of rising housing, food, and other living expenses. When youth turn 21, the abrupt stop to CCSY creates further challenges. Approximately 57% (570 youth per year) of young adults who were formerly under state guardianship rely on some form of government income support in adulthood, including Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program (OPACY, 2012a).

Estimated Costs

- If 570 of the 1000 youth leaving state guardianship each year rely on Ontario Works for income support, the cost to the province to support this group of youth is more than \$5 million dollars annually; over a lifetime (18 to 65) this would amount to \$235 million (or more than \$400,000 per person).

ISSUE # 3 HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Youth leaving state guardianship are acutely vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. Youth ‘aging out’ often leave state guardianship without adequate support and guidance to find secure housing or to live independently. As a result, these youth are 200 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who were never under state guardianship (Doucet, 2020; Gaetz et al., 2016). Indigenous and LGBTQ+ youth experience homelessness at the highest rates (Doucet, 2020). Youth leaving state guardianship who experience homelessness are likely to be homeless for longer than other similarly situated vulnerable youth (Raising the Roof, 2009).

Youth ‘aging out’ are 200 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who were never under state guardianship.

A lack of family support, combined with poverty, mean many youth leaving state guardianship move frequently—between homelessness, emergency shelters, transitional housing, and rented properties (Shaffer et al., 2016). Some youth report couch surfing for months at a time (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Kovarikova, 2017). These conditions demonstrate a pattern of frequent moves that begins while under state guardianship and continues after youth ‘age out’—with equally disruptive and devastating consequences.

Estimated Costs

- Approximately 58% (n=580) of youth leaving state guardianship each year will experience homelessness. If these young people stay in emergency shelters, the annual cost to taxpayers is approximately \$13.4 million. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the costs of operating shelter beds increased, with the reported cost of a single bed in Toronto doubling from \$40,000 to \$80,000 (BGM Strategy Group, 2020).

ISSUE # 4 CRIMINALIZATION

When young people are exposed to significant, compounding traumas they sometimes develop survival skills in response to their environments that can become visible to others as disruptive behaviours (Finlay et al., 2019). Many foster parents and frontline staff in group homes fail to recognize these behaviours as expressions of pain and respond by trying to manage the behaviours, an approach which often involves the police (Finlay et al., 2019). As a result, these youth are overrepresented in the youth justice system. The conditions that youth face after leaving state guardianship further increase their likelihood of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Longitudinal studies tracking the progress of youth who have ‘aged out’ over time show that this group is more likely to experience imprisonment as adults than their peers who have stable familial support (Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Given the

When young people are exposed to significant, compounding traumas they sometimes develop survival skills that become visible to others as disruptive behaviours. Often the police are called to intervene. As a result, these youth are overrepresented in the youth justice system.

tumultuous transition to adulthood youth leaving state guardianship face, they need more support so that they are not criminalized due to systemic failures. There is a need to establish prevention and diversion programs in the community that can better support youth and keep them out of custody.

Estimated Costs

- Despite declining crime rates and steady imprisonment rates, per capita expenditures on the criminal justice system have *increased* (Story & Malkin, 2013 cited in Koegl & Day, 2018). On average it costs Canadian citizens \$75,077 per year (\$206 per day) to imprison one man in a federal, medium security prison; it costs \$83,861 per year (\$230 per day) to imprison one woman in a federal prison (all security levels) (Segel-Brown, 2018). It costs \$78,475 per year (\$215 per day) to imprison someone in a provincial jail (Statistics Canada, 2018). The current system is not working to reduce or prevent crime, which means we could be spending our money more efficiently and effectively.

ISSUE # 5 MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Youth who ‘age out’ of state guardianship experience worse health outcomes than their peers who have not been under state guardianship. Many factors that impact a person’s health are outside of individual control. Social determinants of health, for example, refer specifically to socioeconomic factors, such as education and income. Experiences of social and economic inequality also extend as health inequity in people’s lives. For example, health and education are inextricably linked (PHO, 2008). It is widely recognized that those with higher educational attainment are healthier overall than those with less education (PHO, 2008). In contrast, poor health and low income security can trap individuals, families, and communities in a vicious poverty-illness cycle (Lönroth, Tessier, Hensing, & Behrendt, 2020). Youth under state guardianship may benefit from additional support around school in order to succeed, transition into adulthood, and achieve strong health outcomes (PHO, 2008).

Youth who ‘age out’ of state guardianship experience worse health outcomes than their peers who have not been under state guardianship.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, also lead to poor health outcomes. Young people who experience as few as four ACEs are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide, 4.6 times more likely to experience depression, and 7 times and 10 times respectively to develop alcohol or drug dependencies compared to those who have experienced zero ACEs (Humber College, 2020). Because youth who are apprehended by child protection services have experienced significant trauma, abuse, or neglect in childhood, compounded by considerable instability while under state guardianship, it is unsurprising that two thirds of these youth experience mental health challenges (Scully & Finlay, 2015), and one third have been formally diagnosed with a mental disorder (Kovarikova, 2017). By comparison, 20% of youth in Ontario’s general population experience some form of a mental health challenge (MHASEF Research Team, 2015).

According to a study in British Columbia (2009), the death rate for youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship, ages 19 to 25, is 6.5 times higher than that of the general population. Youth are denied what they need to survive and thrive while under state guardianship. After they ‘age out,’ many are left to contend with traumas while isolated and alone. This is a horrific and unacceptable outcome for youth who were under the state’s “protection” and “care.”

Estimated Costs

- Health expenditures are higher for individuals who have lower incomes. In Canada, the average monthly cost to maintain a hospital bed is \$10,900 (ACTO, 2017). If even 1% of the approximately 580 youth who ‘age out’ and experience homelessness each year seek healthcare services at a hospital in Ontario which requires an overnight stay in a hospital bed, the average monthly cost to taxpayers would be \$63,220; over one year, this cost would be \$758,640.

In Summary

Based on the combined total of lost earnings of youth leaving state guardianship over their lifetimes, the province stands to lose approximately **\$118 to \$315.8 million** in revenue.

The lifetime cost to the province to support youth leaving state guardianship who rely on income supports like Ontario Works is approximately **\$235 million**.

Over their lifetime, youth leaving state guardianship who experience homelessness may cost the province approximately **\$629.8 million** for emergency shelter.

Youth who leave state guardianship and experience incarceration stand to cost the province approximately **\$19.6 to \$36 million annually**; over their lifetime, the province may incur **nearly \$1 billion** in incarceration costs. Actual costs are likely much higher as this amount does not include other criminal justice expenses.

The lifetime cost to the province if even 1% of youth leaving state guardianship require prolonged hospital care over their lifetime is approximately **\$35.6 million**. Given the connection between Adverse Childhood Experiences and poor health outcomes, this number is likely much higher.

The total estimated costs borne by the province based on the adverse outcomes youth leaving state guardianship face in their lifetimes is more than \$2 billion.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for change were informed by first-voice advocates with lived experience in the state guardianship system and those who provide direct service to young people in and leaving state guardianship. Some of those who contributed include:

Charlene April, Creating Roots

Mobafa Baker, StepStones for Youth

Irwin Elman, former Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth

Jennifer Gourley and Vanessa Wu, Free to Be

Aviva Zukerman Schure, Never Too Late

RECOMMENDATION # 1

Focus on interdependence instead of independence.

Youth under state guardianship need continuous support, and more time to transition out of state guardianship and achieve a balance of *interdependence* with peer and non-professional support networks and community. Authentic relationships with professionals should also be allowed. The current goal of *independence* is a false construct, as everyone depends on others at different points and in different ways throughout their lives, especially youth in today's society. Increasing supportive networks will reduce the need for systems and professionals in youths' lives.

RECOMMENDATION # 2

Prioritize permanent and long-term caregiver and housing placements. Implement the Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) philosophy.

Relationship-based housing options provide a baseline of stability and support to youth that mitigate the likelihood of longer-term adverse outcomes. Youth in permanent or long-term, safe and stable homes early on, that last beyond age 18, experience improved academic achievement, job retainment, and mental health. Housing stability is critical to improving mental health for youth who have suffered trauma, abuse, neglect, and inconsistent guardian care. For youth who leave housing placements, the HF4Y approach prioritizes finding them safe and suitable housing and providing the necessary supports to keep them housed. This philosophy underscores housing as a basic right. When youth are supported with the basic necessities of life, including housing, they are better positioned to thrive.

RECOMMENDATION # 3

Provide holistic support; create conditions that make educational success possible.

Provide multi-institutional, integrated, and holistic support to all youth under state guardianship, including living costs, advocacy, mentoring, trauma-informed counselling, community connections, and social support. Holistic support means a one-stop-shop where youth can access all of the supports to meet their basic needs first, and then be able to meet their aspirations and other life goals.

RECOMMENDATION # 4

Expand and continue mental health support.

Support the emotional and mental health of youth leaving state guardianship. Increase access to supports and ensure support is ongoing. Provide **all** youth leaving state guardianship with the *Aftercare Benefits Initiative*; continue trauma-informed counseling and life skills support services without an age cut-off for youth 25+.

RECOMMENDATION # 5

Provide transition supports for young people entering adulthood.

All youth should be provided with strong links to support networks and community far beyond the age of 18. Policies that dictate support be cut off when youth reach particular ages need to be reconsidered. The state should take their parental responsibilities seriously; and those responsibilities cannot simply end once a young person turns 18. Available services should be made more accessible, and for a longer amount of time. A universal age-range is needed for the term “youth.”

RECOMMENDATION # 6

Extend and redistribute Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY) benefit.

Increase the CCSY benefit to match the cost of living expenses for young people ‘aging out’ of state guardianship. Extend the CCSY benefit up to age 25, at minimum, for **all** youth leaving state guardianship. Redistribute these funds from Children’s Aid Societies to community-run organizations for distribution. Youth who are supported in finding safe, affordable, and sustainable housing and who have their basic needs met can focus on achieving their life goals. Increased support further improves youths’ overall quality of life.

RECOMMENDATION # 7

Support young parents.

Create supports and services for young parents who were formerly under state guardianship without increasing the risk of their children entering the system.

RECOMMENDATION # 8

Provide services and supports to parents/guardians of origin.

A separate government system or department is needed to provide more support for youths’ parents and guardians of origin.

RECOMMENDATION # 9

Reunify youth with their families.

If a young person is on track to ‘age out’ of the state guardianship system, prioritize reunification and provide necessary supports for the family to be successful. Better evaluation of parents’ readiness is needed, which should include and center the voice of young people.

RECOMMENDATION # 10

Move to a family model of child welfare.

Shift away from a prevention and intervention model toward a family model of child welfare.

RECOMMENDATION # 11

Tackle the disproportionate representation of children and youth of colour in the state guardianship system.

Increase cultural competency and awareness within the child welfare system. Understand differences in protecting children and shift away from Euro-centric and white understandings of foster care removal procedures.

RECOMMENDATION # 12

Mandate a standard of care and service delivery for all Children's Aid Societies.

A standard of care and service delivery should be mandated for all Children's Aid Societies in the province.

RECOMMENDATION # 13

Reinstate the Office of the Provincial Child and Youth Advocate.

This position is necessary for our community to hold the child welfare system accountable. System accountability is needed to ensure that standards of care are met, that young people are being supported to succeed, and that youths' voices are centered in the decisions that impact their lives.

RECOMMENDATION # 14

Monitor and evaluate youths' progress and needs over time.

Youths' progress should be monitored and evaluated with their participation and leadership (action research) on an ongoing basis to understand what programs, advocacy, and systemic changes best support youth, and where improvements are necessary. Create and mandate system impact measurement tools to monitor the health and wellbeing of children, youth, and adults; use this data to inform policy and practice. This process ensures timely, responsive, effective, and evidence-based interventions as youths' needs change.

Additionally, we recommend:

RECOMMENDATION # 15

Remove barriers to seeking and staying in educational programs.

This includes waiving tuition and fees for programs (adult high school equivalency and post-secondary) and ensuring that youth have adequate living expense funding during their education. Child-care subsidies should be given to young parents seeking education. Removing barriers means understanding the unique challenges confronting individual youth and providing solutions to assist help remove barriers to allow them to meet their educational and other life goals—for example, such as facilitating safe, private, and quiet living and workspaces.

RECOMMENDATION # 16

Provide close mentorship to guide youth through education programs.

Youth under state guardianship may be the first generation in their family to complete high school or seek post-secondary education, and they may lack the guidance that other youth receive from families and family connections with these intergenerational benefits. This mentorship includes close support to help youth choose

programs, apply for programs, understand how to succeed, and work through challenges in order to stay in programs.

RECOMMENDATION # 17

Address the criminalization of youth.

Continue supports, like case conferencing and requiring CAS representatives to attend court appearances, for youth who ‘age out’ and are criminalized. Prioritize and increase access to community-based diversion programs and connect youth with treatment and support. Incarceration, both pre-trial and post-sentencing, should be avoided. Bail and probation conditions that set young people up to fail must be addressed. Focus should shift away from retribution toward restoration and transformation.

RECOMMENDATION # 18

Value alternative ways of knowing.

Indigenous epistemologies are distinct from dominant western worldviews. Acknowledge, resource, and celebrate Indigenous worldviews in child welfare policy and practice. This means resourcing Indigenous service providers and communities to provide culturally specific support and mentorship for Indigenous youth under state guardianship, in support of educational plans and other life goals. It also means moving away from language and values which centre western worldviews at the exclusion of Indigenous ones.

2. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Acronym	Full term
AOJ	Administration of Justice Charge
AI	Appreciative inquiry
CAFC	Children's Aid Foundation of Canada
CAS	Children's Aid Society
CCO	Continuing Custody Order
CCSY	Continued Care and Support for Youth
FTC	Fail to Comply
GED	General Education Development
GTA	Greater Toronto Area
HF4Y	Housing First for Youth
MCCSS	Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
OACAS	Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies
ODSP	Ontario Disability Support Program
OSAP	Ontario Student Assistance Program
OSSD	Ontario Secondary School Diploma
OW	Ontario Works
PHO	Provincial Health Officer (British Columbia)
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RCY	Representative for Children and Youth (British Columbia)
YIT Worker	Youth-in-Transition Worker

3. INTRODUCTION

3.1 Land Acknowledgement

The land now known as Ontario has been inhabited and stewarded by Indigenous peoples—Anishinaabe (Algonquin, Chippewa, Delaware, Mississauga, Nipissing, Ojibway, Odawa, Potawatomi, Saulteaux), Haudenosaunee (Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, Tuscarora), Oji-Cree, Cree—since time immemorial. The land is also home to Métis, and homeland to Huron-Wendat and Neutral-Attawandaron.⁶ The first peoples of this land did not have institutions of systemic child removal from families and communities as there are today. In writing this report we acknowledge the harms that colonialism, including through systems of child removal, have on Indigenous peoples and racialized peoples in Ontario. We orient this report to educating ourselves and others of these harmful impacts and amplifying solutions forwarded by Indigenous organizations and communities.

3.2 Youth Leaving State Guardianship in Ontario

In 2020, there were 2,762,885 children and youth, ages 0 to 17, in Ontario (Varrella, 2021). Approximately 11,700 (0.4%) of these children and youth are under state guardianship (MCCSS, 2021). Almost half of these young people are in extended society care (formerly known as Crown Wards in Ontario) meaning they have been permanently removed from their homes and families. For these youth, the province has assumed formal responsibility as a “parent” (Kovarikova, 2017).

Each year, 1000 youth ‘age out’⁷ of state guardianship in Ontario (and 6000 across the country) (Alisha Bowie cited in Doucet, 2020). While the state serves youth under the age of 21, we focus on the importance of supporting youth readiness during their 20s and beyond. In this report, “readiness” means youth leave placements and other supports when they feel ready to do so, while allowing for interdependence rather than independence. This means ongoing support networks to address isolation and trauma that extend long after adolescence.⁸ We focus on Ontario, although these challenges and systemic failures are found across Canada.

Throughout this report we use the term state guardianship to refer to children who have been made the legal responsibility of the government. Other terms used to label this status include child welfare, extended society care, and out-of-home care. Terms commonly used to describe youth include ward of the state, crown ward, permanent ward, and foster children. We avoid using these labels and refer to youth simply as youth. Different types of placements include foster care, group homes, residential treatment, kinship care, and informal kinship care. While all of these terms have some descriptive utility in different contexts, it is important to recognize the limitations of each, as they may imply that these adolescents are a monolithic group (Bala, Finlay, De Filipis, & Hunter, 2013). These terms also further assumptions about “care” when many youth describe their experiences as lacking care.

Research shows Indigenous and Black children and youth are overrepresented in both the state guardianship and criminal justice systems (Chan & Chunn, 2014; OHRC, 2018; Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Over

⁶ The Huron-Wendat were displaced from the land that is now known as Ontario. The Neutral-Attawandaron were dispersed due to war, disease, and famine during the 17th century.

⁷ We use single quotations around ‘aging out’ as informed by Melanie Doucet (2021), a scholar who has lived experience in the child welfare system. This usage demonstrates its specificity to youth under state guardianship and attempts to de-normalize the term.

⁸ The Ontario Children’s Advancement Coalition has called for a readiness model which means that youth in care should decide when it’s time to be on their own, with no age cut-off.

half of children (52.2%) under age 15 in foster care in Canada are Indigenous, despite Indigenous children accounting for only 7.7% of the child population (Statistics Canada, 2016). There is a lack of statistics on Black children under state guardianship, but we know that 34% of children and youth under state guardianship through Children’s Aid Society of Toronto are Black, yet only 9% of Toronto’s population under the age of 18 is Black (CAS Toronto, 2017). Approximately 25% of federally sentenced adults in Canada currently come from backgrounds of state guardianship or have had some involvement with state guardianship in the past (Zinger & Elman, 2017; see also: Corrado, Freeman, & Blatier, 2011; Public Safety Canada, 2012; Yi & Wildeman, 2018).⁹ We use the term “crossover youth” to describe the funneling of youth from one system (state guardianship) to another (confinement in prisons and jails) (Bala et al., 2015; Scully & Finlay, 2015).

“If the child protection system was a parent, it may well have its children taken away”

(Kovarikova, 2017, p.6).

and youth who are subjected to maltreatment and harm at the hands of their caregiver(s)—be that a parent, relative, or other guardian. In severe cases, children are apprehended from their homes. Once a child has been removed from what is deemed to be a harmful setting, one might reasonably expect that child protection services would create the conditions needed for children to live safely, whether with a relative (kinship care) or in the care of the state (foster care or group home), under the supervision of the Children’s Aid Society (CAS). The unfortunate reality for many children is that far from feeling safe and settled, their trauma compounds when they are removed from their homes (OPACY, 2012b; Rampersaud & Mussell, 2021a).

“If our children do not thrive, our societies will not thrive”

(Canadian Council on Social Development, 2007 in PHO, 2008, p.1).

of their level of readiness to live on their own (Doucet, 2020). There are also limited supports for youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship and significant barriers prevent youth from accessing the few that are available. For example, youth must know how to navigate the application process for supports, meet the restrictive eligibility criteria, and obtain approval prior to deadlines (Doucet, 2020). Even when youth meet these criteria, there are often long waiting lists before they can begin to access services. The message given to youth under state guardianship by the current legislative context is that “you are not worthy of love, belonging and support once you turn 18 or 19.” This is unjust and can no longer be accepted as the status quo (Doucet, 2020, p.21).

Acknowledging that the state fails to level the playing field for this subset of youth compared to their same-age peers, it is important the state measures impact of interventions to ensure efficacy (Kovarikova, 2017). Drawing on ideas of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010),¹⁰ we frame failures as belonging to the state, instead of to youth. AI permits focus on youths’ strengths rather than weaknesses.

The child welfare system was created to protect children

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child has the right to grow, learn, play, develop, and flourish with dignity—to thrive. The age-of majority cut-off is counter to this directive, as well as well-documented adolescent brain development research (Doucet, 2020) and societal trends (Arnett, 2000). While nearly half (42%) of young Canadians between the ages of 20 and 29 are living with their parents, youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship abruptly lose basic supports and services due to age-based cut-offs, regardless

⁹ There is a lack of research on experiences with state guardianship and imprisonment. We anticipate that the number of people imprisoned with backgrounds in state guardianship is higher.

¹⁰ This theoretical approach is explained further in section 4.3.

Since 1987 there have been 75 reports centered on youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship published in Canada, which have together amassed over 435 recommendations for change to child protection policy (Doucet, 2020). Evidence from Ontario and beyond shows that youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship lack the support and services to transition smoothly to adulthood. According to Cheyenne Ratnam, president of the Ontario Children’s Advancement Coalition and a former youth under state guardianship, “Child welfare is the largest pipeline into other violent systems, such as homelessness, prison, and poverty” (Doucet, 2020, p.24). The system inflicts significant harm on youth and must be changed.

The former Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth’s 2012 report,¹¹ estimates the costs of current outcomes and the potential benefits of better preparing and supporting youth aging out from state guardianship in the early years of their adulthood. In this report we extend earlier findings and follow the example of Marvin Shaffer, Lynell Anderson, and Allison Nelson for Fostering Change (2016), as they estimated the economic costs of ‘aging out’ in British Columbia. This report 1) summarizes what is known about youth aging out of care in Ontario, 2) estimates the tangible and intangible costs of current outcomes, and 3) recommends policy options to improve outcomes for youth and society. We focus our attention on five key issues: 1) Education, 2) Employment, Poverty, and Income Support, 3) Housing and Homelessness, 4) Criminalization, and 5) Mental and Physical Health and Wellbeing. These structural and interrelated issues greatly impact the lives of youth leaving state guardianship. This research shows that the challenges youth ‘aging out’ face are great, the outcomes poor, and the costs are substantial. The potential cost savings and social benefits that improved supports can generate for youth and society are immense. The cost of adverse outcomes in these five areas for youth ‘aging out’ of care are high—between \$222 and \$268 million for the cohort of 1,000 youth ‘aging out’ each year—plus other intangible costs (Shaffer et al., 2016).¹² Intangible costs are significant and include the trauma and suffering experienced by youth. Increased support for youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship from age 18 up to their mid to late 20s is required to help meet living costs, pursue further education, and connect with their communities for personal, cultural and social support (Shaffer et al., 2016). Providing more support time would reduce the costs of adverse outcomes and generate intangible benefits as well. Furthering a goal of readiness that shifts away from age cut-offs and instead focuses on supporting young people to leave care when they *feel ready* is needed. Meaningful systemic change in Ontario will transform the lives of children and youth in and leaving state guardianship.

¹¹ See: OPACY, 2012a in References.

¹² Schaffer et al.’s (2016) report is among the only of its kind providing strong cost-benefit analysis. There is a need for more research of this kind to be conducted in Canada.

4. METHODS

4.1 Stakeholder Interviews

This report draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young adults and social workers that were conducted in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) between March 2019 and December 2020. Youths' voices are centred in our analysis. To maintain participants' confidentiality: all youth participants have been assigned pseudonyms; social workers have been assigned a code (YIT = Youth-in-Transition Worker) and a unique identification number, (e.g., YIT 1, YIT 2, etc.).

Interviews were conducted with 25 young adults, ages 18 to 24, who have previous involvement in the state guardianship and criminal justice systems. A combination of targeted and snowball sampling were used to recruit eligible youth. The study was advertised at 16 community organizations who directly support youth aging out of the child welfare system. Staff, social workers, and interviewees were also asked to refer eligible youth to participate. Most youth experienced out-of-home care in either foster (n=16) or kinship (n=1) care, or group homes (n=3). Five youth remained in their homes of origin, but their families had active open files with the Children's Aid Society (CAS) that were closed when they turned 18 years old. All youth experienced forms of criminalization, including contact with the police, arrest, charge, or bail. With permission from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), interviews were also conducted with 10 Youth-in-Transition Workers.

The data was analyzed using NVivo software to perform emergent, data-driven, inductive coding. Words and phrases that represented key thoughts and concepts were highlighted as codes and subcodes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saldaña, 2013). Each participant groups' perspectives were then woven together to map the experiences of young people leaving care. Youth and YIT workers' testimonies provide descriptions of the challenges young people experience when leaving care and preparing for greater independence and how these challenges often result in adverse outcomes.

4.2 Analysis of Available Literature

Following Jane Kovarikova's (2017) method of comprehensive literature analysis, we also conducted a review of research reports, media, and peer-reviewed academic journals related to leaving state guardianship. We considered research from across Canada and the United States with a particular focus on research from Ontario.

In addition to a comprehensive literature analysis, we searched for relevant statistics about the youth leaving state guardianship, as reported in 2011 and 2016 Statistics Canada census data, and by provincial and national level research bodies. Five interrelated issues were frequently discussed in the literature, which informed the focus of this report: (1) Education; (2) Employment, Poverty, and Income Support; (3) Housing and Homelessness; (4) Criminalization; and (5) Health and Wellbeing.

While interviews were conducted with young people between the ages of 18 and 24, there were multiple age definitions of youth adopted in the literature. In general, researchers defined "youth" as being between the ages of 16 and 29. We use the term youth consistently with this broader age category; we use the terms "under state guardianship" (under age 18) and "leaving state guardianship" (age 18 to 29) to distinguish between age groups.

4.3 Theoretical Orientation

This report centres situated knowledge and appreciative inquiry. Situated knowledge entails recognition that all forms of knowledge are shaped by conditions in which they are produced (Haraway, 1988). Embracing situated knowledge means a move away from a sense of objectivity in research and acknowledgement of the role of power in knowledge production. People with lived experience provide important insights about their own lived conditions, experiences as marginalized people, and power relations. Appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based, positive approach oriented to changing the social world from one that is oppressive to one that promotes and nurtures human potential (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). Importantly, the focus is on peoples' strengths and successes and visions of the best future (Zandee & Cooperrider 2008).

4.4 Statement of Positionality

We provide statements of positionality (Harding 1983; Hartsock 1983) in recognition of the role we play as researchers in the production of this report. Our identities influence our understanding and interpretation of these topics. Marsha Rampersaud is a settler, cis woman of colour, and community-oriented researcher. Her scholarship combines insights from critical race, punishment, and abolition theories to examine issues of racial and social justice and the purpose of punishment. Her research explores the compounding impacts of the state guardianship and criminal justice systems on youth and young adults. This research was inspired by her community work with the Elizabeth Fry Society of Kingston and StepStones for Youth where she observed firsthand how existing criminal justice policies and practices have disparate impacts, especially for those who have had prior experiences of state guardianship.

Linda Mussell is a settler, white, cis woman from a low-income background in southern British Columbia. She is the first person in her family to receive a post-secondary education, and one of her parents did not have a high school education. She received a PhD with the guidance and support of many peers and mentors. She approaches these topics as someone who has not lived these experiences, and centres listening to and amplifying voices of lived experience. Her broader research uses critical policy analysis to interrogate the carceral state, namely policies of removal, isolation, coercion, assimilation, and confinement. Through her work she supports transformative justice and disrupting the harmful direct and intergenerational impacts of carceral policy.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Education

BACKGROUND

High School Completion Rates

It is common for youth to move frequently while under state guardianship—between placements, and sometimes between cities. Youth typically move at least once for each year they are under state guardianship (Kovarikova, 2017; Rampersaud & Mussell, 2021b). Frequent moves¹³ can be a significant barrier to high school completion. In a survey by the Children’s Aid Foundation (2018), half of the 153 respondents (n=77) noted having four or more school moves during primary school grades and over one-quarter (n=46 of 153, 29%) had four or more school moves during secondary school. Of those that completed high school, one-in-seven (n=25, 16%) took six years or more to complete. School moves impact how long it takes someone to complete high school, and in many cases impacts whether a young person finishes at all.

One social worker explained how disruptive frequent moves can be for youths’ educational and overall development:

“Imagine being quite literally on your own, being bounced around from home to home, what that does to you, the trauma, the emotional impact that that would have on a young person and their development. I think it's important for [people] to understand how having so much change and not having a very nurturing or stable home environment and upbringing can impact someone’s brain development, how they process things” (YIT 1).

Frequent moves mean youth are constantly being uprooted from school to school which contributes to tremendous instability in their lives (Kovarikova, 2017). Maani, a 22 year old man, described having to move several times between his familial home and various foster care placements. Each move involved changing schools. After being told about yet another move, Maani described feeling frustrated and asked his father if he could stay enrolled at his current school:

“Especially when I had to move to another area with my dad. He was already working somewhere and I just went to another school. The thing was that, at first I didn’t want to move schools. ...My dad was like ‘no, you’re just gonna have to change schools, I’m not [...] driving you [out of town] every day’. And at the time I didn’t really understand. The change was pretty [bad] but I got used to it pretty quick” (Maani, 22 year old Middle Eastern man).

Because of the frequent disruptions moves created in his life, Maani felt he had to get “used to it,” but getting used to it did not make it less disruptive.

Education and social work researchers Rosalind Kirk and Angelique Day (2011) report, every time a young person moves, they lose between four and six months of academic progress because of the disruption to their studies. These gaps in their education can be difficult to make up over time. Frequent moves between

¹³ Cross et al. (2013) found that the key three reasons for placement moves are: 1) caregiver-related reasons, such as maltreatment by caregivers or changes in caregivers’ lives; 2) child behaviour-related reasons such as aggressive behaviours; and 3) system- or policy-related reasons, such as the need to use temporary placements or the aim of placing children with siblings.

foster homes and group homes also often result in lengthy absences from school. Youth need to enrol in and then adjust to new schools (Liljedahl, Rae, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2013; Murphy, 2011). When enrolled in school, youth frequently miss classes due to Children's Aid Society (CAS)-related work, such as meetings with their social workers (Contenta, Mosebraaten, & Rankin, 2014).

The challenges young people under state guardianship face may be compounded by their race and gender, further impacting their ability to be successful in school, and hampering their future prospects. In British Columbia in 2014, the six-year completion rate for all Indigenous children in care with a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) was 40%. For Indigenous boys under state guardianship, the rate was even lower (37%) (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).¹⁴ Racial and gender inequities observed in broader society are also evident in the education system. Racialized students are disciplined at higher rates than students racialized as white; Black students in general, but especially Black boys, are more likely to be pushed out of school and directed away from post-secondary programs than other racial groups (Sharp, 2020). Race and gender are important factors intersecting with experiences of state guardianship.

Youth also face significant personal challenges related to past and ongoing traumas and tied to familial breakdown and/or removal by the state for other reasons. Anthropologist Daphne Winland (2013) indicates past traumas contribute to higher rates of substance use, mental health issues, learning disabilities, and behaviour labelled as 'criminogenic' (see also Gaetz et al., 2013; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Scully & Finlay, 2015). These factors can further erode young peoples' potential to achieve educational success as they define it.

At 23 years old, Tomas described that he continues to experience considerable mental and emotional instability in his life. He aspires to eventually become a social worker so he can "help kids like [himself]," but the mental instability he experiences is a barrier to enrollment:

"I'm not involved in [school] right now. I'm trying to get back involved in some schooling eventually because I know I want to help kids like me, but right now I'm not at that mental stability, you know what I mean?" (Tomas, 23 year old white man).

All of these conditions can culminate in youth under state guardianship falling significantly behind in their studies. Some youth find it impossible to catch up. In these tough circumstances, some youth are held back for a year in school and most are hindered in meeting their academic potential (Liljedahl, Rae, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2013). Importantly, 56% of youth under state guardianship in Ontario drop out of high school.

Pedro, 19 years old, described falling behind in his last two years of high school and not being able to graduate on time. To graduate, he will have to retake his entire final year of studies. He wants to finish high school, but is worried about having to balance the competing demands of work and school:

"I have no clue how I'm gonna do it right now, but once school starts I'll try and completely do grade 12 over again and try and finish high school" (Pedro, 19 year old Latinx man).

Like Pedro, Theo, 24 years old, was unable to finish high school. Theo shared that he received a criminal charge for a "low-level" and non-violent crime when he was 16 years old: the instability he experienced while under state guardianship was compounded by having to spend a few months in secure custody. The disruption to his

¹⁴ This data is from British Columbia. There is a lack of research in this area that is disaggregated by race.

studies was too difficult to overcome and he ended up dropping out. When he wanted to go back, he was too old to attend classes at his former high school:

“I got in trouble [in high school] a little bit too, but I wanted to finish there. But I kind of just left early and then I couldn’t go back after a certain time because you’re allowed to stay in high school until you’re 21, but I left a little bit early. ...But I’ve only got 15 credits. I can’t even go to college without 30 credits. Because I got a [charge] when I was 16” (Theo, 24 year old Black man).

Aiden, 24 years old, was unable to finish school after he was denied bail and held in remand detention for eighteen months:

“I’m actually going to do my GED test. That’s something I was doing while I was locked up but I never got to finish because I got released early. I just have to find a time to schedule the classes but with everything going on it’s kind of hard right now” (Aiden, 24 year old Black man).

Both Theo and Aiden shared that they aspire to move on to post-secondary studies. After aging out of state guardianship, Theo indicated he had no support—from his foster family or from his CAS worker—finding alternative ways to obtain his General Education Development (GED) certificate. Aiden explained he is working full time and bound by probation conditions which make it hard to think about coordinating the GED test. At 24 years old, neither Theo nor Aiden have completed high school; Theo works in retail and Aiden works in a factory.

According to Statistics Canada (2017), 34.7% of young adults in Canada, ages 20 to 34, live with their parents. The highest proportion of young adults living in the parental home in 2016 was in Ontario (42.1%). Yet, existing child welfare policies in Ontario require youth to leave their foster care and group home placements when they turn 18. When they ‘age out,’ youth face the added pressure of needing to become financially stable so that they can secure and maintain independent housing, while simultaneously completing their high school diploma. Noah described the immense challenges of finishing high school while figuring out his living situation when he ‘aged out’:

“It was the hardest time of my life. I remember writing my last exams for grade 12 just zoning out. My teachers [had] never seen me like that before. They’re like, ‘what’s going on?’ I’m like, ‘honestly, I’m not too worried about this right now, I’m worried about [where] I’m gonna live” (Noah, 21 year old biracial man).

Education researcher Naomi Nichols (2013) reports that the most vulnerable youth find themselves homeless during this transition. Only 25% of youth who experience homelessness after leaving state guardianship will complete their high school education (Nichols, 2013; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006).

Youth also described difficulties when trying to balance their financial insecurity with their desire to attend school:

“[Finishing school] is an option but I haven’t fully committed to it or decided if I should yet. In the meantime, I’m kind of working trying to save up some money and see where that goes” (Maani, 22 year old Middle Eastern man).

“Because I’m working right now, I can’t even go to school. After work I’m so tired” (Theo, 24 year old Black man).

While many youth living with their families of origin are able to rely on family for financial and emotional support, most youth ‘aging out’ do not have these supports. Like Maani and Theo, many have to prioritize working in order to afford to live and place their educational goals on hold. Finding the time and energy for school comes second to financial security. It is unsurprising that only 44% of youth under state guardianship complete high school and obtain an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).¹⁵

Some youths’ experiences show it is possible to disrupt this trajectory. Like Theo, Ayesha (18 year old Black woman) experienced disruption to her high school studies after receiving a series of criminal charges for ‘low-level’ and non-violent crimes as a youth. With mentorship and support from one of her teachers, she was able to overcome the challenges of frequent disruptions. At the time of her interview, Ayesha shared that she was on track to graduate at the end of the current school year:

“I never went to school. I got five credits in grade nine and I got two in grade 10. I never went to school after grade 10 so if it weren’t for my teacher, I would probably be in adult school and I would probably still be doing grade 10 work and grade nine work. I’m trying to graduate this year and I don’t think that would be possible without my teacher because I got a lot of charges” (Ayesha, 18 year old Black woman).

Ayesha’s story shows the important role that social support and mentorship can play in youths’ educational attainment and overall success.

Post-Secondary Enrolment & Completion Rates

“Youth who have no experiences of state guardianship are 20 times more likely to enrol in post-secondary studies”

(OPACY, 2012a).

Few youth leaving state guardianship continue with post-secondary education. Finances are a significant barrier for many youth. In recent years the Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada (CAFC) (2018) started offering funds and the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) started providing tuition waivers through their Living and Learning Grant to youth leaving state guardianship to offset the financial component of attending post-secondary school. Approximately 60% (n=264) of eligible youth reported accessing these resources to attend post-secondary school straight from high school.¹⁶ Among youth who do apply for post-secondary studies in Ontario, the majority (84%, n=222) enrol in apprenticeship programs or college, rather than university (16%, n=42) (OPACY, 2012a).

In the Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada’s (2018) survey of former youth in state care, only 7% of youth ranked tuition waivers as the key factor in deciding to attend post-secondary education. Personal expectations were ranked highest by 82% of youth, career goals by 66% of

¹⁵ The Children’s Aid Foundation (2018) reported most youth (n=133, 84%) completed high school within a four- to five-year period, but one in seven (n=25, 16%) took six years or more to finish; 91% of respondents were from Ontario. There is a lack of data on the number of youth who ‘age out’ and later obtain a GED.

¹⁶ Approximately 28% reported seeking employment for one year after leaving high school before going on to post-secondary school (CAFCm 2018).

youth, and additional scholarships and support by 50% of youth (Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, 2018). Tuition waivers were only accessed by 11% of that survey's participants.¹⁷

Some youth do not apply to post-secondary programs because they do not have assistance navigating the application process. While many youth have family members who can help them research post-secondary institutions, visit school campuses, and apply for programs, most youth leaving state guardianship do not. After 'aging out,' few youth remain in contact with their foster families or group home staff. Most have severed or tenuous connections to their families of origin. Contact with their CAS workers is also substantially scaled back, often reduced to once-per-month meetings. The process of identifying and enrolling in post-secondary programs can be too difficult for many youth to complete by themselves. Without support, many qualified youth 'aging out' of state guardianship do not apply to or attend post-secondary studies.¹⁸

Past traumas contribute to higher rates of substance use, mental health issues, learning disabilities, and behaviour labelled "criminogenic" among youth leaving state guardianship (Winland, 2013). These factors do not disappear when youth turn 18. For many, these factors persist in adulthood and can further prevent youth from reaching their educational goals:

"I would like to study... I wouldn't mind doing architecture. Honestly, I thought about interior design and maybe mechanics, but architecture is really something that stimulated my head so far. I've just struggled with a lot of addictions recently and I'm trying to really get a grasp on it but it's incredibly hard" (Jesse, 24 year old white man)

"I took child and youth work for a semester. I did like it until certain things opened up from my past that I'm still working on overcoming" (Roland, 24 year old white man).

Both Jesse and Roland described ways their past traumas resurfaced, making it difficult to enroll in or complete post-secondary studies. At the time of their interviews, neither youth had pursued post-secondary studies again.

Youth who enroll in post-secondary studies have a much different experience than those who were never under state guardianship. For example, it is common for some youth who were never under state guardianship to change their programs of study or to take an extra year to finish their undergraduate degrees. According to researcher Doug Lederman (2017), nearly one third of first time post-secondary students will change their major at least once during the first three years of school. In contrast, youth who were under state guardianship that receive the Living and Learning Grant are only eligible to receive this support for up to four years, maximum. Most youth leaving state guardianship recognize that their circumstances are different from their peers and know they cannot afford to make any mistakes (Batsche et al., 2014).

Information about the post-secondary graduation rates of Ontario youth who were previously under state guardianship is not publicly available.¹⁹ However, in their research with youth leaving state guardianship in British Columbia, economist Marvin Shaffer and his colleagues (2016) reported youth graduated from university at a rate that is one-sixth that of their peers who were never under state guardianship. If we apply this rate to youth in Ontario, of the 42²⁰ youth who enroll in university each year, we can expect only five

¹⁷ There is a lack of research on the benefits and challenges of offering tuition waivers to youth 'aging out' of state guardianship.

¹⁸ More research is needed on the experiences of youth 'aging out' of state guardianship when accessing or not accessing post-secondary education and training.

¹⁹ We recommend more research in this area.

²⁰ This number is based on approximately 264 youth leaving care who access resources to attend post-secondary school, 16% of which (n=42) attend university.

(12.8%) will graduate.²¹ These five Ontarian youth represent 0.5% of young people leaving state guardianship annually who graduate from university.²²

High School Diploma and Future Prospects

Higher rates of high school completion in Ontario are commonly attributed to changing labour force entry-level requirements, social expectations (parents not wanting their children “left behind”), and overall prosperity (which reduces the need for early labour force entry) (The Conference Board of Canada, 2021). In 2016, 87.9% of people aged 25 to 64 in Ontario had a high school diploma or equivalency certificate (Statistics Canada, 2017b). In 2016, 8.5% of men and 5.4% of women aged 25 to 34 had less than a high school diploma, representing about 340,000 young Canadians (Uppal, 2017). People with experience of state guardianship are reflected in these numbers, yet their unique experiences receive little acknowledgement as a barrier to completing high school and further studies. American research indicates that youth from state guardianship are more likely than their peers to complete high school with a GED rather than a diploma (Okpych & Courtney, 2014).²³ Young people under state guardianship encounter a number of barriers that can make it difficult for them to be successful in school, which can have a direct impact on future life opportunities and employment prospects.

Structural Factors

Structural risk factors, such as poverty, foster care, and lack of support for young mothers, present significant barriers to academic performance. In a Manitoba study, psychologist Marni Brownell and colleagues (2010) concluded it is not only specific factors that undermine positive outcomes, but the cumulative effect of factors that is especially debilitating. Youth under state guardianship come from poverty²⁴ 80% of the time (Brownell et al., 2010 cited in Kovarikova, 2017).²⁵ Poverty, challenging conditions under state guardianship, and the lack of support provided to families, including young parents, are systemic failures.

When looking at high school attainment specifically, both school and non-school factors contribute to dropping out of high school. Non-school factors include low social class, racialization, school-home linkages, and community support; school factors include ineffective punishment, lack of counseling, support, and outreach, and disregard for learning styles (BCG, 2011). It is important to note these factors because youth should not be blamed for systemic failures. Rather, these areas are points of intervention from which youth can be better supported to achieve success.

COSTS

Based on census data indicating differences in earnings by level of educational attainment, those without a high school diploma will earn an average of \$15,000 less annually than those with a post-secondary degree; this number incrementally increases over one’s lifetime (Statistics Canada, 2019). By the time a young person reaches retirement age (approximately 65), this difference is more pronounced, amounting to more than \$40,000 per year on average between a person with no high school diploma and a person with a post-secondary

²¹ Youth leaving state guardianship graduate university at a rate one sixth that of Ontario youth (77%), which amounts to graduating 12.8% of the time. If 42 youth enroll in university each year, we can expect approximately five will graduate, based on this rate.

²² The university graduation rate for Ontario youth is on average 77% per year, with negligible fluctuation across cohorts (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2021).

²³ There is a lack of comparable Canadian research in this area.

²⁴ Brownell et al. (2010) define “poverty” as families receiving governmental income assistance.

²⁵ More research is needed looking into this relationship.

degree (Statistics Canada, 2019). Given that 56% of youth leaving state guardianship each year do not finish high school, each youth stands to lose between \$705,000 to \$1,880,000 in earnings over their lifetime (between ages 18 to 65). The cohort of at least 560 youth (the number is likely higher)²⁶ leaving care who do not finish high school each year in Ontario stand to lose a combined total of lost earnings between \$394,800,000 to \$1,052,800,000 over their lifetime. Shaffer and colleagues (2016) estimate that at least 30% of this cost is borne by governments in foregone tax revenues alone.²⁷ According to the Conference Board of Canada (2019), each additional high school graduate saves the Ontario government (on average) \$2,767 each year on social assistance, health care, and criminal justice, while each person who does not complete high school costs the province \$3,128²⁸ each year.

Lower educational attainment and income insecurity impacts public healthcare costs. For example, nutritional scientist Valerie Tarasuk and colleagues (2015) found that health care costs rose systematically with the increasing severity of Ontario household food insecurity—related to income-related problems of food access. Annual public health costs were 23% higher in households with marginal food insecurity, 49% higher in those with moderate food insecurity, and 121% higher in those with severe food insecurity.

There are also intangible costs to youth who face barriers in reaching their educational and career goals. School can provide the opportunity to learn how to learn.²⁹ Students can gain critical thinking, verbal, quantitative, moral reasoning, and other skills. It can provide a forum to learn how to participate in a democracy through voting and civic participation (Brennan, Durazzi, & Tanguy, 2013). It can provide an opportunity to form important relationships and social skills. School can help open minds, expose people to different perspectives and experiences, and broaden horizons and a sense of what is possible. These costs are also felt by the community when there are members who are not given the same opportunities to engage and grow.

²⁶ More research is needed to understand how many youth complete or do not complete high school.

²⁷ From Schaffer et al.: Based on these differences in lifetime income, the cost (more precisely the opportunity cost) of not closing the educational attainment gap between the 1000 youth aging out each year and the grade 12 graduation, post-secondary participation and university graduation rates of the general population is estimated at \$142 to \$180 million in present value—an average of \$142,000 to \$180,000 per youth.

²⁸ People who complete high school still end up “costing” the government, just not as much as people who do not complete high school.

²⁹ Some students do not find school to be a helpful environment (e.g., Morris, 2018) and feel “pushed out.”

5.2 Employment, Poverty, and Income Support

BACKGROUND

Education and Employment

Without a high school diploma, the possibility of finding meaningful work that provides more than basic needs is often significantly reduced. High-school completion is also the prerequisite stepping stone to post-secondary education (The Conference Board of Canada, 2021). In previous generations, a high school diploma was adequate for most jobs, including many well-paid jobs. More recently however, “The growing complexity of work in the global knowledge economy and the rising rates of post-secondary completion in Canada...have reduced the relative value of a high school diploma” (The Conference Board of Canada, 2021). In an increasingly credentialed society, it is now commonplace for employers to specify post-secondary education as a minimum qualification for employment. A post-secondary credential is often required even when it exceeds the actual skills required for entry-level jobs. These circumstances can have devastating impacts on the majority of youth who ‘age out’ of state guardianship in Ontario without completing high school.

Chris, 24 years old, has been searching for permanent employment since he ‘aged out’ of state guardianship six years ago. He has not finished high school, but he was taking continuing education courses to obtain a GED certificate. Chris is ineligible to apply for most permanent jobs without a post-secondary degree. The jobs he is eligible to apply for tend to be “temporary” and “seasonal,” which he thinks are designed for people who are still in school:

“The market of jobs is designed for students instead of full-grown men” (Chris, 24 year old Indigenous man). His Youth-in-Transition Worker added, “There’s a lot of temporary stuff, and seasonal work, so you can get laid off in that. But Chris has been really active in that and trying to find a job. He’s motivated.”

Chris wants to find meaningful, permanent employment but the credentials required for many jobs exclude those who do not have a diploma or a degree from applying. Similar to the 56% of young people who have not completed high school, Chris’ choices are limited.

Career Prospects

Employment opportunities available to young people who have not graduated high school are limited, less secure, and lower paying than other careers that young people qualify for with post-secondary training. According to Statistics Canada (2020), the average hourly salary of an employee in the accommodation and food services sector is \$14.66/hour, and \$15.49/hour in the wholesale and retail trade. Service sector jobs average an hourly wage of \$17.51/hour, and other jobs including in construction, transportation, and warehousing pay close to the same. Many who do not have a high school diploma are limited to employment in one of these areas. Youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship face the added pressure of needing to secure employment quickly, to ensure they can survive on their own after turning 18 (OPACY, 2012b). But according to one social worker, many youth have never even held a job before:

“I remember we had this question on one of our intake forms, ‘can you maintain employment for more than six months?’ And one of my youth was like, ‘I don’t know? I’ve never worked. But I hope so’ (YIT 5).

Many young people who have never held a job before, meaning they have never had to learn the soft skills related to employment such as punctuality and attendance among other skills, are suddenly expected to find full time employment at age 18, upon which their survival depends.³⁰ When Scarlett was about to turn 18, her foster parents told her she would have to find a place to live independently. She was able to stay with her partner and his family temporarily, but his parents made it clear that they should start looking for a place of their own. Scarlett has not completed high school and has not given thought to what kind of job she wants. Scarlett said:

“I really don’t care. I’m just looking for any kind of job” (Scarlett, 18 year old white woman).

Scarlett shared she had applied to several jobs in hospitality and retail and was willing to take the first job she was offered. Her primary goal was to save up enough money for her and her partner to live independently.

Other youth interviewed, including Farrah, 24 years old, Diego, 19 years old, and Ben, 21 years old, indicated they worked in lower paying fields.

“I’m looking for a job right now, but I was working as a customer care agent over the phone” (Farrah, 24 year old Indigenous woman).

“I’m trying to go into the culinary background, so right now I’m working at a restaurant” (Diego, 19 year old Latinx man).

“I do sales [...]. [My mom said] nothing is easy in this life, right? But then this one dude got me into sales and stuff, and I’m not saying sales is easy, but it is something that’s very rewarding and you don’t even need an education for it” (Ben, 21-year-old Black man).

For Ben, he appreciated how “easy” and “rewarding” sales was. He shared that he felt pressured by his mother to follow the path of high school to post-secondary in order to be successful. But at age 21, he still has not completed high school and does not plan to go back in the near future. He was happy to find a job without having completed high school where he can still support himself. Yet, some youth, like Roland, 24 years old, and Maani, 22 years old, find themselves working in more precarious or “under the table” employment scenarios to make ends meet:

“At the moment I’m an on-call snow shoveler. I would kind of appreciate it if the weather would snow more. But that’s about it” (Roland, 24 year old white man).

Roland expressed how challenging it was to have to depend on the weather for income and security. Maani also engaged in cash-for-work electrical and snow removal jobs:

“Right now I’m in between jobs and helping out with an electrical cash job and I’m also doing snow removal. It’s pretty demanding physically though so I’m looking for something more chill, like what

³⁰ Research is needed on the barriers to employment for youth under state guardianship. For example, are youth discouraged by guardians? Do youth need support in applying for jobs, getting to jobs, and staying employed that others not under state guardianship receive from their kin?

I was doing with the afterschool program. It's more consistent, better hours, better pay" (Maani, 22 year old Middle Eastern man).

Maani hoped for a better employment circumstance but described feeling stuck in precarious employment situations. Employment opportunities are limited without a high school diploma, which means more than half of youth leaving state guardianship each year are concentrated in low-paying jobs or rely on government income supports.

Earning Potential

People who do not graduate from high school earn substantially less than those who graduate. A person with a high school diploma in Canada earns 80% of what a person with a diploma earns (The Conference Board of Canada, 2021). The average annual salary of a young person aged 15-19 in Ontario with no high school diploma in 2016 was \$2,774 less than those with a high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2019). These disparities grow as time goes on. For young people aged 25-29 with no high school diploma in 2016, the average annual salary was \$4,512 less than those with a high school diploma and \$16,513 less than those with a bachelor's degree. By the time these youth reach retirement age (60-64), their average annual salary without a high school diploma is \$5,977 less than those with a high school diploma, and \$42,616 less than those with a bachelor's degree. These disparities have large impacts on people aging out of state guardianship. The Conference Board of Canada (2014) indicates a youth aging out of state guardianship will earn about \$326,000 less in income over their lifespan compared to the average Canadian.

According to researchers Stephanie Cosner Berzin, Erin Singer, and Kimberly Hokanson (2014), without intervention or supports in place, youth leaving state guardianship experience lower employment rates, lower earnings, and fewer opportunities than their peers who were never under state guardianship. These conditions can set many youth on a path of accumulated disadvantage into adulthood, including an increased likelihood of experiencing poverty and relying on government income supports (Kovarikova, 2017).

Poverty and Reliance on Income Supports

"The majority of youth who age out of care live in poverty"

(Kovarikova, 2017, p.15).

To mitigate potential financial hardship for youth leaving state guardianship, nearly all youth receive the Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY) benefit, administered by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. This benefit provides youth with a monthly stipend of \$850. This support expires when youth turn 21. While CCSY is certainly helpful, the current amount provides little financial security for youth in the face of rising housing, food, and other living expenses. Rent is high in a number of cities, for example the average rent for a bachelor apartment in Toronto is \$1,211 (City of Toronto, 2021), \$1,105 in Kingston (a mid-size city, population: 136,685), (Rent Board, 2021) and \$907 in nearby Belleville (a smaller city, population: 50,000) (Rent Café, 2021). Researcher Eric Melillo for the Northwestern Ontario Health Unit (2018) reports the cost of food alone in Northern Ontario is higher than in Toronto. For a family of four in the Rainy River and Kenora Districts, healthy food baskets would cost \$1018.20 per month, approximately \$160 more per month than a family spends in Toronto (Melillo, 2018).

Arlo, 24 years old, has worked two part-time jobs since leaving state guardianship. These earnings, combined with the CCSY supplement, left him with \$50.00 each month after paying his rent. Arlo described

how he was able to overcome food insecurity by shopping for food at the dollar store for two years, before finding available supports in the community:

“I had to take people’s health cards and go to a foodbank and say all these people live with me so when I went to the food bank they would give me enough food for eight people. But I didn’t come up with that idea until two years [later]. So for two years I was eating nothing but popcorn and nothing but soup. I was so skinny, you should’ve seen me man, because I was malnourished. If I bought chicken, it was a luxury” (Arlo, 24 year old Latinx man).

Low educational attainment significantly impacts youths’ future career prospects and many ‘age out’ to poverty. Despite working two part-time jobs in the fast-food industry, Arlo still experienced significant challenges in making ends meet after he left state guardianship.

When youth turn 21, the abrupt stop to CCSY creates challenges. Theo works full-time in retail but explained that he finds it difficult to maintain his financial independence. He dreams of living a “comfortable life” but finds it impossible to save for his future on his current income:

I just need to have enough money, first of all. Not spend it too much. Spend, save some, do whatever you gotta do. Rent first. Mostly just gotta have enough to do whatever I wanna do in life, right? Just enough, right? I don’t need to be like a billionaire, I just need a couple mill, haha” (Theo, 24 year old Black man).

Arlo’s and Theo’s stories are common among many youth leaving state guardianship. In a Canadian study of 210 former wards of the state, 77% reported earning less than \$20,000 annually in the initial years after ‘aging out’ (Tweddle, 2005). In a more recent survey, the Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada (CAFC) (2018) reported that the median income of youth who responded (60% of participants) is only between \$10,000 - \$19,999. The barriers to receiving secondary education greatly impact the lifetime financial prosperity of youth with experiences of state guardianship. It is unsurprising that 57% of young adults who were formerly under state guardianship rely on some form of government income support, including Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) (OPACY, 2012a).

While income for the 20-24 population is typically low in general, many youth are able to offset financial hardship with the support of their families (Shaffer et al., 2016). Societal trends indicate many youth are staying in school and staying at home longer than previous generations, often well into their 20s (Milan, 2016). Young people now find it necessary to obtain a post-secondary degree to access a number of employment opportunities. These trends, combined with higher housing costs and later average marrying and childrearing ages,³¹ mean many youth are staying at home longer (Shah et al., 2017). The traditional markers of adulthood are now delayed, often until young peoples’ late twenties and early thirties (Arnette, 2000). Most youth leaving state guardianship, however, do not have access to family support and are an exception to these broader social trends.

COSTS

Low educational attainment limits employment prospects and earning potential. Individuals who work in the low-pay sector contribute less in taxes than do those who have access to and who are employed in higher-

³¹ Youth with experience under state guardianship are more likely to be teen or young parents (Kovarikova, 2017).

paying sectors. These circumstances may increase the need for some youth leaving state guardianship to rely on government income support.

For 57% (n=570) of youth ‘aging out’ each year who come to rely on income supports, the costs to society are high. Individuals who qualify to receive the Ontario Works income support benefit are given a monthly Basic Needs allowance of \$343/month and a Maximum Shelter Allowance of \$390/month, which amounts to a maximum of \$733/month, per individual. If 570 of the 1000 youth leaving state guardianship each year rely on Ontario Works for income support, the cost is more than \$5 million dollars annually; over a lifetime (18 to 65) this would amount to \$235,000,000. In contrast, the cost to extend the Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY) benefit for these 570 youth would amount to \$5,814,000 annually, however, in line with a goal of readiness,³² the CCSY benefit would only extend until youth have reached greater financial independence and no longer need this financial support. The time to reach more independence for each youth will differ, but even if all youth were supported until they turned 30, this would amount to \$69,768,000, which provides a cost-savings of more than \$165 million over youths’ lifetimes.

There are enormous economic benefits associated with interventions that prevent adverse educational and employment outcomes for youth leaving state guardianship. When permanency³³ and long-term caregiver placements are prioritized over cut-offs for support, youth are able to stay home longer. In addition to a long-term home available after they turn 18, youth should have permanent support networks and community connections (allowing and facilitating healthy relationships of interdependence). Without the fear of having to find employment and housing at 18, youth can focus instead on finishing high school and enrolling in post-secondary programs. Youth can also be given support to identify post-secondary programs, go for campus visits, and navigate the application process by longer-term caregivers, which increases their likelihood of enrolling in post-secondary programs. In Ontario’s heavily credentialed job market, having a post-secondary degree will increase youths’ career prospects and earnings potential, breaking them free of the cycle of poverty. When youths’ career prospects are not hindered by their educational outcomes, they reduce the need to rely on income support and increase their likelihood of higher earnings, both reducing the cost to the province and increasing tax revenue.

³² There is a “readiness model” forwarded by advocates in Ontario. We draw upon the concept of readiness and operationalize it differently with a focus on maintaining relationships of interdependence, rather than prioritizing youth’s gradual independence.

³³ Permanency means reunification, legal guardianship, a permanent placement with a fit and willing relative, or another planned permanent living arrangement.

5.3 Housing and Homelessness

BACKGROUND

Increased Risk of Experiencing Homelessness

Youth leaving state guardianship are acutely vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. In fact, youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship are 200 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who were never under state guardianship (Doucet, 2020; Gaetz et al., 2016). In a given year there are an estimated 35,000 youth experiencing homelessness in Canada (Gartner & Caloz, 2013). Nearly two-thirds (57.8%) of these youth have been under state guardianship (Gaetz et al., 2016; Shewchuk, 2020). Youth leaving state guardianship who experience homelessness are likely to be homeless for longer than other similarly situated vulnerable youth (Raising the Roof, 2009).

In a given year there are an estimated 35,000 youth experiencing homelessness in Canada. Nearly two thirds (57.8%) of these youth have been under state guardianship.

Indigenous and LGBTQ+ youth experience an even higher amount of homelessness (Doucet, 2020).

Youth ‘aging out’ often leave state guardianship without adequate support and guidance to find secure housing or to live independently. Under these conditions, many youth experience a challenging transition to adulthood. Like some youth preparing for independence, Dina, 21 years old, was supported by her Children’s Aid Society (CAS) worker to find independent housing. The support she received, though, was limited to “basic needs” and was not ongoing:

“It was more so just basic needs that they helped with. [My CAS worker] helped with getting me bedding and sheets and stuff like that, which was amazing. But I didn’t last living in the apartment because I struggle with mental health. So it didn’t work out with me living on my own independently because it’s hard when you have mental health concerns and struggles” (Dina, 21 year old Black woman).

Dina, who had experienced significant traumas and contended with mental health challenges struggled to cope when living on her own. Without meaningful support *after* she was housed, Dina lost her housing shortly after moving in.

Jesse, 24 years old, also described his experience of losing housing:

“When I turned 18 [my CAS worker] helped me find an apartment. They paid first and last for that. That was no problem. It was when I actually got into the place, I ended up screwing up this apartment that they got me. And from there I kind of just went downhill. Like I had lost the apartment I got myself into because I ditched it on my own. Stupid” (Jesse, 24 year old white man)

Without ongoing social and therapeutic supports to cope with their mental health struggles, Dina and Jesse found it difficult to live independently. Since broader social trends indicate many youth are staying home longer, well into their twenties, it is reasonable to expect that many youth would find it challenging to have to live independently at age 18. These feelings of unpreparedness are exacerbated for young people like Dina and Jesse who experience significant mental health challenges. Support during this transition means more than giving

youth resources to secure housing; it means supporting youth in the context of significant barriers to help them remain housed.

Limited Available Housing Options

Most youth leaving state guardianship have severed or tenuous connections with their families of origin. However, some youth attempt to reunite with their families of origin after ‘aging out.’ In some cases, youth may return to live with their families but these reunions are frequently short-lived and youth find themselves on their own once again. Often, the reasons why youth were initially apprehended persist, for example volatility, abuse, or neglect (among other reasons).³⁴ Roland, 24 years old, for example, left his family home after his relationship with his stepfather broke down:

“That only really happened in the last year or so. Till that point I was living at home but I guess the conditions I was living under weren’t technically the best. I was mistreated by my stepfather so that kind of culminated in why I am no longer at the house” (Roland, 24 year old white man).

Noah also described returning home and a breakdown in relationships soon after:

“I remember my biological dad sold me a dream, I went to live with him and [in] less than 6 months he kicked me out” (Noah, 21 year old biracial man).

When familial relationships break down, many youth have nowhere else to turn after ‘aging out,’ and many turn to emergency shelters for housing.

For some youth, living in emergency shelters and experiencing homelessness happens multiple times and for months or years at a time. David described experiencing homelessness for years:

“Right now I’ve been living on my own, like homeless and in shelters and stuff, for about a couple of years now” (David, 22 year old white man).

David tried to live with his uncle after ‘aging out,’ but when he could not live there anymore, he was not able to secure housing. He has lived "on his own" for the past two years, back and forth between homelessness and emergency shelters.

Instability and Transience

When youth leaving state guardianship experience homelessness, it can be nearly impossible for them to move forward with their lives or to work on their future goals. Their immediate survival goals become their primary concern. With a lack of stable shelter, youth find it difficult to stay in school. Maani, 22 years old, attempted to reunite with his biological family after leaving state guardianship. With “stable” housing from his parents and financial support from the Living and Learning Grant, Maani enrolled in a post-secondary program. Within two years of returning home however, his relationship with his parents broke down, he left home, and he left his studies:

³⁴ That said, some youth, including 60s and Millennium Indigenous scooped people, express that they were removed for trivial reasons.

“I was [studying] for two years and then I dropped out because my parents kicked me out so I couldn’t finish it. I was also doing [a program and] only had three courses left, but I also dropped out of that” (Maani, 22 year old Middle Eastern man).

When his parents kicked him out, Maani experienced homelessness and stayed in an emergency shelter. He briefly enrolled in a different education program, but the instability of shelter living prevented him from continuing.

Ben, 21 years old, described how difficult it was to move back and forth between homelessness and emergency shelters; “street living” and “shelter living”:

“Living in shelters makes it difficult to pursue anything else. When you’re living in emergency housing [...] you don’t have time to do anything. It’s just [...] exhausting” (Ben, 21 year old Black man).

Noah also described the challenges of living in a shelter and the impossibility of even reading a book, much less going to school:

“I want to be out of [the shelter] by mid-December. Even if it's like a shitty basement apartment or something and I'm literally just sleeping on the floor. I'd rather do that than be in there. I'll put 10 [...] comforters on the ground and sleep on that before I stay where [...] I'm staying now 'cause at least then I can have some peace of mind. I have a book right now that I'm trying to finish and I can't even read it. ... I just don't get time to read. I can go to the library and stuff, but why [...] am I going all the way there if I wanna just read in my room? I just wanna read while I eat or something, you know what I mean?” (Noah, 21 year old biracial man).

Staying in a shelter may mean sleeping in a different bed/room each night and in some cases sharing a room with other people, sometimes different people each night. Some shelters do not offer day programming and youth are required to leave for several hours during the day, meaning they have to carry their stuff with them throughout the day. Further, some shelters place a cap on how many items can be brought in, so youth may have to pare down their belongings in order to have a place to sleep at night. These conditions make it challenging to consistently attend school or employment.

A lack of family support, combined with poverty, mean many youth leaving state guardianship move frequently—between homelessness, emergency shelters, transitional housing, and rented properties (Shaffer et al., 2016).³⁵ Some youth report couch surfing for months at a time (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Kovarikova, 2017). These conditions demonstrate a pattern of frequent moves that begins while under state guardianship and continues after youth ‘age out’—with equally disruptive and devastating consequences. For example, the instability youth experience while under state guardianship make it challenging for them to build relationships and finish high school, many continue to experience instability in young adulthood (and after) that impacts their ability to maintain housing and employment.

The issues that many youth leaving state guardianship face are interconnected and compounding. Any of these factors—poverty, homelessness, isolation—on their own have a significant impact on a youth’s life.

³⁵ More research is needed to understand why youth are moved frequently between placements.

But when taken together, it is clear these young people are set up to fail. One social worker emphasized how difficult this transition is for young people:

“If you don't have housing as a kid—and I say kid on purpose because I think we are working with kids. I don't think that just because you turn 17 or 18 all of a sudden you become this responsible adult who can take care of all their bills. ... If you don't have housing as a kid, you can't have mental health stability, you can't stay in school, you can't maintain a good job usually. It's really, really tough, right? Some people can. It's very rare though” (YIT 2).

The cumulative disadvantage that youth leaving state guardianship face begins the moment they are taken into state guardianship and continues as they transition to adulthood, on precarious footing.

In the words of Arlo, depression, trauma, substance use, and homelessness is a cycle that is hard to break:

“Shelters don't [care] about you. They care at first. So [when] you get intaked they care about you. But the thing is that when you're in a shelter you got two options, you got isolation and you got—is it the fray where you join the people? Yah, you got the fray. You either join the elite homeless kids who all band together—and we don't got much, but it's enough if we share. ... So I got in with the wrong crowds. I've got enough money to pitch on a bottle, you got enough money to pitch on a bottle. You're sad. I'm sad. She's sad. He's sad. We're all [...] sad. We're all gonna get drunk. We're all gonna smoke weed. We're all gonna share our drugs. We're all gonna just repeat together. And I got into a cycle for two years. I couldn't break out of it because yo, I just can't anymore. I was looking for death. Basically I was just waiting to die. I was just like, okay, this is my final stop whatever. Homelessness” (Arlo, 24 year old Latinx man).

Many youth who experience homelessness feel isolated and hopeless. In response, many will turn to negative coping mechanisms like substance use and self-harm and will lose contact with any previously established supports. In the absence of support from stable, non-professional adults, youth face extreme isolation, or are forced to join “the fray,” as Arlo puts it.

COSTS

Homelessness has significant economic costs for municipalities and taxpayers. In Canada, the average monthly costs to maintain shelter beds are \$1,932 (ACTO, 2017). These costs are approximately ten times higher than the monthly costs to maintain affordable housing units, estimated at \$199 (ACTO, 2017). Approximately 58% (n=580) of youth leaving state guardianship each year will experience homelessness. If these young people stay in emergency shelters, the annual cost to taxpayers is approximately \$13.4 million. People experiencing homelessness who also contend with mental illness are especially vulnerable. These individuals generate high costs for society. More preventative programs are needed for youth that address their health, housing, and social services needs (Latimer et al., 2017). A study found that \$53,144 is spent on average per person annually for people experiencing homelessness alongside mental health issues in the cities of Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montréal and Moncton (Latimer et al., 2017). During COVID-19, the costs of operating shelter beds has increased, with the reported cost of a single bed in Toronto doubling from \$40,000 to \$80,000 (BGM Strategy Group, 2020).

In addition to these monetary costs are important individual and social costs that arise from homelessness, substance use, and mental health—three interrelated factors that impact youths’ wellbeing. For example, Shaffer et al. (2016) recognize that these factors decrease youths’ wellness and quality of life. Homelessness also renders many youth more vulnerable to experiencing victimization and criminalization (Latimer et al., 2017). These circumstances result in higher health care, criminal justice system, and emergency shelter costs for taxpayers.

With more targeted prevention and intervention, youth leaving state guardianship can be supported to find safe, secure, and stable housing. Allowing youth to stay in their foster care and group home placements, or more targeted matching of youth with long-term or permanent caregivers, could reduce the pressure on youth to find independent housing immediately upon turning 18. Additionally, more affordable housing and support services should be made to youth ‘aging out’ as they prepare for more independence, and these supports should continue after youth are housed. Adopting a Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) approach offers youth access to permanent housing in combination with individualized, ongoing support to ensure they stay housed (Doucet, 2020; Shewchuk, 2020).

5.4 Criminalization

BACKGROUND

Youth Under State Guardianship and the Criminal Justice System: “Crossover Youth”

The conditions youth face while under state guardianship render them vulnerable to criminalization. It is unsurprising that these youth are overrepresented in the youth justice system, making them an especially vulnerable subset of youth under state guardianship. While the overlap between the state guardianship and criminal justice systems is recognized in practice and documented in literature (see: Bala, De Filippis, & Hunter, 2013; Bala, Finlay, De Filippis, & Hunter, 2015; Scully & Finlay, 2015; Finlay et al., 2019), there is no systematic data available at the provincial level in Ontario or the national level in Canada. According to law professor and “crossover youth” researcher Nicholas Bala et al. (2015, p.133), “This absence of data is itself disconcerting, since it reflects a lack of priority given to understanding the needs and outcomes for children whom the state has decided to remove from parental care.” Among youth interviewed, it is noteworthy that most engaged in “low-level” and non-violent crimes. Nearly half of youth (44%, n=11) committed drug (n=3) or theft (n=8) offences. When simple assault is added—which includes incidents of fights between foster siblings or peers in group home settings—76% (n=19) of youths’ offences are accounted for. This data suggests youth under state guardianship tend to engage in minor offences that reflect the trauma they are subjected to and environments they are placed in, a pattern that continues into legal adulthood, which keeps them ensnared in the criminal justice system.

Though the provincial government in Ontario does not collect data about crossover youth,³⁶ in British Columbia the Child and Youth Representative (RCY) and the Provincial Health Officer (PHO) (2009) undertook a study with a cohort of more than 50,000 children who were born in 1986 that sheds light on the unique experiences and outcomes for youth with crossover experiences. This report reveals it is more likely for a youth under state guardianship in British Columbia to end up in the justice system (35.5%) than to graduate from high school (24.5%); police recommend charges for youth under state guardianship (41%) more often than they do for youth who have not been under state guardianship (6%); and one in six youth under state guardianship have spent time in custody compared to less than one in 50 among youth who have never been under state guardianship (RCY & PHO, 2009). At the local level, StepStones for Youth (2020) found 46% of youth leaving state guardianship in Toronto experienced forms of criminalization after ‘aging out.’

Abundant research documents and recommends ways to address the unique issues that crossover youth face (see for example: RCY & PHO, 2009; Finlay et al., 2019; Herz, Ryan, & Bilchik, 2010; Scully and Finlay, 2015). As a result, tremendous efforts have been made by service providers and justice system actors to support these youth when they experience criminalization. If a youth who is supervised by CAS is criminalized before they turn 18, they receive specific supports to navigate the complex justice system, one example being their CAS worker should attend court with them in the capacity of their “parent.” This safeguard seeks to equalize challenges a young person faces because they lack stable family support, in comparison to their peers who do. Having someone in court, for example, can influence proceedings; in cases where a CAS worker was not present, youth under state guardianship were more likely to be held in remand (Bala et al., 2015). Indigenous, Black, and LGBTQ+ youth continue to be criminalized at high rates however, which indicates these safeguards are not able to equalize outcomes by race and identity.

Despite the availability of these supports, Nicholas Bala et al. (2015) indicates that an overwhelming majority of youth in custody (75%) cease involvement with the child welfare system while they are detained, a

³⁶ The Ontario government should collect this data going forward.

pattern that was also evident among youth interviewed for this study. For example, when asked whether they told their CAS workers they had been arrested or charged, several youth indicated they had not:

“No. I don't know if [my CAS worker] knows. No, I never told her that story” (Yalina, 19 year old Black woman).

“After I got charged, I stopped dealing with CAS” (Ayesha, 18 year old Black woman).

“No. ... I don't have any type of interaction with CAS whatsoever right now” (Dafnie, 18 year old biracial woman).

When youth do not tell their CAS workers that they have been charged, the supports that workers offer are not available to them, which leaves youth to navigate the justice system—and to reintegrate upon release—on their own (Bala et al., 2015; Scully & Finlay, 2015). Being criminalized as a youth increases the likelihood of being criminalized again and into adulthood (Bala et al., 2015). But when these youth ‘age out,’ most of the available supports offered from their workers ends abruptly, even though the reasons why these supports were created persist.

Crossover youth who ‘age out’ are especially vulnerable among youth leaving state guardianship. The universal age-criminalization curve shows that the risk of criminalized activity peaks in mid- to late-adolescence for all youth (Yi & Wildeman, 2018). But for youth who are ‘aging out,’ this period coincides with the time when they are preparing for abrupt emancipation and independence, making an already turbulent life stage even more difficult (Yi & Wildeman, 2018). These youth too rarely receive the support needed to disrupt the cycle of criminalization *before* they reach adulthood, which means the cycle often continues in adulthood (Bala et al., 2015). In a study in British Columbia (Shaffer et al., 2016), almost 70% of youth reported being criminalized in the first year after ‘aging out.’

Unique Experiences of Youth Leaving State Guardianship in the Criminal Justice System

The differences between youth leaving state guardianship and their peers who have never experienced state guardianship are pronounced at all stages of the criminal justice system. A few comparisons from the early stages of the legal process—from arrest to bail—help illustrate these differences.

PRESENCE/ABSENCE OF KINSHIP SUPPORT

We define kinship as immediate and extended family, trusted and close neighbours, friends, and community members. The focus in research and discourse is usually on immediate family rather than a broader network of kinship. This limits the network of supports for youth and fails to reflect the lived experience of many.

Research suggests that kin play a crucial role in easing the difficulties of a criminal charge. Those who have stable family support—emotional, financial, and otherwise—have help navigating the complex criminal justice process (Côté, 2000; Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005; Lee, Courtney, & Tajima, 2014; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Having kin present in the courtroom signals the presence of a support system which is viewed positively by the court. In contrast, those who do not have stable kin support face significant challenges if they are criminalized after they turn 18, in addition to the prospect of losing employment and housing if imprisoned. Once a youth under state guardianship turns 18, their CAS worker—who is their legal “parent”—is no longer

required to attend court appearances with them. Youth leaving state guardianship rarely have non-professional adults in their lives who will attend court with them.

Having kin supports also means a young person likely has help *throughout* the legal process, whereas many youth who have ‘aged out’ do not have a parent or family member to rely on. When asked whether they had let their families of origin know they had been charged, Carmela, 24 years old, said “I had nobody to call” and Kalee, 18 years old, and Riyad, 22 years old, both said their parents had been the ones who called the police leading to their charge:

“[My mom]’s the one that called the police” (Kaylee, 18-year-old white woman).

“I finally [...] snapped. I drew the line and I told [my mom to]... shut [...] up. And her response, she kind of stopped what she was doing [...]. Then she called the cops and then the cops came and they said, ‘did you say this?’ and I said, ‘[...] yah I said it.’ (Riyad, 22 year old Middle Eastern man).

Without kin support, many youth find it difficult to navigate the legal process. Diego, 19 years old, shared that he found it challenging to keep track of court appearances:

“I wasn’t really living in a stable home, so I missed a couple of my court dates, so it added up to five fail to appears in court which they take seriously. And then I got bail for that and then I failed to show up for my fingerprints, [but] I got it done so there wasn’t another warrant for my arrest” (Diego, 19 year old Latinx man).

When a lack of social supports is combined with other challenges, such as precarious housing as in Diego’s case, it can be difficult for youth to keep track of and attend court appearances which can result in additional criminal charges for failing to appear.³⁷ Given that a high number of youth leaving state guardianship experience poverty (Kovarikova, 2017; OPACY, 2012a) and homelessness (Doucet, 2020; Shewchuk 2020), factors which increase their likelihood of coming into contact with the criminal justice system, it is likely that many youth experience the challenges Diego described.

At the bail stage, one particularly onerous condition of release is the requirement of a surety. A surety is a person who agrees to supervise an accused individual in the community while they await the resolution of their charges. In some cases, released individuals may be required to live with their sureties. Those who have stable kinfamily support will likely have a parent or family member who is willing to act as their surety if one is required for release. To be satisfied the surety is suitable, they must hold sufficient assets, be of good moral character, and the court must believe the accused will respect their authority. While parents are not the default surety for release, they are generally accepted in courts as ideal and suitable sureties. There is an assumption that a parent will help a young person keep track of their court appearances and abide by their conditions of release. A lack of stable and non-professional adult supports in their lives means that many youth who have ‘aged out’ will not have a “suitable” surety, if one is required.³⁸

³⁷ Defence counsel develop a bail plan to mitigate the accused person’s risk as connected to the three grounds for detention outlined in section 515(10) of the *Criminal Code*. The young person must abide by these conditions while they are awaiting their trial in the community, which can take up to one year (or longer) in some cases. Failure to comply with the conditions of release constitutes a criminal offence and may result in an AOJ charge and a return to bail court but the court is less likely to release them again since they have demonstrated they are unable to comply with a court order (Myers, 2016). For a more fulsome discussion of bail conditions, see Rampersaud, 2021.

³⁸ The impact of a surety condition is discussed in more detail in Rampersaud, 2021.

TRAUMA AND CRIMINALIZATION

When young people are exposed to significant, compounding traumas they sometimes develop survival skills in response to their environments that can become visible to others as disruptive behaviours (Finlay et al., 2019). Many foster parents and frontline staff in group homes fail to recognize these behaviours as expressions of pain or survival and respond by trying to manage the behaviours, an approach which often involves the police (Finlay et al., 2019). Carmela, 24 years old, shared that her Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms were frequently misinterpreted by her foster parents. She was criminalized beginning as early as 12 years old due to these misinterpretations:

“My first charges happened going way back [to when] I first got into care, got into a foster home. There was [an] incident that happened there with arson, 'cause that's what I got charged with. And I think it happened because I was probably having ... a PTSD moment, not knowing what it was and experiencing it. So I think I was just traumatized. 'Cause I was by myself, I was in the basement and then something happened and then my foster mom came down. She was screaming. All these things happened. She called the fire [station] and then next thing I know I'm in cuffs” (Carmela, 24 year old Black woman).

This event in Carmela's life set in motion a cycle of criminalization which began at age 12 and continued into adulthood.

After Carmela's initial charge, she found herself going to jail “for little things,” sometimes “because [she] didn't listen to staff or because [she disagreed] with them” (Carmela). It is noteworthy that in some cases, children and youth under state guardianship may behave in ways that are perceived as “acting out” in response to their circumstances. As a result, youth often receive criminal charges for non-criminal actions, like slamming a door or “stealing” food from the kitchen. Ben, 21 years old, was arrested after he broke a lock on a kitchen cabinet at his group home. He explained that “[group home staff] would bolt the [cupboard] doors” where they kept the junk food and youth were only given access to fruit, which always made him angry. While he understood the health benefits of eating fruit, he felt that locking away food was a way to “treat [youth] like shit” (Ben). When Ben broke the lock on the cabinet to access the food he wanted to eat, the group home staff responded by calling the police, indicating he had “destroyed property” and “committed theft.” While this behaviour would likely be dealt with by parents or guardians for most youth in their homes of origin, in a foster care or group home setting this behaviour is often characterized as dangerous or disruptive, which warrants criminal intervention. This difference in response is important and highlights a meaningful limit to professional versus non-professional supports. One YIT Worker explained, “Just because someone's in foster care doesn't necessarily mean that there's any type of support whatsoever” (YIT 4). The professional supports in youths' lives are meant to guarantee a standard of living, but their professional mandate does not always include “care” in any broader sense.

Everyone who is under state guardianship has experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect.³⁹ Their histories impact their experiences in the criminal justice system. Many youth distrust authority based on past traumas and experiences in government systems, which results in behaviours that are misinterpreted as disrespectful or resisting authority. Dina, 21 years old, was arrested by two male officers in plain clothes. She had experienced victimization by men in her past, so when she was approached by these two men, she was triggered and slipped into a mode of survival:

³⁹ Though some youth are placed under state guardianship for reasons other than abuse or neglect, such as the death of parent(s)/guardian(s), the act of apprehension and placement in care is traumatizing.

“Because of [what] I went through when I was in care, I had no trust for a lot of people, especially men. And the two officers that had picked me up, they were both men and just very not cool. And I’m happy I didn’t pick up another charge ‘cause I kinda tried to fight them. ...it was triggering. It wasn’t because I was just being defiant, it was more so trauma” (Dina, 21 year old Black woman).

From her perspective, Dina was defending herself because she believed she was being harmed. But the police officers responded to her with force, indicating they perceived Dina to be acting aggressive and hostile.

Finlay et al. (2019) theorize there is no express link between child welfare and criminal justice, but rather a history of trauma may lead to behaviour that brings young people in contact with both systems (see also Bala et al., 2015). The conditions that youth face after leaving state guardianship further increase their likelihood of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Longitudinal studies tracking the progress of youth who have ‘aged out’ over time show that this group is more likely to experience imprisonment as adults than their peers who have stable familial support (Yi & Wildeman, 2018).⁴⁰ Prisons can exacerbate and generate new trauma through physical, mental, and sexual violence including isolation, solitary confinement, denial of humanity, powerlessness, strip searches, separation from family and community, disruption of culture, poor provision of health care, lockdowns, and more—whether firsthand and/or witnessing harms occur to other people while confined (DeVeaux, 2014). Given the tumultuous transition to adulthood youth leaving state guardianship face, they need different support so that they are not criminalized due to systemic failures.

Lasting Impact of Criminal Justice System Contact

The experiences highlighted above occur in the early stages of the legal process, *before* a young person has been convicted. The differences between youth leaving state guardianship and their peers become more pronounced when moving through the legal process. The disadvantages youth leaving state guardianship experience are compounded at each stage. Contact with the criminal justice system during a difficult emancipation and transition period can devastate youths’ attempts to find their footing as independent adults.

For Noah, after ‘aging out’ he temporarily lived with his father. But this relationship soon broke down and he was forced to find housing on his own. Shortly after securing housing he was evicted from his apartment. One week after being evicted he was charged:

“Right after all of this, a week later after my eviction notice, I [went] to jail. And then, after jail, I’m in a ward for a long [...] time. And then, when I get discharged, I only have a week to gather up everything and move [...] out. I literally lost everything ‘cause of this. Honestly, I’d rather the eviction notice and none of the charge. I would’ve at least—I could’ve figured it out, put my stuff in storage [or] something, gather everything, go and live with someone for a bit. If I [had] to live with someone, [I’d] tell someone to hold my stuff. And I couldn’t do that properly. I couldn’t plan things out properly. I lost three weeks of my life that I’ll never get back. I didn’t have clothes with me, I didn’t have [anything] with me. They took away my phone. I lost everything” (Noah, 21 year old biracial man).

The disruption this charge created for Noah was all-encompassing. He lost everything he had when he was charged and taken into custody for three weeks. Noah now lives in an emergency shelter and has not been able to get back on his feet. His experience illustrates that the indeterminacy and uncertainty of imprisonment, even

⁴⁰ More research on this relationship is needed in the Canadian context.

for a short time, can create significant challenges in youths' lives (Pelvin, 2017). This uncertainty does not only centre on their legal fate, but also creates significant challenges in their personal lives with lasting negative effects (Pelvin, 2017).

COSTS

On average it costs Canadian citizens \$75,077 per year (\$206 per day) to imprison one man in a federal, medium security prison; it costs \$83,861 per year (\$230 per day) to imprison one woman in a federal prison (all security levels) (Segel-Brown, 2018). It costs \$78,475 per year (\$215 per day) to imprison someone in a provincial jail (Statistics Canada, 2021). Based on the police-reported crime trends in Canada between 1962 and 2019, crime was on the rise from the 1960s and peaked in the early 1990s but has steadily fallen since. There appears to be a small upward trend beginning in the mid-2010s, though it is too early to make a claim about a longer-term trend. It is noteworthy that the crime rates have remained consistently low since the 1970s. Though crime rates have changed over time, imprisonment rates have remained relatively stable (Varella, 2021). While crime rates may be more sensitive to social, economic, and other external factors, imprisonment rates are not. Consequently, crime and imprisonment rise and fall for different reasons.

Despite declining crime rates and steady imprisonment rates, per capita expenditures on the criminal justice system have *increased* (Story & Malkin, 2013 cited in Koegl & Day, 2018). Rod Story and Tolga Yalkin (2013) estimated government expenditures on criminal justice in Canada was \$20.3 billion in 2011/2012; further, though the rate of crime decreased by approximately 23% between 2002 and 2012, expenditures on criminal justice increased by approximately the same amount due to increasing security and court costs (cited in Koegl & Day, 2018).⁴¹ The data indicate that the current system is not working to reduce or prevent crime, which means we could be spending our money more efficiently and effectively. Rather than imprisoning youth leaving state guardianship—which does not impact crime—state funding would be better spent addressing the root causes why young people engage in criminogenic behaviours to begin with, in order to prevent their criminalization. Such programs would be responsive to their unique needs which would have more impact on their overall rehabilitation and desistance from crime, thereby reducing the costs to society to imprison this population.

It is worth noting that approximately one third of charges brought before the courts are administration of justice (AOJ) charges which contribute substantially to criminal justice spending (Department of Justice Canada, 2013 cited in Koegl and Day 2018). AOJ charges refer to: failures to appear in court and failures to comply with the conditions of a release order. For example, if youth have a condition of release that they need to “appear at the door if a police officer checks in” and the youth does not hear the doorbell and fails to answer the door within 15 minutes, the youth can be charged with failing to comply (FTC) with their conditions. In some cases, individuals are not convicted of the initial charge but then receive a criminal conviction for their AOJ charge. This is particularly problematic as the behaviour is not, in and of itself, illegal (i.e., not answering the door) (Spratt & Myers, 2011; Myers, 2016). Given the difficulties youth leaving state guardianship face that render them more vulnerable to being criminalized—including poverty, homelessness, substance use dependencies, and mental health—there is a need to establish prevention and diversion programs in the community that can better support youth and keep them out of custody.

⁴¹ Up-to-date research on the costs of criminal justice systems in Canada is needed.

5.5 Mental and Physical Health and Wellbeing⁴²

BACKGROUND

Social Determinants of Health

A person's health status is a product of complex interactions among a variety of personal, social, economic, and environmental factors. Influential factors include:

- Access to Health Services
- Behaviour
- Biology and Genetic Endowment⁴³
- Early Childhood Development
- Education and Literacy
- Food Security
- Gender
- Housing
- Income and Income Distribution
- Indigenous Status
- Physical Environment
- Race and Racism
- Social Safety Net
- Social Inclusion and Exclusion
- Un/Employment and Employment Security
- Working Conditions⁴⁴

Many factors that impact a person's health are outside of individual control. Social determinants of health, for example, refer specifically to socioeconomic factors, such as education and income. Socioeconomic factors, which are connected to structural conditions, are strong and reliable predictors of one's health; because these factors are intricately connected to the material advantages and disadvantages that accumulate over one's lifespan, they are connected to specific health outcomes (Langille, 2004; Raphael, 2008; Sugie & Turney, 2017). Experiences of social and economic inequality also extend as health inequity in people's lives.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, also lead to poor health outcomes. Young people who experience as few as four ACEs are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide, 4.6 times more likely to experience depression, and 7 times and 10 times respectively to develop alcohol or drug dependencies compared to those who have experienced zero ACEs (Humber College, 2020). Because youth who are apprehended by child protection services have experienced significant trauma, abuse, or neglect in childhood, compounded by considerable instability while under state guardianship, it is

Youth who 'age out' of state guardianship experience poorer health outcomes than their peers who have not been under state guardianship.

(Geiger & Schelbe, 2014)

⁴² Note youth were not asked questions about their physical and mental health during interviews. Consequently, fewer youth quotes appear in this subsection.

⁴³ In other words, inherited predispositions to particular diseases and health issues.

⁴⁴ This list was compiled using these resources: Kubik, Bourassa, & Hampton, 2009; Public Health, 2020; Raphael, 2008.

unsurprising youth who ‘age out’ of state guardianship experience poorer health outcomes than their peers who have not been under state guardianship (Geiger & Schelbe, 2014).

It is important to recognize how historical roots of discrimination manifest in unjust health outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized peoples. According to Métis health researcher Carrie Bourassa et al. (2006), sexism, racism, and colonialism are dynamic processes that began historically, but continue to cumulatively and negatively impact the health status of racialized groups who live on the land known as “Canada” (Timothy in Srivastava, 2021). Compounding effects of colonial murder,⁴⁵ government created starvation on the plains,⁴⁶ stolen unceded land,⁴⁷ the pass system,⁴⁸ banned potlatches,⁴⁹ residential schools,⁵⁰ segregated tuberculosis hospitals,⁵¹ forced sterilization,⁵² “starlight tours,”⁵³ the “Sixties Scoop,”⁵⁴ and the “Millennium Scoop”⁵⁵ are evidence of an ongoing colonial project that continues to this day, with devastating effects.

Young people who are apprehended by child protection services and placed under state guardianship have been subjected to maltreatment and harm at the hands of their caregiver(s)—be that a parent, relative, or other guardian. Existing child welfare policies instruct CAS workers to intervene when removal is necessary and when removal is in the best interests of the child. Yet, apprehension itself is traumatizing, and the conditions young people face in foster care and group homes can be harmful (Doyle, 2007). Further, these practices have been scrutinized by Indigenous and racialized communities for whom apprehension has not necessarily responded to immediate “risk” or “harm” but been connected to larger state goals, including its ongoing colonial project of assimilation and genocide (Sinclair, 2016).

While Indigenous children comprise 7.7% of the child population in Canada, they account for more than half (52.2%) of children under state guardianship. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2014) reports 30% of children under state guardianship in the province are Indigenous, while only 4.1% of the child population is Indigenous. Some view the apprehension of Indigenous children and placement under guardianship of the state as a continuation of the residential school system (Sinclair, 2016). There are currently more Indigenous children under state guardianship than there were in residential schools at the height of their use (OHRC, 2014). These structural conditions, combined with youths’ histories of trauma, abuse, and neglect, contribute to poor mental and physical health outcomes in this population (Deutsch et al., 2015; Greeson et al., 2011; Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012).

⁴⁵ In the 1720s, British soldiers were promised ten guineas in bounty for every Mi’kmaq person they killed (Hornborg, 2008).

⁴⁶ Despite guarantees of food aid in times of famine in Treaty 6, officials denied food as a means to ethnically cleanse a vast region (Regina to the Alberta border) to facilitate the Canadian Pacific Railway (Daschuk, 2013).

⁴⁷ Unceded means that Indigenous people never ceded or legally signed away their lands to the Crown or to Canada.

⁴⁸ Any Indigenous person who wanted to leave their reserve community, for any reason, had to have a pass approved by the reserve’s Indian agent (Dickason & Newbigging, 2015).

⁴⁹ Potlatch refers to the ceremony where Pacific Northwest Indigenous families gather and names are given, births are announced, marriages are conducted, and where families mourn the loss of a loved one (U’Mista Cultural Society, 2003).

⁵⁰ Residential schools were boarding schools for Indigenous children in operation from the 1880s to 1990s, funded by the federal government and run by Christian churches (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

⁵¹ For example, in 1964, over 70% of Keewatin Inuit were placed in hospitals for periods ranging from three months to nine years. Together with this practice, children were adopted to outside families without birth family consent or notice (Dickason, 1992).

⁵² Indigenous women continue to come forward with experiences of coerced sterilization (Stole, 2012).

⁵³ “Starlight tours” refer to police picking up Indigenous people and driving them outside city limits. In the winter this can prove lethal (Razack, 2015, 173).

⁵⁴ The “Sixties Scoop” refers to “a child-welfare policy that removed Aboriginal children from their homes and placed them with non-Aboriginal families” (IRC, 2015, 24) from the 1950s to the 1980s (Johnson, 1983).

⁵⁵ Children continued to be removed from their homes in large numbers, and this later period is sometimes referred to as the “Millennium Scoop” (Maurice, 2014).

Sociologists Youngmin Yi and Christopher Wildeman (2018) contend, race and poverty are strong predictors of child removal by the state. In Canada, First Nations children are 9.3 times more likely than other racial groups to be placed under state guardianship and Black children of Caribbean and African descent are 2.5 times and 1.9 times, respectively, more likely than other racial groups to be placed under state guardianship (Contenta et al., 2016). Racialized families (20.8%) are also more likely to experience poverty than those racialized as white (12.2%) (OCASI, 2019). Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people contend with the daily grief of racism, classism, sexism, among other overlapping oppressions, which impact their health (Timothy in Srivastava, 2021). Given these circumstances, racialized populations experience worse physical and mental health outcomes (Barrington, 2010; Kubik, Bourassa, & Hampton, 2009; Mussell, 2020). Considering the circumstances that many children and youth under state guardianship face illuminates their exposure to cumulative material disadvantage and worse physical and mental health outcomes. Racialized children and youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship are an especially vulnerable group.

Mental Health

Youth leaving state guardianship experience significant mental health challenges (Shaffer et al., 2016). Because youth who are apprehended by child protection services have experienced significant trauma, abuse, or neglect in childhood, compounded by considerable instability while under state guardianship, it is unsurprising that two thirds of these youth experience mental health challenges (Scully & Finlay, 2015), and one third have been formally diagnosed with a mental disorder (Kovarikova, 2017). By comparison, 20% of youth in Ontario’s general population experience some form of a mental health challenge (MHASEF Research Team, 2015).⁵⁶

ISOLATION AND SUBSTANCE USE

For many youth leaving state guardianship, ‘aging out’ abruptly severs their social supports. Many youth experience deep anxiety about entering adulthood without social support (Kovarikova, 2017). Many report feelings of abandonment after they ‘age out.’ Arlo, 24 years old, explained how he felt abandoned after leaving state guardianship. He did not feel he was being prepared to transition to independence; rather, he felt he had been kicked out:

“And then I was on and off the streets for a little bit. I developed a sense of abandonment because nobody really wants me. I’m in care, care kicks me out and they don’t [want me], and nobody calls me, I don’t even have a phone, I get \$50 a month and nobody [cares] about it” (Arlo, 24 year old Latinx man).

Like Arlo, Riyad, 22 years old, also described feelings of abandonment. After he left state guardianship, all his supports were taken away which impacted his ability to build trust in new relationships:

“Half the time I felt like nobody loved me, you know? I just started building this thing in my head where I was like [...], I think people are just telling me they love me and they care about me but I don't think they do, you know, because if they did, why am I [in an emergency shelter]? Why am I where I am? You know? And that really had a big [...] part to play in my life. And it still bothers me. That's why when I'm at home and I'm living by myself and I get lonely, you know, and I start

⁵⁶ These numbers are likely higher for both youth with experience under state guardianship and youth in the general population.

thinking [...] ‘do people care, are people gonna call me,’—nobody calls me” (Riyad, 22 year old Middle Eastern man).

Many youth leaving state guardianship enter adulthood with few non-professional connections and feel completely alone. When asked who he includes in his support network now, David, 22 years old, explained he had two people he could count on:

“My court support worker, my ODSP worker. That’s about it. That’s all I have” (David, 22 year old white man).

It is noteworthy that both of the supports in David’s life are professionals. While it is important for youth to have people they can rely on as they transition to adulthood, there are meaningful limits to the support that a professional can provide. For example, professionals may only be able to provide support during their regular working hours, and do not provide close emotional support and guidance of a parental role. Similar limits are not in place in personal relationships.

Many youth describe experiences of extreme loneliness and isolation after ‘aging out.’ Riyad now lives independently in the community. He shared,

“It’s extremely lonely, I’ll tell you that. I lean more towards electronics and stuff, mainly because it just kept me busy and it was a reason for me to be in my room, a reason for me to close that door, barricade it with the dresser, put on a projector and enjoy a movie without being [...], you know, harassed by everybody, and my mom, you know. So, when I have my place now, I have a whole [...] movie theatre in my house, it’s crazy. It’s nice to be on my own. I do get lonely, very lonely. That’s I think one of my biggest problems. And that leads to smoking cigarettes and smoking dope. No, dope is a different story. Yah, it’s a [...] lonely life” (Riyad, 22 year old Middle Eastern man).

Like Riyad, many youth leaving state guardianship turn to substances to help cope with their extreme loneliness. Scarlett, age 18, shared that she used drugs to help her manage a difficult time in her life:

“I was on drugs and stuff. This was a really bad time in my life and I was in [a] homeless shelter and stuff. I was just not in a good space. All I would remember was just being really [messed] up and going to [the mall]” (Scarlett, 18 year old white woman).

Similarly, Tomas, age 23, explained his issues with substance use are intensified when he is lonely or isolated:

“I have addiction issues. It’s not good for me to be isolated in my own home [where] I can do whatever [...] I want, whenever[...] I want. That’s something I need to watch out for because boredom and idle time is dangerous, you know what I mean? (Tomas, 23 year old white man).

Substances are a common coping mechanism among youth contending with serious isolation and mental health challenges. Intervention is needed to disrupt this pathway, which ultimately renders many youth more vulnerable to criminalization and poor health outcomes. Part of the Housing First for Youth strategy involves supporting young people who are living independently; with continuous supports, youth may combat feelings

of abandonment, isolation, and loneliness, and be better situated to thrive (Doucet, 2020). Interdependence, rather than independence, might better support youths' wellbeing after 'aging out' (Doucet, 2020).

Physical Health and Wellbeing

People with high educational attainment are considered more actively engaged in society and they tend to make informed choices about factors that affect their quality of life (e.g., diet, smoking, exercise) (The Conference Board of Canada, 2021). Health and education are inextricably linked (PHO, 2008). It is widely recognized that those with higher educational attainment are healthier overall than those with less education (PHO, 2008).

People with higher educational attainment have lower mortality rates. This is because educational attainment may provide personal and interpersonal skills that are needed to produce good health (Luy, Zannella, & Wegner-Siegmundt, 2019). Health literacy is an especially important skill, which includes the ability to access and use health information to make decisions that promote and maintain good health (Clouston, Manganello, & Richards, 2017). People with higher education may be better positioned to receive preventative health messaging and make changes in their lives to action this messaging (Iwein, Hunt, & Looby, 2018). This includes altering behaviours like substance use. Higher educational attainment can also reduce financial uncertainty, hardship, and related stress.

Poor health and low income security can trap individuals, families, and communities in a vicious poverty-illness cycle (Lönroth, Tessier, Hensing, & Behrendt, 2020). Low-wage positions featuring manual labour, repetitive stress, and high levels of public interaction can also pose risks of occupational injury and communicable illness (Lay et al., 2017). Low-wage positions may also offer little additional health benefits, parental leave, or sick leave. Income insecurity is also related to food insecurity and poorer health status (Tarasuk et al., 2015). Youth under state guardianship may benefit from additional support around school in order to succeed, transition into adulthood, and achieve strong health outcomes (PHO, 2008).

EARLY PARENTHOOD

The average age of parenthood has increased in recent years among young people who were never under state guardianship, largely due to societal trends of young people staying in school longer and getting married later (Arnett, 2000). In contrast, young people who were apprehended by child protection services are more likely to experience teen or early parenthood (Shaffer et al., 2016). When youth leaving state guardianship experience early parenthood, the next generation may experience intergenerational processes of poverty and child removal.⁵⁷ Experiencing early pregnancy exacerbates the challenges that young people face, often setting in motion the cycle of poverty they themselves experienced; Schaffer et al. (2016) report 20 to 25% of children who are raised in poverty will remain in poverty as adults. The trauma of child removal is also carried across generations (intergenerational trauma), meaning the effects of one's trauma may be passed down to their offspring, reproducing similar outcomes in generations that follow (Sinclair, 2016).

More positively, the benefits of anti-poverty measures are also carried across generations (Barr & Gibbs, 2017). Efforts to intervene and disrupt this cycle of poverty and government care can have lasting impact for young people. Policy choices have intergenerational ripple impacts not only on the intended recipient (usually an individual) but on rising and future generations (Mussell, 2021).

⁵⁷ The exact numbers are not available in Canada.

Childhood Loss of Life

Researchers Eugene Sabotta and Robert Davis (1992) contend children who experience abuse are three times more likely to die in childhood. Premature loss of life is alarmingly high among those who experience childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect. In Ontario, between 2013 and 2017, the coroner listed 541 deaths involving child welfare; 102 of these children were Indigenous (Jackson, 2019). The coroner tracks deaths of children who, or whose family, had contact with a child protection agency within 12 months of their death. On average, 70% of the children had an open agency file at the time of their death. Data was not collected systematically over this five-year period and many believe this number to be much higher.⁵⁸

According to a study in British Columbia (2009), the death rate for youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship, ages 19 to 25, is 6.5 times higher than that of the general population. Youth are denied what they need to survive and thrive while under state guardianship. After they ‘age out,’ many are left to contend with traumas while isolated and alone. This is a horrific and unacceptable outcome for youth who were under the state’s “protection” and “care.”

Access to Health Services

During the difficult transition to adulthood, many youth identify barriers to accessing health services. To better support youth in accessing health services and to contribute to more positive health outcomes in this population, in 2014 the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS) implemented the *Aftercare Benefits Initiative*, funded by the MCCSS. Youth who were formerly under state guardianship have access to a range of benefits, including prescription drug, dental, vision, and extended health benefits until they turn 25. Eligible youth between ages 21 and 29 years old also have access to counseling and life skills support services.

Without social support, however, many youth still experience barriers to accessing health services. Some may not know how to find and contact a family doctor, ophthalmologist, or dentist on their own. Some do not have phones. Many youth find it difficult to make and keep appointments. One YIT Worker shared that, unless they drive youth they support to their appointments, youth will not attend:

“That’s also a challenge because, for my youth who are struggling with mental health, sometimes it means going to pick them up and taking them to the appointment and going with them because otherwise... Like when I picked up [this youth] this morning, she was still in bed but she knew I was coming. As soon as I got there and called her she got up and she came. But otherwise she wouldn’t have gone to the appointment had I not taken her. So that’s a challenge too” (YIT 7).

Carmela explained that she had to learn how to schedule and keep track of appointments. In Carmela’s words:

“Just being able to build knowledge and have people educate you on what independence looks like because sometimes we feel like it’s so easy because we’ve been in the group home for so long and [we’re] able to get away with so much. If you don’t show up for appointments—that’s so basic right? If you don’t show up for appointments with CAS, no worries, no disciplining, no nothing. But if I don’t show up for doctors or dentist appointments, they’re charging me \$50 - \$60 dollars, and I can’t afford that. But we don’t learn that. It’s just little things like that. It really affected—those things affected my finances” (Carmela, 24 year old Black woman).

⁵⁸ Ontario’s data collection faces serious gaps, including the exact number of Indigenous children and youth under state guardianship in Ontario on any given day. We urge governments to collect this, and related, data.

Carmela felt like she did not have the knowledge needed to be independent after she ‘aged out’. She never had to make appointments on her own while she was living in group homes. But after leaving state guardianship, she had to learn how to do these things on her own. The learning curve for independence was steep, and the price she paid when she made mistakes was high. It is likely that other youth leaving state guardianship simply do not access services unless they have adequate support to do so.

COSTS

Youth leaving state guardianship experience poor mental and physical health outcomes. This group’s associated healthcare costs are predictably high. Homelessness and poverty reliably predict poor health outcomes. Individuals who experience homelessness have a higher exposure to illness, which may lead to more hospital visits, putting strain on Ontario’s healthcare system. In Canada, the average monthly cost to maintain a hospital bed is \$10,900 (ACTO, 2017). If even 1% of the approximately 580 youth who ‘age out’ and experience homelessness each year seek healthcare services at a hospital in Ontario which requires an overnight stay in a hospital bed, the average monthly cost to taxpayers would be \$63,220; over one year, this cost would be \$758,640.

Health expenditures are higher for individuals who have lower incomes. Many youth leaving state guardianship experience poverty. Those who do not complete high school have a high likelihood of remaining in poverty through their lives. In their study of costs associated with poverty in Toronto, researchers Alexa Briggs, Celia Lee, and John Stapleton (2017) report that individuals living below the poverty line (the poorest 20% of Torontonians) share 30.9% of total Public Health expenditures in the city. The proportion of health care expenditures decreases incrementally as income increases. Many youth leaving state guardianship who experience homelessness live below the poverty line and are represented in this group. The health care expenditures for youth leaving state guardianship are high (Shaffer et al., 2016).

Marvin Shaffer and colleagues (2016) contend another cost of not completing high school is reduced life expectancy. Premature loss of life is alarmingly high among those who experience childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect; one estimate in British Columbia is a rate 6.5 times higher than that of the general population. The federal government assigns a value of \$7 million per life saved or lost when they evaluate proposed regulations or investments (Shaffer et al., 2016). While a precise number of deaths per year is not available, even one life lost indicates a minimum of \$7 million should be allocated to addressing the risks leading to premature death in order to be consistent with other government decision-making (Shaffer et al., 2016). Furthermore, these monetary costs do not account for the intangible costs associated with premature loss of life, including human suffering and grief. Preventive programming and systemic change are needed to reduce the risk of premature loss of life and to improve the overall health and quality of life for youth leaving state guardianship.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report highlights five interrelated, structural issues that significantly impact the future prospects and quality of life for youth leaving state guardianship: (1) Education; (2) Employment, Poverty, and Income Support; (3) Housing and Homelessness; (4) Criminalization; and (5) Mental and Physical Health and Wellbeing. All of these factors contribute to a premature loss of life among youth leaving state guardianship. All five of these issues are made worse by the abrupt severing of social support that occurs when youth ‘age out’ at 18. Key findings include:

Low educational attainment limits youths’ employment and earnings potential. Based on the combined total of lost earnings of youth leaving state guardianship over their lifetimes, the province stands to lose approximately **\$118 to \$315.8 million** in revenue.

With limited education, youth leaving state guardianship are concentrated in the low-paying sector of the economy. With limited employment prospects, many youth ‘age out’ to poverty and rely on income supports. The lifetime cost to the province to support youth leaving state guardianship who rely on income supports like Ontario Works is approximately **\$235 million**.

Over their lifetime, youth leaving state guardianship who experience homelessness may cost the province approximately **\$629.8 million** for emergency shelter.

Low educational attainment and poverty are connected to poor mental and physical health outcomes and criminal justice system contact. Youth who leave state guardianship and experience incarceration stand to cost the province approximately **\$19.6 to \$36 million annually**; over their lifetime, the province may incur **nearly \$1 billion** in incarceration costs. Actual costs are likely much higher as this amount does not include other criminal justice expenses.

Poor mental health aggravates the impact of low educational attainment and poverty, and when linked to substance use, contributes to worse health outcomes and increases criminal justice contact. The lifetime cost to the province if even 1% of youth leaving state guardianship require prolonged hospital care over their lifetime is approximately **\$35.6 million**. Given the connection between Adverse Childhood Experiences and poor health outcomes, this number is likely much higher.

The total estimated costs borne by the province based on the adverse outcomes youth leaving state guardianship face in their lifetimes is more than \$2 billion.

Criminologists,⁵⁹ neuroscientists and neurobiologists,⁶⁰ cognitive and developmental psychologists,⁶¹ and sociologists⁶² have long recognized that adulthood does not abruptly begin at 18. Instead, comprehensive, interdisciplinary research supports the view that the transition to adulthood occurs over a period of time, until mid- to late-20s for most (Arnett, 2000). Kin play a crucial role in easing the challenges of transitioning to adulthood by providing youth the time needed to enter adulthood on a solid footing (Lee, Courtney, & Tajima, 2014). But youth leaving state guardianship are expected to be independent when they turn 18.

Reaching the age of majority often creates deep anxieties for youth about having to manage their finances and find secure housing while at the same time trying to finish high school and move on to post-secondary studies. While youth are supported in their preparation for independence, many youths' support networks abruptly come to an end upon their 18th birthdays, meaning many youth do not receive meaningful social support *during* and *after* their transition to greater independence. An abrupt end of social support means that many youth leaving state guardianship have to learn how to live well independently all on their own—including cooking and cleaning to paying bills and making appointments for themselves. These basic life skills are often things that individuals with familial support have modeled to them, that they receive support for, and that they have time to learn how to do on their own. Youth leaving state guardianship must learn for themselves.

Most youth leaving state guardianship find the transition to adulthood challenging. The adverse outcomes among this population are well documented, including low educational attainment, homelessness, and poverty. These circumstances render many youth leaving state guardianship vulnerable to contact with the criminal justice system. All of these conditions are exacerbated by youths' histories of trauma and abuse. Unsurprisingly, approximately two thirds of youth leaving state guardianship contend with mental health challenges (Scully & Finlay, 2015) and many contend with substance use dependencies (Bala et al., 2015). The effects of the trauma, abuse, and neglect youth experience that led to their apprehension by child protection services are further compounded by the considerable instability they experience while under state guardianship. This instability continues when youth 'age out,' which means many enter adulthood on a precarious footing. This population experiences worse mental and physical health outcomes than those who were never under state guardianship. Premature loss of life is alarmingly high among those who experience childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect. This outcome is particularly grave and illuminates the effects of cumulative systemic failures.

⁵⁹ See discussion of the age-criminalization curve on p61.

⁶⁰ The frontal lobe is the youngest part of the brain, meaning it takes the longest to develop fully. Research confirms that the prefrontal cortex (found within the frontal lobe) takes over two decades to reach full maturity (Kostovic et al. 1988 & Sowell et al. 1999a cited in Diamond, 2002). Thus, developmental changes continue after the age of 18, into adulthood (Diamond 2002).

⁶¹ The frontal lobe is responsible for our high-level behaviours such as problem-solving, judgement, planning, attention, spontaneous response, impulse control, and emotional regulation (Prasad, Lins, & Ain 2016; Romer 2010). The prefrontal cortex is integral to selecting alternative ideas, making decisions, and accomplishing time sequenced actions (Prasad, Lins, & Ain 2016). The fact that these functions continue to develop into adulthood is significant for our cognitive development, but also for our social and emotional development, too (Diamond 2002). Reduced judgement, impulse control, and emotional regulation are some of the long-documented behaviours associated with criminogenic propensity (Akers 1991 and Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990 cited in Jenkins 2018). That these functions are continuing to develop beyond age 18 in many young adults helps to explain the relationship illustrated in the age-crime curve (Prasad, Lins, & Ain, 2016).

⁶² Sociologists also recognize the existence of a period of prolonged transition between late adolescence and fully independent adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Shah et al. 2017). This period, which they have deemed "emerging adulthood," helps to explain shifting societal trends in recent decades.

The evidence is clear: The state must take their parental responsibilities seriously; and those responsibilities cannot simply end once a young person turns 18. This report highlights the systemic failures that underscore the adverse outcomes common among youth leaving state guardianship. With meaningful intervention and systemic change, these outcomes can be prevented.

The following recommendations for change were informed by first-voice advocates with lived experience in the state guardianship system and those who provide direct service to young people in and leaving state guardianship. Some of those who contributed include:

Charlene April, Creating Roots

Mobafa Baker, StepStones for Youth

Irwin Elman, former Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth

Jennifer Gourley and Vanessa Wu, Free to Be

Aviva Zukerman Schure, Never Too Late

RECOMMENDATION # 1

Focus on interdependence instead of independence.

Youth under state guardianship need continuous support, and more time to transition out of state guardianship and achieve a balance of *interdependence* with peer and non-professional support networks and community. Authentic relationships with professionals should also be allowed. The current goal of *independence* is a false construct, as everyone depends on others at different points and in different ways throughout their lives, especially youth in today's society. Increasing supportive networks will reduce the need for systems and professionals in youths' lives.

RECOMMENDATION # 2

Prioritize permanent and long-term caregiver and housing placements. Implement the Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) philosophy.

Relationship-based housing options provide a baseline of stability and support to youth that mitigate the likelihood of longer-term adverse outcomes. Youth in permanent or long-term, safe and stable homes early on, that last beyond age 18, experience improved academic achievement, job retainment, and mental health. Housing stability is critical to improving mental health for youth who have suffered trauma, abuse, neglect, and inconsistent guardian care. For youth who leave housing placements, the HF4Y approach prioritizes finding them safe and suitable housing and providing the necessary supports to keep them housed. This philosophy underscores housing as a basic right. When youth are supported with the basic necessities of life, including housing, they are better positioned to thrive.

RECOMMENDATION # 3

Provide holistic support; create conditions that make educational success possible.

Provide multi-institutional, integrated, and holistic support to all youth under state guardianship, including living costs, advocacy, mentoring, trauma-informed counselling, community connections, and social support. Holistic support means a one-stop-shop where youth can access all of the supports to meet their basic needs first, and then be able to meet their aspirations and other life goals.

RECOMMENDATION # 4

Expand and continue mental health support.

Support the emotional and mental health of youth leaving state guardianship. Increase access to supports and ensure support is ongoing. Provide **all** youth leaving state guardianship with the *Aftercare Benefits Initiative*; continue trauma-informed counseling and life skills support services without an age cut-off for youth 25+.

RECOMMENDATION # 5

Provide transition supports for young people entering adulthood.

All youth should be provided with strong links to support networks and community far beyond the age of 18. Policies that dictate support be cut off when youth reach particular ages need to be reconsidered. The state should take their parental responsibilities seriously; and those responsibilities cannot simply end once a young person turns 18. Available services should be made more accessible, and for a longer amount of time. A universal age-range is needed for the term “youth.”

RECOMMENDATION # 6

Extend and redistribute Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY) benefit.

Increase the CCSY benefit to match the cost of living expenses for young people ‘aging out’ of state guardianship. Extend the CCSY benefit up to age 25, at minimum, for **all** youth leaving state guardianship. Redistribute these funds from Children’s Aid Societies to community-run organizations for distribution. Youth who are supported in finding safe, affordable, and sustainable housing and who have their basic needs met can focus on achieving their life goals. Increased support further improves youths’ overall quality of life.

RECOMMENDATION # 7

Support young parents.

Create supports and services for young parents who were formerly under state guardianship without increasing the risk of their children entering the system.

RECOMMENDATION # 8

Provide services and supports to parents/guardians of origin.

A separate government system or department is needed to provide more support for youths’ parents and guardians of origin.

RECOMMENDATION # 9

Reunify youth with their families.

If a young person is on track to ‘age out’ of the state guardianship system, prioritize reunification and provide necessary supports for the family to be successful. Better evaluation of parents’ readiness is needed, which should include and center the voice of young people.

RECOMMENDATION # 10

Move to a family model of child welfare.

Shift away from a prevention and intervention model toward a family model of child welfare.

RECOMMENDATION # 11

Tackle the disproportionate representation of children and youth of colour in the state guardianship system.

Increase cultural competency and awareness within the child welfare system. Understand differences in protecting children and shift away from Euro-centric and white understandings of foster care removal procedures.

RECOMMENDATION # 12

Mandate a standard of care and service delivery for all Children's Aid Societies.

A standard of care and service delivery should be mandated for all Children's Aid Societies in the province.

RECOMMENDATION # 13

Reinstate the Office of the Provincial Child and Youth Advocate.

This position is necessary for our community to hold the child welfare system accountable. System accountability is needed to ensure that standards of care are met, that young people are being supported to succeed, and that youths' voices are centered in the decisions that impact their lives.

RECOMMENDATION # 14

Monitor and evaluate youths' progress and needs over time.

Youths' progress should be monitored and evaluated with their participation and leadership (action research) on an ongoing basis to understand what programs, advocacy, and systemic changes best support youth, and where improvements are necessary. Create and mandate system impact measurement tools to monitor the health and wellbeing of children, youth, and adults; use this data to inform policy and practice. This process ensures timely, responsive, effective, and evidence-based interventions as youths' needs change.

Additionally, we recommend:

RECOMMENDATION # 15

Remove barriers to seeking and staying in educational programs.

This includes waiving tuition and fees for programs (adult high school equivalency and post-secondary) and ensuring that youth have adequate living expense funding during their education. Child-care subsidies should be given to young parents seeking education. Removing barriers means understanding the unique challenges confronting individual youth and providing solutions to assist help remove barriers to allow them to meet their educational and other life goals—for example, such as facilitating safe, private, and quiet living and workspaces.

RECOMMENDATION # 16

Provide close mentorship to guide youth through education programs.

Youth under state guardianship may be the first generation in their family to complete high school or seek post-secondary education, and they may lack the guidance that other youth receive from families and family connections with these intergenerational benefits. This mentorship includes close support to help youth choose programs, apply for programs, understand how to succeed, and work through challenges in order to stay in programs.

RECOMMENDATION # 17

Address the criminalization of youth.

Continue supports, like case conferencing and requiring CAS representatives to attend court appearances, for youth who ‘age out’ and are criminalized. Prioritize and increase access to community-based diversion programs and connect youth with treatment and support. Incarceration, both pre-trial and post-sentencing, should be avoided. Bail and probation conditions that set young people up to fail must be addressed. Focus should shift away from retribution toward restoration and transformation.

RECOMMENDATION # 18

Value alternative ways of knowing.

Indigenous epistemologies are distinct from dominant western worldviews. Acknowledge, resource, and celebrate Indigenous worldviews in child welfare policy and practice. This means resourcing Indigenous service providers and communities to provide culturally specific support and mentorship for Indigenous youth under state guardianship, in support of educational plans and other life goals. It also means moving away from language and values which centre western worldviews at the exclusion of Indigenous ones.

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