



PROGRAMS AND SERVICES OFFERED TO YOUNG PEOPLE TRANSITIONING OUT OF CARE IN CANADA: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Résumé de l'article

Little research has been carried out on young people transitioning out of care in Canada. The objective of this paper was to describe and comment on the services provided to youth leaving care systems in Canada, with a focus on the four provinces with the largest populations (Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, and Alberta). The Quebec government offers only one limited-access transition program, which has just been extended to age 25. Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta offer several transition programs, which include financial, education, and life skills components. In British Columbia, these offer support up to age 29. The 6 remaining provinces and the 3 territories offer support to a maximum age that ranges from 21 to 26. Most offer a general financial allowance, and some offer additional supports that can include a housing allowance, tuition waivers, and job training. British Columbia and Ontario offer the most supports, including medical assistance, tuition waivers, and mental health supports. Research is needed to find out which supports are most beneficial, and under which circumstances.



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Abstract: Little research has been carried out on young people transitioning out of care in Canada. The objective of this paper was to describe and comment on the services provided to youth leaving care systems in Canada, with a focus on the four provinces with the largest populations (Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, and Alberta). The Quebec government offers only one limited-access transition program, which has just been extended to age 25. Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta offer several transition programs, which include financial, education, and life skills components. In British Columbia, these offer support up to age 29. The 6 remaining provinces and the 3 territories offer support to a maximum age that ranges from 21 to 26. Most offer a general financial allowance, and some offer additional supports that can include a housing allowance, tuition waivers, and job training. British Columbia and Ontario offer the most supports, including medical assistance, tuition waivers, and mental health supports. Research is needed to find out which supports are most beneficial, and under which circumstances.

Keywords: foster youth, transition out of care, transition programs, youth care leavers, Canada, transition to adulthood

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Transitioning out of care tends to be associated with negative outcomes including increased risk of homelessness (Dworsky et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2017; Goyette, Blanchet, Bellot, et al., 2022), low academic achievement (Batsche et al., 2014; Goyette et al., 2021; Piel, 2018; Ziani & Goyette, 2020), and unemployment (Dworsky, 2005; Goyette et al., 2021; Hook & Courtney, 2011). It is therefore important to examine programs and services offered to young people after they leave care. In general, Canada's health and social services are not controlled by the federal government but almost autonomously by its 10 provinces and three territories; this is particularly the case with child protection and transition programs (Jones et al., 2015; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). As a result, services offered to care leavers vary considerably across the country, with Quebec being an outlier in terms of the restricted access to, and limited scope and duration of, services provided in the public health sector (Jones et al., 2015; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). To the authors' knowledge, no published articles have collected and synthesized information on transition programs or services offered by individual Canadian provinces. The present paper aims to fill this gap, especially with regard to government programs.

Method

Canadian provinces and territories vary widely in terms of population. Ontario and Quebec account for 15 million and 8.6 million people respectively out of Canada's total population of 38.6 million (Statistics Canada, 2022). At the other extreme, the northern territory of Nunavut numbers about 40,000 residents, and Prince Edward Island, the smallest province, counts 167,000 residents (Statistics Canada, 2022). Accordingly, greater attention will be focused on the most populated jurisdictions, the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia (5.2 million), and Alberta (4.5 million; Statistics Canada, 2022), which together account for 86% of Canada's population. Only a brief overview of programs found in less populous provinces will be provided. We found limited information concerning the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut.

Information was collected through WorldCat, Google Scholar, and Google by combining search terms such as “transition foster care”, “care leaving”, “foster care leaving”, “extended foster care program”, “extended transition support”, “youth”, “youth in care”, and “aging out”, with geographical designations (“Canada”, names of provinces and territories). The equivalent French terminology was used for Quebec. Due to the paucity of peer-reviewed articles, much of the information presented here comes from news articles, theses, government websites, and submissions to the Quebec *Commission spéciale sur les droits de l'enfant et la protection de la jeunesse* [Special Commission on the Rights of Children and Youth Protection], which is known as the Laurent Commission (Government of Quebec, 2021). Research queries were restricted to the past 10 years for both published and grey literature to ensure that the information was as up-to-date as possible. If a particular search yielded no information for that interval or if no change in

policies had been made, the latest available information, regardless of publishing date, was used. An information source was selected if it helped to answer the following questions:

- What are the programs and services offered to youth aging out of care, particularly in terms of education, housing, financial aid, employment support, and life skills support?
- Are the services provided by the government or by community organizations?
- Has there been any change or evolution since the inception of the program or service?
- Is there systematic transition planning?
- What are the challenges or issues related to these programs and services?

We also extracted from each document the following information: service type (education, housing, financial, employment, life skills, and others); age of majority; whether the government issued the program or service; currency of the information; challenges surrounding the program or services, and transition planning; and the ages of eligibility for each type of service, along with any other eligibility criteria.

Three reviewers conducted the literature review. Leal-Ferman and Weight identified sources and conducted data extraction. In cases of doubt, they consulted each other to review the information and reach a consensus. Latimer reviewed the results and queried Leal-Ferman and Weight about apparent inconsistencies and anomalies.

Results

British Columbia

In British Columbia, the age at which a youth is no longer in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development is 19 (Child, Family and Community Service Act, Part 2.1, 12.2(6), 1996.). Programs have been put in place, however, to provide a health and social safety net to youth who have aged out. The first transition program in British Columbia, introduced in 2008, was the Agreement with Young Adults (AYA; Government of British Columbia, n.d.), which provides financial support to a maximum of \$1,250 per month to eligible youth leaving care (Laube & Wadhvani, 2019; Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2022). However, the funding provided by the program was deemed inadequate by some care leavers (Laube & Wadhvani, 2019). British Columbia's Budget 2022 includes a 3-year government project to modify the eligibility criteria and increase support for youth transitioning from care (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2022). A press release from the Ministry of Children and Family Development (2022) outlines the changes, which include: extending the current age limit for receiving support from 19 to 27; being eligible for \$1,250 per month, regardless of participation in programs; a new rent supplement (\$600/month); a no-limit earnings exemption; better access to transition workers; enhanced life skills and mental-health programs; and better medical benefits until age 27.

As of August 2022, the amount of funding a care leaver receives through an AYA contract no longer considers employment income or employment insurance; thus, care leavers no longer have to choose between working and having the agreement (Aged Out, 2022). The initial eligibility criteria to be in the AYA program were: (a) to be enrolled in a life-skills, mental health, or skills training program for a minimum of 5 hours per week; or (b) to have 60% or more of a full-time course load (40% if the youth has a disability); or (c) to be in a rehabilitation service (Laube & Wadhvani, 2019; Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2022). Relaxing these criteria as planned in Budget 2022 will allow all young people who were in care for at least 24 months to get access to the AYA program and receive financial support for housing, living expenses, and more (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2022).

Another important change is an extension of temporary housing support that will allow young people to continue to stay in their homes until their 21st birthday (Junos, 2022). New transition workers in Delegated Aboriginal Agencies will also be deployed for early and ongoing transition planning, beginning at age 14 and continuing until the 25th birthday, to help youth navigate new and existing government services (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2022). Taken overall, the expansion of the transition program for care leavers in British Columbia, together with complementary resources such as Aged Out¹ (2023), and Aunt Leah's Place (2023)², will provide more equitable access and increase the support provided to care leavers.

Alberta

In 2004, through the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act, Alberta introduced a government transition planning program called Post-18 support, financial assistance that is colloquially known as the Support and Financial Assistance Agreement (SFAA). The SFAA enabled youth leaving care at 18 to receive financial support with a maximum of \$1,810 per month as of 2022 (Johnson, 2022), continuing until age 24 (Government of Alberta, 2004; Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2019, p. FC-83; Mir Iniesta, 2016). The SFAA provided youth who were in the welfare system with caseworkers, services to develop life skills, counselling, living accommodations, some health benefits, basic financial assistance, and supplementary financial assistance related to training and education (Government of Alberta, n.d.). On April 4, 2022, a new program called Transition to Adulthood Program (TAP), for those 18 to 24 years old, replaced the SFAA (Government of Alberta, 2022c). TAP expands services provided to care leavers to include mentoring opportunities, life skills, mental health and addiction supports, and assistance seeking employment (Government of Alberta, 2022b, 2022c). General financial support (maximum: \$1810/month) provided by TAP terminates at age 22; in contrast, under the SFAA, this support was provided until the age of 24 (Government of Alberta, 2022c, 2022d; Johnson, 2022; Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2019, p. FC-83). Youth can, however, apply to the Advancing

¹ Aged out provides resources through its website at <https://agedout.com>.

² Aunt Leah's Place acts as an alternate caregiver for youth aging out of care. It provides supported housing, job training, and life skills coaching. <https://www.auntleahs.org/programs/>

Futures program, which offers targeted financial support (up to \$40,000 over 4 years) to cover costs associated with pursuing an undergraduate degree or certification (Davidson, 2019; Government of Alberta, 2022a, 2022b). Youth can apply before the age of 25 and are supported for 5 years, to a maximum age of 31 (Government of Alberta, 2022a, 2022b). Additional financial supports provided by Advancing Futures include funds for necessities, transportation, childcare, and rental deposit; health care is also provided through this program (Government of Alberta, 2022a), whereas health benefits were previously provided by the SFAA. In addition, youth transition programs are offered by several non-profit organizations. Examples are the YMCA of Northern Alberta Youth Transition Program³ (n.d.); the Youth Transition to Adulthood Program⁴ of the McMan Youth, Family and Community Services Association of Calgary & Area (n.d.); and the Trellis Society Youth Transition to Adulthood program⁵ (n.d.). These programs are accessible through a referral from Child Services, though the YMCA does accept self-referral.

Ontario

Ontario provides many supports to care leavers until their mid-twenties. In 2005, a transition program called Extended Care and Maintenance was offered to care leavers up to age 21 (Goldstein & Wekerle, 2008, p. 10), and in 2013, it was replaced by the Continued Care and Support for Youth program, which also offered support to age 21 (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2015, p. 120). In 2014, additional supports related to physical health and mental health were offered by the provincial government through the Aftercare Benefits Initiative, which provided “health and dental benefits for eligible youth between 21 and 25 years old, and ... counselling and life skills supports for eligible youth between 21 and 29 years old” (Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, 2014a, para. 2).

As of 2022, there is a plethora of services in Ontario for youth in transition who are 16 to 24 years old, some of which come from non-profit organizations through either a referral service or through youths contacting the organization directly (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b). There is a wide range of services such as mental health care, addiction support, health and dental care, independent or life skills training, employment services and training, legal services, and education or vocational skills resources (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b). Throughout Ontario, various service agencies operate Youth in Transition Worker programs: for example, John Howard Society of Ontario (n.d.), YouTurn (n.d.), and Ontario Native Women’s Association (n.d.). Some provide other services, employment programs, or events to First Nation Communities (Weechi-it-te-win Family Services, n.d.; Youth Employment Readiness Program, 2009).

³ <https://ymcanab.ca/programs/learning-leadership-employment/youth-young-adults/youth-transitions-program>

⁴ <https://mcmancalgary.ca/yta/>

⁵ <https://www.growwithtrellis.ca/youth-programs/housing-shelters/youth-transitions-to-adulthood>

Aside from the services given by non-profits, Ontario has a Voluntary Youth Service Agreement program that is specific to youth 16 to 17 years old who are in need of protection, and which aims to enable a seamless transition without disruptions to services before aging out at 18 (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021a). If a youth is still in care at 18, Ontario offers the Continued Care and Support for Youth (which includes \$850/month as well as non-financial supports), which can be extended until the 21st birthday (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021a). There is also the Stay Home for School Program, which allows youth from 18 to 21 who need additional time to complete high school to remain with their caregivers (Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2016).

In Ontario, no financial support is given past the 21st birthday. However, former youth in care between 21 and 25 (and their dependants) are eligible to receive prescription drug, dental, vision, and extended health benefits through the Aftercare Benefits Initiative (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2014a). In addition, youth may be able to receive counselling and life skills supports until age 29 (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2014a). Other services include a savings program (Ontario Child Benefit Equivalent) with financial management training (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2018), an Immigration Status Guide to help youth address unresolved immigration issues before aging out of care (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2014a), and education grants for post-secondary education (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b). In short, Ontario offers a variety of supports for care leavers, some of which can last until age 29, presumably increasing the likelihood that they can successfully reach independence.

Quebec

Quebec offers only one transition program for youth, the Youth Qualification Program (*Programme qualification des jeunes*; PQJ). Until July 2022, this program provided support only to age 19 (Centre intégré de santé et de services sociaux de l'Outaouais, n.d.; Government of Quebec, 2021). It began as a pilot project that ran between 2001 and 2005 with 80 youths and was made available provincially in 2006 (Goyette & Morin, 2010). Access to the program, which lasted for 3 years, was limited to 16-year-olds who had been referred by their social worker; the youth were then provided with job and skills training and preparation for independent living through both individual and group activities (Centre intégré de santé et de services sociaux de l'Outaouais, n.d.; Goyette & Morin, 2010). The program was found to improve autonomous functioning but had strict eligibility criteria and limited geographical accessibility (Goyette, 2007; Government of Quebec, 2021). A recent report by Goyette, Blanchet, Tardif-Samson, and Gauthier-Davies (2022) suggests that the program might not have been providing enough support. Following the release of the Laurent Commission report (Government of Quebec, 2021), the maximum age has been extended to 25, and eligibility has been extended to those who are not likely to reintegrate with family, and who are interested in receiving the services offered (Government of Quebec, 2022). Another planned change is increasing the number of educators and opening around 650 placements

for youths (Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, 2021). As the number of youths leaving care far exceeds the number of youths who can enter the program, additional placements will be needed before the program can be accessible to all care leavers. Unlike other provinces, Quebec does not provide general support to care leavers once they reach age 18 (Government of Quebec, 2021).

To fill this vacuum, multiple independent projects have been created by non-profits and some regional health authorities (known by their acronyms CISSS and CIUSSS in Quebec). For example, project CLÉ provides youth with financial support to a total of \$8,000 for post-secondary studies (Fondation du Centre Jeunesse de la Montérégie, n.d.; Touzin, 2017), and Maison ASPIRE provides independent housing at \$200 per month for up to two years (Étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés au Québec et en France, 2017; Touzin, 2017).

Recently, the scope of supports that the province offers has been extended through multiple modifications of existing programs and structures. The Société d’Habitation du Québec has set aside, over the course of a 5-year plan, 100 rent supplements for vulnerable youth to use as long as needed; these rent supplements are paired with case management services that are intended to partner with existing community supports (Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, 2021). The number of rental units is low, however, considering that over 2,000 youth leave care every year in Quebec (Government of Quebec, 2021, p. 266). A reform initiated by the Public Curator⁶ is also scheduled to come into effect on November 1, 2022, which will allow vulnerable young adults to name an “assistant” who will support and counsel them in their transition towards adulthood (Curateur public du Québec, 2022; Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, 2021). Furthermore, the *Aire Ouverte* [Open Area] program, which is similar to the Australian Headspace model (Headspace, n.d.) and the Foundry program in British Columbia (Foundry, n.d.), will be opening unique physical spaces designed to appeal to youth aged 12 to 25 while facilitating access to physical and mental health services, including an on-site nurse or a social worker (Macé & Weiss, 2021). Support or advice will also be provided on topics such as employment, school, and housing, along with legal and financial aid (Government of Quebec, n.d.a; Macé & Weiss, 2021). Finally, a mentorship program for youth aged 16 to 21 who are in protection services has been established with the help of *Les grands frères et grandes soeurs du Grand Montréal* [Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Montreal] in which volunteers accompany youth during their transition and meet for activities twice a month for half a day (Les grands frères et grandes soeurs du Grand Montréal, 2021, n.d.; Votre gouvernement, 2019).

Amendments to Draft Bill 15 that were passed on April 26, 2022, make it mandatory that a transition plan be completed 2 years before a youth’s 18th birthday (Assemblée Nationale du Québec, 2022). Youth will then receive support until age 26 and remain in their foster home (Chaire de recherche sur l’Évaluation des actions publiques à l’égard des jeunes et des populations

⁶ The Public Curator of Quebec is a government agency responsible for protecting vulnerable individuals who cannot manage their affairs due to mental or physical incapacity (Government of Quebec, n.d.-b).

vulnérables, 2022). Thus, having long been an outlier in terms of the paucity of the supports it offers care leavers, the Quebec government, spurred by the Laurent Commission report, has recently started expanding supports to care leavers as they transition into adulthood, in terms of both the age at which supports can be accessed and the range of types of support (Radio-Canada, 2021). Unlike in other provinces, however, government programs providing financial assistance to care leavers, whether for basic needs or to help access training and education, remain unavailable (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). At this time, Quebec still lags behind other Canadian provinces in offering support to care leavers.

Other Provinces and Territories

The transition programs that the remaining provinces and territories offer share many similarities. Most but not all require transition planning (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2014; Sukumaran, 2021). The age at which foster care ends varies — in some cases, it can be as early as 16, but in most jurisdictions care ends at either 18 or 19 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). Transition support is provided everywhere, although the length and conditions of these programs vary (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). Transition supports last until 24 or 26 in some provinces and territories, but more often only until 21 (Government of Northwest Territories, 2016; Government of Nunavut, 2021; Legislative Assembly of Yukon, 2022; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019; Social Supports NB, 2022).

At a minimum, all of these jurisdictions offer financial support to care leavers who agree to a contract with the government (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). As in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, additional supports can be provided; Prince Edward Island, for instance, has increased funding for education, job training, and housing (Meader, 2021). However, even the minimum support can be contingent on factors such as education status, employment status, age, and criminal history (Government of Prince Edward Island, 1988; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). In Prince Edward Island, advocates, care leavers, and foster parents have recommended that supports should be available to all care leavers, eliminating eligibility criteria (Provincial Foster Care Program Review Steering Committee, 2019).

Among the provinces, Manitoba stands out in terms of the many services it provides to care leavers. Since 1997, care leavers in Manitoba have been supported until the age of 21 through the Act to Amend the Child and Family Services Act and Consequential Amendments (Government of Manitoba, 1997). The requirement for a formal agreement and transition planning were introduced in 2015, whereby care leavers at the age of 15 meet with a social worker to establish goals; if necessary, they also sign an agreement with the Director of Child Protection to continue to support their goals until age 21 (Government of Manitoba, 2015a, 2015b).

Manitoba has funded and created other services such as Futures Forward, a collaborative effort between the Canadian Mental Health Association, Youth Employment Services, and Community Financial Counselling Services that offers accessible services and transitional supports for current and former youth in care aged 15 to 29 in the areas of mental health, housing, employment,

education, and financial counselling (Futures Forward, n.d.). Manitoba also offers the Youth Engagement Program, which supports Western Manitoba's youth in care in their journey from entering care to independence and competence: Youth Engagement Program workers provide supports and resources, and advocate for the rights of youth (Child and Family Service of Western Manitoba, n.d.). Furthermore, a youth may be referred to pilot programs such as MYTEAM, which provides skills training, mentorship to support education or training goals, and work experience opportunities, as well as support in getting other resources or informal health support (Ka Ni Kanichihk, n.d.). SAIL, another pilot program, provides a support worker to help youth acquire independent living skills and get housing until they have either completed the program or have been discharged from care (Knowles Centre, n.d.). Finally, Voices: Manitoba's Youth in Care Network (n.d.) provides peer mentoring, outreach services, leadership programs, and scholarships, and allows youth to speak out about their situation. Each of the remaining provinces and territories has at least one government program to provide support to care leavers, and additional supports can be obtained through existing non-profit organizations.

Common Denominators Across Canadian Provinces and Territories

All jurisdictions, including Quebec, provide at least one governmental transition program under such names as Voluntary Youth Service Agreement and Young Adult Agreement (Government of Alberta, 2022c; Government of British Columbia, n.d.; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b; Government of Northwest Territories, 2016; Government of Nunavut, 2021; Government of Quebec, 2022; Legislative Assembly of Yukon, 2022; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2014a; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019; Social Supports NB, 2022). The programs focus on the same goal of supporting youth up to a specific age while facilitating, to a variable extent, participation in education or training in areas such as education, employment, and life skills (Government of Alberta, 2022c; Government of British Columbia, n.d.; Government of Quebec, 2022; Legislative Assembly of Yukon, 2022; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b; NCSA Connections, n.d.; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2014a; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019; Social Supports NB, 2022).

Common Components Across Canada

Financial Support

Unlike Quebec, transition programs in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario include a monthly allowance to help youth leaving care pay for basic living needs and housing (Government of Alberta, 2022c; Government of Quebec, 2021; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b; Junos, 2022). As noted above, the maximum amount varies by jurisdiction: for example, it is currently \$330/month in Nunavut and \$575/month in Saskatchewan (Government of Nunavut, n.d.; Government of Saskatchewan, 2014). Some jurisdictions, such as Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Northwest Territories, have transition programs with financial assistance, but the amount is not disclosed (Government of Manitoba, 2015b;

Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.; Government of Northwest Territories, 2016). However, in British Columbia and Ontario, youth leaving care often stated that the amount provided did not cover all expenses, leaving them struggling and susceptible to becoming homeless (Laube & Wadhvani, 2019; Rampersaud & Mussell, 2021). In 2022, the time of writing, youth leaving care in British Columbia have multiple sources of income, with nearly half (48%) receiving the AYA, 44% earning money through employment, and smaller numbers receiving bursaries and scholarships, help from their family, and other forms of income assistance (McCreary Centre Society's Youth Research Academy, 2022, p. 39). Despite these supports, 52% of these youth were in debt (McCreary Centre Society's Youth Research Academy, 2022, p. 5). Thus, a more generous allowance (or other financial assistance program) that applies to all care leavers and is enough to cover all living expenses — more in line with the support that British Columbia is currently implementing (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2022) — would be helpful in other jurisdictions as well.

Education

Many transition programs incentivize youth to pursue education by providing additional support that is contingent on working towards completion of secondary or post-secondary education (Government of Alberta, 2022a; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019; Student Aid BC, n.d.a, n.d.b). This support can take the form of reimbursements or bursaries for tuition and expenses related to schooling (Government of Alberta, 2022a; Student Aid BC, n.d.a, n.d.b). The focus is generally on high school education, with some provinces such as Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario expanding this support to those enrolled in post-secondary education as well (Government of Alberta, 2022a; Government of British Columbia, n.d.; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b; Student Aid BC, n.d.b). The age limit for completion of schooling in British Columbia is 27, the highest in the nation; in Alberta and Ontario, the limit is 24 (Government of Alberta, 2022a; Government of Ontario, 2012; Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2022). Education has been a central component of many transition programs in Canada, as the benefits of supporting care leavers' education help justify the costs of implementing these programs (Leroux et al., 2020; Sukumaran, 2021).

Life Skills Programs

Life skills programs are offered by some provinces to help youth leaving care develop the necessary skills to become independent adults (Government of Alberta, 2022b; Government of British Columbia, n.d.; Government of Saskatchewan, 2014; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b). The Quebec PQJ focuses on the development of life skills, job skills, and social skills (Government of Quebec, 2022). Participation in the PQJ was associated with an increase in life skills over a 3-year period, but did not show improvements in areas such as housing, education, and employment (Goyette, 2007; Goyette, Blanchet, Tardif-Samson, & Gauthier-Davies, 2022). The Ontario program is similar to the PQJ; youth can enrol as early as 16, and can stay in the program until age 25 (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b).

The eligibility criteria are not as restrictive as those of the PQJ, and other supports, such as for housing, education, and mental health, are offered together with employment training (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b). British Columbia also offers a life skills program that is focused on day-to-day living and helping youth attain their own goals (Government of British Columbia, n.d.), while Alberta, New Brunswick, and Saskatchewan offer programs focused on becoming an independent adult (Government of Alberta, 2022b; Government of New Brunswick, n.d.; Government of Saskatchewan, 2014). Provinces that include integrated life skills programs in their transition programs hope to help care leavers become more independent by learning to manage everyday tasks, although evidence concerning their real-world effectiveness is limited.

Challenges

Lack of Social Support

Care leavers tend to have few social supports prior to leaving care (Sukumaran, 2021). Unless care leavers remain in contact with family members or foster families, they leave foster care without a social safety net, making it more difficult to integrate into their communities (Sukumaran, 2021). A few provinces, such as Saskatchewan and British Columbia, have peer support groups for formerly displaced youth (Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks, n.d.; Saskatchewan Youth in Care and Custody Network Inc., 2007; Sukumaran, 2021). Without social supports and someone to help find the right resources, care leavers are likely to encounter feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Montgomery et al., 2016). While the importance of social support is accepted, further research is needed to clarify the best ways of providing it to care leavers.

Mental Health Resources

In our source literature, connecting care leavers with mental health resources is rarely mentioned as a service provided by transition programs, even though care leavers are more likely than their peers to have experienced traumatic childhoods (Baidawi et al., 2014; Charlesworth, 2020; Dorsey et al., 2012). Due to their traumatic pasts, care leavers tend to have unresolved psychological issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, complex trauma, depression, and anxiety (Patterson et al., 2015; Turney & Wildeman, 2016). As noted in a recent report by Del Graff (2019), the Child and Youth Advocate for Alberta, if youth do not have the means to access psychological services when they leave care, their mental health issues are not addressed as well as they might be, further impeding their ability to integrate into society. The report further discussed the deaths of care leavers in the transition program, attributing the deaths in part to mental health issues, themselves likely influenced, if not brought about, by past traumatic events. This report suggests that the absence of mental health supports is one reason care leavers are more likely to die young, compared to youth who have not been in care. It is important that mental health services be provided to youth prior to leaving care to allow them to heal from their pasts and build resilience (King, 2021; Sukumaran, 2021).

Lack of Knowledge Regarding Programs

Care leavers themselves are often unaware of services that may be available to them, relying on their caseworkers to provide this information (Sukumaran, 2021). If a youth does not have a good relationship with their caseworker, if the caseworker is not aware of all the programs and services available, or does not understand the criteria for or the main purpose of a program, the caseworker may not pass on the information to the youth (Sukumaran, 2021). In a study entitled “Youth in Transit: Growing Out of Care”, youth in care emphasized the benefits of understanding the available community supports that fit their needs and interests (Montgomery et al., pp. 226–227, 2016). Care leavers need to be informed of the resources and supports available to them, and social workers need to be more knowledgeable about these resources and to advocate for care leavers so that they can access the supports that will be most helpful to them.

Strict Eligibility Criteria

The eligibility criteria to enter transition programs, which can include age, enrolment in training or education, and employment status, can mean that youth leaving care do not receive these services (Sukumaran, 2021). For instance, in Ontario, foster families can continue to receive funds for a youth over 18 until the age of 21 only if they are finishing their high school education through the Stay at Home program (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b; Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, n.d.). Most provinces other than the four most populated provide supports for youth no later than age 21, with few supports provided for care leavers in their mid to late twenties (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). Meanwhile, in the general population, young adults often live longer with their parents — one in three adults between the ages of 25 and 29 was living with their parents in Ontario in 2016 (Ministry of Finance, 2021). This trend has been attributed to the high cost of housing in Canada along with increased time in education and job market changes (Ansari, 2019). Young adults transitioning out of care, who disproportionately struggle with trauma and mental health issues, clearly need continued access to programs that compensate for the lack of family support and provide a safety net for when things do not go as planned (Sukumaran, 2021). Transition programs need to increase their accessibility to all care leavers so that they receive the supports they need until they are well into their twenties.

Inadequate Transition Planning

Case managers often do not collaborate with youth on transition planning, and when they do, transition planning is often not systematically implemented (Montgomery et al., 2016; Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2014; Sukumaran, 2021). In the Yukon, despite transition planning being officially integrated in the transition program, only 41% of files mentioned a transition plan (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2014). Furthermore, transition plans do not always reflect the wishes and needs of youth; instead, some youth report being told what to do without regard for their wishes (Montgomery et al., 2016; Sukumaran, 2021). Perceiving their contribution as unimportant, care leavers may choose to leave the care system early or not enrol in transition programs (Montgomery et al., 2016; Sukumaran, 2021).

Conclusion

Findings regarding transition programs across Canada suggest that reforms are needed to better support care leavers. Compared to the other jurisdictions, British Columbia offered the most supports and provided them for a longer duration, and is moving in the direction of making eligibility criteria less restrictive (Government of British Columbia, n.d.; Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2022). Ontario also offers many supports in regard to education, employment, and physical and mental health, among other areas; however, some supports are only available to age 25 (Government of Ontario, 2012; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021b; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2014a). Quebec has been an outlier in terms of the lack of supports offered to care leavers by the government, and supports seem likely to remain relatively limited even after implementation of the changes prompted by the release of the Laurent Commission report in May 2021 (Government of Quebec, 2021; Radio-Canada, 2021). Alberta's SFAA program, which provided financial and other supports until age 24 (Johnson, 2022), was recently replaced with the TAP, which expanded transition services but ended general financial support at age 22 (Government of Alberta, 2022c). When combined with Advancing Futures, however, some services can be provided up to age 31 (Government of Alberta, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). The other provinces and territories provide financial support through an agreement with care leavers that can span ages 21 to 26; depending on the agreement, other supports can be included (Government of Northwest Territories, 2016; Government of Nunavut, n.d.; Legislative Assembly of Yukon, 2022; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019; Social Supports NB, 2022).

While some of these programs have existed for over a decade, little is known about their effectiveness in terms of education, employment, and independent living outcomes (Sukumaran, 2021). Some efforts have been made to determine which types of support care leavers prefer, and which provide the most benefits. One study, conducted at a residential care facility in the United States, found that transition planning was important to care leavers, and additional supports were desired (Trout et al., 2014). The types of supports desired differed by gender, with males generally valuing support on financial management and cultivating relationships, while females prioritized educational supports (Trout et al., 2014). Only two studies examined the Quebec PQJ: Goyette (2007), and Goyette, Blanchet, Tardif-Samson, & Gauthier-Davies (2022). In the 2022 study, Goyette and colleagues found that those enrolled in the program did not improve in terms of educational status or employment. Those enrolled were at high risk of homelessness, low education, and unemployment; the program appeared unable to overcome those challenges. Additional studies are needed to determine how effective Canadian transition programs are, and what types of supports would best allow care leavers to successfully transition out of care.

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