

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Hearing their voices: Youths' experiences of unstable housing and homelessness post-care

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Why this research is important

The results send a clear message: Care leavers are not getting the support they need to prepare for life post-care. Changes must continue to be made to the child welfare system in Manitoba to better prepare and support youth transitioning from care.

How the research was conducted

Content analysis was used to explore, “What are the post-care housing experiences of youth who have transitioned from care through an independent support program?” Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten youths who had aged out of care. In addition, we interviewed six service providers who worked with youth in and from care in various capacities.

What the researchers found

Two of the several themes revealed by data analysis were:

What you need to know

Youth who leave the care of child and family services are generally not prepared for life post-care and face adverse health outcomes and high rates of homelessness. These negative outcomes disproportionately affect Indigenous youth as they make up approximately 90% of youth in care in Manitoba.

1. *Youth leaving care then wishing they could return:*
In order to foster the value of accountability, the child welfare system is teaching youth to act like adults way before their counterparts in the general population are required. Yet, paradoxically the system is not allowing the youths to practice independence. The oppressive rule, and lack of opportunity to practice life skills, lead to a view among the youths that support from the child welfare system is an impediment to independence rather than a natural part of this transition. This perception may be why half of the youth participants chose to leave the care of the child welfare system early. They were given the message that they needed to act like adults and that this was impossible while in the care of child and family services.
2. *I take responsibility for where I am now:*
This theme adds new information to the literature.

Unlike the service providers who all agreed that the child welfare system must be altered to improve outcomes for youths post-care, all the youth participants, except one, did not place blame on the system for any of their struggles.

This theme tells us that youth in care are internalizing dominant Western values of individualism, independence, and self-reliance. It can be argued that the child welfare system is instilling dominant European values in children from care who are primarily Indigenous, causing a fundamental conflict in values: individual independence versus the interdependence of the individual. This conflict of values is also perpetuating the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples. There have been lasting intergenerational effects from the assimilation and cultural genocide (Miller, 1996; Neu, 2000) of Indigenous Peoples in Canada that began with colonization and continued through the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop. The long-lasting effects are now reflected in the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care both in Manitoba, which has one of the highest rates, and in Canada overall. Underlying racist beliefs about Indigenous people stemming from Canada's colonial history also play a large role in the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care today (Allan & Smylie, 2015).

How this research can be used

This study provides evidence that youth in care experience serious disadvantages in their transition to adulthood. The following are recommendations as to how some of these disadvantages could begin to be addressed.

1. Supports and services provided to youth while still in care must focus on fostering life skills which would include the opportunity to meaningfully practice these skills.
2. Youth who have left care should have the opportunity to return to care for support. This would better mirror the support youth in the general population receive.
3. Supports and services provided to youth in care should be culturally appropriate and foster culturally relevant identity formation.

About the researchers

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Housing, youth homelessness, social services, child protection, Indigenous youth

Publication based on this research

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