YOUTH IN CARE MATTER:
Examining the experiences of youth ‘aging out’ of the Canadian child welfare system during the COVID-19 pandemic
This research report is accompanied by the Youth in Care Matter e-book, which features the artistic contributions of the young people from care who participated in this project: click here to view.
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1. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Research in the last twenty years in North America and other Western countries has shown that young people in the general population are progressively taking longer periods of time to transition to adulthood (e.g., Arnett & Schwab, 2012, 2013, 2014; Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). This phenomenon, termed by Arnett (2015) as 'emerging adulthood', is associated with young people transitioning to adulthood between the ages of 19 and 29. Research also shows that young people are becoming more interdependent on their families and support networks throughout their young adult lives rather than independent from them (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Molgat, 2007). Interdependency incorporates values of collaboration, connection and empowerment between members of a support network rather than isolation and complete autonomy (Propp, Ortega & NewHeart, 2003). In contrast, youth in long-term government care who have not been adopted or reunited with their biological families are expected to transition to adulthood and become self-sufficient quite rapidly. This is due to provincial legislation across Canada mandating child welfare agencies to release youth from their care at the age of majority (Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, 2011; Mulcahy & Trocmé, 2010; Reid & Dudding, 2006). According to national estimates, approximately 10% (6,700) of the youth in care population transitions out ('ages out') of the Canadian child welfare system every year (Flynn, 2003).

This accelerated transition to adulthood has been shown to affect the ability of youth in care to self-focus in terms of their aspirations, identity development and needs, and limit their ability to build human and social capital to support them throughout adulthood (Courtney, Hook & Lee, 2012; Singer & Berzin, 2015; Stein, 2006). According to Stein (2006), it also places an unrealistic expectation of instant adulthood upon these youth, one that many of their peers are not held to. Due to fragmented and limited services, many adolescents who have not found permanent placements during their time in care are left to fend for themselves once they leave, and in more than dire circumstances. Unlike their peers who can continue to seek assistance and support from their families, youth who have left the child protection system do not have the option to return to the care of the state in times of difficulty. Not surprisingly, evidence from North American studies over the past 30 years have thus demonstrated that youth in care face a multiplicity of challenges that many of their peers will never face, such as high rates of homelessness, under-education, unemployment or under-employment, economic hardships, mental health issues and post-traumatic stress, substance abuse and early pregnancy or parenthood (Casey Family Programs, 2003; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty & Damashek, 2011; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Koegel, Melamidt & Burnam, 1995; Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012; Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw & Brown, 2007; Tessier, Flynn & Beaupré, 2014).
The COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented in Canada, and no prior nation-wide research exists on the 'aging out' experiences of youth in care in a Canadian pandemic context. Studies in Quebec and the United States at the beginning of and during the COVID-19 pandemic showcased a heightened vulnerability to housing instability, homelessness, barriers to continuing education, job insecurity, and mental health issues (Amechi, 2020; Goyette, Blanchet & Bellot, 2020; Goyette et al., 2022; Greeson et al., 2020; Greeson et al., 2022; Rosenberg et al., 2022). Goyette and colleagues’ (2020; 2022) Quebec-based study following a cohort of youth exiting the youth protection system between the ages of 17 and 21 found that by wave 3 of the study (n=560), which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, over one third of participants had experienced at least one episode of homelessness in the first years after their exit from care. Youth with experiences of homelessness also tended to experience a higher rate of mental health issues (53% vs. 33% for youth with housing stability), and a higher rate of involvement in the criminal justice system (44% vs. 25% for youth with housing stability). The researchers observe that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated these outcomes especially as it relates to housing instability and judicialization, and remarked that youth between the ages of 18 to 24 received the highest number of fines in Quebec for breaking public health orders.

In the U.S., Greeson and colleagues’ (2020) national study examined the experiences of 281 older youth in and recently aged out of foster care (ages 18-23) during COVID-19. They found that nearly half of respondents experienced a negative impact on their housing situations, with nearly three quarters reporting financial insecurity. Nearly half reported experiencing employment instability, with 55% reporting having experienced food insecurity. Two thirds of participants reported experiencing barriers to continuing their education, with more than half experiencing mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

Research indicates that young people in and from care suffer from systemic marginalization and social exclusion (Stein, 2006); consequently, their voices are often left out of social change conversations. For instance, Abrams, Curry, Lelayants and Montero (2016), found that child welfare social policy is often disconnected from the lived realities of the young people it impacts, and is often aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviours of clients rather than the system itself. In addition, Holland (2009) points out that the understanding of key concepts and priorities by youth in care are often different from those reported by adults in their lives such as caregivers, child protection practitioners and policy makers. Thus, it is important to first and foremost capture the perspectives of young people 'aging out' of care about their transition experiences, needs and strengths during this pandemic, as their own perceptions and experiences may vary from what adults might think youth in and from care are experiencing. This research project aimed to gather the experiences and expertise of youth who were in the process of 'aging out' or recently 'aged out' of the child welfare system in the various provincial and territorial jurisdictions across the country during the COVID-19 pandemic.
RESEARCH QUESTION

What kind of short-term and longer-term supports are perceived by youth who have 'aged out' of care as crucial to their successful transition to adulthood during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This study, especially the data gathering process, was guided by the following areas of inquiry:

- What does this pandemic situation mean to youth who have 'aged' out of care?
- What are the expectations of youth who have 'aged out' of care pertaining to receiving adequate supports during and after the pandemic and why?
- What are some of the barriers and required supports identified by youth who have 'aged out' of care to be able to successfully transition to adulthood during and after the pandemic?
- What are some of the strengths or points of resilience identified by youth who have 'aged out' of care in successfully transitioning to adulthood during and after the pandemic?
The method for this research project focused on a qualitative mixed methods approach, including arts-based creative expression of choice of the participants (e.g., photography, painting, drawing, poem, spoken word, song, rap, etc.) and one-on-one follow-up qualitative interviews with each participant after their creative work was submitted in order to further contextualize their creative works and inquire about their expectations, needs, barriers and strengths or points of resilience during and after the pandemic. Creative and arts-based research can elicit different, new and even less easily solicited perspectives compared to traditional research (Van Der Vaart, Van Hoven & Huigen, 2018). It can also be used in any parts of the research project, including data collection, analysis and dissemination and can reach wider and more diverse audiences beyond traditional research dissemination (Jones & Leavy, 2014; Wang, Coeman, Sigesmund & Hannes, 2017).

Through adopting an arts-based qualitative research approach, the participants are empowered to represent their lived experiences through their own eyes and stories, rather than have their stories solely told and interpreted by others. Arts-based research is especially meaningful for marginalized populations such as youth from care, as it provides an enhanced self-expression format on the participants' own terms that helps to overcome research-participant power imbalances (Walsh, Rutherford & Crough, 2013; Coemans & Hannes, 2017). Transparency and member checking process was also embedded in the research project so that participants could fact check and approve their work and thematic analysis prior to public release of findings.

After the completion of the data collection phase, the artistic submissions and qualitative interviews were manually transcribed and thematically analyzed to identify common and individual themes emerging from the experiences of the participants. As part of the member checking process, participants were provided with the opportunity to review the preliminary thematic analysis and emerging recommendations for child welfare policy and practice, and to provide input and feedback. Participants had the opportunity to review any direct quotes to be used in publications, including the research report, prior to public release. The goal was to allow the participants to control the story and narrative that gets publicly released and to be transparent about the data analysis and dissemination processes.
3.1 Sample

A total of ten youth between the ages of 18 and 22 from urban areas across 8 provinces (British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince-Edward-Island and Newfoundland & Labrador) participated in the study, with six participants identifying as female, three as male, and one as 2 Spirit. Six participants were aged 18 and 19 years. In terms of race and ethnic background, four identified as Indigenous, three mixed race, two Caucasian and one participant as Black. Six of the participants identified as LGBTQ2+. Five participants were in school, and five were employed either part-time or full time. In terms of living situation, four were in a transitional housing program, three were living with family, two were renting alone, and one youth was living with roommates. In terms of level of education, most participants (seven) had completed their grade 12 or equivalent; two had a grade 9 or 10 education, and one participant from Quebec had completed CEGEP.

FINDINGS

In this section, overarching themes and sub-themes emerging from the interviews are presented, in addition to the arts-based submissions from the participants to highlight the emerging themes, which range from poems, paintings and drawings. The sub-themes emerging from the interviews are presented across five overarching themes: (i) feelings about the transition experience; (ii) systemic barriers to a successful transition to adulthood; (iii) Covid-19 Pandemic barriers; (iv) strength factors; and (v) recommendations for change.

i. Feelings about the transition experience

The most common emotion reported by most participants was a sense of isolation, with the pandemic intensifying their feeling of being on their own. Half of the participants expressed feeling scared or finding the transition process scary. Nearly half expressed finding the experience very stressful, with nearly half finding the transition process to be a struggle in terms of being hard and challenging. Nearly a third expressed feeling hopeless about their transition to adulthood, with half of participants expressing feeling anxious or depressed due to having to transition out of care during the pandemic. A few youth expressed feeling trapped and in a state of emergency, which were amplified by the pandemic restrictions. A few youth also expressed that they felt the transition situation was unfair. Other emotional experiences that were mentioned by individual participants included being confused, traumatized and suicidal. One of the participants shared:

“The Covid-19 pandemic was also like, really, [...] emotionally hard on me, I’ve been feeling a bit more depressed and like more like, just kind of like hopeless just because of how the world was going. And I felt like, it kind of just like, disempowered me. Before the pandemic, I was excited to leave care. And then now, just because of the pandemic, it seems more scarier, it feels a bit more stressful, because you don’t have to just work around normal leaving home things, but you also have to worry about a pandemic.” - Participant 4, QC
We're used to it.
Early on at an early age
those like us are made.
Coming from homes filled
with suffering, trauma and pain,
emerging from poverty, instability and disdain…
We're used to it.

Emergencies,
they are natural but they come looking for us
as if we have a debt to pay.

Sickness, chaos, cruelty, violence and despair,
these are a few of the trials we have fared,
we,
the youth formerly,
the youth in
and
the youth soon to be in care,
weather storm after storm,
abuse after abuse, only…
We find more difficulty on the horizon.
We're used to it.
Yes, emergencies, yes.
We're used to them.
But emergencies are not easier,
they prey on vulnerability, weakness and dismay.
It would be idiotic to say
that since we're used to crisis
we're doing okay.

We are no different in our human nature.
We're used to it, yes,
but we're not getting magically greater.
Sickness in the world
simply adds larger weights
onto already heavy loads.
People say that you reap what you sow…
Where exactly did I cause such harm?

Those at risk to suicide, overdose or stigmatized degradation,
find no solace or gain
in the globe being broken again and again.
We get worse and worse
more often than better.
Emergencies set us all back
and this virus is a constant attack.
Financial security, mental health and lives blown to bits…
But, sure, all is well!
After all we are used to it.
“The cartoonish monsters represent fear. Fear of growing up, fear of leaving care. Overcoming these fears along with the pandemic on top of everything adds more stress. Becoming an adult through it all is unnatural. And it bleeds into our art. Graduating with a mask on and standing 6 feet apart from one another is chaotic. So, I paint.”
Poem title: Leaving In A Pandemic

Artist: Payge

Living on your own is hard enough,
so why not add “Living alone during a worldwide pandemic”,
just to make it sound more intriguing.
I knew turning eighteen would be hard, and scary.
Aging out of care is scary, it’s overwhelming.
Doing it in a pandemic makes it scarier, more overwhelming.
You live on your own, you’re not supposed to have a lot of people over.
Six feet at all times.
It’s lonely, and scary.
For me I felt like I was constantly underwater,
not getting any air.
I felt trapped,
I was sad,
and so full of anger.
I wanted other people to feel what I felt,
I wanted them to know what it’s like to be all alone,
to feel my sadness,
to hurt like me.
It was hard to communicate all of my emotions,
when I couldn’t get close to anyone,
when I couldn’t see anyone’s full face because of a mask.
All I wanted was to be and feel normal.
ii. Systemic barriers to a successful transition to adulthood

Nearly all participants expressed they were not getting sufficient supports from their agency and/or the Ministry for their transition to adulthood, with the majority expressing that restrictive eligibility criteria limited their ability to access adequate post-majority supports. For instance, one participant expressed that they were unable to apply for social assistance due to living with a family member who was already accessing it. In addition, two of the participants expressed that the cap on personal income of their post-majority supports agreements prevented them from having financial stability.

Half of the participants indicated that they were receiving inadequate mental health supports; over two-thirds of the participants did not feel the child welfare system had the capacity to properly support youth with mental health issues and disabilities, and that this inadequacy was exacerbated during the pandemic. Nearly half of participants reported receiving inadequate health supports, with no access to health insurance for prescriptions and emergencies. Half of the participants expressed that they were not receiving support from their agency and/or Ministry for their schooling, with nearly half of participants expressing that they were not getting the necessary help with developing life skills. One participant shared:

“[…], they're just not helping me with like life skills. Like I can barely cook, I don't know how to do my own laundry and they're not really helping me with any of that. And I expressed that I'm having trouble with that.” – Participant 2, MB

Nearly half of the participants felt that their caseworkers were not following transition to adulthood policies, causing delays and missing important deadlines. Three of the participants expressed that they felt their worker was unreliable, with a lack of a sense of urgency for their needs and situation. Three participants expressed that the transition planning process was ambiguous and unclear, resulting in confusion and miscommunication. Three participants also expressed that they were forced to become adults too soon, and that this ‘adultification’ was used as an excuse by workers and the system to not provide post-majority supports. Nearly half of the participants expressed that the end of supports or drastic reduction in supports at the age of majority was highly problematic, and also occurred on their birthday. One participant expressed that the oversurveillance that accompanies most post-majority supports was a deterrent to wanting to access them. Another participant expressed that they had no social support system, which negatively impacted their transition to adulthood experience.
ARTISTIC SUBMISSIONS

Drawing Title: Into the Unknown
Artist: Keyanna

Drawing Title: Untitled
Artist: Anonymous

Caption:
“Me not wanting to transition and having concerns about driving a car, education and my health. A bit of anxiety, a bit of excitement and a bit of motivation.”
iii. Covid-19 Pandemic barriers to a successful transition to adulthood

Over half of the participants expressed that the intense isolation conditions of the pandemic negatively impacted their mental health and ability to connect with others.

“There’s a reason solitary confinement is one of the harsher punishments of prison systems. And it’s because isolation is known to be psychologically detrimental even in the short term.[...] So this long term isolation, even though it’s not necessarily in a prison context, is functioning as though we are in a socially isolated solitary confinement.” – Participant 6, B.C.

Nearly half of youth expressed feeling overly controlled and sheltered in their placements, compared to peers in the general population. Several youth shared that the rules in their placement did not make sense, and were stricter than those put forward by Health Canada. Three youth expressed that there was a lack of transparency and clarity about pandemic rules in their placement, with one youth sharing that they felt there was a disconnect between those who were making the rules and the youth who were living the realities. A few youth felt there was a lack of preparation for the pandemic and disorganization in their program placements. Two youth shared that these overly strict rules were impacting their access to much needed transition supports. One participant who lived in a group home shared:

“And, like, for me, personally, I just felt like, because I’m in the system, like in the group homes and stuff, like the rules are 100% way more strict [...]. I just felt like I just wanted to interact with people. Like, I know at one point that was not allowed to kind of like illegal, you could get fined, but like, after the fact when things eased and my group home still really couldn’t. [...] they should really like, listen to them [the youth] and hear what they have to say instead of just like, management and like supervisors, and head of this and head of that making decisions when they’re not the ones who are living in it for their own selves, not other people. And here they are determining things for other people.” – Participant 9, P.E.I.

Another participant who lived in a transition housing program shared:

“[...] the mentor that we have that’s the live-in mentor, [...] actually got tested positive for COVID. So for a while we were really just locked in our rooms, like we couldn’t do anything. And [then] we had to like walk around the house with masks on but we wouldn’t be walking around the house. It was so stressful.” – Participant 5, ON
Over half of participants expressed that the move to virtual and phone appointments negatively impacted the quality and accessibility of services, and increased their sense of isolation. One youth shared that the disconnect made it difficult for them to be vulnerable during their sessions, while another shared that it was harder to get a hold of workers and community services to make appointments. Nearly half of the participants expressed feeling frustrated with bureaucracy and red tape in accessing supports, such as requiring hard copies of receipts and bills for reimbursement during times of strict lockdowns. Three participants expressed that the pandemic situation caused their progress towards transition readiness to stall, and impacted their schooling progress as well. One participant had their school year cut short, while another participant expressed that they had to drop out of school due to pandemic-related stress and barriers.

Over half of participants experienced the economic impacts of the pandemic, as they found it more difficult to find employment and/or to keep employment. One youth expressed that they were unable to work due to their mental health and anxiety, which was exacerbated by the pandemic conditions. Three participants expressed that the rising cost of necessities, food and rent was negatively impacting their life. One youth expressed that they had experienced increased housing instability since the beginning of the pandemic. One participant shared:

“So like leaving in a pandemic is extra hard, because there's less resources, most things are virtual. It's harder to make appointments, because of how it is done, whether it's like, online, video, like the capacities of the person. So things are like, they fill up quicker. So there's less resources, less people - obviously, things are more challenging now. And everything is skyrocketing with price. Because everything is shut down, and everything's overpriced, and we're just stuck home all the time. I know for a fact that my mental health has deteriorated, so it's been extra hard with the thought that I'll be leaving in a few months. So I'm not prepared. I don't know what to expect. Society is a scary thing. It really is.” – Participant 13, NL

Over half of participants in jurisdictions or agencies where moratoriums and emergency measures were put in place were unaware of this information. One youth was aware of the moratorium in their province, but shared that they had not received that information from their social worker.
“[…] I was just trying to convey the feeling of like, being trapped, like locked in your house or in your room and the feeling of restlessness you get, not really being able to do anything, even though there are things to do. The pandemic, you can still feel like - I'm trapped in here. Like I can't go outside unless like I have to, I can't meet with like any friends or family [...].”
– Gelila
"Being in care is already so traumatic, but during the pandemic I was aged out of care without the acknowledgment of the March 2021 rule. Without the help of my social workers I don’t have the funds to get everything I need, they paid for my prescriptions and housing. Now I need to decide if I want my prescriptions or a room and my phone but without my sleeping pills I don’t sleep, which messes with my mental health then I start overthinking which I could end up getting bad grades."
iv. Strength factors that support a successful transition to adulthood

Nearly all youth identified having their basic needs (e.g., housing, food, clothing) being met as one of the major strength factors during their transition to adulthood in the pandemic context. Receiving financial support for rent and necessities was also identified a strength factor by nearly all participants. Being employed was identified as a strength factor by three of the participants. The support of family, chosen family and friends as well as being in school were also identified as crucial strength factors by half of the participants, respectively. Three of the participants were living with family members at the time of the interview, and identified this as a strength factor. Three other participants who were living in group homes or transitional housing programs indicated that they had a good relationship with the staff and considered this a strength factor. More than half of youth expressed that having access to paid therapy or psychiatrist sessions helped them considerably during the pandemic. One youth had taken in a stray cat during the pandemic, and the animal companionship was helping them during their transition:

“And we just, like got me like, a stray - like, we found a stray cat. So like, I have a little buddy, she's always bugging me. And so, so that's helpful, too.” – Participant 3, MB.

A few youth expressed that emergency pandemic supports targeted to the youth in care population, such as moratoriums, emergency measures and emergency funds provided by the Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada were a strength factor during their transition. One youth questioned why these supports were not put in place prior to the pandemic.

“So it's good that they put a cease on the on aging out because, honestly, you can't deal with the pandemic and also deal with a dramatic decrease in resources. Like that's unrealistic. And that's also pretty inhumane, if you would think about it.” […] And I think that the pandemic is really going to highlight in not just a youth in care way, but in a general way - how, why didn't we just do this before?” – Participant 6, B.C.

A few youth felt that the pandemic gave them a time to pause and focus on themselves, something they felt would not have been possible otherwise. One participant shared:

“But also like, the time - the pandemic made us just kind of stop and pause on life, so I had more time to do writing, I had more time to actually organize myself. So those are some like positive things that helped me.” – Participant 4, QC.

A few of the participants indicated that spending time on artistic expression such as making music and drawing, helped them get through the difficult transition period and the pandemic. A few others indicated that making an effort to go outside and doing physical activity helped them practice self-care. Nearly half of the participants expressed that they felt they were already self-sufficient and resourceful, which they considered as a strength factor during their transition to adulthood. Another youth expressed that they had good self-advocacy skills, which helped them obtain the supports they needed for the transition.
“[…] the gray stuff, like on the drawing on the right side – that’s just […] showing my mental state and how it affected me emotionally, and […] the thoughts I ran through my head were all negative and like real dark I guess. And so […] having […] mental illnesses […] - like some people just don't really think before they say things, because it's true that words do […], can affect a person. […] it just like shows […] the switch in my mindset, like how I look at things differently - like, when I'm feeling down […] it's kind of hard to look at the good things. […] over the past three years, I have […] learned different strategies […] to cope and like, you know, change my thinking, and like you know, be more positive and […] respect myself and others and stuff like that.”

- Shey
Poem title: **Looking back while Moving Forward**

Artist: Dez

A few months from now I will leave with everything I own.
Boxes and bags in my hands, venturing into the unknown.
I feel the date getting closer, the days just fly by.
Months weeks and now days. All gone in a blink of an eye.
The greatest trails are the ones against time.

It makes me uneasy to leave, with the world as it is.
Even when I’m used to chaos, adapting and finding my own ways to cope.
If I leave care with one thing. It better be hope.

All my life, I’ve been sheltered. My life was managed and planned to the tee.
Now my only direction is wherever I want to be.
As much as I cried, it was only temporary.
The pain, the lockdown, and fear and anxiety.

I sit with myself and take all of myself in.
My feelings, my trauma, my pain, love, dreams and everything.
Breathe deep, breathe new life in me. I accept all of me.
It’s time to discover, recover and redefine reality
After these years in care
I am free to be me.
v. Recommendations for change to child welfare policy and practice

Concrete recommendations for change to child welfare policy and practice were provided by the youth participants during the one-on-one interviews; these recommendations are considered as part of the data collection and analysis process rather than the researcher’s own recommendations. Several youth shared that more support and help in general needs to be implemented for youth transitioning to adulthood from care, within and outside of a pandemic context. Several youth also shared that independent living programs need to be more youth-centered and tailored to their individual needs, with realistic goals. One participant shared:

“[…] when kids are transitioning out of care, like it needs to be a plan that works for them, not for like the program you're in.” – Participant 4, QC. Another youth emphasized the need for individualized programming rather than one-size-fits-all approaches: “[…] there are different, like, you could call it different shades of youth in care. We were not all the same colour, you know, in terms of this metaphor.” – Participant 6, B.C.

Several youth voiced that planning for the transition to adulthood felt rushed and last minute, and recommended that earlier planning would help them feel more prepared. One youth shared that they only started receiving the support they needed when they were about to 'age out':

“I only got a different one [social worker] when I was about to age out, because [my previous social worker] like, well, I think she'll help you more better than I can. But it's like I needed her three years ago, not when I am about to turn 18.” – Participant 3, MB.

Another youth shared that the lack of prioritizing advanced planning negatively impacted their transition to adulthood:

“I need like support, and I need it now. [...] I've been saying that ever since I was like in care - I need support. And I need it now. But everyone just puts it off, but there's no time to put it off anymore.” – Participant 13, NL

Several youth expressed that social workers and front line workers need to show more empathy towards the youth they work with. Participants who were living in independent living housing shared that this was especially crucial during the pandemic, as the public health restrictions impacted them more intensely.

“[…] [social workers,] be very empathetic to your kids, because you don't know what's happening - like being separated from your family and your friends, it's really hard on them. So just taking account of that, because workers get to go home to their families every night, and kids in care don't have that option.” – Participant 4, QC

Several youth also expressed that more time is needed for the transition to adulthood, as they did not feel ready or prepared once they reached the cut-off age for supports and services.
This also tied into the need for more hands-on and comprehensive life skills training during their time in care, with youth indicating needing to learn more about budgeting, saving money, laundry, cooking and meal prep.

“And being in the system now, you're not taught much, you're thrown out there as independent. So I feel like they [workers, the system] need to spend more time with their youth, do more things with their children. Teach them - like, that is very important, because no one else will. And we won't learn otherwise. I think that it's very frustrating. Because when like you're young, for me, for example, when I was young, when I was taken out, they like preach that they will take all these damaged and broken kids and turn them into successful, responsible adults, when I'm now an adult versus a kid - I'm not any less damaged or broken, but I'm not prepared for anything either. So I feel like that's a mistake on their end.” – Participant 13, NL

One youth recommended that every youth in care be assigned a specialized Transition Worker that is dedicated to help them with the transition process and accessing the supports they need. They expressed that because their social worker had other types of caseloads, they were not a priority.

“I think that every kid should have one [a Transition Worker]. But it shouldn't be something that should be forced on them, like for me, I just wanted help, like, not with the housing search, but with finding furniture and stuff. And she [social worker] didn’t get back to me. But if I had had like a Transition Worker I'm sure it would have gone a lot smoother. [...] it's like something that everyone needs like, you know [...]. It should be something like how would you like someone to help you with the housing search, at look at your rental [agreement], just all that stuff.” – Participant 12, B.C.

Several youth shared that they wanted to be more connected with people in their community, and that developing a sense of community during the transition to adulthood is an important strength factor for youth in care. This was identified as even more crucial during the pandemic, due to the increased sense of isolation. One youth shared:

“[…] try to stay connected with people. Because like, you know, a lot of people need it, especially in like, during this time, if they don’t have any family or friends, you know, it can get really lonely.” – Participant 10, N.B.

Several youth expressed that their needed to be better organization of pandemic strategies by the Ministry and/or their independent living program, and that more transparent and consistent communication about those strategies was needed. As identified under the Covid-19 barriers theme, youth felt that the justification for certain pandemic rules were unclear, and that the rules were often overly strict compared to the public health restrictions in the general population. A few youth also expressed the importance of listening to youth in care and involving them in any future policy and practice changes or reform efforts. One youth shared:

“I feel like we should include like the youth with recommendations. And we should be incorporating their feedback as much as possible. Just because I felt like I wasn't really given that choice.” Participant 4, QC.
Caption:

“I really think that there needs to be a lot more support for kids aging out of care during a pandemic. So the piece was a little bit darker, I suppose, just to reflect that, because I really think that a lot of young people are feeling scared about aging out during a pandemic.”
- Oliver
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Research on the experiences of youth ‘aging out’ of care in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is limited, with no prior pandemic-focused studies emerging from a Canadian context. From the few North American studies published to date, themes similar to the ones identified in this study have emerged related to barriers and challenges, such as financial insecurity caused by economic inflation, employment insecurity, and intensified mental health challenges. Due to the broad research question and arts-based submissions, youth participants shared their feelings about their transition out of care while in the midst of an unprecedented public health crisis, identified transition-related and pandemic-specific barriers as well as strength factors and provided recommendations for change to social work policy and practice.

One of the pandemic-related barriers identified by most participants was overly strict rules, especially for those who were in independent living programs and transitional housing. Youth participants expressed being overly controlled and sheltered, compared to the pandemic public health orders for the general population, which left them feeling trapped and isolated. This oversurveillance and legislated regulation is common for youth while they are in the child welfare system, which has been described as a ‘forced compliance environment’ (Fox, 1994). Youth participants also expressed a lack of transparency and clarity about the pandemic rules, with a disconnect between the realities of those who made the decisions and the youth who had to abide by the regulations. This disconnect between social policy and the lived realities of the people it impacts has also been highlighted in the care leaving literature (e.g., Abrams et al., 2016; Stein, 2006). Participants recommended that youth voice should be at the center of any future child welfare policy and practice changes, with clearer and more transparent organization of emergency-related strategies. In addition, participants recommended that front line workers should be more empathetic towards youth during pandemic times, and recognize their privilege in being able to go home to their loved ones at the end of the work day.

This project has several limitations. Due to the pandemic realities and challenges, it proved to be much more difficult than expected to recruit youth participants. While the project aimed to recruit up to a maximum of two youth per province/territory for a total of 28 youth, the lead researcher was initially contacted by 13 youth; 10 of those youth submitted an artistic creation and did the one-on-one virtual interviews.
In addition, the recruitment phase was much longer than expected due to pandemic period spanning over several years. In addition, the convenience sampling method may have excluded young people from care who did not have access to technology during the pandemic, such as homeless youth and those involved in the criminal justice system.

However, this project also has several strengths. The incorporation of artistic submissions enabled deeper depictions of and reflections on the experiences of youth ‘aging out’ of care during the pandemic. In addition, the lead researcher is a former youth in care, which helped to build trust and reciprocity with youth participants. Member checking was also built into the report writing process, so that youth were able to review the report and provide feedback prior to publication to empower them to control their own narratives. The recruitment and interview process also emphasized the recognition of youth in care as experts on their own lives, including their ability to identify areas for improvement in child welfare policy and practice.

This research is the first in Canada to date to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of youth ‘aging out’ of care across the country during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, and the ways they can be better supported during their transition to adulthood in times of societal emergency. Further research is required to examine the long-term impacts of the pandemic on youth ‘aging out’ of care.
Youth in Care Matter:

‘Aging out’ of the child welfare system during the COVID-19 pandemic

Are you an individual at or over the age of majority (18 or 19 depending on your province/territory of residence)?

Are you either about to ‘age out’ or have recently ‘aged out’ of the Canadian child welfare system during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Are you passionate about making a difference in the lives of youth in and from care?

Are you interested in sharing your story in a creative way?

If yes, we would love to hear from you!

Compensation will also be offered for your participation!

Interested? Please send an email to researcher melanie.doucet@mcgill.ca or call or text 438-871-3777 expressing your interest or with any questions. All calls, texts and emails will be kept confidential.

This project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF) at McGill University.

We are seeking 2 young adults per province and territory who are in the process of ‘aging out’ of care or have recently ‘aged out’ of the child welfare system during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project aims to take a closer look at the experiences of youth ‘aging out’ of care during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they can be better supported during their transition to adulthood. The project will be led by Melanie Doucet, a recent PhD graduate at the McGill School of Social Work, who is also a former youth in care. This is also a great opportunity for you to share your valuable experience - through your own creative expression - with some of your peers and with the community!

This project will engage you as an artist and expert on your own life. You will be asked to submit an original artistic creation of your choice - whether it be drawing, painting, photography, poetry, a recorded spoken word piece, song or rap, video entry, etc. - to provide a unique insight into your experience as a young person from care in the COVID-19 context. Your artistic creation will be shared via social media and media features to showcase your work, raise public awareness and advocate for change. You will also be asked to do a follow-up one hour one-on-one interview after your artistic submission has been received.
REFERENCE LIST


