

COVID-19 leaves youth forced out of foster care even more vulnerable

February 25 2021, by Marsha Rampersaud and Linda Mussell



Once they turn 18, youth in foster care are required to fend for themselves. This includes finding shelter and services. Credit: Shutterstock

During the pandemic, Canadians have been asked to stay home to stay safe, yet thousands of [youth are facing homelessness](#). Each year in Ontario, [800-1,000 youth](#) age out of the child welfare system.

For most of these [young people](#), turning 18 coincides with an abrupt withdrawal of their social supports as they simultaneously have to [secure](#)

[affordable housing, manage finances and finish high school.](#)

Youth exiting the child welfare system are [significantly less prepared to face these challenges than their peers](#), and many fare poorly. In Ontario, 58 percent of these youth [experience homelessness](#), 46 percent report coming into [conflict with the law](#) and only 44 percent of youth exiting the system [graduate from high school](#).

In the early months of the pandemic, [the Ontario Children's Advancement Coalition \(OCAC\) and allied partners](#) lobbied the Ontario government to stop the practice requiring youth to leave their care placements when they turn 18. In June 2020, the Ontario government [placed a moratorium](#) on this policy until March 31, 2021. Yet the pandemic continues and the clock is running out.

We research policy and work with youth and adults who are ensnared in the Canadian criminal justice system—many of whom have had contact with the child welfare system.

"Too many young people 'age out' to poverty, to homelessness. It's a pipeline to the criminal justice system for some. And it exacerbates mental health conditions," says Ratnam, co-founder of the non-profit Ontario Children's Advancement Coalition (OCAC). <https://t.co/MzP7WgHkj7>

— YWCA Toronto (@YWCAToronto) [July 6, 2020](#)

Challenging conditions in state care

Children who are deemed by child protective services (CPS) as

experiencing abuse or neglect may be removed from their caregivers and placed under the guardianship of the state. Based on 2011 census data, there are [11,375 children in the child welfare system in Ontario](#). [Black and Indigenous children](#) are highly represented, with Indigenous children comprising [30 percent](#) of kids in care in Ontario.

Many children and youth under state guardianship report moving among multiple homes and sometimes cities. Youth reported to us that they can count on having at least one move for every year that they're in the child welfare system, and some move multiple times in a year. Frequent moves can [disrupt education](#), resulting in low rates of high school completion. Youth who don't complete [high school face challenges](#) and are more likely to experience poverty and rely on government assistance.

This instability can create low levels of [attachment, trust and relationship-building](#). Many youth contend with [mental-health challenges](#), such as post-traumatic stress disorder, that have an impact on their mental, emotional, social, spiritual, physical and occupational wellness and development. It's unsurprising that many youth describe feeling [vulnerable and angry](#) in these circumstances. Often youth are labelled oppositional [and criminalized](#) due to the way they behave, but this is in response to trauma and their circumstances.

From a youth we interviewed: "[Being in the child welfare system] really changed my character. It really just changed who I was as a person.... I've been in [at least] 20 different places and you know, it's just so much [stuff]. And that's the thing. Like all this stuff, people don't realize ... for somebody like me, I've been so thrown around, like [basically] tossed around, like here, there, everywhere."

Emerging adulthood

When youth under guardianship of the state turn 18, they are required to

leave their foster care or group home placements. Some young people may continue to receive [financial support](#) after they turn 18 through the [Continued Care and Support for Youth \(CCYS\)](#) program. This financial support stops abruptly when they turn 21.

Psychologist Jeffrey Arnette's [theory of emerging adulthood](#) recognizes a period of prolonged transition between late adolescence and fully independent adulthood. Emerging adulthood helps to explain shifting societal trends in recent decades.

Many emerging adults rely on their families for [financial, housing and social support](#) longer than in the past, often well into their 20s. More young people seek post-secondary education, face higher rates of unemployment and rising housing costs, and marry and have children at a later age, on average.

Despite these broader societal trends, currently youth in the child welfare system [are required to leave their placements when they turn 18](#). While other young adults are able to gradually transition to independent adulthood, young people leaving care are abruptly forced into adulthood.

When asked how prepared they were for "independence," one young person shared: "We all got like a Tupperware container, or a tub full of pots and pans and dishes and stuff like that. But yeah, there wasn't really any preparation."

Another added: "I just had to learn how to be a human on my own. Like, I had to learn everything that like a mom or like a parent or guardian is supposed to teach a kid from young."

After the moratorium

Once the moratorium lifts on March 31, 2021, there will be a flood of

young people leaving their homes and heading into a decimated housing and employment market.

Heather O'Keefe, executive director at StepStones for Youth, says: "The devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have created further vulnerability for youth from the child welfare system with the lack of safe housing options, the loss of jobs, the inability to make rental payments and purchase essential items, and increased isolation and seclusion. The toll on the mental health of these youth has been exacerbated with the closure of libraries and schools, reduced services for people living in poverty, fewer opportunities to meet with counsellors and psychotherapists in person, and increased anxiety and suicide ideation."

Our work with these young people underscores that the moratorium should be extended indefinitely. Rather than maintaining arbitrary age cut-offs for support, the provincial government should [implement a readiness model](#).

This approach would work with every young person from the minute they enter the [child welfare system](#) to encourage better outcomes once they decide they are ready to be fully independent rather than being forced to leave care once they turn 18.

Youth leaving state guardianship have always been vulnerable. And with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, [youth](#) aging out of care will be in a much more vulnerable position, with potentially more severe impacts.

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