

POST EVENT REPORT

2023 International Transitions from Child Protection Symposium

About the Symposium

On October 12 & 13, 2023, the International Transitions from Child Protection Symposium was held in Richmond, BC. The Symposium was co-hosted by A Way Home Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and our Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab and sponsored by the Home Depot Canada Foundation and Porticus. This project was also funded [in part] by the Government of Canada. This two-day Symposium united individuals connected to the child welfare and youth homelessness sectors, including decision-makers, researchers, policymakers, service providers, and first-voice advocates speaking with lived experience of the childcare system, homelessness, or both. The Symposium intended to facilitate cross-sectoral dialogue, providing an opportunity to identify promising practices and opportunities for action, ensuring successful transitions to adulthood, preventing youth homelessness, and fostering positive life outcomes for youth in and from care.

About this Document

This summary document serves as a high-level reflection on the symposium's purpose and key takeaways. Throughout this document, we emphasize our collective understanding of the challenges at hand, shaped by the many rich discussions that took place over the two-day gathering. Throughout, we emphasize that this work is the responsibility of multiple sectors and that we are all accountable to ensuring safe and dignified transitions for youth leaving care.

As we navigate through these insights, we reflect on the symposium's accomplishments and challenges, while setting our gaze on the path forward. This document is not just a recap, but a call to action and a reminder that our commitment to change extends beyond this gathering. As we share our commitments (on behalf of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, A Way Home Canada and our Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab), we also invite you to contemplate the impactful commitments you can make on your end. We hope that this document and the knowledge and leadership of first voice and community advocates will be a catalyst for introspection, dialogue, and, most importantly, action as we collectively strive to create positive change for youth leaving care.

Summary

The Connection Between Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness

We know that experience with child welfare is directly linked to an increased risk of youth homelessness and a range of other adverse outcomes such as earlier “hard” substance use, poorer educational attainment, a greater number of adverse childhood experiences (ACE), mental health challenges and suicidality, involvement with the justice system, and more (Barker et al., 2014; Bonakdar et al., 2023; Gaetz et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2013). First voice advocates continuously tell us about the challenges the current systems perpetuate, and these accounts are consistently affirmed by service providers, public service data, and academic research time and time again (Doucet & The National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2020). These outcomes are entirely preventable, yet we continue to fail these youth. How can we achieve the transformations needed to address these injustices and pursue a more just and equitable future?

Key Research Findings

First, let’s take a closer look at the data discussed throughout the symposium to remind us of where we stand:

- ▶ Youth who “age out” of child protection are expected to live independently (at age 18 or 19, depending on jurisdiction), while **the reality is that 62.6% of all youth aged 20-24 in Canada are living with parents** (Statistics Canada, 2016)
- ▶ Compared to the general public, **youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely to have been involved with the child welfare system** than the general public (Gaetz et al., 2016)
- ▶ Notably, a 2019 survey found that **among youth who first experienced homelessness under age 16, 72.2% had histories of child welfare system involvement** (Bonakdar et al., 2023 re: 2019 survey)

- ▶ **Only 30% of youth with experience of child protection reported that they received help from a caseworker** to plan their departure from foster care, group homes or both (Bonakdar et al., 2023 re: 2019 survey).
- ▶ **63.1% of youth who are homeless report experiencing childhood trauma, abuse, and/or neglect** - a key cause of involvement with child welfare (Gaetz et al., 2016)
- ▶ **Indigenous people have been found to be four times more likely to have had involvement in child protection services** than non-Indigenous people (Alberton et al., 2020), although some jurisdictions, this number is much higher (Hobson, 2022)
- ▶ According to the 2021 Census, **53.8% of children in foster care in Canada are Indigenous, but account for only 7.7% of the child population** (Statistics Canada, 2021).
- ▶ **2SLGBTQ+ youth were more likely to report involvement with child protection than peers: 70.8% vs 56.9% for transgender & gender non-binary youth vs cisgender youth, and 62.8% vs 55.8% for LGBTQ2S vs straight youth** (Gaetz et al., 2016)
- ▶ **Youth with a history of child protection involvement are more likely to report lower levels of educational attainment** (Gaetz et al., 2016)
- ▶ **Youth with a history of child protection involvement are more likely to report having a diagnosis of (a) learning disability(ies)** (Gaetz et al., 2016)

Why does this happen?

As discussed throughout the Symposium, these outcomes for youth occur due to several failures in our child welfare systems and the sociopolitical context they sit within. We spoke about policy failures such as inconsistent child welfare policies and practices across jurisdictions, including the age of transition, transition planning protocol, available supports, and conditions that must be met to receive that support. We discussed the injustice of youth “aging out” of care much before they are ready, and years before many of their peers are expected to be self-reliant. We had conversations about the child welfare policies that make developing friendships or strengthening relationships

with family members and natural supports unattainable, and the dangerous impacts this has on youth. We heard and shared stories about the removal of youth from their communities and culture, the loss of cultural practices, language and connection, and the trauma that is associated with this. We expressed frustration over these many practices that fail to ground themselves in evidence-based solutions and a basic understanding of human rights.

We also looked at how colonialism has shaped our child welfare systems and the many colonial practices that persist within “care” and broader social services today. Despite a common dialogue of incorporating equity, diversity and inclusion-based approaches, we continue to see how discrimination rooted in racism, homophobia and transphobia persist and intersect throughout these systems, further impeding the support many youth receive. We recognize that many policies and programs fall short of the trauma-informed, culturally safe, harm-reduction approaches we know are needed in this work. We also looked at the dangers of misguided language and philosophies, such as emphasizing “independence” rather than “interdependence,” celebrations and resulting expectations of youth “resilience,” and the dominant paternalistic and protectionist approach to child welfare that fails to center youth voice and youth choice in this work.

What Can We Do?

While many of us did not need to be reminded of the challenges youth in and from care face, discussing these barriers and areas for improvement throughout the symposium was important for many reasons. Engaging in this multi-sectoral dialogue provided a holistic perspective on transitions from care and encouraged us to think about the issue through a lens we may not typically adopt. We heard encouraging feedback about the value of this symposium, such as the cross-country connections made, a better understanding of how other sectors and jurisdictions approach transitions, the opportunity to hear about the inspiring work being done by service providers, the nuanced research taking place in this field, and more. Most importantly, we heard from many experts who not only have accomplished great feats in transitions-related work and have had an incredible impact on the way we understand transitions from care, but also approach their work with the unique perspective and expertise of having experienced the system firsthand. These first-voice advocates reminded us that despite the devastating failures in our child welfare systems, there is hope; we know what equitable transitions for youth in and from care should look like and that change is possible.

Here are some examples of what we heard works for youth in and from care:

- ▶ **Family and Natural Supports**
- ▶ **Rights-based approaches**
- ▶ **Ensuring transitions are rooted in relationships, community, and belonging**
- ▶ **Prioritizing First Voice Expertise in policy and program development**
- ▶ **Incorporating harm-reduction and trauma-informed practices**
- ▶ **Peer support**
- ▶ **Cultural connection**
- ▶ **Cultural safety and anti-racism training for staff**
- ▶ **Extending age of transition and ensuring a readiness based approach**
- ▶ **Developmentally appropriate wrap around supports (education & professional development, financial, housing, legal, physical and mental health, etc)**
- ▶ **Upstream interventions that focus on prevention**
- ▶ **Mandating earlier transition planning**
- ▶ **Prioritizing youth voice and choice**
- ▶ **Improving youth's access to their data**
- ▶ **Equitable standards for transitions**
- ▶ **Strong collaboration across multiple sectors**
- ▶ **Housing First for Youth**
- ▶ **2SLGBTQ+ affirming practices and support**

When hypothesizing an ideal landscape for youth leaving care, we understood what success could look like. Here are some of the ideas we came up with for **“Wouldn’t it be Fantastic If…”**

- ▶ We saw accountability from management
- ▶ We were successful in holding our governments accountable
- ▶ We had evaluation models for child welfare systems and programs
- ▶ We were able to share resources and collaborate across sectors
- ▶ Resources existed to encourage internal advocacy and change
- ▶ There were more co-developed policy and shared responsibility
- ▶ Youth voices were centered in all work that pertains to them
- ▶ We foster more family connections for children and youth in care
- ▶ Resources were diverted to families to prevent separation
- ▶ Youth in care had easily accessible ways to build connections and friendships with their peers
- ▶ There was affordable or free counseling for parents/ families
- ▶ The flourishing of children and families were our top priority
- ▶ There was a greater focus on culture, identity and belonging
- ▶ Every province worked towards the National Council of Youth in Care Advocate’s Equitable Standards
- ▶ The government adopted a national framework for transitions from care
- ▶ There was political support for youth in and from care across party lines
- ▶ We could shift public opinion to policy change
- ▶ There were better mental health supports for social workers and support staff
- ▶ We had increased wages and benefits for social workers and support staff
- ▶ There was more funding for training and education in the field
- ▶ More organizations adopted a Housing First for Youth Philosophy
- ▶ We weren’t in a housing crisis

- ▶ There was more funding for youth exiting care
- ▶ There were more Indigenous-led programs for youth in and leaving care
- ▶ There was more up to date data on the outcomes of youth leaving care
- ▶ 2SLGBTQ+ youth felt safe and supported by their networks
- ▶ Children weren't removed from their families due to their socioeconomic status

What this means going forward

Throughout the symposium, we were able to hear about many amazing initiatives creating positive change in this space from our delegates, as well as others who were unable to join us. What was clear to us, is that no single organization or sector can create the change that we hope to see on their own. This work must be rooted in connection and strengthening relationships, a concept we know to be important for youth in and leaving care as well.

Moving forward, we are committed to sustaining the connections established during the symposium and fostering new collaborations with organizations and sectors that share similar priorities. We recognize the value of diverse approaches to the issue and believe that by uniting our efforts, we can collectively contribute to a more comprehensive and impactful response.

The symposium also highlighted the need for consistent adoption of Equitable Standards, accountability and evaluation of policies and programs. This reaffirms our commitment to supporting the amazing work of the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, who are advancing calls for change in 8 pillars that impact transitions to adulthood. These pillars are an example of one of the many initiatives led by first-voice advocates, and are a great place for all of us to start to align our actions toward more just and equitable transitions from care.

| | | |
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| 1 |  | Financial : Every young person should have the financial resources required to meet their needs. Youth in care deserve to have a financial starting point that is above the poverty line, and allows them to pursue their career interests and dreams. |
| 2 |  | Educational & Professional Development : Every young person should experience an environment where they can learn and grow in ways that are meaningful to them and at their own pace. |
| 3 |  | Housing : Every young person should have a place they can call home, without strict rules and conditions to abide by. |
| 4 |  | Relationships : Every young person should have people in their life that they can count on unconditionally and interdependently. Youth in care need to feel that they belong, have worth and are valuable members of their communities. |
| 5 |  | Culture & Spirituality : Every young person should be connected to their culture and spirituality, in ways that are meaningful to them, safe, and at their own pace. |
| 6 |  | Health & Wellbeing : Every young person should be provided with timely ongoing services and benefits that support their lifelong health and well-being. These supports need to be offered within a trauma-informed, non-judgemental harm reduction approach, without significant wait times. |
| 7 |  | Advocacy & Rights : Every young person should have their rights respected and should experience environments where their voices are heard, and their silence is addressed holistically. |
| 8 |  | Emerging Adulthood Development : Every young person should experience environments that cultivate personal growth and development as they transition into adulthood. |

To find out more about the National Council's work, [visit their website](#). If you have any questions about the Equitable Standards or want to get involved in this work, please contact Dr. Melanie Doucet at melanie@cwlc.ca.

We gathered feedback about the event through a survey, and directly with the Steering Committee and National Council. Survey results indicated that 90% of the 62 respondents were satisfied or highly satisfied with the event, though we also received feedback on what did not work and how to improve. Logistically, having funding to sponsor more people with lived experience to attend was a suggestion for events. The pacing of the days was also addressed with people desiring a better balance between content, time for questions and discussions, and down time. Having more Indigenous-led perspectives was also noted as of interest given the connections between child welfare systems and intergenerational impacts of settler colonialism and resultant significant overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in state care. Additionally, delegates wanted to have greater emphasis on collective action to take the knowledge and connections made and have tangible next steps coming out of the event. While the Symposium itself was a one-time event, we have numerous future actions and events planned where we will have the opportunity to implement this feedback. We will continue to seek ways to feature the work of first voice and Indigenous advocates, and people pursuing practice, policy and systems change regarding youth homelessness and transitions from care.

Next Steps

A Way Home Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, and our Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab, have a role to play in supporting research, knowledge mobilization, and policy advocacy on preventing young people's transitions from child welfare into homelessness. In addition to past research and advocacy work we have contributed, the following represent some of the current and future actions our organizations are committed to collaborating on:

- ▶ **Original Making the Shift Research Currently Underway**
 - ▶ [Youth Leaving Care - From State Care into Homelessness: Prevention and Early Intervention](#)
 - ▶ [Decolonizing Transitions from Care for Indigenous Youth](#)
 - ▶ [Ai'aoskiikowaata \(Providing Guidance to Youth\): Supporting Healthy Transitions from Government Care to Independent Living](#)
 - ▶ [Youth Transition from Child Welfare to Precarious Living Conditions: A Mixed Methods Longitudinal Study of Risk and Protective Factors in Nova Scotia](#)

▶ Knowledge Mobilization Activities

- ▶ A blog series with the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness focused on Transitions from Care - please contact Emily at ekellway@yorku.ca if you are interested in contributing
 - [Our first blog of the series can be found here](#)
- ▶ COH to host webinar focused on equitable transitions from care and other audio/video content on the topic engaging with individuals who work in this space
- ▶ A page on the [Homeless Hub with a collection of presentations from the Symposium](#)
- ▶ Gauging interest in a Community of Practice on Transitions Work to connect with others doing this work in different jurisdictions across the country - If you are interested, please email Emily at ekellway@yorku.ca indicating:
 - What should be the purpose/focus of this community of practice? (e.g., cross-sector learning; policy development and advocacy; dedicated space for frontline practitioners; etc.)
 - Suggested topics
 - Your ideal time commitment (monthly, quarterly, etc.)
 - Anything else you think would be beneficial for staying connected?
- ▶ If you know of work being done by first-voice advocates in this space that has not yet been featured, please reach out so we can discuss how to highlight or support this work

▶ Policy Advocacy

- ▶ Continuing to mobilize the knowledge generated by first-voice advocates, research and practice to pursue meaningful policy change on transitions from child protection and preventing youth homelessness across orders of government
- ▶ Stepping up to calls within our network for policy and systems change by lending our voice, platforms and evidence base where desired and appropriate

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved in making this symposium a deeply engaging and generative event. Your commitment to the well-being of youth in and from care is evident and inspiring, although we know that more work needs to be done to ensure that no youth exits care into homelessness. We are resolute in our commitment to build upon this positive momentum, deepening relationships and connections in meaningful ways. Your feedback and questions are invaluable to our ongoing efforts, and we encourage open dialogue to further enhance our shared mission. Together, we continue to shape a more supportive and inclusive future for youth transitioning from child welfare systems.

How to stay in touch

- ▶ preventhomelessness.ca
- ▶ awayhome.ca
- ▶ makingtheshiftinc.ca
- ▶ Emily's email: ekellway@yorku.ca



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Acknowledgements

Authors: Emily Kellway and Amanda Buchnea

Editors: Susan Russell-Csanyi, Cheyanne Ratnam, Melanie Redman, Katie Davies-Jorgensen, and members of the Transitions Symposium Steering Committee

Layout and Design: Hub Solutions

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