

Youth Transition from Child Welfare to Diverse Living Situations: A Mixed Methods Longitudinal Study of Risk and Protective Factors



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Background

Despite dedicated efforts by community services staff, using the best evidence available to support the transitions out of care of young people who have had contact with Child Welfare Services (CWS), a number of these youth are still experiencing periods of homelessness and other related forms of vulnerability. Few studies, however, have managed to follow a large cohort of young people through their transition out of CWS or identified the psychological, institutional, social, educational and political/policy aspects of young people's lives that enhance their resilience (and success) or put them at risk for homelessness.

Research Questions

To address this gap in the research, we have designed a study to answer the following questions:

- Which pathways through Child Welfare Services are most likely to help young people develop the resources they need for success (resilience) and which pathways are more likely to predict precarious housing after young people transition out of services?
- What are the specific risk and protective factors that most influence patterns of resilience and patterns of homelessness for youth who receive the many different kinds of Child Welfare Services, and how are these patterns specific to young people with different histories of abuse and neglect or families facing different challenges?
- How does the diversity of young people (their gender, sexual orientation, race, age, residence in a suburban or urban setting, and family's economic status) affect their access to the promotive and protective factors associated with resilience that affect service use, schooling, employment and, eventually housing after leaving care?
- How can results from research like this be shared so that they have the most enduring impact on policy and practice that promote resilience and prevent youth homelessness for youth exiting care?

Methodology

The study will target young people between the ages of 14 and 18 who are involved with all forms of CWS, from prevention and voluntary services to foster care and secure residential treatment. Using a mixed methods design, we hope to better understand the nuanced pathways that young people travel as they navigate their way through services and supervision to independence and success. While we cannot accurately describe every possible pathway of every individual youth (each youth's case history is unique), we can through careful research capture trends that explain young people's possible experiences as they move through CWS and transition to independence.

Study Phases

1. We will establish a Research Advisory Committee, comprised of Department staff and staff from agencies in the community, as well as a Youth Advisory Committee. Both committees will help guide the research design and data collection tools, and facilitate the sharing of results.
2. Working with a cohort of youth engaged as co-researchers (both those who have successfully transitioned from services and those with experiences of homelessness) through participatory and arts-based methods, we will identify the most important factors to track while doing the study, and seek advice on how best to reach young people and how to share results.
3. We will randomly sample 14-18-year-olds currently involved with all forms of CWS (in care, using family supports, etc.) who reside within an 80 km radius of Halifax, and follow them for three years using quantitative surveys at four time points. The questionnaire should take approximately 45 minutes to complete and be designed for all levels of literacy.
4. A purposeful subsample (20%) of these youth will be invited to participate in a series of qualitative interviews to help deepen our understanding of the quantitative data and the pathways through services and the way resources are used to build resilience or accentuate patterns of vulnerability. Youth will be selected based on the differences in their case histories, demographics, level of risk, and access to resources.
5. CWS file reviews will be conducted for this same subsample (pending the youth's consent and that of their caregivers/department representatives depending on the youth's age). File reviews will only focus on decision points and the timing of the services and supports used. While basic data on the overall reason for the youth's involvement with CWS will be noted, these reviews will not focus extensively on case notes, but instead scan the files to locate critical turning points through services. To ensure privacy, a Department staff will be seconded to support the file review process. Data will be carefully anonymized to avoid disclosure of personal information.
6. Throughout, there will be opportunities for knowledge mobilization that builds on young people's networks and those of our service provider and policy co-leads.

This study will be a pilot for replication in other provinces and territories.

Role of The Department of Community Services

The Department of Community Services will be asked for support to locate young people, invite them to participate in the study, and facilitate access to some of the young people's case histories. The study is purposefully designed to limit the collective burden on workers within the Department, as well as prevent more than nominal costs to the Department.