

Improving Outcomes for Youth Transitioning out of Care: An Analysis of Canada's Transition Programs

Shobana Sukumaran
Student ID: 300019863
Supervisor: Professor Geranda Notten

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Graduate School of Public and International Affairs
University of Ottawa

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ABSTRACT

Youth leaving care disproportionately experience negative outcomes in adulthood. Compared to the general population, they have higher rates of homelessness, poverty, poor health and mental health outcomes, substance abuse, and involvement with the criminal justice system, and lower educational and employment outcomes. A key contributing factor to their poor life outcomes is the immediate transition out of care and into adulthood without sufficient support. Despite the availability of transition programs in Canada that are designed to provide support during this process, there is a continued prevalence of negative outcomes among former foster youth. This paper seeks to understand ways that Canada can better address the needs of youth transitioning out of care through transition programs in order to improve their outcomes in adulthood. To do so, this paper begins with an academic literature review to identify the most effective approaches in transition programming, and then conducts a jurisdictional scan to determine the gaps in the existing transition programs in Canada. The research finds that transition programs in Canada are insufficient in preparing foster youth for adulthood; provide limited support to meet core needs in housing, mental health, social connections, and life skills development; and are difficult to access. This paper recommends four priority areas for future policy responses to encourage more positive transitions out of care: develop targeted transition supports for housing, mental health and life skills training; integrate the values of interdependence and empowerment into transition programs; improve data collection and monitoring of the outcomes of transitioning youth; and improve accessibility of supports.

Keywords: Foster youth; transition out of care; outcomes; adulthood; transition programs

INTRODUCTION

Turning 18 is usually perceived as an exciting new chapter in life. At this age, a youth legally becomes an adult in most jurisdictions in Canada. It informally marks the point at which youth begin their “transition to adulthood”, which is often reflected by embarking on a new journey to further academic, career or other life aspirations. This transition to adulthood is markedly different for youth in the child welfare system, who face a unique set of challenges during this process and are more likely to experience negative life outcomes during their adulthood.

When youth in care exceed the age of protection in their jurisdiction, which ranges from 16 to 19 years across Canada, they exit the child welfare system and are no longer eligible to receive child protection services (Charlesworth, 2020). This situation is often referred to as “transitioning out of care”. All provinces and territories have transition programs in place that provide foster youth with services and supports to aid in their transition out of care and into independence.

Despite the availability of transition programs, foster youth continue to disproportionately face poor outcomes during adulthood. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness found that nearly half of homeless youth aged 13 to 24 across Canada were involved with the child welfare system (Wiebe, 2015). Research studies indicate that individuals in care or who were formerly in care are more likely to experience higher rates of homelessness, poverty, poor health and mental health outcomes, addiction and substance abuse, involvement with the criminal justice system in adulthood, as well as lower educational and employment outcomes in adulthood (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). These poor outcomes are more pronounced among Indigenous and Black children, who are overrepresented in the child welfare system due to the long-lasting

impacts of colonialism and discrimination, and who have lower take-up rates of after-care supports (Charlesworth, 2020; Mosher & Hewitt, 2018).

These negative outcomes suggest that there are gaps in the existing supports provided to young adults as they transition out of care, preventing them from being adequately prepared for adulthood and independent living (Wiebe, 2015). It also signals that existing post-care programs may not appropriately reflect the current trends of transitions to independence among the general young adult population, who are staying at home and relying on their parents longer and do not enter the independent phase of their life until much later, often in their late twenties or early thirties (Lee & Berrick, 2014).

Research Question

This paper seeks to understand how Canada can better address the needs of youth transitioning out of care through transition programs and policies in order to improve their outcomes in adulthood. While there are several factors driving these poor life outcomes, this paper focuses solely on examining one aspect: transition programs and policies. In order to answer the research question, this paper will identify the gaps in existing transition supports offered by provincial and territorial governments in Canada, and examine ways these gaps can be addressed to encourage more positive transitions to adulthood.

By answering this question, this paper provides additional insight on the key barriers facing young adults in Canada as they transition out of care. The findings of this paper can be used to consider ways to strengthen or modify transition programs, allowing Canada to take steps towards breaking the cycle of disadvantage faced by one of the most vulnerable groups in the country. Children and youth represent the future of a country, and preparing them for a positive

and stable life in adulthood benefits all of society, especially as it could lead to positive outcomes in other social issues closely linked to foster youth, such as poverty, homelessness, and substance abuse.

This paper builds on work done by other academics and advocates on this topic. Shewchuk (2020) recently conducted a jurisdictional scan of all transition programs in Canada and presented the types of support offered across each jurisdiction. However, this paper takes that analysis one step further by not just looking at the services offered by each of these programs, but also by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each program in light of the literature on this subject. This assessment involves consulting a significant number of sources (about 58) that provide information on each of the transition programs offered in Canada in order to determine the most common and significant limitations of transition policies and programs in the country. Through this examination, the paper provides an original contribution to scholarship on this topic by identifying the gaps in existing government programming, which can be used to shape future policy priorities in this area.

Methodology & Section Overview

Section I presents background information on the topic that is important in understanding the main aspects of the study. It provides a brief overview of the child welfare system in Canada and the population of interest, youth who are transitioning out of care. Section II consists of an academic literature review that provides an overview of the key ideas and perspectives in relevant academic literature pertaining to transition programs for foster youth, which will be used to frame the analysis and discussion in this paper. Both these sections will involve consulting academic papers, and grey literature (e.g., government documents, reports by non-governmental organizations). The literature will be identified using various academic databases and search

engines: the UOttawa Library, JSTOR, ProQuest Social Sciences, and Social Services Abstracts. To identify the secondary research that will inform the analysis, the following key terms will be applied in the search: child welfare system; youth aging out of care; youth transitioning out of care; transition programs; positive outcomes; adulthood, and best practices. Literature will also be identified by consulting the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, a platform providing up-to-date research on Canadian child welfare programs and policies. To the extent possible, data sources will be consulted.

Section III reviews the existing supports provided to youth transitioning out of care throughout Canada and analyzes the gaps in programming by identifying the unmet needs and barriers faced by this group. This will be done by taking two steps. The first step involves undertaking a jurisdictional scan of all transition programming in Canada to determine the types of supports and services available to care leavers. The scan sets out to identify two types of transition programs: (1) transition planning or services available to youth before they leave care to prepare them for their transition, and (2) supports or services available to young adults once they have exited care to support their transition to adulthood and independent living. Due to the scope of this paper and timing constraints, the scan will be limited to programs offered by the provincial or territorial governments, and will not include any programs offered by self-governing Indigenous governments, Indigenous child welfare agencies, non-profit organizations and private institutions. The research will be conducted by consulting provincial, territorial and federal government websites, child welfare legislation for each jurisdiction, and other relevant grey literature.

Once all transition programs have been identified, the next step involves determining the gaps in these programs and the unmet needs facing young adults as they transition out of care.

This will involve reviewing documents that evaluate these programs. Sources of information will be identified by searching for any of the following: government audits on these programs; reviews and evaluations on these programs or policies conducted by other stakeholders (e.g., child welfare advocates, non-profit organizations, etc.), and news articles speaking about these programs. Most provinces and territories, with the exception of Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia, have an independent provincial advocate for children and youth who advocates on behalf of those in foster care. These provincial advocates routinely prepare reports that provide ethnographic accounts of transitioning youth. These reports will be examined during the literature review, as well as any additional literature published by non-profit organizations or academics on these programs.

Section IV summarizes the key observations from the research and provides insights for future policy actions and further research avenues on this topic.

SECTION I: BACKGROUND

This paper speaks about a very specific population group within the child welfare system: youth who are transitioning out of care. In the context of this paper, a “transition out of care” reflects the situation where a youth exceeds the age of protection in their jurisdiction and are no longer eligible to receive foster care and other child protection services, reflecting an exit out of the child welfare system (Charlesworth 2020; Shewchuk, 2020). It does not refer to any other situations where a child leaves the system (i.e., adoption, family reunification), but instead refers to the situation when they must leave the system due to age. In Canada, the age of protection varies by jurisdiction, ranging from 16 to 19 years. There are a number of interchangeable terms that describe this situation: “transitioning out of care”, “aging out of care”, “leaving/exiting care” or “transitioning into adulthood”. This paper will use all these terms with

the exception of “aging out of care” because, as noted by Charlesworth (2020), this phrase is outdated, short-sighted, not reflective of the actual experiences and aspirations of young adults leaving care, and non-inclusive (i.e., it is colonial concept not found in many Indigenous cultures). Additionally, the term “youth transitioning out of care” can be used interchangeably with other terms, such as “care leavers”, “transitioning youth”, and “young adults who were formerly in care”.

Before examining the issues pertaining to transitioning youth, this section provides a brief overview of the child welfare system in order to provide a deeper understanding of the history and foundation of the issues that will be examined in detail in this paper.

Overview of the Child Welfare System in Canada

The main objective of the child welfare system is to promote the well-being of children through protecting and safeguarding them from abuse and neglect (Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal). According to the 2016 Census, there are about 44,000 foster children in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). However, other sources have indicated this number may be underreported and the number of children in out-of-home placements is much higher at approximately 62,000 (Trocmé et al., 2019).

In Canada, the responsibility of child welfare falls under the jurisdiction of the 13 provinces and territories, who are responsible for funding, legislating, regulating and coordinating out-of-home placements for children and youth (Shewchuk, 2020). While there are a variety of services offered by these different child welfare systems, the key activities typically include child protection, child placement in alternate living arrangements, family support, and

independent living services for youth leaving foster care (Tufford, 2019). This paper examines the last aspect of the system.

Indigenous child and family services are governed by provincial or territorial legislation, except where Indigenous self-government agreements apply. The federal government provides funding for services on reserve. On January 1, 2020, *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis children, youth and families* came into force. This new legislation affirms the rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services through their chosen government or entity, and also establishes national standards that are to be applied to all Indigenous children in care, including consideration of the child's best interests, shifting to more preventive services, and preservation of the child's connection to their family, community and culture (Government of Canada, 2020).

The federal government primarily plays a funding role in child welfare. In addition to funding Indigenous child and family services on reserve, the federal government also provides funding to provinces and territories through the Canada Social Transfer (CST), which can be used towards funding child welfare services. The federal government also offers the Children's Special Allowance, which pays government agencies and institutions that care for children. There is neither federal legislation nor any national standards for how child welfare systems should be designed and how funding should be used.

This delineation of powers between the federal and provincial and territorial governments means a single, unified child welfare system does not exist in Canada. Instead, there are various child welfare delivery models administered by the respective jurisdiction's legislative framework. Provincial and territorial governments, sometimes in partnership with private or

non-profit organizations, have established over 300 children's aid agencies that provide child welfare services. Additionally, there are over 120 Indigenous agencies dedicated solely to protect and support Indigenous children through culturally relevant services (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013).

Having various models across the country has translated into a number of challenges. There is a significant lack of data on children in care, as well as a lack of comparability of data, across the various jurisdictions (Jones et al., 2015). There are also differences in how child welfare is administered across the country, which is reflected in the various transition programs offered to youth leaving care. For example, the age of protection and the eligible age range for transition support vary across the country (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2019). Despite these differences, these provincial and territorial legislative frameworks share a common legislative history and as a result, they share key features and objectives within their frameworks, such as acting in the best interests of the child, respecting continuity of care and stability, respecting parental responsibility of child rearing, among others (Trocmé et al., 2019).

While not the focus of this paper, it is important to consider the systemic issues of child welfare to Canada to better understand its impacts on children and youth in care. Child welfare has been criticized as being underfunded, having a lack of resources and staff, lacking quality care, particularly by having foster parents who do not have experience raising children, and lack of public oversight (Trocmé et al., 2019). Although the main objective of child welfare is to protect children from abuse and neglect, only 20% of child apprehensions are due to these reasons. Most apprehensions are linked to poverty, poor living conditions, inadequate housing, or addiction issues (Byle, 2019). This has led to an overrepresentation of children from marginalized communities, highlighting the need for structural and systemic transformations within and beyond the child welfare system (Mosher & Hewitt, 2018).

It is also important to also recognize the deeply inequitable nature of Canada's child welfare systems. Indigenous children are over-represented in care and at every stage of child protection intervention across Canada due to the long history of colonization in Canada, and on-going discriminatory policies, such as residential schools and the Sixties Scoop (Mosher & Hewitt, 2018). Indigenous children account for over half (52.5%) of total children under age 15 in foster care, even though they only make up 7.7% of that age group in Canada overall (Statistics Canada, 2017). Indigenous youth are 17 times more likely than non-Indigenous youth to be involved in the child welfare system (Charlesworth, 2020). Other vulnerable populations, such as Black Canadians, LGBTQ2S+ youth, and young people with disabilities, are also removed from their families and placed in the child welfare system at disproportionate rates (Mosher & Hewitt, 2018).

Overview of Youth Transitioning Out of Care

The population of interest in this group are youth transitioning out of care, defined earlier in this section. While there are rough national estimates of the total number of children in care, there are very few estimates of how many youth are transitioning out of care every year due to age restrictions. Flynn (2003) estimated in 2003 that there were roughly 6,700 youth leaving care every year, amounting to about 11% of all children in the system. After this year, there have been no other reliable national estimates made for the number of children leaving care. However, national estimates for the total number of children and youth in care after this year have increased, which suggests that the number of youth transitioning out of care may have also increased since 2003 (Jones et al., 2015).

Concerns over youth who were transitioning out of care emerged fairly recently. Propp et al. (2003) note that the high incidence of emancipating foster youth only began to garner attract

attention in the late 1970s and early 1980s, reflecting the low likelihood of these youth being adopted or reunited with their family while in care. They further note that subsequent decades saw an increasing number of foster youth in the system, and growing recognition of the poor outcomes they faced as they transitioned out of the care and into independent living, which was often without a plan or any resources.

The majority of Canadian provinces and territories offer post-care supports to care leavers, often through voluntary agreements, to provide assistance and maintenance support as they navigate into adulthood and into independent living. Many jurisdictions also have transition planning integrated into its child welfare services, through which youth set out goals for the next stage of life and caseworkers provide them with resources to help them to achieve these goals and transition to adulthood (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2014). These supports and programs will be discussed in detail in Section III.

Despite the availability of these transition services, youth transitioning out of care continue to be among the most disadvantaged groups in society. Research studies have revealed that children and youth who have interacted with the child welfare system continue to be more at risk at facing adverse outcomes later in life compared to their non-care peers (Woodgate et al., 2017). The 2016 *National Youth Homelessness Survey* finding that 57.8 per cent of homeless youth in Canada were formerly in foster care at some point in their lives. Provincial studies find similar results in individual jurisdictions across Canada, reflecting that more time spent in the system was often associated with a higher chance of experiencing homelessness (Charlesworth, 2020; Kovarikova, 2017; Wiebe, 2015; YCA0, 2019). Addition to homelessness, a significant number of research studies conducted shows that youth formerly in care often experience higher rates of housing insecurity; poorer physical and mental health outcomes, which includes higher

rates of suicide; less educational attainment and workforce attachment; more involvement with the criminal justice system; and early parenthood (Charlesworth, 2020; Kovarikova, 2017; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Tweddle, 2007; Wiebe, 2015; Woodgate et al., 2017; Yukon Child and Youth Advocate Office, 2019). Care leavers also experience post-traumatic stress disorder, with studies in the US showing they have double the rate compared to war veterans (Kovarikova, 2017). This trend is not just specific to Canada, but is found in other developed countries as well, including the United States, United Kingdom and Australia (Woodgate et al., 2017).

Findings from these research studies suggest that existing child welfare systems do not adequately prepare youth for their transition into adulthood, and instead might be contributing to the adverse outcomes they face once they exit care (Wiebe, 2015; Kovarikova, 2017). This suggests that there may be significant gaps in the transitional supports offered to youth leaving care and the approaches taken to support these youth during this transition. The next section of this paper examines recent scholarship on transition programs to better understand the issues pertaining to this topic.

SECTION II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines the academic literature pertaining to the transition faced by foster youth as they leave care and navigate to adulthood. It provides context on the challenges faced by these individuals, the goals and limitations of transition programs, and recent observations on these programs. This sections aims to provide an understanding of the scholarship on this topic, which will be used to frame the analysis and discussion later in this paper.

Examining the Factors Driving Poor Outcomes for Transitioning Youth

There are a variety of factors that contribute to the higher risk of poor life outcomes among young adults who were formerly in care: traumatic experiences during childhood; a lack of a stable family environment during time in care; and an immediate transition to adulthood without proper support (Antle et al., 2009; Barker et al., 2020; Lee & Berrick, 2014).

Many individuals who have been involved with the child welfare system have trauma from adverse childhood experiences, such as experiencing abuse, maltreatment, neglect and exposure to violence – circumstances that generally led to them being placed in care in the first place (Barker et al., 2020). As noted in Section I, many also come from families living in poverty, have substance abuse issues, or are already marginalized (Barker et al., 2014; Byle, 2019; Mosher & Hewitt, 2018).

Being in the child welfare system can contribute to trauma as well; studies have shown that children in care are more at risk than the general population to experience domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and parental neglect (Barker et al., 2014). Furthermore, once placed in care, foster children often face multiple, on-going transitions, resulting in a lack of a stable family environment. Not only do many foster children move in and out of the system due to the complex circumstances facing their families, they also often experience placement instability while in care. Rather than having a stable environment to grow up in, children face instability as a result of constantly changing homes, having multiple caregivers, some of whom are strangers, or even residing in institutional settings, such as group homes (Lee & Berrick, 2014). This often translates to a childhood of suboptimal care, weak family ties, lack of close connections and supportive networks, and an absence of strong, healthy and enduring relationships with adults that they can trust (Green et al., 2020; Lee & Berrick, 2014). Traumatic childhood experiences

and an unstable environment for childhood growth and development influence the risk of negative outcomes later in life. It increases the chances of engaging in illicit substance use and becoming street-involved (Barker et al., 2014). It is also associated with lower education and employment levels. For example, studies have found that disruptions faced by foster youth during their childhood or adolescence can have significant negative effects on their education, and as a result, they often need more time and support to obtain a certain level of education in comparison to their non-care peers (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). This is reflected in the high school graduation rates of foster youth, which are significantly lower than the general population. For example, only 44 percent of crown wards in Ontario graduate from high school compared to 81 percent of the general population (Kovarikova, 2017).

These disadvantages are further exacerbated during the critical time when a foster youth reaches the age of majority in their jurisdiction and must exit the child welfare system and begin to live independently. These youth must undergo an immediate transition to adulthood without any safety net, as they are typically unable to rely on biological or foster families for support (Antle et al., 2009; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). The transition is starkly different for the general adult population. In recent decades, the transition to adulthood for young adults, particularly those living in developed countries, has been delayed, with many living with and/or relying on their parents well into their late 20s and early 30s (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Lee & Berrick, 2014). In Canada specifically, the 2011 Census revealed that close to 60% of all young adults aged 20-24 in Canada were living with their parents at that time, either because they had not yet moved out or because they returned home (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Today's economic realities, such as employment instability and the high costs of post-secondary education and housing, as well as changing social and cultural constructs, such as what it means

to be an “adult”, have prolonged this process (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). This is a trend that is common across young adults regardless of socioeconomic status, as parents can provide various types of support other than financial buffers, such as accommodation and emotional support. These trends demonstrate that the “transition to adulthood” for young adults overall is no longer a linear process.

Those who are in the child welfare system do not have the same options. While the majority of the general adult population is able to prolong their transition to independent living when they feel ready for it, the transition for foster youth is determined by chronological age rather than by developmental readiness or maturity. Rutman & Hubberstey (2016) refer to this transition as “abrupt, stark, inflexible, and typically irreversible” (p. 21). Foster youth cannot rely on others for support and do not have a parental “safety net” to fall back on in case they face challenges (Antle et al., 2009). The types of support that the general young adult population receive from their families is not just limited to financial assistance, but also includes other types of crucial support, including social support. Social support is multi-dimensional, and ranges from emotional support to guidance and advice to fostering self-esteem. Social and financial capital has significant impacts on one’s journey to adulthood. This immediate transition to adulthood with a lack of parental backing is another factor that continues to poor outcomes for these youth.

The conclusions drawn from the academic literature indicate a need for system-wide changes in order to address the three identified driving factors of negative life outcomes. Changes can take many forms – for example, addressing the first two factors could involve changing how the child welfare system is designed, how child protection services are administered, or offering more targeted supports to families in difficult circumstances. However, this paper solely focuses on addressing the last factor – the immediate transition out of care and

into adulthood without proper supports – by exploring ways that Canada can improve transition programs. Improvements in this part of the system could result in more positive transitions out of care and contribute to reducing adverse outcomes for foster youth.

Insights on Transition Programs

Transition programs were created as a response to the poor outcomes observed among former foster youth (Barker et al., 2020). These programs are designed to provide support to youth in the absence of parental support in order to level the playing field and contribute to positive transitions and better life outcomes (Woodgate et al., 2017). These programs can take the form of various services, such as financial support, life skills training, transition planning, workshops aimed at career planning or employment training, accommodation, and benefits. Furthermore, many jurisdictions also incorporate transition planning prior to youth leaving care, which encourages youth to set out goals for the next stage of life and to identify which resources they need for their transition to adulthood (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2014).

Unfortunately, there is a lack of reliable monitoring and longitudinal data on the outcomes of those formerly in care in Canada, which means there is very little information on the effects and impacts of transition programs over the long run (Kovarikova, 2018; Shewchuk, 2020; Tweddle, 2007). However, research studies show that transitioning youth continue to face challenges in obtaining employment and stable housing, and completing their education, even with support in place (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Woodgate et al., 2017).

Recent scholarship on this topic has investigated the shortcomings of transition programs and identified different approaches and best practices that can be applied to transition programs to improve the adequacy of support provided. While all transition programs provide some type of

support, they often focus on building technical or hard skills and achieving measureable outcomes, particularly in the realm of education or employment (Antle et al., 2009; Barker et al., 2020; Lee & Berrick, 2014). The literature suggests that these programs often fail to focus on other aspects that are crucial for independent living, such as building relationships, social connections and agency (Lee & Berrick, 2014; Shewchuk, 2020). While there are numerous frameworks, models or best practices that have been proposed by academics, advocates and practitioners, there are common themes that emerge in the literature of what makes transition programs effective. Elements that have been identified as contributing to more stability and positive outcomes in adulthood include interdependence, social capital, agency, longer transition periods and holistic services, which will be discussed in more detail here.

Many transition programs are designed around the objective of self-sufficiency (Propp et al., 2003). While self-sufficiency can be beneficial, it also creates pressure on youth for self-reliance, preventing them from reaching out to others if they need help and aiming for standards that are often unfeasible and sustainable (Curry & Abrams, 2015). This pressure, combined with limited social connections, has resulted in many young adults feeling lonely, insecure, unprepared, and not knowing how to live independently. It is important to recognize and emphasize the fact that being an adult or being independent does not equate to self-sufficiency. Some scholars argue that transition programs should shift away from focusing on self-sufficiency to instead placing emphasis on interdependence, connection and collaboration (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Focusing on these principles would not only lead to building strong social capital and relationships, but it would also move towards an empowerment model of practice for youth.

Propp et al. (2003) argue that re-defining the transition approach towards interdependence would also better align with the core principles of the child welfare system. The child welfare systems in Canada are designed to prioritize family preservation (i.e., placing children, to the extent possible in a family-like setting) as well as family reunification. However, with most transition services centered on self-sufficiency, there is less regard to the well-being of youth - an outcome that Propp et al. (2003) attest is “not desirable within a framework that emphasizes family preservation and reunification” (p. 260). Shifting towards an interdependence framework would normalize the fears and concerns that foster youth have as they transition out of care into independent living, and would emphasize that relying on or turning to others during this process is healthy. This could help to reduce certain behaviour that could impact one’s transition, and reduce the likelihood of poor outcomes.

Emphasizing interdependence in transition models also places importance on building social capital, which is commonly identified by scholars and advocates as a crucial factor that can improve outcomes for vulnerable children and youth (Lee & Berrick, 2014; Propp et al., 2003; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Social capital means having membership in groups or communities, which in turn ensures a sense of belonging and strong relationships and connections to rely on for support (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Social support is multi-dimensional and can encompass a broad range of support, including emotional support, guidance and advice, company, and feedback to boost self-esteem (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Transitions out of care have been found to be more successful when the individual has had social networks, which often allows them to have role models or individuals in their life to provide them with guidance (Tweddle, 2007).

Integrating social capital into transition programs and planning could take many forms, such as facilitating and prioritizing relationship-building with biological and foster families, friends, and with peers; continuing case worker support post care; and having those previously in care to provide mentoring to those currently in care (Antle et al., 2009). An essential element is to ensure that this support continues once youth leave care as well. Incorporating this aspect makes sure youth are able to rely on others for social support, reduce social isolation, and increase feelings of belonging. These positive feelings are associated with better outcomes, particularly in education, health and mental health (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

Another concern that has emerged from the literature review is the lack of agency felt by youth during their transition planning as youth are often not consulted or involved during decisions made during this process (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Transition programs would benefit immensely from moving towards an empowerment model that emphasizes the strengths, competencies and decision-making power of youth, and that encourages collaborative relationships with caseworkers. Individuals could become more confident to deal with challenges in their life through this approach (Propp et al., 2003). Research studies have found that interventions that foster agency and self-determination have resulted in better outcomes in employment, education and higher quality of life (Lee & Berrick, 2014).

Scholarship on this topic has also frequently examined the appropriate length of support that should be provided to foster youth, recognizing that the general young adult population has a longer and slower transition to adulthood and independent living. Academics and advocates have consistently called for extending the age of transition to 21 or longer, which allows individuals in the system to have more time to be prepared for independence (Barker et al., 2020; Charlesworth, 2020; Shewchuk, 2020). International literature points to growing evidence that

extended care results in positive transitions and better outcomes among foster youth, such as improved educational outcomes, increased income, reduced criminal justice involvement, increased support networks, and improved parenting skills (Matheson, 2018; Shewchuk, 2020). Matheson (2018) assessed four studies undertaken internationally on extended care: one was a longitudinal study in the United States that followed a sample of individuals as they transitioned out of care into adulthood, and the other three were evaluations of pilot programs that offered extended care until the age of 21. Upon reviewing the positive results of four studies undertaken in the United States and England, he concluded that extended care works for a number of reasons. It allows for continued stability and a nurturing environment, empowers foster youth by allowing them to have greater control over their transition, and provides opportunities for them to have similar transition experiences as their non-care peers. However, Matheson (2018) also argues that extended foster care is not a magic solution, as not all findings point to the same results. It is important for foster youth and foster families to want extended care.

Another commonly cited best practice is to provide more tailored and targeted supports, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Services should recognize and reflect the fact that youth in care have had unique experiences and have diverse needs as a result. Youth are often at different levels of readiness for independent living, and may require different levels of attention to different aspects of their life. Many advocates have called for more trauma-informed and culturally appropriate services, particularly when it comes to mental health services (Charlesworth, 2020; Shewchuk, 2020).

The literature reveals that there are a number of factors driving poor outcomes among youth, such as trauma from childhood, an unstable family environment, and an abrupt transition into adulthood without a safety net or any parental capital. This means that there needs to be

system-wide efforts in various areas to improve the poor outcomes among youth who are transitioning out of care. This paper only examines one piece of the puzzle by assessing the limitations of transition programs and policies in Canada and how they can be modified or strengthened to improve outcomes in adulthood. While there is a lack of data and information of the effectiveness of programs, there have been numerous studies conducted on best approaches to take when designing and delivering supports and services to help foster youth transition out of youth in independent living. The literature has identified that centering programming around the principles of interdependence, social capital, agency, holistic services, and extended care are often associated with positive outcomes. These findings from the academic literature will be referenced as this paper undertakes its analysis of the supports available across Canada.

SECTION III: ANALYZING THE CURRENT POLICY CONTEXT

The purpose of this section is twofold: to examine the scope and type of supports currently being offered by provincial and territorial governments across Canada, and to determine the gaps in these supports by identifying the unmet needs that youth continue to face in their transition to adulthood even with these supports in place. These findings are meant to provide greater insight on the limitations of existing supports, and inform policy actions that the provincial and territorial governments – and possibly the federal government – can take relating to transition programs and policies to improve outcomes for foster youth in adulthood.

In order to achieve the first objective, a jurisdictional scan was completed in order to identify all the supports offered to transitioning youth by provincial and territorial governments in Canada. In order to identify transition programming, the scan looked for two types of programs: (1) pre-transition supports available to youth before they leave care to prepare them for independent living, and (2) supports or services available to young adults once they have

exited care. These supports have to be targeted specifically towards foster youth exiting care or those who were formerly in care. As such, the scan does not include supports available to the general young adult population, such as income assistance or student loans. Given the limited timelines for this paper, the scan was limited to provincial or territorial programs, and did not include any programs offered by self-governing Indigenous governments or Indigenous child welfare agencies, non-profit organizations and private institutions.

This part of the research was conducted by first consulting provincial, territorial and federal government websites and publications, as well as provincial and territorial child welfare legislation, to determine the transition policies and programs in place in each jurisdiction. For jurisdictions where these sources had little or no detail on the transition programs, further research was conducted by consulting grey literature that had information on provincial or territorial transition programs, such as any reports or published research by child welfare advocates, non-profit organizations, researchers, or appointed panels and steering committees.

The relevant grey literature was identified by searching through the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, a platform that has a searchable database containing up-to-date information, statistics, research and literature on Canadian child welfare programs and policies. The database allows for filtering of results by jurisdiction, keywords and type of publication, so it was not difficult to determine whether there were any publications on specific jurisdictions and their transition programs. If certain jurisdictions did not have any relevant grey literature, other search engines and databases were used to find more information on transition programs. Since this part of the scan was simply to find more information on transition programs, academic databases and search engines, such as the UOttawa Library and JSTOR were not very helpful as those search results often lead to academic papers on the general topic of transition programs, but

do not provide information on the specific transition programs in Canada. Google was a more helpful search engine as it was able to identify reports or news article that contained information on these transition programs.

The second objective was achieved by finding publications that review or evaluate the transition programs identified in the first step in order to get more insight on their strengths and limitations. Similar to the previous objective, the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal was first consulted to find publications that have some sort of assessment on any of the transition programs in Canada. The second step was to find any publications by the independent provincial or territorial advocate for children and youth in each jurisdiction. Most provinces and territories, with the exception of Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia presently, have an independent provincial advocate for children and youth who advocates on behalf of those in foster care regarding their key concerns and issues they face. These advocates regularly conduct research and publish reports on the limitations and gaps of child welfare services, including transition programs and policies. These reports typically contain ethnographic accounts of care leavers, reflecting their lived experiences of transitioning out of care and accessing transition programs. For any provinces and territories that did not have these type of publications, both search engines and databases were used to try to any other relevant literature, such as government audits, or reviews and evaluations undertaken by other stakeholders (such as non-profit organizations, appointed panels, steering committees, or academics). News articles were also a great source of information for some jurisdictions, as it provided comments from transitioning youth, professionals from the field, or caregivers on the strengths or weaknesses of some transition programs. Overall, for both parts of the jurisdictional scan, 58 sources were consulted.

Reliable and informative literature was found for almost all provinces and territories, with the exception of Nova Scotia and Nunavut. There were no publications found that explicitly assessed the transition programs in place in both these jurisdictions. However, there were still some useful information sources identified, such as other government publications that referenced foster youth, news articles, legislation and government publications, which provided some insight on the limitations of programs.

Key Characteristics of Transition Programs

The jurisdictional scan identified 25 programs in the 13 provinces and territories that provide targeted support to foster youth who are transitioning out of care. **Table 1** below provides an overview and description of the transition programs offered in each jurisdiction. The **Appendix** at the end of the paper provides more details on each program listed in this table as well the sources from which information was obtained for each program¹.

The jurisdictional scan revealed a number of differences across jurisdictions on transition policies. One of the key differences is the child protection cut-off age – the age where individuals in care must exit the system and no longer receive protection services - which ranges from 16 years to 19 years across the country. Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nunavut have the lowest cut-off age at 16 years. Despite the lower cut-off age, all three jurisdictions offer youth aged 16 or 17 (as well as 18 years for Nunavut) the option of entering into services agreements to receive continued intervention services if they have no one to take care of them upon exiting care. The remaining provinces and territories are split evenly between having a cut-off age at 18 years versus 19 years.

¹ The rest of this section analyzes information that was compiled from 58 sources. As such, some of the findings presented here are not from one single source, but from a critical analysis of information obtained from multiple sources. Please refer to the **Appendix** which cites all the sources for the information obtained from each jurisdiction, and which also has a full list of sources categorized by jurisdiction.

Table 1. Overview of Available Transition Supports by Province¹

Province/ Territory	Cut-off Age ²	Transition Planning ³	Transition Programs Offered ⁴
BC	19	Mandatory for those who have youth agreements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreements with Young Adults (19-26 years): Provides funding if enrolled in educational, vocational, rehabilitative or life skills programs • Provincial Tuition Waiver Program (17-26 years): Waives tuition fees for foster youth registered in school • Youth Education Assistance Fund: Provides bursaries up to \$5,500 • Youth Futures Education Fund: Provides funding to cover additional costs, such as books, housing and utilities
AB	18	Mandatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and Financial Assistance Agreements (18-24 years): Provides assistance with living expenses, accommodation, and other services, and financial assistance for training/education and health benefits (only up to 20 years) • Advancing Futures (18-24 years): Provides up to \$40,000 to those enrolled in post-secondary education to cover tuition, living expenses, transportation, child care, and other services
SK	16	Mandatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service agreements (16-17 years): Provides residential services, financial assistance and other transition services for eligible youth • Other (18-21 years): Provides supports to those enrolled in education, require educational or employment training, or require support due to a disability
MB	18	Mandatory as of age 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreements with Young Adults: Provides support for education, vocational training, therapy, culturally-appropriate services, transition to adult services, and independent living
ON	18	Process exists, but not mandatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued Care and Supports for Youth (18-20 years): Offers up to \$850/month, and other necessary services • Aftercare Benefits Initiative: Provides health, dental and prescription drug benefits (21-24 years only) and counselling and life skills supports (up to 29 years) • Registered Education Savings Plan: Requires children's aid societies to create one for children in care to support education-related expenses once they leave • Living and Learning Grant (until 24 years): Offers up to \$6,000 per academic year for a maximum of four years • Other: Youth in transition workers (16-24 years); extended care arrangements to finish high school (18-21 years)
QC	18	Referral basis only	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme Qualification des Jeunes (16-19 years): Prepares the most vulnerable foster youth for their transition to independent living through focus on employability, and personal and social development (referral basis only)

Province/ Territory	Cut-off Age ²	Transition Planning ³	Transition Programs Offered ⁴
NB	19	Mandatory for those on youth agreements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Engagement Services (16-18 years): Provides financial assistance, life skills training and other supports for independence • Independent living programs (18-19 years) • Other (19-24 years): Provides support to those enrolled in an educational program or who are not self-sufficient due to a disability
NS	19	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post Care and Custody Agreements (19-24 years): Provides education support to complete up to one post-secondary educational program
PE	18	Mandatory as of age 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended Service (18-21 years): provides up to \$10,000 and other independent living services for those enrolled in an education, training or rehabilitative program
NL	16	Mandatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Services program (16-17 years): Provides continued protection and intervention services for eligible youth • Extension of Youth Services Program (18-21 years): Offers financial, residential, supportive and rehabilitative services to individuals who can no longer live at home
YK	19	Mandatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-care agreements (19-24 years): Offers various supports, including counselling and training for independent living skills or for education
NT	19	Mandatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended Support Services Agreements (19-23 years): Provides support for education, counselling, employment training, programs for mental or physical development, assistance to find housing, and other necessary services
NU	16	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voluntary service agreement (16-19 years): Offers continued intervention services to eligible youth, such as counselling, rehabilitation programs, parenting programs, financial management services, alternative living arrangements, mediation of disputes, and other necessary services • Extended service agreements (19-24 years): Extension of agreements listed above

¹ Sources: Please refer to the **Appendix**.

² Cut-off age refers to the age that youth are cut-off from child protection services and must exit the child welfare system.

³ Transition planning is a process that helps youth prepare for their transition out of care, typically through the development of a formal transition plan.

⁴ Only includes programs specifically targeted towards foster youth who are transitioning out of care or those who were in care. It does not include programs provided to the general youth/young adult population.

The length of support also varies between jurisdictions. With the exception of Quebec, which only has one transition program offered to specific foster youth until the age of 19, the other jurisdictions offer some form of transition services until the age of 21. Ontario offers the longest period of support till the age of 29, however, it only offers counselling and life skills support after an individual turns 24 years. British Columbia and Nunavut come in second with the maximum age for transition support being 26 years.

While there are differences between the various transition supports offered in each jurisdiction, this assessment also revealed a number of similar characteristics among them.

Table 2 provides a summary of the most common type of transition services offered in Canada.

Table 2. Summary of Type of Transition Services by Jurisdiction

Type of Service	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	NB	NS	PE	NL	YK	NT	NU
Transition Planning	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Education	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	
Employment Services	X	X	X	X	X	X			X			X	
Life Skills Training	X			X	X		X				X		X
Mental Health Services			X	X	X						X	X	X
Rehabilitative Services	X		X						X	X			X
Accommodation Support		X							X	X	X	X	X
General Financial Assistance			X		X		X			X			
Building Social Capital				X	X	X				X			

Source: Created by the author based on the research findings.

The most common service offered is transition planning, which is typically integrated in the protection services offered to youth before they left care. Transition planning is meant to help youth prepare for their transition out of care and enter into the next stage of their life (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2014). It can involve training, guidance and in many jurisdictions, the development of a transition plan that is meant to reflect a youth's goals and plans post care. Almost all provinces and territories, with the exception of Nova Scotia and Nunavut, have transition planning, with nine of the 11 having it as a mandatory process.

Many provinces and territories also have similar objectives or priorities reflected in the type of transition supports they offer. As noted in **Table 2**, the majority of transition programs across the country focus on providing assistance in the education or employment domains. About 10 of the 13 jurisdictions have programs that are specifically designed to support individuals if they pursue post-secondary education. Most of the education-focused programs provide direct financial assistance to cover tuition costs, sometimes with other accompanying supports, such as funding to cover living expenses and accommodation. Only Yukon provides a different form of education support, which is training for education (there is a lack of detail on what this training looks like). Similarly, over half of the provinces and territories also provide services focused on helping individuals get employment. This provides an option for those individuals who may not be ready or wish to pursue education right after leaving care. These employment services vary by jurisdiction, but typically include providing financial assistance for vocational training, or other types of employment services, such as career planning workshops.

There is markedly less focus on other areas that are just as important for independent living. Less than half of jurisdictions provide life skills training, counselling services, and accommodation support. Life skills training involve teaching individuals basic and useful life

skills, such as financial management/budgeting, laundry and cooking. For the provinces that do offer life skills training, the details of what type of skills are fostered prior to or after leaving care are unclear. It is also unclear the extent of support provided in certain domains, particularly for housing and mental health services. For example, many jurisdictions say that caseworkers provide assistance to secure housing, but it is unclear whether this means that it is a mandatory requirement for caseworkers to ensure youth have a place secured before they leave care, or whether it means that caseworkers just point them to resources and youth have to find housing or a living arrangement themselves.

The existing supports also appear to place little emphasis on the areas that are associated with the most effective type of interventions identified in the academic literature review in Section II. The findings of the literature review showed that focusing transition programs and policies on interdependence, social capital, and agency, as well as providing holistic services and extended care options are often associated with positive outcomes. The existing supports do not place significant emphasis on many of these features. In terms of social capital, Manitoba, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador are the only jurisdictions who explicitly say their transition planning focuses on building social connections and networks, and Manitoba is the only one that indicates youth are involved in decision making. Quebec's Programme Qualification des Jeunes, which resembles transition planning, also focuses on social development, but the program is only offered to a select number of foster youth who are referred to the program (Institut national d'excellence en sante et en services sociaux, 2018). In terms of extended care, Manitoba, Ontario and Nunavut are the only jurisdictions that provide options for youth to remain in their foster homes past the age of protection, while continuing to pay foster parents. However, Manitoba only allows this option if individuals are pursuing post-secondary

education or attending skills training, while Ontario only allows it for those individuals who need more time to finish high school (Government of Ontario, 2021; Manitoba Family Services, 2015). Nunavut is the only jurisdiction that offers housing support, which can involve placing the individual in foster home, facility, or other accommodation, without any conditions (Child and Family Services Act, 1997).

A lot of the programs are designed to be transactional or conditional, meaning that young adults are required to meet certain conditions in order to receive funding. Many of the ones that provide education or employment support are only provided to those who are enrolled in an approved program, which is often a post-secondary education program or some type of training to increase employability or develop a set of skills. Other programs, even if not conditional on enrolment, require young adults to regularly update their transition plans and demonstrate their progress towards the goals set out in them or their need for additional services. Some jurisdictions only offer supports to those who are in care or in specific care arrangements (e.g., permanent custody order) immediately before aging out of the system.

Analyzing the Gaps in Transition Programs

The lack of emphasis on essential areas in the transition process shows that there are gaps in transition programming across the country. This was confirmed by the second part of the jurisdictional scan, which examined publications that evaluated each of the provincial and territorial programs identified in the first part of this section. This assessment revealed a number of gaps in existing transition supports. **Table 3** provides a high-level overview of the unmet needs of young adults leaving care identified in each jurisdiction.

Table 3: Overview of Identified Gaps in Transitional Programs across Canada

Jurisdiction	Unmet Needs of Young Adults Leaving Care
BC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not prepared for adulthood/independence • Lack of support and guidance during transition • Difficulty accessing safe and stable housing • Difficulty accessing quality mental health services reflective of needs and experiences • Lack of social connections and strong relationships • No “in-between” support for those not ready to pursue education or employment • Supports are not wraparound
AB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient transitional planning • Not involved in transitional planning • Difficulty accessing supports (e.g., waitlist, location) • Difficulty accessing safe and stable housing • Lacking basic life skills • Difficulty accessing quality health and mental health services • Support cut off immediately following successes or setbacks • Mismatch between services offered and individual goals
SK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not prepared for adulthood/independence • Insufficient or no transition planning • Lack of support and guidance during transition • Difficulty accessing supports (e.g., waitlist) • Difficulty accessing quality mental health services
MB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty accessing safe and stable housing • Lack of social connections and strong relationships • Lacking basic life skills • Insufficient training to secure employment with sufficient income
ON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not prepared for adulthood/independence • Lacking basic life skills • Insufficient transition planning • Loneliness • Difficulty accessing safe and stable housing • Difficulty accessing quality mental health services
QC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty accessing safe and stable housing • Lack of educational resources and support • Lack of employment services and training • Difficulty accessing quality mental health services
NB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of employment services or support for training to enter workforce • Insufficient transition planning • Supports cut off without warning • Not prepared for adulthood/independence

Jurisdiction	Unmet Needs of Young Adults Leaving Care
NS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of supports related to employment, life skills training, and accessing housing • Lack of social connections and strong relationships
PE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not prepared for adulthood/independence • Lacking basic life skills • Lack of employment services or support for training to enter workforce • Not enough focus on relationship building • Difficulty accessing safe and stable housing
NL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not prepared for adulthood/independence • Lacking basic life skills • Difficulty accessing supports due to lack of coordination across different systems • Difficulty accessing safe and stable housing (i.e., lack of supportive housing options)
YK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not prepared for adulthood/independence • Insufficient transition planning • Not involved in transition planning • Lack of emphasis on relationship building • Lacking basic life skills • Difficulty accessing safe and stable housing
NT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports are not wraparound • Insufficient transition planning
NU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty accessing safe and stable housing • Lack of quality mental health services

Note on sources: This table was created by the author based on the research findings. Please refer to the **Appendix** for the **list of sources** from which information in this table was compiled, and for additional details on the gaps identified in each jurisdiction.

There is a significant overlap of unmet needs between provinces and territories, reflecting that many of the key barriers facing youth in each jurisdiction are common throughout the country. **Table 4** provides a comparative overview of the most common unmet needs and barriers identified in the scan. Financial assistance is not identified as a key gap, possibly due to the availability of other government programs that provide income support, such as welfare or student loans. Instead, the most common barriers facing these young adults are in other domains. These key unmet needs can be categorized into three broad themes: a lack of preparedness for independent living, limited support in critical areas, and difficulty in accessing supports.

Table 4. Overview of Most Commonly Identified Unmet Needs

Unmet Need	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	NB	NS	PE	NL	YK	NT	NU
Housing	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
Preparedness for independent living	X		X		X		X		X	X	X		
Insufficient transition planning	X	X	X		X		X				X	X	
Lack of basic life skills		X		X	X			X	X	X	X		
Social connections	X			X	X			X	X		X		
Employment services				X		X	X	X	X				
Mental health	X	X	X		X	X							
Accessibility	X	X	X				X			X			

Source: Created by the author based on the research findings

Lack of Preparedness for Independent Living

The findings from the research show that many young adults do not feel they are prepared for independent living. This is mainly a result of inadequate transition planning, lack of training in basic life skills, and developmental factors.

As noted earlier, transition planning is found in 11 of the 13 provinces and territories. However, **Table 1** shows that transition planning requirements vary across the country. Some jurisdictions have transition planning embedded in legislation, making it compulsory for caseworkers and youth to develop a transition plan prior to leaving care, while some make it mandatory for specific groups only (e.g., those in youth service agreements), and others have it as an encouraged practice or do not mention it at all. Despite the nearly nationwide provision of transition planning services, there is evidence of insufficient or inadequate transition planning in almost all jurisdictions. Despite it being a mandatory component in provinces and territories,

some young adults in those jurisdictions were found to not have transition plans when they left care or were not offered appropriate guidance by caseworkers. Some have indicated that relationships with caseworkers mattered during transition planning, citing that if caseworkers did not like an individual or did not believe in them, they would not point them to the appropriate resources that could help with their transition. Many young adults and their caregivers were also excluded from decision-making process during the planning process. Youth reported not hearing words of encouragement from the key figures in their life, and instead were frequently discouraged or held to low expectations. The challenges faced by these foster youth shows that transition planning is often not enforced or delivered effectively. It also demonstrates that transition planning often fails to empower youth, involve them in decisions, and help them build agency, which, as noted in Section II, academic scholarship has identified as an effective model for transition programs.

Caregivers are also often excluded from the transition planning process, with many citing that they are willing to extend support or allow youth to remain at home, but are not provided with any guidance or resources to determine whether they can do so. Ontario, Manitoba and Nunavut offer options for young adults to remain at their foster home past the age of majority by providing funding to caregivers, which is an important step in the right direction, but as noted earlier, this is often only allowed if specific criteria are met.

Additionally, many youth feel they are completely lost once they leave care and do not have the basic life skills to live independently (e.g., not knowing how to do important tasks, such as laundry, getting groceries, cooking or managing their financials). A lack of basic life skills is more prevalent among those who lived in group homes as they did not have the opportunities to learn these skills before having to leave care. Additionally, some noted that they left care without

cash, knowing how to get health benefits, and or even having proper ID and documentation, The latter makes it difficult to do things such as open a bank account or apply for income assistance, which can make the transition to independent living difficult.

In addition to insufficient transition planning and the lack of training on basic life skills, many individuals felt they were not mentally ready to live on their own upon exiting the system. This feeling is further exacerbated by the high expectations placed on these individuals, who unlike their non-care peers, have no safety net to fall back on if things do not go as planned. Most transition programs have strict eligibility criteria, so youth cannot afford to fail without feeling the repercussions of support being taken away. Others fail to access the services in the first place, as they have often have to deal with complex circumstances in their lives and are unable to organize and plan their lives on time to apply for the supports.

However, there are some notable and promising practices underway. For example, transition planning in Manitoba is quite holistic and goes beyond focusing on providing financial assistance or educational support (Manitoba Family Services, 2015). The planning process here aims to teach youth basic life skills before leaving care, places emphasis on building relationships and a social support network, and actively tries to involve decision-making from youth and other important individuals in their lives. Unfortunately, the unavailability of any data tracking the outcomes of these young adults renders it difficult to truly assess the effectiveness of transition planning and other programs (Kovarikova, 2018).

Analyzing the factors that contribute to a lack of preparedness for adulthood reflects a number of areas that can be improved to overcome the identified gaps in policies and programs. While most jurisdictions have transition planning integrated into the transition process, the

findings make it clear that this component needs to be strengthened and more strongly enforced to become more effective. Second, better data and monitoring of outcomes is an essential gap that needs to be addressed to determine the extent to which transition planning contributes to better life outcomes and to inform future policy and program development. Finally, exploring options for extended care could be useful in addressing both the development and preparedness gaps, allowing youth to have more time to become mentally prepared, get their lives organized, and build social, personal and financial capital before they set out to live independently.

Limited Support in Critical Areas

As noted earlier in the section, the focus of most post-care supports is on educational or employment outcomes and is often designed to require participation in programs that will help to achieve this. Education seems to be the primary, and in some jurisdictions the sole, area of focus. While educational supports are important, there is a lack of focus on other critical areas of independent living, such as housing, building social capital, and mental health, all of which were identified as key unmet needs among young adults who had transitioned out of care.

Housing

Findings show that 10 of 13 provinces and territories have housing as an unmet need in transition supports. Young adults who had left care have challenges in securing safe and affordable housing, often due to a lack of supportive housing options, long waitlists and delays, or inability to access housing due to their circumstances and complex needs. Many young adults who have left care find it difficult to retain housing over the long-term due to accumulating debt and low credit ratings (Dunsmore, 2019). In the context of transition programs, there is insufficient support provided through caseworkers and existing services, and there is a lack of

government programs that provide transitional housing to foster youth. The consequences of not overcoming this barrier is abundantly clear in the outcomes of foster youth, who are significantly over-represented in the homeless population and face a high chance of housing instability upon leaving care (Kovarikova, 2017; Wiebe, 2015; YCA0, 2019).

Housing is a complicated gap to address. In many regions and metropolitan areas across Canada, housing affordability is a significant issue due to a lack of affordable housing stock and general housing costs being too high relative to incomes. Income and social support programs would benefit immensely from having housing as a core component, as obtaining permanent housing is often a critical step in having stability and allowing individuals to work towards their goals (Charlesworth, 2020). Many of the transitional services provided to care leavers often point them to other resources or offers guidance on how to obtain housing. Some programs offer financial assistance for rent, but in many cases, this is tied to meeting other conditions, such as being enrolled in an approved program. The services do not do nearly enough to ensure youth leaving care do not end up homeless.

There is progress being made on this issue in some jurisdictions. Both Yukon and PEI have taken action to develop more transitional housing and supportive living arrangements for this group to ensure a more seamless transition to adulthood (Meader, 2021; Yukon Department of Health and Social Services, 2019). These arrangements provide an in-between stage for youth, who are able to learn basic life skills, rely on the on-site staff for help and resources, and get used to independent living, before having to enter the world on their own (Meader, 2021; Waddell, 2019; Yukon Department of Health and Social Services, 2019). While these initiatives are recent and there is no data or feedback on the value of these programs yet, monitoring the impacts of these programs on the outcomes of foster youth would provide useful information.

Consideration should also be given to extended care options to address housing needs. As noted earlier, some provinces, such as Manitoba, Ontario and Nunavut, offer options allowing for extended care arrangements, but only Nunavut offers this option without any conditions. Newfoundland and Labrador does not offer extended care, but instead provides supportive services to individuals who have returned to their home to address any health or safety issues so that the individual can continue to remain home and maintain a strong connection to family and community (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d). Apart from these jurisdictions, there is a lack of extended care options offered across the country.

Social Capital

Section II identified strong social capital as an effective intervention for transitioning youth. However, the findings from the jurisdictional scan reveal a lack of focus on this aspect in Canada. Many programs fail to prioritize building relationships and a strong social support network during transition planning, leading to negative impacts on young adults once they leave care (i.e., feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, no one to turn for emotional support or guidance). Leaving care and getting cut off from support also means losing access to their caseworker, who for some individuals is the strongest relationship they have in their life.

The objective of most of the transitional programs offered by jurisdictions is preparing young adults to be self-sufficient and care for themselves. Despite the recent shift of many provincial child welfare systems towards more family-centered values, such as family reunification or maintenance, transitional supports have not followed suite and do not place the same value on building and maintaining formal and informal relationships with family, friends, and community.

This gap suggests there needs to be a shift towards focusing on social capital and relationship building. Developing more wraparound supports, which would involve a creating a strength-based and family-focused plan for services to meet the needs of the individual and their families or caregivers, might also be helpful to address unmet social needs.

Mental Health

The literature also revealed another common unmet need: the lack of appropriate, trauma-informed and culturally relevant mental health services. Youth often found that while counselling and therapy was available, it often failed to consider the experiences and circumstances of foster youth and offer the help they needed. There was also difficulty in accessing mental health services in the first place due to a lack of resources and long wait times.

Difficulty in Accessing Supports

The research exposed a number of systemic and structural barriers impacting the ability to access supports. Some were due to limited funding and resources, or incoordination among different government ministries, which often resulted in delays in receiving supports, not being able to access services in certain locations. Two other key factors that were found to impact accessibility to supports were restrictive and non-inclusive program criteria and inequitable access.

Restrictive and Non-Inclusive Program Criteria

As noted earlier, most post-care supports offered by jurisdictions focus largely on providing assistance to pursue educational goals and require that individuals be enrolled in a post-secondary educational program. Some jurisdictions have expanded their criteria to

participation in other programs, such as approved vocational training, life skills training or rehabilitation programs. The latter is more reflective of the different trajectories that young adults can take after leaving care, and provides more opportunities for them to improve their outcomes for employment and independent living. However, as noted by the experiences of many youth, financial assistance and other supports provided by these programs are immediately cut off once they no longer meet eligibility criteria. Sometimes this happens due to young adults being successful (e.g., earning income), or due to setbacks which may mean they fail to meet specific criteria. The design of these programs inherently punishes young adults for having minor setbacks or even successes, and asks young adults to meet high standards without providing them with a safety net. Having punitive and restrictive program criteria means providing fewer opportunities to foster youth in comparison to the general population. As noted in Section II, the latter often have support from their parents to fall back on if they fail out of university or lose a job, giving them opportunities to succeed again (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Lee & Berrick, 2014).

The main objective of these supports is supposed to be assisting youth in their transition to adulthood. This is not an easy process for foster youth due to their unique experiences and complex circumstances, and it is important they feel supported throughout the process. Those earning income should continue to receive support so they can continue to develop skills, accumulate capital, and strengthen their ability to live independently. Those suffering setbacks should not be punished because that reflects the typical journey of any young adult. Instead, programs can be designed in a way that continues to provide these individuals with a safety net as they move into a self-sufficient lifestyle.

Furthermore, strict eligibility requirements also means programs are not universally accessible to all care leavers. It excludes those who may need more time to organize their lives

and get to a position where they are able and ready to pursue post-secondary education or get a stable job. As noted earlier in the paper, many youth in care do not graduate high school. This is often due to an unstable childhood and constant life disruptions as they move in and out of care, which results in having larger educational gaps to address prior to pursuing education (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). There are also some young adults who may choose to enter the workforce after high school, but would benefit from the same services offered by the education-oriented transitional programs, such as counselling, accommodation, and career planning workshops.

Inequitable Access

There is limited data tracking outcomes of these young adults in the years after they left care. While some jurisdictions do have data on the uptake of programs, even less have data disaggregated by specific demographic or geographic variables, such as gender, race, or region. The available data on program take-up often reflect inequitable access to supports, with the more vulnerable individuals not accessing the supports that could greatly benefit them. Poor take-up is often reflected among Indigenous youth, who are overrepresented in the child welfare system, other children of colour, and those not living in large urban centres (Charlesworth, 2020).

This suggests that despite recent awareness and a shift towards providing more culturally-appropriate services, particularly to Indigenous children in care, more changes may be needed to prevent policies and programs from being overgeneralized. Children and youth in care are not a homogenous group: they have varying experiences and their characteristics – such as gender, age, race, ethnic background, placement history, geography and family history – affect their outcomes differently.

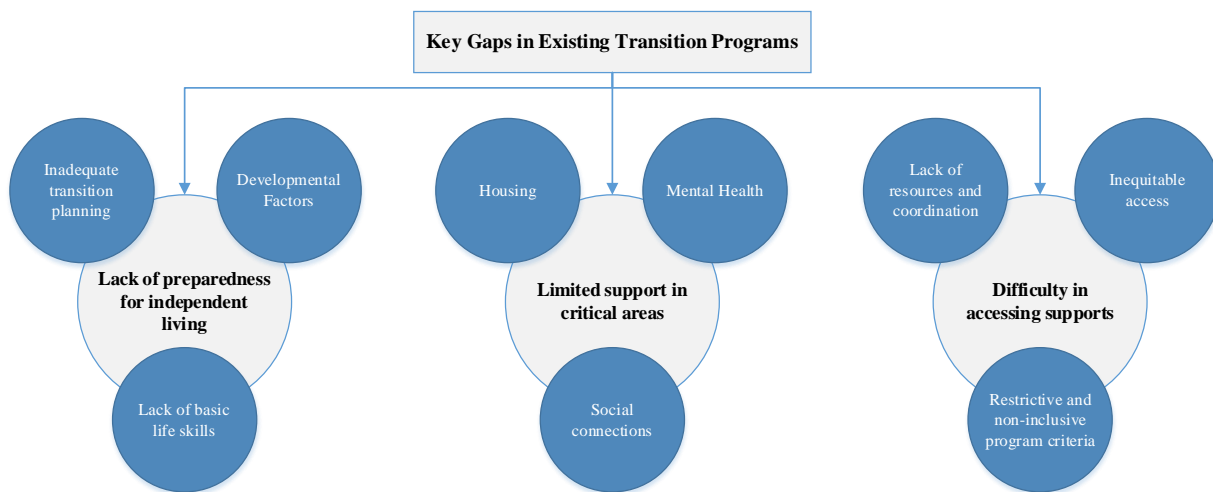
Additionally, the program criteria in most jurisdictions only offer services to those who are in permanent custody prior to leaving care, disregarding individuals who may in other forms of care (i.e., temporary care, voluntary care) who may face similar disadvantages and challenges when entering adulthood or independent living.

SECTION IV: KEY OBSERVATIONS

Principal Research Findings

The purpose of this paper was to understand how Canada can improve its transition programs to better address the needs of youth transitioning out of care and improve their outcomes in adulthood. To answer this question, the research identified the most effective interventions noted in recent academic scholarship, as well as the key gaps and barriers in existing transition policies and programming in Canada (summarized in **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Key Gaps in Existing Transition Programs



Source: Created by the author based on research findings

The gaps identified in the existing programming align with the findings in the academic literature review in Section II. Recent scholarship identified interdependence and empowerment as key features of effective interventions. These principles require more emphasis on strengthening the social capital and agency of youth prior to them leaving care. The assessment of Canadian transition programs revealed a lack of social connections and relationships as a key unmet need, which often led to the prevalence of negative feelings among young adults in adulthood. Additionally, another identified gap was the lack of youth involvement in decision-making and transition planning prior to leaving care. This aligns with the arguments found in the academic literature that more emphasis on these two areas is related to more positive transitions.

The academic literature also identified the provision of holistic services and extended care option as factors that contribute to more effective interventions. The first observation directly relates to another key gap in Canadian transition programs, which was the lack of targeted supports in critical areas, such as housing and mental health services. While the lack of extended care options was not directly recognized as a key gap in the analysis of Canadian transition programs, housing was found to be one of the biggest challenges facing youth during their transition period. Extended care is one option that can address the housing barrier.

Recommended Priority Areas for Future Policy Responses

This paper provides evidence of gaps in existing transition programs and supports across the country. There are a number of actions that provincial and territorial, and in some cases the federal, governments could take to address the identified gaps, which could subsequently contribute to more positive outcomes for youth transitioning out of care. These actions can take different forms: it could involve modifying and strengthening specific aspects of existing

transitions programs; redesigning the foundations of some transition supports; or introducing completely new policies or programs to better address the unmet needs of transitioning youth. This paper identifies four priority areas for future policy responses that can improve outcomes for foster youth through transition programs: developing targeted supports for housing, mental health and life skills training; integrating the values of interdependence and empowerment into transition programs; improving data collection and monitoring of the outcomes of young adults who were formerly in care; and improving accessibility of supports.

Priority Area #1: Develop targeted supports for housing, mental health, and life skills training

One of the top unmet need from the jurisdictional scan was housing. Individuals leaving care struggle to secure safe and stable housing, particularly in the long-term. While there are various factors that can contribute to this, one factor, in the context of transition programs, can be attributed to insufficient services and resources provided during the transition planning process, particularly from caseworkers. This finding aligns with other data in Canada, such as the overrepresentation of former foster youth among the homeless population in Canada, and signals a need for caseworkers to secure a living or housing arrangement for youth before they exit care.

This paper did not focus on evaluating or identifying effective housing interventions. Consequently, this paper does not recommend specific housing interventions to address this unmet need, but instead recommends that housing be considered a priority area for future policy responses. More research is required to determine the most effective approaches to address the housing barrier. While there is a lack of government transition programs focused exclusively on housing, there are a number of non-profit organizations and charities across the country that

provide housing services for transitioning youth. Any research that is undertaken should evaluate existing non-governmental programs to provide insight on the extent of government intervention that is required to address the housing gap. These findings could inform whether government intervention, for example, should be limited to providing resources to youth in order to secure housing (e.g., financial assistance, guidance, funding to non-profits to create more space) or whether it should directly house transitioning youth in the first few years following their exit from care.

Future research could also monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the pilot transitional housing/supportive living programs being undertaken in both PEI and the Yukon. These programs are designed to bridge the gap between the exit from care and independent living by offering housing arrangements for individuals who are leaving care. Both programs also provide wraparound supports by ensuring that youth are also taught basic life skills and have access to staff for help and resources during their time living there. These programs provide these young adults with a “trial” of independent living with support on-site to ensure they are able to learn to live independently before they are required to leave. The results of these programs, particularly on the outcomes of participants, could help to inform policy development for similar programs in other jurisdictions.

Another possible option for targeted housing supports is offering extended care options. As noted in the academic literature review in Section II, extended care till the age of 21 has been observed as an effective intervention as it allow individuals to have more time to become prepared for independent living both developmentally and financially. It allows them to get their lives in order after the leave care and allows them time to pursue academic aspirations or find

employment and save money, providing them with opportunities to get on equal footing with the general young adult population.

Young adults who exited care also identified a lack of basic life skills training and mental health services. These are two other areas where the provincial, territorial and federal governments can conduct more research and evaluations in order to develop effective and targeted responses to help transitioning youth fulfill these needs both before they leave care and during their transition to adulthood.

Priority Area #2: Integrate the values of interdependence and empowerment into transition programs

Another key gap identified in over half of jurisdictions in Canada was that young adults did not feel prepared for adulthood or independent living once they left care. This was often attributed to insufficient transition planning, which often mismatched youth to services they did not need and in which they were not able to make decisions on their own transition process. Another key gap was lacking a social network and strong relationships after exiting care.

The findings suggest that transition planning needs to be modified to address these unmet needs. As noted in the academic literature review, either integrating or shifting towards a model that is founded on interdependence and empowerment could lead to more positive transitions and address some of the unmet needs voiced by these individuals. A focus on interdependence would mean placing importance on building social capital, and developing and maintaining strong and reliable relationships and social connections. It increases the ability to rely on others for support, reduces social isolation, reduces the prevalence of negative feelings in adulthood, and increases feelings of belonging (Lee & Berrick, 2014; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). This in turn increases

the likelihood of better outcomes in various domains (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Tweddle, 2007). Provincial and territorial governments can do this by ensuring that transition planning prioritizes relationship-building with biological and foster families, friends, peers, and other important individuals in their life. It can also continue to provide access to their caseworker post care for a few years, so that those who have left care can continue to have somebody in their life that they can turn to for guidance and advice.

Focusing on empowerment would ensure that individuals are involved in decision making during transition planning. This not only helps to build agency and decision-making skills prior to leaving care, but it also encourages the development of identity, and invoke feelings of control and having choices. Having more decision-making power will ensure that youth are able to voice their concerns and the needs they want to address before leaving exiting care. They could note they require access to mental health services, require training of certain basic life skills, among other services.

Priority #3: Improve data collection and monitoring of the outcomes of transitioning youth

While undertaking research for this paper, it was evident that there is a significant lack of longitudinal data tracking the outcomes of foster youth in adulthood. The research undertaken for this paper identified grey literature that reflected ethnographic accounts of the experiences of transitioning youth or those formerly in the system who accessed transition supports. However, there is no public data that systematically tracks and monitors the outcomes of all youth transitioning out of care into adulthood. Shewchuk (2020) notes this type of data is not just lacking in the public domain, but also internally (i.e., within provincial and territorial governments) with respect to transition programs. This absence of data means that it is difficult

to evaluate the effectiveness of transition programs on foster youth. Existing evaluations and audits of these programs are often based on interviews and consultations with transitioning youth and relevant stakeholders. While this is important, it is difficult to determine the *direct* impacts of transition supports on outcomes. The most common indicator that is tracked by provinces and territories is program uptake data; however, this measure does not provide any information on how well participants are doing in different domains of their adult life nor any indication of the overall success of a participant's transition. While there was sufficient qualitative research to answer the research question, data collection and monitoring of outcomes would contribute to a deeper understanding of the impacts of transition programs on the outcomes of care leavers. Better data can inform the development of evidence-based solutions and targeted policy action that could produce improved outcomes for foster youth.

Another key step to better data is to be able to produce a more updated estimate of the number of youth transitioning out of care every year. As noted in Section I, the most common estimate of the number of Canadian youth transitioning out of care every year is 6,700, which was produced nearly two decades ago. There have not been any efforts to reproduce an updated or current number. There is also a need for more granular data that can be disaggregated by specific demographic or geographic variables, such as gender, race, or region, or by specific issues (e.g., substance abuse issues). More data on how these individuals are accessing, using and benefiting from transition support can help to inform targeted policy responses to increase take-up among vulnerable groups and design more relevant or culturally-appropriate services to improve their outcomes.

There are some efforts underway to strengthen data. For example, there is a research project underway in Quebec, the *Étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés au Québec*

et en France, which will examine the living outcomes and transition from care of young adults aged 17 to 21 and will be the first representative study of its kind in Quebec (EDJeP, n.d.). This will provide great insight on longitudinal outcomes faced by youth and has the potential to inform future policy development of transitional supports.

Similarly, the other provinces and territories could explore ways to improve their data collection and tracking of outcomes of individuals leaving care, which could be used to determine the effectiveness of existing transition supports and inform improvements in the quality and delivery of services. There is also a potential role for the federal government to work with provinces and territories to develop a comprehensive system and standard indicators to monitor and track data, which can be used to report holistically on transitioning youth and can allow for comparisons on specific issues between jurisdictions.

Priority #4: Improve Accessibility

Another key theme that emerged throughout the analysis of barriers facing transitioning youth was accessibility. The analysis revealed a few different type of systemic and structural barriers that resulted in individuals being excluded from or receiving unequal access to support.

As noted in Section III, eligibility or program criteria is one of the main impediments to accessibility. Many programs are offered on conditional basis, typically requiring participation in an approved program or post-secondary education. Some programs take away support from individuals who are doing very well, or who fail to meet specific criteria or milestones while on support. Provinces and territories could examine ways to make eligibility criteria more flexible to accommodate for the complex circumstances of foster youth. For example, they could consider removing conditions on program eligibility to increase take-up of existing supports and provide

more “in-between” assistance to all young adults leaving care, regardless of whether they are enrolled in school or another approved program. Another approach is to redesign transition programs and services to be reflective of the realities and challenges facing young adults during adulthood and to serve as a safety net. This would recognize the fact that young adults who are or were in care are at a disadvantage when compared to the general young adult population. The latter typically has a parental safety net to fall back during challenging times and are allowed to fail without losing their support system. Transition programs should be designed in the same way, and they should not punish participants for either their success or failures by taking support away. Instead, these programs should ensure young adults have continued support through both their successes and failures so they can continue their journey of independent living and truly achieve positive life outcomes.

Another key barrier is inequitable access among different groups of foster youth, such as those who are Indigenous, Black, not living in urban centers, or who are in different forms of care. As noted earlier, more data on the take-up of these various groups, as well as their experiences after leaving care and accessing transition supports, are required to truly determine the impacts of these support (or lack of) on their outcomes. This could help to inform the development of more inclusive, culturally-appropriate and relevant services.

.The final set of barriers in accessing services concerns a lack of resources, long wait times, low-quality and underfunded services, lack of services in non-urban centers, and a lack of coordination among different government offices. Increasing funding and coordinating different services across the province or territory can help to address some of these barriers; it can help to obtain more resources, deliver more services, including in less populated areas, reduce wait times, and improve the quality of services. However, jurisdictions should undertake more

investigation and determine the best approaches to address these barriers first so that any increased funding is used appropriately and effectively.

Limitations and Future Considerations

The scope of this research paper was limited to solely identifying and analyzing transition supports offered by provincial and territorial governments. As a result, there are a few areas that the paper did not focus on, but where further research would contribute significantly to a deeper understanding of the issues examined and the developed of more targeted policy responses.

Since this paper focuses generally on all former foster youth or transitioning youth in Canada, there is a lack of an Indigenous lens. As noted earlier, Indigenous children and youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system, are more at risk of facing poor outcomes after leaving care, have lower take-up rates of transition supports, and face greater barriers to finding services that are culturally appropriate (Charlesworth, 2020; Mosher & Hewitt, 2018). As such, it is critically important to apply an Indigenous lens to future research and policy development to better understand and address the unique barriers and unmet needs facing Indigenous youth. Additionally, this study does not reflect any transition programs offered by the Indigenous child welfare agencies in Canada, who provide targeted services to Indigenous foster children and their families. That is another critical area where research is required to identify existing transition programs for Indigenous foster youth and their limitations, and to better understand how transition programming could be tailored to Indigenous youth and reflective of their unique needs and experiences. Similarly, this type of research and analysis could be extended to understanding the experiences and addressing the needs of other vulnerable groups in the child welfare system as well, such as Black and LGBTQ2S+ youth.

There are also a number of transition services and supports offered by the non-profit and private sectors in Canada. The analysis and research undertaken in this paper can be furthered by examining programs offered in these sectors as well to get a more comprehensive picture of all transition programs offered in Canada. This research could provide insight on the linkages between government and non-government services, and consider the extent to which non-government services are incorporated into provincial and territorial transition planning. For example, are foster youth being directed or referred to appropriate non-government services before leaving care? Do provincial and territorial governments have partnerships with these sectors in delivering these services? Is there a need for provincial and territorial governments to develop more targeted supports in critical areas (such as housing), or could they work with non-profits to strengthen existing supports (e.g., through increased funding)? Considering questions like these could help to inform the role that each stakeholder plays in implementing and delivering transition programs.

This paper focuses on only one of the many factors that contribute to poor life outcomes among foster youth. As noted in Section II, there are other contributing factors, such as traumatic experiences and an unstable family environment during childhood. Further research in these areas could help to provide a more holistic view of the root causes of negative life outcomes, and provide insight on other actions that can be pursued, particularly preventative actions that can reduce the likelihood of these outcomes. Finally, while the academic literature review in Section II references some international research on this topic, further research on international transition programs and their impacts on life outcomes can help to build a more thorough body of evidence that could inform policy.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to understand how Canada can better address the needs of youth transitioning out of care through transition programs in order to improve their outcomes in adulthood. This was accomplished by undertaking a literature review to determine the most effective approaches used to design transition programs and policies. The paper then conducted a jurisdictional scan to identify the gaps in existing transition programs in Canada by assessing the unmet needs of transitioning youth in every jurisdiction.

The research findings show that existing supports are insufficient in preparing foster youth for independent living after leaving care. They fail to fulfil some of the key needs of young adults during their transition, such as having secure housing, accessing mental health services, having strong social connections and relationships, and having basic life skills. There are also a number of barriers preventing easy and equitable access to supports, such as restrictive and non-inclusive eligibility criteria, and lack of funding and coordination.

This paper provides insights on how jurisdictions could contribute to more positive outcomes for those who are in and leaving care. Upon analyzing the identified gaps in tandem with the most effective approaches observed in the academic literature review, this paper identifies four areas that Canadian jurisdictions should prioritize when formulating future policy responses on this issue. The first area is developing more targeted supports to address key unmet needs in housing, mental health, and life skills training. The second area is integrating the principles of interdependence and empowerment into transition programs, which would enable youth to build strong social connections and relationships and develop skills associated with an increased preparedness for adulthood. The third priority is improving data collection on the longitudinal outcomes of former youth in care to determine the impacts of current policy

interventions and inform the development of evidence-based policy solutions. The final area is improving accessibility by removing barriers that prevent or limit equal access to supports.

This paper provides an original contribution to scholarship on this topic by identifying the gaps in existing transition programming offered by each provincial and territorial government in Canada as well as the areas that require policy action. Given the limited scope of this paper, further research on this topic can better inform policy development. Future research should focus on applying an Indigenous lens to the research question to better understand and address the unique barriers faced by Indigenous foster youth exiting care. Additionally, more research on international best practices, transition supports offered by the non-profit and private sectors in Canada, and on other factors driving poor outcomes can contribute to a more comprehensive body of evidence that can inform future policy development.

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APPENDIX

Jurisdictional Scan: Detailed Findings

This appendix presents the findings from the jurisdictional scan in greater detail. It includes detailed information on the transition policies and programs in each province and territory, the unmet needs of transitioning youth in each jurisdiction, and other identified gaps in programs or policies. A list of sources categorized by jurisdiction is included at the end.

British Columbia

British Columbia (BC) sees approximately 850 young adults transitioning out of care every year (Charlesworth, 2020). Child protection services are offered to those under the age of 19. Youth aged 16 to 18 years who are unable to live with parents or guardians have the option to enter into agreements that can provide financial assistance, as well as residential, educational or other support services. A key component of this agreement is transition planning, which requires a plan for independence for the youth to be developed that identifies the support that is being provided and the youth's goals that need to be met as a result (PHAC, 2019).

The main post-care support offered by BC's Ministry of Children and Family Development is the Agreements with Young Adults (AYA) program, which is a needs-based program that provides funding to eligible young adults up until they turn 27, for a maximum of 48 months, as long as they are enrolled in an educational, vocational, rehabilitation or approved life skills program (Government of British Columbia, n.d.). There are also a number of education supports, including the Provincial Tuition Waiver Program, which waives tuition fees for eligible former youth in care between 17 and 26 years who are registered in full-time or part-time studies at an approved BC institution. Other ones include the Youth Education Assistance Fund, which

provides bursaries of up to \$5,500, and the Youth Futures Education Fund, which provides supplemental funding to cover other expenses, such as books, housing, and utilities (Government of British Columbia, n.d.).

Despite offering progressive transitional supports, a recent report published by Charlesworth (2020), the province's Representative for Children and Youth, has revealed a number of gaps in the existing programs. Young adults who have left care have cited facing considerable challenges during the process. The most significant barrier was feeling completely unprepared for adulthood and the lack of support during the transition out of care. Despite transition planning being a mandatory component of youth service agreements, there have been cases where very little transitional planning was done prior to leaving. Some youth indicated they were not provided with guidance on where to access support services once they leave care (Charlesworth, 2020).

Charlesworth (2020) also finds a number of limitations with the AYA program. Firstly, the program is very transactional in nature – for youth to be able to receive supports, they must be enrolled in an approved program. It does not reflect the wraparound supports that young people who are not in care typically receive from their families during their transition to adulthood. The program also has restrictive eligibility criteria, excluding youth who are in certain types of care (i.e., those in temporary care orders, voluntary care agreements, or special needs agreements) as well as young adults who may not be developmentally ready to enroll in school or the other approved programs. Furthermore, take-up data reflects inequitable access of this program: Indigenous youth, youth with lower education levels, males, and those without a Youth Agreement were less likely to access the AYA (Charlesworth, 2020). Those accessing

AYA were youth who typically faced less challenges during their transition and already had the skills and supports required to access the program.

Charlesworth (2020) also finds that young adults leaving care in BC had other unmet needs, particularly in the areas of safe and affordable housing, quality trauma intervention and mental health services, and supportive relationships. The AYA does not fund mental health services, even though 90% of youth have exposure to trauma during childhood (Charlesworth, 2020). Despite plans by the BC Government to expand mental health services, the upcoming initiatives do not establish appropriate trauma-informed services that would consider the unique experiences of children in care. Indigenous youth have reported having greater barriers in finding services that are culturally appropriate. The current programming also fails to place importance on fostering relationships, not just with biological families, but with other individuals in the young adult's life, which are essentially to develop resilience in life.

Alberta

Child intervention and protection services are offered to children until they turn 18 years old in Alberta (PHAC, 2019). There about 600 young adults who transition out of the provincial child welfare system and into adulthood every year (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019). Caseworkers are required to work with youth before they turn 16 to prepare their transition to independence plan, which sets out the youth's goals in adulthood, the supports they require to accomplish these goals, and the expectations for the youth (Solberg, 2014).

The Government of Alberta offers two post-care programs. The first is the Support and Financial Assistance Agreements (SFAA), available to youth aged 18 to 24 years (note: the maximum age is set to change to 22 years), which can provide assistance with living expenses,

accommodation, and other services that are required for the young adult to achieve independence. It also offers financial assistance for training or educational purposes and health benefits, but only up until 20 years of age (Solberg, 2014). This program is only available to individuals who are receiving intervention services immediately before they turn 18 (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019). The type of supports provided through the SFAA is dependent on the individual's transition plan, which is required to enter into an SFAA, as it only provides the support necessary for the young adult's transition to independence. The maximum length of a SFAA is 6 months, but a young adult is able to enter into additional agreements until they turn the maximum age. About 90% of youth leaving care every year enter into SFAAs (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019). The other program is Advancing Futures, which provides support to current and former youth in care between 18 and 24 years who are enrolled in post-secondary education at an approved institution. It can provide up to \$40,000 in education costs (e.g., tuition, textbooks, mandatory supplies, etc.), and additional funding for living expenses, transportation, child care, health benefits, and other services, such as career planning support (Government of Alberta, 2021).

Gaps in the SFAA program were revealed in 2018 following investigations into the deaths of six young adults receiving services through SFAAs, all of whom had reported struggling with mental health issues, trauma and a lack of stable housing despite having a SFAA (Krugel, 2019). The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (2019) found, through both concerns raised directly to their office and consultations conducted throughout the province, that many young adults leaving the system continue to face significant barriers as they become adults despite the broad range of supports available to them. One of the top barriers encountered was accessing supports, mainly resulting from long waitlists, location of certain services, and from a

general lack of awareness and guidance from caseworkers on how to access support. The services offered were also cited as being insufficient, as many young adults struggled with securing housing, found they did not have the basic life skills required to be independent, were denied mental health services, were not involved in decision making, and had concerns with caseworkers. Support was also very restrictive and was cut off immediately following success or setbacks, without accounting for that individual's experiences and circumstances. Some individuals felt obligated to participate in programs that felt were not necessary for achieving their goals to avoid getting cut off from support (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019). While the Advancing Futures program is a great gateway for individuals to pursue education and achieve career goals, it is restricted to only those pursuing education.

There were also gaps in the support and guidance provided to caregivers, many of whom reported feeling helpless and lost when they tried to assist their foster children in navigating their transition out of care. Most caregivers were ready to allow youth to remain in their home even after they turn 18, but were not provided with financial support to pursue this option or offered any guidance from a caseworker (Solberg, 2014).

Despite calls for reforms to post-care supports, such as raising the maximum age of the SFAA and offering better access to housing, the Government of Alberta went in the opposite direction and announced its intentions to lower the maximum age for SFAA from 24 years to 22. Critics have said this decision would leave these young adults much more vulnerable and without vital supports, such as access to a life coach or financial assistance. This has not been put into effect yet due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that those aged 22 and 23 can remain on the SFAA for the time-being (Hudes, 2021).

Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan, alongside Newfoundland and Labrador, has the lowest age of protection amongst all jurisdictions in the country at 16 years (PHAC, 2019). While it is estimated that the number of children in care in Saskatchewan is approximately 5,000, there is no existing data that reflects how many youth on transition out of care every year (Ruffell, 2020).

Support services can be continued for youth aged 16 to 17 years who are in need of care and supervision because they are unable to return to their family for safety reasons or no parents are willing or able to take responsibility for them. In these cases, the youth may choose to enter into a service agreement with the government that would support their transition to self-reliance and provide them with residential services, financial assistance, or both. The agreement cannot exceed one year, but it can be renewed if the need is still there (*The Child and Family Services Act*, 1989-90).

The Government of Saskatchewan also offers supports to youth aged 18 to 21, but only if they are in government care either through a permanent or long-term court order immediately before they turn 18 years old. Youth are only eligible for this support if they are continuing their education, require training in order to get a job or prepare for further education, or require support due to a mental or physical disability. There is a lack of clarity on the government's website and in provincial legislation on the type of services and the extent of financial assistance offered through this program. However, non-governmental sources have indicated that supports typically involve assistance for shelter, education, counselling or rehabilitative services until the age of 21 (Pringle et al., 2010). Government documents have indicated that youth are strongly encouraged to support themselves from their own earnings to the extent possible. In addition to the post-care supports, caseworkers are required to assist children with preparing for

independence once they leave the system as early as possible, although it is encouraged to become a core activity once the child turns 15 years old (Domshy et al., 2015).

Despite the inclusion of transition planning and extended post-care supports, many youth leaving the system find that they were not adequately prepared for adulthood, with the most notable gaps being ineffective transition planning, few supports, and accessibility. Youth noted that there was either insufficient time dedicated to transition planning, while others said there was no transition planning at all, despite it being mandatory, and they were not provided with the appropriate resources on how to apply for assistance once they left care (Domshy et al., 2015; Ruffell, 2020). Youth have limited skills upon leaving care and felt poorly prepared for independent living. The few supports offered are very rigid and end once an individual turns 21, which is not reflective of the standards in society for achieving independence (Pringle et al., 2010). Those who applied for these supports faced accessibility issues, with many being on a waiting list for months and not being able to access assistance quickly. It is also difficult for young adults to access mental health services, which is necessary when becoming self-sufficient at a young age (Domshy et al., 2015).

In response to reforms recommended by advocates, the Government of Saskatchewan indicated in 2015 that it was considering making two significant changes: modifying the definition of child in its legislation to an individual under 18 years, which would effectively extend protection and related services to children in the system until they turn 18 instead of 16; and to extend educational supports to the age of 24. However, these reforms have not yet been enacted and it is unclear when they will be implemented (Ruffell, 2020).

Manitoba

There are approximately 900 young people in Manitoba who exit foster care annually once they turn 18 (Brohman, 2019). To ensure a successful transition to adulthood, caseworkers are required to begin transition planning for all youth in care at age 15. Transition planning is quite holistic in Manitoba and goes beyond just setting out an education or employment plan for youth; it also requires that youth learn essential life skills (e.g., laundry, shopping, personal hygiene, money management) and develop a social support network prior to reaching adulthood. Caseworkers must ensure that youth continue to have medical, dental and prescription coverage after leaving care, and are required to provide guidance on how to access housing, extended post-care supports, and other governmental supports (i.e., welfare). The planning process also needs to involve youth in decision-making and engage their caregivers and educators (Manitoba Family Services, 2015).

The Government of Manitoba provides extended post-care supports in the form of Agreements with Young Adults (AYA), which can provide services and some level of financial assistance for education, training, therapy, culturally-appropriate services, transition to adult services, and independent living (which can cover costs related to rent, food, transportation). The caseworker is required to provide an explanation of why an AYA is required and how it will help the individual in making a successful transition to independence (Manitoba Family Services, 2015). It also may allow for a young adult to remain living with the foster family if they are pursuing post-secondary education or attending skills training. In March 2017, there were 917 young adults aged 18-21 with AYAs (Manitoba Families, 2017). There is no data on the type of supports typically provided and up to how much in financial assistance is provided.

Despite the government's holistic approach to transition planning, youth have indicated one of their main challenges when leaving care is insufficient planning and supports. The financial assistance they received was not enough to cover housing, school and other necessities and many fell into large amounts of debt and obtained low credit ratings, which made it even more difficult to find stable long-term housing. Young adults also expressed a lack of emotional support, particularly due to being dropped by their caseworkers who, up until that point, were a strong and stable presence in their lives (Dunsmore, 2019). Additionally, the AYA is only available to youth who are permanent wards when turning 18, but not accessible to other youth who were in care, such as temporary wards who were under care of agencies or through Voluntary Placement Agreements (Office of the Children's Advocate, 2012).

Former youth in care and advocates are calling for reforms in transition support, particularly in the area of housing (Brohman, 2019). Without safe and stable housing over the long-term, many youth end up homeless or turn to substance abuse and criminal activity, making them unable to access other supports (Dunsmore, 2019). Helping youth in obtaining and keeping secure housing should be a priority before they leave care. Advocates have also suggested that transitional programs should focus on maintaining relationships with caseworkers, building stronger relationships with families or caregivers, providing additional life skills training, such as cooking and budgeting, and providing job training to obtain stable employment with sufficient income (Dunsmore, 2019).

Ontario

In Ontario, there are approximately 1,000 youth every year who leave care once they turn 18 years old (Kovarikova, 2017). The Government of Ontario offers a number of programs that offer post-care support to individuals who are aged 18 to 21 and 21 to 29.

The Continued Care and Supports for Youth (CCSY) program offers youth aged 18 to 20 with financial support of up to \$850/month, as well as other services and guidance that help to build life skills and transition to adulthood (Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services [MCSS], 2021). Participation in this program involves creating and continuously updating a transition plan that reflects the individual's needs and goals, which must incorporate the following areas: social support network, housing, health, education or employment, identity, and life management skills and personal development (MCSS, 2021). The Aftercare Benefits Initiative (ABI) provides eligible former youth in care aged 21 to 24 with health, dental and prescription drug benefits, as well as counselling and life skills supports up to the age of 29 years. The Ministry also has youth in transition workers whose roles are to ensure that youth aged 16 to 24 are connected to supports and community services that will help to secure stable housing, educational resources, employment services and life skills training (MCSS, 2021).

The Government also provides a number of educational supports. For example, it allows youth aged 18 to 21 who require more time to finish high school to remain in their foster home by providing extended funding to foster caregivers. Children's aid societies are required to establish a Registered Education Savings Plan for children and youth in care, so that youth can access these funds to support education-related expenses once they leave care provided they are enrolled in an eligible post-secondary education or vocational training program. Additionally, former youth in care may also be eligible to receive a Living and Learning Grant up until the age of 24, which provides additional funding of up to \$6,000 per academic year for a maximum of four years (MCSS, 2021).

Ontario offers an extensive range of supports, yet former youth in care, critics and advocates have said these supports can be improved. Many youth do not feel developmentally

prepared to be completely independent once they leave care, citing they lack basic life skills, such as not knowing how to get groceries, pay rent, cook, or find employment (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012; King, 2021). Others have cited feeling lonely and not knowing where to live, suggesting gaps in access to housing and social support networks (Kovarikova, 2017). Critics have argued that the design of the system needs to shift towards a readiness model, which allows youth to leave care once they are developmentally ready (King, 2021). Kovarikova (2017) has also emphasized the need for better data that tracks youth outcomes in order to evaluate the effectiveness of current programs.

During the pandemic, the Government of Ontario has recognized the need to better protect youth transitioning out of care and intends to establish a new framework focused on providing better support and improving their outcomes in life. This new framework would be based on readiness indicators, which would be used to ensure that young adults are actually ready and prepared to leave care (MCSS, 2021).

Quebec

In Quebec, youth are cut off from child protection and intervention services once they turn 18 (PHAC, 2019). It is estimated that around 2,000 young adults leave foster care every year (EDJeP, n.d.).

The Government of Quebec only has one program in place that aims to support the transition to adulthood: the Programme Qualification des Jeunes (PQJ). This program is offered to eligible foster youth aged 16 to 19 years (Goyette, 2007). However, it is not a universal program as foster youth must be referred to the program based on their specific needs, so only the most vulnerable of youth are able to access this intervention (Institut national d'excellence en

sante et en services sociaux [INESSS], 2018). The program design is very similar to the transition planning offered in other provinces and territories. PQJ has three objectives: to prepare youth for their transition to independent living while providing support during the process; ensure that 75 percent of candidates have found employment or completed a vocational program by the time they reach adulthood; and help to develop a support system for youth (INESSS, 2018). In order to achieve these objectives, the caseworkers work with participants to develop an intervention plan that is focused on achieving these goals and maintain follow-up until the participants turn 19 years old.

The PQJ has been evaluated and is associated with positive results, such as participants developing stronger interpersonal skills, agency, and social support networks (Commission spéciale sur les droits des enfants et la protection de la jeunesse [CSDEPJ], 2021; Goyette, 2007). However, the program offers very limited support due to its restrictive criteria (CSDEPJ, 2021). It is not available to all youth in the system, but only offered to the most vulnerable in the system (e.g., those who may have lower academic achievements, or weak social networks, or who have spent more time in the system, etc.), who must be referred to the program by their caseworker (INESSS, 2018).

There is a lack of support for foster children as they transition to adulthood as the Government of Quebec does not offer any other transition programs or services (CBC News, 2016). Research studies conducted in Quebec found that transitioning youth encounter numerous challenges immediately after they leave the system, particularly with accessing stable housing or living arrangements, getting support for education (including graduating from high school), and obtaining employment and mental health services (Child Trauma Research Centre, 2021). It is also difficult to organize initiatives targeted to youth in care or aged-out youth because Quebec

has two parallel youth protection systems in both languages with separate and uncoordinated bureaucracies (Keller et al, 2020).

The Government of Quebec has recently announced more funding towards youth protection measures, some of which will be used to increase the amount of resources in the PQJ and be offered to more participants (CTV News, 2020). Additionally, there is a research project underway in Quebec, the *Étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés au Québec et en France*, which will examine the living outcomes and transition from care of young adults aged 17 to 21 and will be the first representative study of its kind in Quebec (EDJeP, n.d.). This will provide great insight on longitudinal outcomes faced by youth and has the potential to inform future policy development of transitional supports.

New Brunswick

Children in New Brunswick are able to stay in care until they turn 19 years (PHAC, 2019). Youth in care aged 16 to 18 are able to enter into the Youth Engagement Services (YES) program on a voluntary basis, which provides financial assistance, life skills training and other supports with the aim of preparing youth for independent adulthood. The format of the program resembles transition planning, as it involves a number of interventions, including permanency planning, career and life skills workshops, personal or financial counselling, and referrals for other important services, including for mental health and addiction. Participants are required to complete a case plan that focuses on the three areas of education, employment and permanence (Government of New Brunswick, n.d.)

Independent living programs are also available to youth in care once they turn 18, but only for one year until they turn 19 (Government of New Brunswick, 2014; Doucet, 2015). There

is no information available on these programs on government websites, making it difficult to know what type of services are offered. These programs are only referenced in a report by the Government of New Brunswick (2014), in which they responded to a call for reforms in transition programs by saying that “independent living programs are regionally planned and resourced” (p. 51).

Post-care supports are available to youth aged 19 to 24 years of age, but only if they are enrolled in an educational program or not self-sufficient due to a physical, mental or emotional disability (Shewchuk, 2020). There is limited information available on the type of supports and services and the extent of financial assistance provided through this program. An individual is required to apply within 6 months after leaving care, otherwise they cease to be eligible. The funding can only be used towards a first degree at a educational institution in New Brunswick, but not towards additional programs or institutions outside the province (Doucet, 2015).

There is insufficient literature that provides an assessment of the transitional supports offered by the New Brunswick government. However, it is clear upon reviewing the program criteria that there are some youth who are excluded from receiving support, particularly those who may wish to, or need to, to postpone their plans for post-secondary education for longer than 6 months after leaving care or those who wish to enter the workforce after high school. Young adults formerly in care have also noted that transition planning can be improved, as many were cut off from supports and help once they began to live independently (Doucet, 2015).

Nova Scotia

The Government of Nova Scotia provides child protection and interventions services until the age of 19 (PHAC, 2019). Youth aged 16 to 18 have the option of entering into an

agreement with an agency or the Minister to continue receiving services (*Children and Family Services Act*, 1990).

In terms of support, young adults leaving care and pursuing post-secondary education can receive education support by entering into Post Care and Custody Agreements, which provides them with supportive and financial services up until they reach 24 years of age to complete up to one post-secondary educational program (Government of Nova Scotia, 2008).

Caseworkers work with youth to ensure that they are able to successfully transition to adulthood. This involves guiding them to various resources they can access, such as the Educational Bursary Program for their post-secondary educational goals, the Post Case and Custody Agreement noted above, or to the Employment Support and Income Assistance Division which can provide financial assistance to those with low income (Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, 2018).

Unlike most other jurisdictions, Nova Scotia does not have an independent provincial child and youth advocate that conducts research on issues related to the child welfare system and provides recommendations regarding reforms. There is no literature or articles that provide an overview of the issues facing youth who leave care in Nova Scotia. Similar to other jurisdictions, it provides educational support and guides them to other governmental resources that allow them to get financial assistance. However, there is a lack of clarity on whether other supports are provided to youth, particularly during their transition planning, such as support in accessing safe and stable housing, life skills training, preparing them for the workforce (those who do not wish to pursue education) and building strong relationships with caseworkers, family and friends.

Prince Edward Island

Youth in care in Prince Edward Island transfer out of the child welfare system when they turn 18 (PHAC, 2019). Similar to other jurisdictions, preparation for the transition to independence are expected to take place prior to this stage, beginning by at least the time the child turns 16 years (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2017).

Youth who are in permanent care can apply to the government's Extended Service, which provides continued services to prepare for independent living up until the age of 21. However, youth are only eligible if they are enrolled in an approved educational, training or rehabilitative program, or are in unusual circumstances that require special transitional support (*Child Protection Act*, 1988). The legislation does not clearly define what unusual circumstances means. Caseworkers are expected to provide information on this program during transition planning, but it is ultimately up to the youth to decide whether they would like to apply. There are no time constraints on the application, meaning youth can choose to apply at any time up until they turn 21 years old. The program offers both financial compensation, which can include covering high school graduation costs, reimbursements of up to \$10,000 for tuition, books and student fees, and housing, and other supports, such as guidance on applying for student loans and bursaries, financial management tips, support in finding an appropriate living arrangement, and continued medical, dental and optical coverage (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2017).

The Provincial Foster Care Program Review Steering Committee (2019) conducted a review of PEI's foster care system which revealed a number of gaps in the transitional supports provided to youth leaving care. The main concerns raised by children in care, foster parents and caseworkers were that youth often felt anxious and not prepared enough when they exited the system. While the Extended Service has been extremely helpful to many youth attending

post-secondary education, it excludes other groups of youth, particularly those who choose to enter the workforce and those who are not in permanent care (e.g., temporary care). Additionally, youth, particularly those who lived in group homes, do not often get the opportunities to learn how to make independent decisions and develop basic life skills while in care. Post-care supports and transition planning do not place enough emphasis on job training, the development of life skills, and relationship building, all of which are key factors to live independently. Other key issues were the lack of affordable and supportive accommodation, as well the lack of support and financial compensation for foster parents who wanted to keep and support children past the age of 18, but were not in the financial position to do so.

The Government of PEI has recently taken action to address the issue of lack of supportive living arrangements for youth who left care but did not have anywhere to go. In 2018, it launched a request for proposals for a new supervised, home-like facility with a five-bedroom unit for youth who have left care (CBC News, 2018). More recently, a new apartment complex in Charlottetown was constructed, which has 10 studio apartments dedicated to young adults leaving care for up to 18 months. Tenants have to be employed or in school and pay an affordable rent based on their income. These young adults also have access to on-site staff who can teach them life skills, such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting and organizing. Although the new housing is quite new, there has been positive feedback from tenants so far, saying it not only fulfills their housing needs, but also allows them to have their own space where they can learn to become independent (Meader, 2021).

Newfoundland and Labrador

Similar to Saskatchewan, the age of protection in Newfoundland and Labrador is also 16 years. However, after this age, youth aged 16 and 17 may be able to continue to receive

protection and intervention services under the Youth Services program if they are meet the same criteria for protection as children or due to a lack of mental capacity (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.).

Once an individual turns 18, they have the option to extend their agreement under the Youth Services program up until they turn 21(Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.). The individual must continue to follow their individualized Youth Services Plan, which is a plan that is developed before they leave care to support the individual's transition to adulthood and typically identifies their needs and goals in housing, education, employment, health and social relationships (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Newfoundland and Labrador, 2019).

The objective of the Youth Services program is to meet the basic needs of youth and ensure they have the opportunity to improve their quality of life. Supports under this program can include financial, residential, supportive and rehabilitative services to individuals who can no longer live at home. For young adults who have returned to their families, it offers supportive services that address concerns related to health, safety and well-being so that the individual can continue to remain home and maintain a connection to family and community (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d). On June 30, 2020, there were 190 young adults accessing youth services (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020).

The Youth Services Agreement used to require young adults to be enrolled in an educational or rehabilitation program to receive support, but new legislation enacted in 2018 has removed these restrictions (Children, Seniors and Social Development, 2019). It is not entirely clear whether there are new conditions that young adults need to meet, other than showing that

they are using the funding and supportive services to accomplish the goals set out in their Youth Services Plan.

Reviews undertaken by the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate in Newfoundland and Labrador (2019) reveal gaps and systemic barriers in these programs. Transition planning is found to be inadequate, as many young adults leaving care fail to acquire the necessary life skills to live independently. Another key barrier is the unavailability of resources and services, particularly the lack of supportive housing options, which translates to long waitlists and delays, which is often more challenging for young adults with complex needs. Finally, many services were difficult to access due to lack of coordination and integration across systems, translating to various eligibility requirements. The report recommends streamlining services and policies across departments to ensure a more smooth and coordinated transition for young adults.

Yukon

Youth in Yukon can remain in government care until they turn 19 years old. Youth aged 16 to 18 who are unable to be re-established with their family have the option to enter into agreements for support services. These agreements can only be for a maximum of six months, although they can be renewed until the individual turns 19 (*Child and Family Services Act*, 2008). Transitional planning is required to begin once the individual turns 16 and should culminate in the development of transitional case plans (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2014).

Youth who are leaving care or were formerly in care can enter agreements with the Director to access transitional supports up until they turn 24. These supports include counselling, training for independent living skills or for educational opportunities, and connecting individuals

to relevant educational and community resources by entering into agreements (*Child and Family Services Act*, 2008).

Reports that have examined the quality and effectiveness of these supports have revealed a number of gaps in these programs. Many youth who were formerly in care felt they were not sufficiently prepared for adult life and faced many difficulties during their transition out of care. One of the key reasons seemed to be attributed to the delivery and quality of the transitional planning. A review undertaken by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2014) revealed that many files of youth in care did not have a reference to transitional planning, despite the requirement in legislation that this planning begin once they turn 16. Consultations conducted by the Yukon Child and Youth Advocate Office [YCAO] (2019) also found that this planning was often not completed on time, leaving individuals in a “state of uncertainty”.

Additionally, there has been criticism about the core principles upon which transitional planning and supports are based, which place emphasis solely on preparing youth for an independent, adult life. Youth are often left out of discussions regarding their own transition, and decision-making often has little engagement with those closest to the individuals, such as family members and educators. This type of approach fails to place any importance on the individual, building a support network, moving towards a family-based setting, and connecting with their community. The Territorial Advocate recommends shifting the focus of transition planning towards family-centered principles and support networks as having individuals and community to rely on is an essentially part of life (YCAO, 2019). This shift would require caseworkers to ensure that children and youth maintain informal supports to family, friends or their communities while they are in care.

It is unclear from legislation and other program details whether individuals are provided any financial assistance in this transition, or even any support to obtain housing or to pursue post-secondary education (it is mentioned that support is provided only for training for educational opportunities). Many youth have found finding a safe place to live once they leave care very challenging, and that they had not learned the appropriate or necessary independent living skills, but instead were taught skills they did not require. These barriers are more prominent among those who lived in a Group Care facility, who did not have opportunities to care for themselves and make their own decisions (YCAO, 2019).

There are promising initiatives underway in the Yukon. In response to recommendations made by the Territorial Advocate in their 2019 report, the Yukon Department of Health and Social Services (2019) indicated it would look into making changes to its transitional supports. While it said it would not extend supports past the age of 24, it recognized that effective linkages to other programs and supports would need to be made so that individuals can find appropriate supports after the age of 24. Additionally, the Government launched a new initiative in 2019: the development of a new transitional group home that applies an innovative program model with the objective of preparing youth for adulthood (Yukon Department of Health and Social Services, 2019). The model, developed in partnership with First Nations groups and non-profit organizations, allows youth to live at the home while also teaching them essential life skills, such as cooking (through a culinary mentor), budgeting, and vocational training. The model also focuses on maintaining connections to community, culture and supports, with two or three staff on site at all times. Drop-in services are also offered for former youth in care aged 19 to 24, which often involves referring them to the appropriate existing adult services, but also provides

them with access to computers, Internet access, shower and laundries facilities (Waddell, 2019). As the home only opened in December 2019, no data on program effectiveness exists yet.

Northwest Territories

In the Northwest Territories (NWT), child protection services are offered to individuals under the age of 19, although there is a separate protection scheme for youth aged 16 to 18. These youth have the option to enter into a Support Service agreement to receive services and support to take care of themselves, which includes foster care (PHAC, 2019). It is mandatory for youth in care to have a transition plan to support their move into adulthood, which should begin either before the child turns 16 or at least one year before their Permanent Custody Order expires. This transition planning should involve feedback from other participants, such as parents, guardians, and Indigenous organizations (Northwest Territories Department of Health and Social Services, 2021).

Youth in permanent custody before turning 19 are eligible to receive post-care support until the age of 23 by entering into Extended Support Services Agreements, which can provide support for education, counselling, employment training, programs for mental or physical development, assistance to find housing, and other agreed-upon necessary services (*Child and Family Services Act*, 1997; Shewchuk, 2020). These agreements are flexible and can be tailored to the individual's needs and goals for life. They also offer foster families the opportunities to continue housing the foster youth/young adults even after they turn 19 (Fenn, 2018).

There is significant take-up of the Extended Support Services Agreements, with 91% of youth in permanent care entering into one once they turned 19 (Government of Northwest Territories, 2020). Critics have said that while the availability of services until the age of 23 is

beneficial, it does not necessarily equate to extensive support nor meet all the needs of these young adults. They have advocated for more wraparound supports instead of piecemeal supports, and more engagement with other organizations who can offer adequate support (Fenn, 2018).

A system-wide audit conducted for the NWT Department of Child and Family Services in 2019-20 revealed that 104 services were requested under a Support Services agreement for 2019-2020. The top 6 requested services, in order, were services to improve housing situation (27%), counselling (16%), services to improve financial situation (15%), other services agreed to by the Director (12%), education (9%), and mental/physical development (7%). This reflects that housing stands as the top unmet need for youth who are on the verge of leaving care, while there is less interest in support for education. The audit also identified that developing transition plans for youth adults transitioning to independent living was a key challenge, although it is not clearly stated what the issues are (Government of Northwest Territories, 2020).

Nunavut

Child protection services are offered to children in Nunavut up until the age of 16. After this age, youth can continue to access protection and intervention services up until the age of 19 by entering into a voluntary agreement if they are unable to live with their parents, cannot care or protect themselves, and cannot voluntarily enter an agreement due to incapacity, or otherwise meet the criteria for a child in need of protection (PHAC, 2019).

The voluntary agreements provide services that allow youth to support themselves and prepare for independence, and can include counselling, rehabilitation programs, parenting programs, services aimed at improving one's financial situation, support for housing, mediation of disputes and possibly other necessary services. The housing support may involve placing a

youth in a specific living arrangement, such as a foster home, facility or other accommodation. The length of agreements must not exceed a 6-month term, but it can continuously be extended past one term up until the age of 19 (*Child and Family Services Act, 1997*).

If a young adult still has a service agreement in place when they turn 19, they may be eligible to receive extended services up until the age of 26. These extended agreements allow young adults to transition to independence with ease and also allows young adults to remain living with long-term foster parents (Government of Nunavut, n.d.). The legislation does not specify whether young adults between the ages of 19 and 26 have to meet any other additional criteria, other than what is mentioned above, in order to access the services. It is also unclear whether the service agreements provide any financial assistance as the legislation only indicates that services are provided to improve one's financial situation.

There is not any literature or data on young adults who have left care, making it difficult to determine their outcomes and the challenges they encountered during their journey. However, reports exploring other issues in Nunavut, such as poverty and homelessness, have noted that youth transitioning out of child welfare system are at immediate risk of homelessness because it is extremely difficult for them to get a public housing unit for years. There is already a shortage of affordable housing in Nunavut, and these young adults leaving care, similar to many others in the territory, must put their name on a waiting list once they turn 19 (Vink et al., 2014). It is also assumed that young adults formerly in care do not have access to appropriate mental health services, as the territory has insufficient quality mental health services despite the high number of suicides and mental health issues faced by Inuit youth (Vink et al., 2014).

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