



Submission to the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights Aging Out of Care

Submitted by: Children's Aid Foundation of Canada

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This brief and response to Senator questions is in follow-up to the October 21st appearance of Wendy Chan, Associate Director, Program Impact and Christina Loc, Youth and Lived Expert Engagement Manager with Children's Aid Foundation of Canada for the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights' study on Aging Out of Care. We are pleased to expand upon our answers to the following questions and accompanying themes highlighted below.

Intersectional Identities and Youth Aging Out of Care

Senator Bernard: I will ask a question that dove tails with the previous panel. On the previous panel, we heard each of the witnesses talk about the intersections of Indigeneity, race, racism, queer reality, homophobia, transphobia and ableism. The youth aging out of care may be even more at risk for some of the challenges that they have identified. I'm wondering, from your work with the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada — Christina, your work with the youth directly, and Wendy, with your work — do you have data that would speak to the numbers of youth from those various social locations accessing your services?

Expanded Response: We appreciate Senator Bernard's question about the importance of considering the experiences of young people with intersecting identities who are aging out of the child welfare system and better understanding their access to and uptake of relevant supports.

Addressing the overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system is a [strategic priority](#) of Children's Aid Foundation of Canada's (CAFC). With our partners, donors and youth advisors, CAFC is committed to developing and supporting targeted strategies that address the specific needs of Black and Indigenous children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system due to systemic barriers to well-being. Among other indicators, this includes increased measurements of success related to:

- Dollar amount and percentage of total grants directed to programs and initiatives targeting overrepresented populations.
- Number of and percentage change in number of young people served from these communities.
- Number of new partnerships established with experts and organizations committed to addressing the needs of overrepresented populations.

In 2023-2024, across all our initiatives, almost 4,000 Black children, youth, and families were supported (3,742); this is 24% of all of those supported last year. Additionally, over 5,000 Indigenous children, youth, and families were supported (5,278) or 33% of all those supported last year. We also collect race-based and Indigenous identity data at the program level for several national-level initiatives, including our [Post-Secondary Education Program](#) (Figure 1); [Youth Mental Health Fund](#) (Figure 2) and [Youth Works Program](#), Canada's only national pre-

employment development program designed to specifically help youth in and from care transition to independence (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Demographic Analysis of CAFC Scholarship or Bursary Recipients (2023-2024)

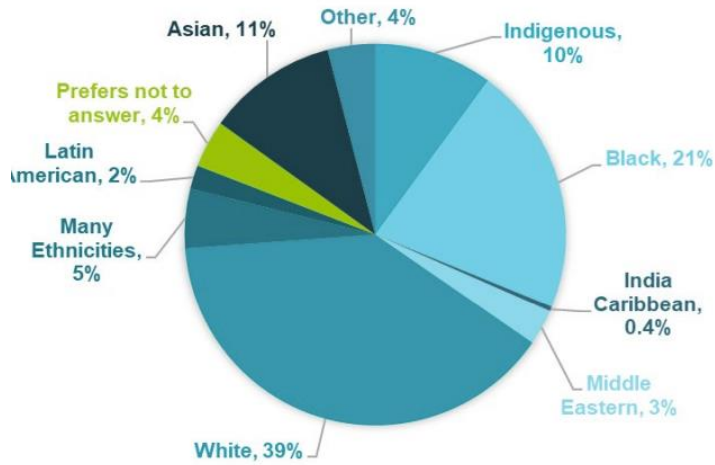


Figure 2: Demographic Analysis of Youth Mental Health Fund Recipients (2023-2024)

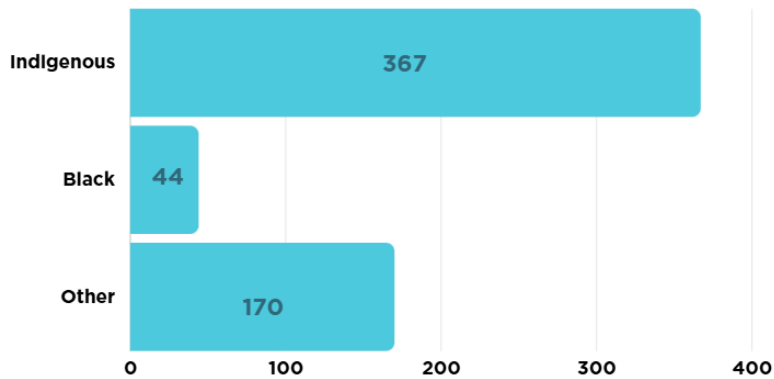
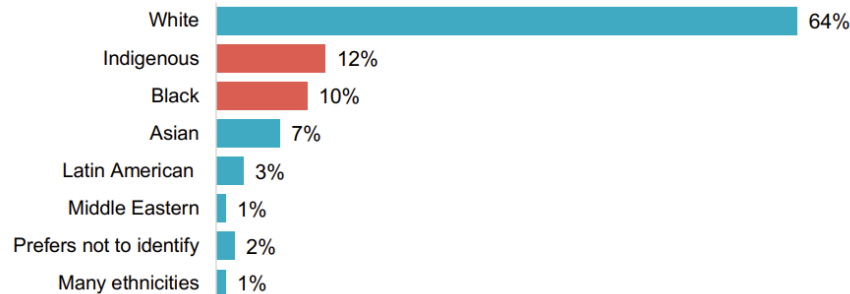


Figure 3: Demographic Analysis of Youth Works Program Participants (2017-2021)

The Foundation has committed to increasing funding and supports for populations overrepresented in child welfare: youth who identify as Indigenous or Black. 22% of Youth Works participants indicated that the ethnicity they most identified with is either Indigenous or Black. The majority of participants (64%) answered that the ethnicity they most identified with is White.



Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care

Senator Pate: You're probably familiar — because you mentioned you knew the two previous witnesses — with the Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care. If there's a plan you have in place that shows how you've taken into account those eight pillars, I think we would be very interested at the committee to receive that.

Expanded Response: Children's Aid Foundation of Canada (CAFC) is proud to be one of the pilot partners for the [Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care Evaluation Model](#). As a pilot partner, CAFC has gone through a process of scoring ourselves to establish our "fidelity score" on each of the eight Equitable Standards. We are now in the process of using the outcome of this assessment to create a concrete action plan, which will be shared publicly and completed in conjunction with CAFC's Young People's Advisory Council to ensure our supports to youth transitioning from care are more equitable.

We are committed to piloting the Equitable Standards Evaluation Model as this is a very tangible way to improve our own supports based on priorities identified by people with lived experience in the child welfare system. Additionally, the national scope of this work is key. Due to the decentralization of child welfare and differences in implementation and supports that are offered across regions, this model helps organizations focus on specific elements that will help improve equitable access to resources and supports no matter where a young person transitioning out of care resides.

We believe this framework can act as a roadmap and strong starting point for any organization or government in developing or adapting supports for youth transitioning to adulthood, or as a complement to existing work in progress. As a pilot partner, we are motivated by the opportunity to be part of a national movement, to demonstrate our support as a visible ally at the national level, and to be part of a community of supportive organizations across the country to help build momentum and action on the Equitable Standards.

Most importantly, lived experts have been telling us what they need for some time. Instead of having youth having to continue to repeat suggestions that have been made in the past, use of the Equitable Standards means that engagement with lived experts can focus on more tangible

steps that an organization will be taking, how to prioritize and implement their action plan, and how to adapt supports and services in specific circumstances and contexts.

Cost/Benefit Analysis of Supporting Young People Aging Out of Care

Senator Pate: I would provide an opportunity for Ms. Chan and Ms. Loc to also discuss whether, especially within the foundation, you've looked at a costing of what happens when you don't intervene. I think you probably heard my question to the previous witnesses wherein there are virtually no folks I meet in prison who have not been in care, yet we spend sometimes upwards of half a million dollars to keep them in custody when supports in the community would be undoubtedly far more effective.

Expanded Response: While CAFC has not conducted our own research into the cost of inaction on supporting the needs of young people aging out of care, we are aware of two reports by the Conference Board of Canada on this topic (one of which CAFC contributed to).

In their 2014 report, [Investing in the Future of Canadian Children in Care](#), the Conference Board of Canada discussed the economic case for action by quantifying the lost economic opportunity that young people leaving the child welfare system represent to the Canadian economy. They found that a child aging out of foster care would earn \$326,000 less income over their lifespan compared with the average Canadian. With a conservative estimate of about 2,291 young people aging out of care annually in Canada, this brings the total economic gap to \$747 million. Since this difference is cumulative year over year, the Conference Board of Canada estimated the total difference over a 10-year period at approximately \$7.5 billion in lost income. They highlighted the need for upfront investments in the mental health and education of young people in and from care to increase their likelihood of finding and maintaining employment

In their 2023 report, [Empowering Indigenous Youth in Care as They Transition to Adulthood: Critical Actions for Philanthropy and Policy](#), which CAFC contributed to, a similar approach was applied to understanding the lost economic opportunity for Indigenous youth aging out of care if action is not taken to improve education, employment, and mental health outcomes. In this case, the Conference Board of Canada projects that an Indigenous youth aging out of care in Canada will earn \$526,500 less over their lifetime than a non-Indigenous youth aging out of care and \$650,000 than non-Indigenous youth in the general population. Over a five-year period, this economic loss across cohorts could amount to between \$2 billion to \$5.5 billion.

Although this report also includes costs to government through inaction, we encourage flipping this narrative that presumes negative outcomes of inaction premised on a deficit focus, to the success that is possible through investments in the education and mental health outcomes of youth transitioning out of care.

Positive Practices: International & Canadian

Senator Bernard: I have a couple of questions. Let me start with Ms. Chan. I was very interested in the international best practices you identified. I don't think we solidified that we would like you to share those with us through the clerk. If you could do that, we would be really interested in knowing more about those international best practices. That would be very helpful for our study.

Expanded Response: In terms of international best practice to support youth aging out of care, we would like to highlight several resources that we believe will be of assistance to Senators in this study (hyperlinked below):

- [OECD Report – Assisting Care Leavers: Time for Action](#) (2022)
- [International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care](#) (INTRAC)
- Strahl, B. et al. (2020). A multinational comparison of care-leaving policy and legislation: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-international-and-comparative-social-policy/article/multinational-comparison-of-careleaving-policy-and-legislation/426A5948C3B429B95279EC3C0FE8DD55>
- van Breda, A. et al. (2020). Extended Care: Global dialogue on policy, practice and research: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740920320193?dgcid=coauthor>
- Mendes, P. & Rogers, J. (2020). Young people transitioning out-of-home-care: What are the lessons from Extended Care Programmes in the USA and England for Australia? <https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article-abstract/50/5/1513/5820581?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

We would also like to highlight that there are many initiatives and programs underway in Canada that are demonstrating positive results and/or charting new evidence and trauma-informed paths in supporting young people transitioning from care:

- [New Housing Models for Youth Transitioning out of Care](#) (CMHC Solutions Lab & WoodGreen)
- [Exploring Critical System Decision Points for 2SLGBTQ+ Youth in Ontario's Children's Aid Societies](#) (INQYR) & [The SOGIE Initiative](#) (OACAS)
- [Mocking Bird Family Model Pilot in Nova Scotia](#) (Government of Nova Scotia)

Additionally, we would like to share that a vital positive practice is always ensuring the engagement of young people with lived experience in the child welfare sector in the formation of programs and initiatives meant to meet their needs. In support of this, CAFC has developed two key documents to support others in this positive practice:

- [Leading with Lived Experience: Youth Engagement Guidelines for the Child Welfare Sector](#) (*scroll down on our publications page)
- [The Bus Ride Home Project](#) (*scroll down on our publications page)

Since good mental health, access to education, and employment are critical factors that positively impact the future well-being and trajectory of young people aging out of care, at CAFC we center our supports to this group of young people around these areas and in the interest of space in this brief, we would like to highlight two of these initiatives as positive practices in Canada that are resulting in better outcomes for youth aging out of care.

First, members of CAFC's Young People's Advisory Council have told us that young people aging out of care require timely access to prioritized, high-quality, trauma-informed and culturally relevant mental health care. We know that a major barrier young people face in their transition from care is timely access to mental health care. CAFC's national [Youth Mental Health Fund](#) helps to remove this barrier by providing funds to address urgent and complex mental health challenges. Working in collaboration with nine delivery partners located across Canada (AB,

BC, MB, NB, NT and ON) funds can be flexibly used to support the young people they work with to pay for therapy and/or counselling, harm reduction and substance use services, crisis support, youth gatherings, Indigenous-focused activities (i.e., support sessions with Elders and traditional ceremonies), and more.

In 2023-2024, this fund supported over 500 young people in and from care in Canada, with most of the recipients being aged 15-19 (53%) followed by those aged 20-25 (28%). When surveyed, 92% of young people who accessed mental health supports reported improved mental health, 91% reported increased resilience/coping strategies, and 82% reported improved self-esteem or sense of self-worth.

Finally, [Youth Works](#) is the only national program of its kind focused specifically on supporting youth aging out of care to find and maintain meaningful employment. It has been operating since 2017 and has been co-designed by CAFC and delivery partners operating in 6 cities across 5 provinces (BC, AB, MB, ON and NB). To date, Youth Works has supported over 3000 young people transitioning out of care, with 97% of youth reporting improved pre-employment tools or knowledge and 82% reporting that they felt more prepared to enter the work force.

For the last four years, Youth Works has been funded in part by the Government of Canada and the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS) but unfortunately despite exceeding ESDC targets, Youth Works was not selected for funding through the most recent call for proposals. Through YESS Program funding, we had been able to expand Youth Works sites and provide youth with critical additional low-barrier and trauma-informed wrap-around services such as mental health care to increase their stability to find and maintain employment. This news has left the future of Youth Works in jeopardy, and we are deeply concerned about the gap in much needed programming this will create for young people from care who are supported through Youth Works across the country.

Recommendations

1. Young People Aging out of Care need Equitable Access to Support

The federal government has a role to play in leveling the playing field and ensuring that young people aging out of care have equitable access to the supports they require.

Youth transitioning out of care have vastly different levels of support available to them based on the region in which they live. This creates inequities in experiences and outcomes, which can be especially pronounced for Black and Indigenous young people who already face unique challenges and barriers due to ongoing experiences of poverty, racism and inequitable access to culturally safe services and supports.

Those aging out of care - Canada's most vulnerable group of young people - need distinct attention when federal programming and funding decisions are being made.

Based on the guiding principle of Canada's Youth Policy, that youth have the right to equal opportunities and supports, we recommend that all national funding and programming initiatives for youth should specifically consider the unique needs of those aging out of care.

2. Young People Need Centralized Access to Learn About Available Supports

The inequitable availability of supports between jurisdictions is exacerbated by the difficulty in finding clear and accessible information about supports youth are eligible for. Lived experts and

young people from care have shared repeatedly over the years that the lack of a central place to learn about supports they are eligible for means that youth and workers struggle to find out about and then access supports, and also that some available supports are underutilized because youth are not aware of them.

Positive practices adopted by some regional online navigation platforms include the ability to search and filter by region, type of support and eligibility, clear criteria for supports and services, the ability to speak with a person who can help navigate the platform and provide warm referrals to the services listed, and a robust marketing strategy to ensure people know about the platform and see it as a user-friendly place to learn about relevant and current resources.

To assist youth aging out of care to be able to optimize supports that are available to them, we recommend that the federal government consider investing in organizations with the capacity and interest to do this work, and we would be happy to collaborate with government and other sector leaders on this discussion.

3. Investments are Needed in National Data to Track Outcomes, Address Disparities and Measure Progress

We know there are inequalities in outcomes for young people in and from care versus their peers in the general population. But we don't know the full extent of these, and it is challenging to know what is working because there is no longitudinal tracking or national data source following the well-being of youth aging out of care in Canada.

Without this data, it is incredibly challenging to develop a national picture of young people aging out of care, target solutions to meet their needs and measure progress to improve outcomes.

We recommend increased federal leadership to coordinate the reporting and collection of this data in an evidence and trauma-informed way as well as investments in projects like the Public Health Agency of Canada's Canadian Child Welfare Information System to develop a national child welfare database to inform policy and practice are key.