

## **Promoting Positive Outcomes for Youth From Care**

Research team: Deborah Rutman, Ph.D. & Carol Hubberstey, M.A., (Co-Principal Researchers), and April Barlow & Erinn Brown (Research Assistants / Peer Support workers).

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### **Who we are**

Our project team was made up of Deborah Rutman, Ph.D. & Carol Hubberstey, M.A., (Co- Principal Researchers), and April Feduniw (formerly Barlow) & Erinn Brown (Research Assistants / Peer Support workers). The project team was comprised of two researchers with experience undertaking academic and community-based research and two former youth in care experienced in providing peer support.

Our project partners were the Greater Victoria Child & Youth Advocacy Society, the National Youth in Care Network, and the BC Ministry for Children and Family Development. As well, the project was guided by an Advisory Committee comprised of young adults involved with the BC Federation of Youth in Care Networks, staff of the Victoria Youth Clinic, head office and regional staff of the BC Ministry for Children and Family Development, faculty and researchers in the School of Child and Youth Care, and staff of the BC Office for Children and Youth.

The project was sponsored by the UVic School of Social Work and was funded from 2003-2006 by the Crime Prevention Partnership Program of the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC).

### **What our project is about**

The Promoting Positive Outcomes for Youth project was a British Columbia study designed to examine what happens to youth following their exit from foster care at age 19.

The overall goal of the project was to better understand the processes, supports and resources that make a positive difference to youth and that help to lead to successful transitions from care. Additional project objectives were to examine strategies to provide youth with peer support during the process of exiting care, and to provide opportunities for youth to voice perspective on how successful transitions are defined.

### **Background to the study**

Canadian longitudinal research on outcomes for youth from care is essentially non-existent and has been recognized as a major knowledge gap by researchers, practitioners, and policy makers alike (Craig, 2001). At the same time, we know from our previous research that many youth leaving care lack education, personal stability, support in the form of someone who cares about how they are doing, and practical skills such as grocery shopping, meal planning, budgeting, searching for finding safe housing, decision-making

and self advocacy (Rutman et al, 2003). Many of these young people also have experienced significant trauma, abuse and neglect, including the often neglectful parenting of the government care system, leaving many youth attempting to cope with unresolved internal conflicts. In view of the magnitude and degree of these risk factors, there is good reason to suspect that when the transition from foster care is not well supported, youth are at greater risk for poor health, homelessness, sexual exploitation, victimization, and involvement in the criminal justice and child welfare systems.

### **Research Process**

The Promoting Positive Outcomes for Youth project was a prospective, longitudinal (3-year) study that followed a cohort of 37 youth in transition from care over a 2.5-year period. Two BC communities were involved in the project: a metropolitan centre and a small city (though within an hour's drive of the urban centre). Youth were invited to participate in a series of in-depth face to face interviews, scheduled at approximately 6 to 9 month intervals.

An interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature and consultations with national colleagues. Interview topics included: background information/demographics; in-care experiences; family relationships; parenting experiences; physical and mental health; substance use; educational experience; training & employment; source of income; social supports and community involvement; experiences of victimization and/or offending; self-care skills; and preparedness for leaving care.

### **Data Collection**

The study also was a qualitative exploration of how 'peer support' is experienced and used by youth in their transition from care. Youth participants self-selected whether they wanted to receive peer support, which was offered on an as-needed basis by two young adults who themselves lived in care. The support focussed on practical, emotional and crisis-oriented issues. As an aspect of the research, the project explored whether and how the provision of 'peer support' makes a difference to youth from care.

### **Overview of findings discussed in project reports**

Our Final Report provides information on the life circumstances of the youth participants from Time 1 to Time 4. As with the two previous reports (*Baseline Report on Findings; Bulletin of Time 2 Findings*), findings presented in our Final Report continue to present a disquieting picture of youths' life circumstances. Not unlike existing North American literature on youth from care, youth from this study were found to: have a lower level of education; be more likely to rely on income assistance as their main source of income; have a more fragile social support network; experience considerable transience and housing instability; and be parenting. In relation to criminal activities, youths' involvement with the criminal justice system declined over time. However, subsequent to leaving care, they continued to be victimized in various ways.

A striking finding was the relationship between mental health issues and parenting – the majority of participants who were parents also reported mental health concerns such as

depression and anxiety; similarly, the majority of participants who had mental health issues were parents.

As well, in stark contrast to recently released census data that highlighted the growing trend for young people to reside in the parental home well into their 20's, the majority of youth in this study did not live with their parents or other family members. Moreover, once these youth turned 19 they no longer had the support of the 'state parent' to fall back onto.

In sum, study findings led to the conclusion that what is needed is a *rethinking* of existing government policies, programs, and priorities, along with the role of communities and families in supporting youth from care. Central to this rethinking is our key message and primary recommendation:

***that youth from care need to have as gradual and extended a transition process to adulthood as youth in the general population.***

For more information on this project, please contact Deb Rutman, School of Social Work, 721-8202 or drutman@uvic.ca.

**References:**

Craig, B. (2001). Annotated bibliography on transitions to independence. Unpublished manuscript. Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada.

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