



# **“HALF THE TIME I FELT LIKE NOBODY LOVED ME”**

## **THE COSTS OF ‘AGING OUT’ OF STATE GUARDIANSHIP IN ONTARIO**

A report prepared by,

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## **The Costs of ‘Aging Out’ of State Guardianship in Ontario**

This report is part of Marsha Rampersaud’s larger PhD research project, *To Protect or To Punish: Illuminating Pathways from Care to Criminalization*, completed in the Department of Sociology at Queen’s University. This research project received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Marsha is currently appointed as a Postdoctoral Fellow on the *Rights for Children and Youth Partnership* in the School of Social Work at Ryerson University.

This report was co-authored by Linda Mussell, PhD, a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow (2021-2023) at the University of Ottawa in the School of Political Studies and Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies.

The quote in the title of this report is by Riyad, a 22 year old youth from Toronto interviewed for this research project.

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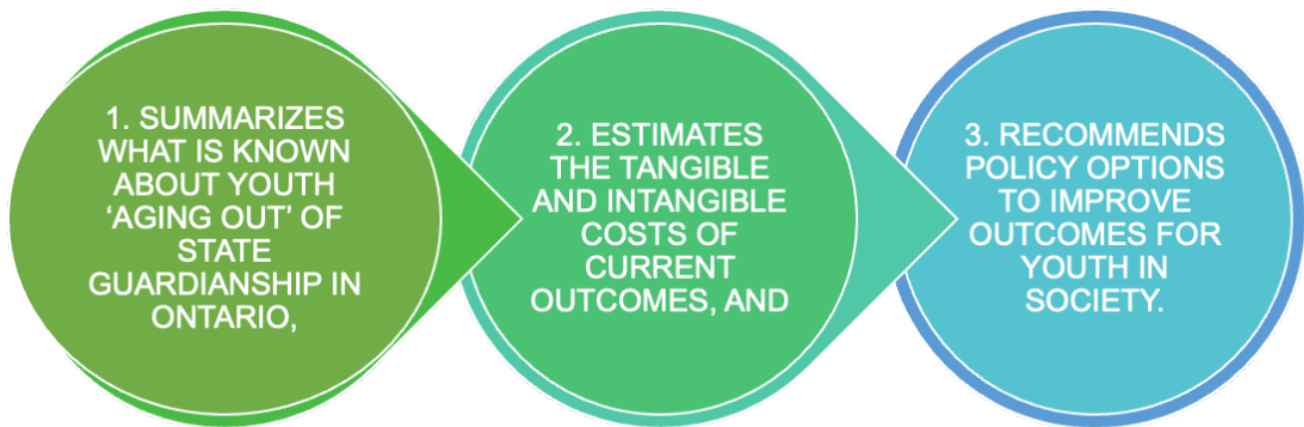
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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2020, there were 2,762,885 children and youth, ages 0 to 17, in Ontario (Varrella, 2021). Approximately 11,700 (0.4%) of these children and youth are under state guardianship (MCCSS, 2021). Data available from 2011 shows a quarter of all Canadian children and youth in care live in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Almost half of these young people are in extended society care (formerly known as Crown Wards in Ontario), meaning they have been permanently removed from their homes and families. For these youth, the province has assumed formal responsibility as their “parent” (Kovarikova, 2017). This report draws on interview data with 25 young people who have ‘aged out’ of state guardianship and 10 Youth-in-Transition Workers. The interviews are synthesized with available data and research to identify the strengths and challenges young people face after leaving care and analyze the costs to society when youth experience adverse outcomes after ‘aging out.’ This report highlights the systemic failures that underscore the adverse outcomes common among youth leaving state guardianship. Specifically, this report:



## Findings

Our research illuminated five issues that have significant impact on youths’ future prospects and quality of life in adulthood, which form the focus of our analysis: education; employment, poverty, and income support; housing and homelessness; criminalization; and mental and physical health and wellbeing. These issues are interrelated and structural, and present opportunities for intervention. The cost of adverse outcomes in these five areas for youth ‘aging out’ of care are high—between \$222 and \$268 million for the cohort of 1,000 youth ‘aging out’ each year—plus other intangible costs (Shaffer et al., 2016). Intangible costs are significant and include the trauma and suffering experienced by youth. Increased support for youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship from age 18 up to their mid to late 20s is required to help meet living costs, pursue further education, and connect with their communities for personal, cultural, and social support (Shaffer et al., 2016). Providing more time would reduce the costs of adverse outcomes and generate intangible benefits as well. Furthering a goal of readiness that shifts away from age cut-offs and instead focuses on supporting young people to leave care when they feel *ready* is needed. Meaningful systemic change in Ontario will transform the lives of children and youth in and leaving state guardianship.

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<sup>1</sup> In Canada overall, there were 47,885 children and youth in care in 2011; 11,455 of whom were aged 15 to 19 (Statistics Canada, 2011).

## ISSUE # 1 EDUCATION

Young people under state guardianship encounter a number of barriers that can make it difficult for them to be successful in school. Frequent moves between foster homes and group homes, often resulting in lengthy absences from school, are a significant barrier to high school completion. Past traumas contribute to higher rates of substance use, mental health issues, learning disabilities, and behaviour labelled as “criminogenic.” These factors can further erode young peoples’ potential to achieve educational success. Some fall significantly behind in their studies and may find it impossible to catch up. In these tough circumstances, some youth are held back for a year in school and most are hindered in meeting their academic potential (Liljedahl, Rae, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2013). Importantly, 56% of youth under state guardianship in Ontario drop out of high school. Few youth leaving state guardianship continue with post-secondary education.

Finances are a significant barrier for many youth to attend post-secondary studies. With financial support, approximately 60% (n=264) of eligible youth report accessing resources to attend post-secondary school straight from high school (CAFC, 2018). But many youth ‘aging out’ have to prioritize employment for survival, which may mean placing educational goals aside. For youth who do want to pursue post-secondary studies, many have little support when it comes to researching schools, visiting campuses, and applying for post-secondary programs. Among eligible youth who do apply for post-secondary studies in Ontario,<sup>2</sup> the majority (84%) enrol in apprenticeship programs or college, rather than university (16%) (OPACY, 2012a).

Information about the post-secondary graduation rates of Ontario youth who were previously under state guardianship is not publicly available. However, in their research with youth leaving state guardianship in British Columbia, economist Marvin Shaffer and his colleagues (2016) reported youth graduated from university at a rate that is one-sixth that of their peers who were never under state guardianship. If we apply this rate to youth in Ontario, of the 42<sup>3</sup> youth who enroll in university each year, we can expect only five (12.8%) will graduate.<sup>4</sup> These five Ontarian youth represent 0.5% of young people leaving state guardianship annually who graduate from university.<sup>5</sup> For youth who experience challenges and do not attain their educational goals, this can have a direct impact on future life opportunities and employment prospects.

**Importantly, 56% of youth under state guardianship in Ontario drop out of high school. Few youth continue with post-secondary education. Among eligible youth who do apply for post-secondary studies, 84% enrol in apprenticeship and college programs rather than university (16%).**

### *Estimated Costs*

- The cohort of at least 560 youth (the number is likely higher) leaving care who do not finish high school each year in Ontario stand to lose a combined total of lost earnings between \$394,800,000 to

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<sup>2</sup> Approximately 44% of youth leaving state guardianship complete high school annually. Data is not available specifying the precise proportion of youth within this group who are eligible to attend post-secondary school.

<sup>3</sup> This number is based on approximately 264 youth leaving care who access resources to attend post-secondary school, 16% of which (n=42) attend university.

<sup>4</sup> Youth leaving state guardianship graduate university at a rate one sixth that of Ontario youth (77%), which amounts to graduating 12.8% of the time. If 42 youth enroll in university each year, we can expect approximately five will graduate, based on this rate.

<sup>5</sup> The university graduation rate for Ontario youth is on average 77% per year, with negligible fluctuation across cohorts (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2021).

\$1,052,800,000 over their lifetime. Shaffer and colleagues (2016) estimate that at least 30% of this cost is borne by governments in foregone tax revenues alone.

## ISSUE # 2 EMPLOYMENT, POVERTY, AND INCOME SUPPORT

Low educational attainment significantly impacts youths' future career prospects and many 'age out' to poverty. Without a high school diploma, the possibility of finding meaningful work that provides more than basic needs is significantly reduced. In previous generations, a high school diploma was adequate for most jobs, including many well-paid jobs. More recently however, "The growing complexity of work in the global knowledge economy and the rising rates of post-secondary completion in Canada...have reduced the relative value of a high school diploma" (The Conference Board of Canada, 2021). In an increasingly credentialed society, it is now commonplace for employers to specify post-secondary education as a minimum qualification for employment, even when it exceeds the actual skills required of entry-level jobs. As a result, employment opportunities available to young people who have not graduated high school are limited, less secure, and lower paying than other careers that young people qualify for with post-secondary training. These circumstances have devastating impacts on the majority of youth who 'age out' of state guardianship in Ontario without completing high school.

**Employment opportunities available to youth who have not graduated high school are limited, less secure, and lower paying than other careers that young people qualify for with post-secondary training.**

To mitigate potential financial hardship for youth leaving state guardianship, nearly all youth receive the Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY) benefit, administered by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. This benefit provides an average of \$850 to youth monthly and expires when youth turn 21. While CCSY is certainly helpful, the current amount provides little financial security for youth in the face of rising housing, food, and other living expenses. When youth turn 21, the abrupt stop to CCSY creates further challenges. Approximately 57% (570 youth per year) of young adults who were formerly under state guardianship rely on some form of government income support in adulthood, including Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program (OPACY, 2012a).

### *Estimated Costs*

- If 570 of the 1000 youth leaving state guardianship each year rely on Ontario Works for income support, the cost to the province to support this group of youth is more than \$5 million dollars annually; over a lifetime (18 to 65) this would amount to \$235 million (or more than \$400,000 per person).

## ISSUE # 3 HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Youth leaving state guardianship are acutely vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. Youth ‘aging out’ often leave state guardianship without adequate support and guidance to find secure housing or to live independently. As a result, these youth are 200 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who were never under state guardianship (Doucet, 2020; Gaetz et al., 2016). Indigenous and LGBTQ+ youth experience homelessness at the highest rates (Doucet, 2020). Youth leaving state guardianship who experience homelessness are likely to be homeless for longer than other similarly situated vulnerable youth (Raising the Roof, 2009).

**Youth ‘aging out’ are 200 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who were never under state guardianship.**

A lack of family support, combined with poverty, mean many youth leaving state guardianship move frequently—between homelessness, emergency shelters, transitional housing, and rented properties (Shaffer et al., 2016). Some youth report couch surfing for months at a time (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Kovarikova, 2017). These conditions demonstrate a pattern of frequent moves that begins while under state guardianship and continues after youth ‘age out’—with equally disruptive and devastating consequences.

### *Estimated Costs*

- Approximately 58% (n=580) of youth leaving state guardianship each year will experience homelessness. If these young people stay in emergency shelters, the annual cost to taxpayers is approximately \$13.4 million. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the costs of operating shelter beds increased, with the reported cost of a single bed in Toronto doubling from \$40,000 to \$80,000 (BGM Strategy Group, 2020).

## ISSUE # 4 CRIMINALIZATION

When young people are exposed to significant, compounding traumas they sometimes develop survival skills in response to their environments that can become visible to others as disruptive behaviours (Finlay et al., 2019). Many foster parents and frontline staff in group homes fail to recognize these behaviours as expressions of pain and respond by trying to manage the behaviours, an approach which often involves the police (Finlay et al., 2019). As a result, these youth are overrepresented in the youth justice system. The conditions that youth face after leaving state guardianship further increase their likelihood of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Longitudinal studies tracking the progress of youth who have ‘aged out’ over time show that this group is more likely to experience imprisonment as adults than their peers who have stable familial support (Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Given the

**When young people are exposed to significant, compounding traumas they sometimes develop survival skills that become visible to others as disruptive behaviours. Often the police are called to intervene. As a result, these youth are overrepresented in the youth justice system.**

tumultuous transition to adulthood youth leaving state guardianship face, they need more support so that they are not criminalized due to systemic failures. There is a need to establish prevention and diversion programs in the community that can better support youth and keep them out of custody.

### ***Estimated Costs***

- Despite declining crime rates and steady imprisonment rates, per capita expenditures on the criminal justice system have *increased* (Story & Malkin, 2013 cited in Koegl & Day, 2018). On average it costs Canadian citizens \$75,077 per year (\$206 per day) to imprison one man in a federal, medium security prison; it costs \$83,861 per year (\$230 per day) to imprison one woman in a federal prison (all security levels) (Segel-Brown, 2018). It costs \$78,475 per year (\$215 per day) to imprison someone in a provincial jail (Statistics Canada, 2018). The current system is not working to reduce or prevent crime, which means we could be spending our money more efficiently and effectively.

## **ISSUE # 5 MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

Youth who ‘age out’ of state guardianship experience worse health outcomes than their peers who have not been under state guardianship. Many factors that impact a person’s health are outside of individual control. Social determinants of health, for example, refer specifically to socioeconomic factors, such as education and income. Experiences of social and economic inequality also extend as health inequity in people’s lives. For example, health and education are inextricably linked (PHO, 2008). It is widely recognized that those with higher educational attainment are healthier overall than those with less education (PHO, 2008). In contrast, poor health and low income security can trap individuals, families, and communities in a vicious poverty-illness cycle (Lönroth, Tessier, Hensing, & Behrendt, 2020). Youth under state guardianship may benefit from additional support around school in order to succeed, transition into adulthood, and achieve strong health outcomes (PHO, 2008).

**Youth who ‘age out’ of state guardianship experience worse health outcomes than their peers who have not been under state guardianship.**

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, also lead to poor health outcomes. Young people who experience as few as four ACEs are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide, 4.6 times more likely to experience depression, and 7 times and 10 times respectively to develop alcohol or drug dependencies compared to those who have experienced zero ACEs (Humber College, 2020). Because youth who are apprehended by child protection services have experienced significant trauma, abuse, or neglect in childhood, compounded by considerable instability while under state guardianship, it is unsurprising that two thirds of these youth experience mental health challenges (Scully & Finlay, 2015), and one third have been formally diagnosed with a mental disorder (Kovarikova, 2017). By comparison, 20% of youth in Ontario’s general population experience some form of a mental health challenge (MHASEF Research Team, 2015).

According to a study in British Columbia (2009), the death rate for youth ‘aging out’ of state guardianship, ages 19 to 25, is 6.5 times higher than that of the general population. Youth are denied what they need to survive and thrive while under state guardianship. After they ‘age out,’ many are left to contend with traumas while isolated and alone. This is a horrific and unacceptable outcome for youth who were under the state’s “protection” and “care.”

## *Estimated Costs*

- Health expenditures are higher for individuals who have lower incomes. In Canada, the average monthly cost to maintain a hospital bed is \$10,900 (ACTO, 2017). If even 1% of the approximately 580 youth who ‘age out’ and experience homelessness each year seek healthcare services at a hospital in Ontario which requires an overnight stay in a hospital bed, the average monthly cost to taxpayers would be \$63,220; over one year, this cost would be \$758,640.

## **In Summary**

Based on the combined total of lost earnings of youth leaving state guardianship over their lifetimes, the province stands to lose approximately **\$118 to \$315.8 million** in revenue.

The lifetime cost to the province to support youth leaving state guardianship who rely on income supports like Ontario Works is approximately **\$235 million**.

Over their lifetime, youth leaving state guardianship who experience homelessness may cost the province approximately **\$629.8 million** for emergency shelter.

Youth who leave state guardianship and experience incarceration stand to cost the province approximately **\$19.6 to \$36 million annually**; over their lifetime, the province may incur **nearly \$1 billion** in incarceration costs. Actual costs are likely much higher as this amount does not include other criminal justice expenses.

The lifetime cost to the province if even 1% of youth leaving state guardianship require prolonged hospital care over their lifetime is approximately **\$35.6 million**. Given the connection between Adverse Childhood Experiences and poor health outcomes, this number is likely much higher.

**The total estimated costs borne by the province based on the adverse outcomes youth leaving state guardianship face in their lifetimes is more than \$2 billion.**

## Recommendations

The following recommendations for change were informed by first-voice advocates with lived experience in the state guardianship system and those who provide direct service to young people in and leaving state guardianship. Some of those who contributed include:

**Charlene April, Creating Roots**

**Mobafa Baker, StepStones for Youth**

**Irwin Elman, former Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth**

**Jennifer Gourley and Vanessa Wu, Free to Be**

**Aviva Zukerman Schure, Never Too Late**

### RECOMMENDATION # 1

***Focus on interdependence instead of independence.***

Youth under state guardianship need continuous support, and more time to transition out of state guardianship and achieve a balance of *interdependence* with peer and non-professional support networks and community. Authentic relationships with professionals should also be allowed. The current goal of *independence* is a false construct, as everyone depends on others at different points and in different ways throughout their lives, especially youth in today's society. Increasing supportive networks will reduce the need for systems and professionals in youths' lives.

### RECOMMENDATION # 2

***Prioritize permanent and long-term caregiver and housing placements. Implement the Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) philosophy.***

Relationship-based housing options provide a baseline of stability and support to youth that mitigate the likelihood of longer-term adverse outcomes. Youth in permanent or long-term, safe and stable homes early on, that last beyond age 18, experience improved academic achievement, job retainment, and mental health. Housing stability is critical to improving mental health for youth who have suffered trauma, abuse, neglect, and inconsistent guardian care. For youth who leave housing placements, the HF4Y approach prioritizes finding them safe and suitable housing and providing the necessary supports to keep them housed. This philosophy underscores housing as a basic right. When youth are supported with the basic necessities of life, including housing, they are better positioned to thrive.

### RECOMMENDATION # 3

***Provide holistic support; create conditions that make educational success possible.***

Provide multi-institutional, integrated, and holistic support to all youth under state guardianship, including living costs, advocacy, mentoring, trauma-informed counselling, community connections, and social support. Holistic support means a one-stop-shop where youth can access all of the supports to meet their basic needs first, and then be able to meet their aspirations and other life goals.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 4**

### ***Expand and continue mental health support.***

Support the emotional and mental health of youth leaving state guardianship. Increase access to supports and ensure support is ongoing. Provide **all** youth leaving state guardianship with the *Aftercare Benefits Initiative*; continue trauma-informed counseling and life skills support services without an age cut-off for youth 25+.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 5**

### ***Provide transition supports for young people entering adulthood.***

All youth should be provided with strong links to support networks and community far beyond the age of 18. Policies that dictate support be cut off when youth reach particular ages need to be reconsidered. The state should take their parental responsibilities seriously; and those responsibilities cannot simply end once a young person turns 18. Available services should be made more accessible, and for a longer amount of time. A universal age-range is needed for the term “youth.”

## **RECOMMENDATION # 6**

### ***Extend and redistribute Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY) benefit.***

Increase the CCSY benefit to match the cost of living expenses for young people ‘aging out’ of state guardianship. Extend the CCSY benefit up to age 25, at minimum, for **all** youth leaving state guardianship. Redistribute these funds from Children’s Aid Societies to community-run organizations for distribution. Youth who are supported in finding safe, affordable, and sustainable housing and who have their basic needs met can focus on achieving their life goals. Increased support further improves youths’ overall quality of life.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 7**

### ***Support young parents.***

Create supports and services for young parents who were formerly under state guardianship without increasing the risk of their children entering the system.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 8**

### ***Provide services and supports to parents/guardians of origin.***

A separate government system or department is needed to provide more support for youths’ parents and guardians of origin.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 9**

### ***Reunify youth with their families.***

If a young person is on track to ‘age out’ of the state guardianship system, prioritize reunification and provide necessary supports for the family to be successful. Better evaluation of parents’ readiness is needed, which should include and center the voice of young people.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 10**

### ***Move to a family model of child welfare.***

Shift away from a prevention and intervention model toward a family model of child welfare.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 11**

### ***Tackle the disproportionate representation of children and youth of colour in the state guardianship system.***

Increase cultural competency and awareness within the child welfare system. Understand differences in protecting children and shift away from Euro-centric and white understandings of foster care removal procedures.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 12**

### ***Mandate a standard of care and service delivery for all Children's Aid Societies.***

A standard of care and service delivery should be mandated for all Children's Aid Societies in the province.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 13**

### ***Reinstate the Office of the Provincial Child and Youth Advocate.***

This position is necessary for our community to hold the child welfare system accountable. System accountability is needed to ensure that standards of care are met, that young people are being supported to succeed, and that youths' voices are centered in the decisions that impact their lives.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 14**

### ***Monitor and evaluate youths' progress and needs over time.***

Youths' progress should be monitored and evaluated with their participation and leadership (action research) on an ongoing basis to understand what programs, advocacy, and systemic changes best support youth, and where improvements are necessary. Create and mandate system impact measurement tools to monitor the health and wellbeing of children, youth, and adults; use this data to inform policy and practice. This process ensures timely, responsive, effective, and evidence-based interventions as youths' needs change.

Additionally, we recommend:

## **RECOMMENDATION # 15**

### ***Remove barriers to seeking and staying in educational programs.***

This includes waiving tuition and fees for programs (adult high school equivalency and post-secondary) and ensuring that youth have adequate living expense funding during their education. Child-care subsidies should be given to young parents seeking education. Removing barriers means understanding the unique challenges confronting individual youth and providing solutions to assist help remove barriers to allow them to meet their educational and other life goals—for example, such as facilitating safe, private, and quiet living and workspaces.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 16**

### ***Provide close mentorship to guide youth through education programs.***

Youth under state guardianship may be the first generation in their family to complete high school or seek post-secondary education, and they may lack the guidance that other youth receive from families and family connections with these intergenerational benefits. This mentorship includes close support to help youth choose

programs, apply for programs, understand how to succeed, and work through challenges in order to stay in programs.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 17**

### ***Address the criminalization of youth.***

Continue supports, like case conferencing and requiring CAS representatives to attend court appearances, for youth who ‘age out’ and are criminalized. Prioritize and increase access to community-based diversion programs and connect youth with treatment and support. Incarceration, both pre-trial and post-sentencing, should be avoided. Bail and probation conditions that set young people up to fail must be addressed. Focus should shift away from retribution toward restoration and transformation.

## **RECOMMENDATION # 18**

### ***Value alternative ways of knowing.***

Indigenous epistemologies are distinct from dominant western worldviews. Acknowledge, resource, and celebrate Indigenous worldviews in child welfare policy and practice. This means resourcing Indigenous service providers and communities to provide culturally specific support and mentorship for Indigenous youth under state guardianship, in support of educational plans and other life goals. It also means moving away from language and values which centre western worldviews at the exclusion of Indigenous ones.