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Interventions for youth aging out of care: A scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Youth aging out the child welfare system are being transitioned out of the child welfare system with few interventions in place to support their move to independence. In developed countries, compared to their peers, youth aging out of care face poorer outcomes when it comes to education, employment, and housing. A better understanding of the effectiveness of the existing interventions that support youth in care is warranted. This paper presents a critical scoping review of the available evidence on interventions available to youth who are aging out of the child welfare system and identifies gaps for future research. Arksey and O'Malley's framework for scoping reviews shaped the process of this review. A total of thirteen databases were searched resulting in the retrieval of 1978 articles. Of the 1978 retrieved, only 68 met the review's criteria. Studies included were in English, described an intervention that was implemented and evaluated in developed countries, and published within the last 20 years. Interventions were categorized as: housing, employment, education, mentorship, independent living, and health. The majority of studies fell under the independent living category which provide cohesive resources to improve education, housing, and employment. Studies evaluating these programs generally reported positive outcomes on youth's ability to complete their education and attain part- or full-time employment. Methods of evaluations were found to be methodologically weak with respect to determining the effectiveness of interventions in ensuring youth's successful transitions to independence. Future research should look at longitudinal outcomes of youth and cost-benefit analysis of supporting youth transitioning out of the child welfare system. Recommendations also include policy changes extending the age of eligibility for youth transitioning out of the child welfare system.

1. Introduction

The period of adolescence is a time when youth begin to assert their independence and explore their identities as they prepare to transition to adulthood. Marginalized youth, which include but are not limited to Indigenous, refugee, sexual minority (Edge, Newbold, & McKeary, 2014; Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009), and youth in care of the child welfare system, face additional adversities during adolescence (Kääriälä & Hiilamo, 2017). Studies on marginalized youth show that they experience poverty, trauma, and discrimination, which can lead to negative health outcomes and risky behaviors (Edge et al., 2014; Wexler et al., 2009).

According to Jones, Sinha, and Trocmé (2015), there were 62,428 youth in care in Canada in 2013. In the United Kingdom (UK), approximately 10,000 youth transition out of the child welfare system each year (National Audit Office, 2015). In 2015, an estimate of 27,703 youth in the United States (US) transitioned out of the child welfare system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). On average, youth in the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK transition out of the child welfare system at the age of 18 (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Liabo, McKenna, Ingold, & Roberts, 2016; Mendes, Baidawi & Snow 2014a; Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012).

In the US, they have enacted the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which allows states to extend care up to age 21 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017). Most recently, 25 states in the US have extended foster care (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017). Some provinces in Canada are also extending support services for youth aging out of care until age 21 (Milne, Kozlowski, & Sinha, 2014; Wegner-Lohin, Kyte, & Trocmé, 2014). In Australia, legislation and policies have allowed support to be provided on an "as needed basis" from 19 to up to 25 years of age (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2010). Lastly, in the UK, the government requires local authorities to support youth leaving the child welfare system up to the age of 25 provided that they are engaged in educational or vocational

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opportunities (National Audit Office, 2015).

Even with the extension of support, youth transitioning out of care experience difficulties in finding and maintaining employment, securing stable housing (Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden, & Rosenau, 2012; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006; Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012; Reilly, 2003), and completing their education (Bender, Yang, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2015; Courtney et al., 2004; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Gypen et al., 2017; Kääriälä & Hiilamo, 2017; Montgomery et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003). Studies have shown that many youth are unable to meet their basic needs and end up in poverty once they age out of care (Dworsky, 2005; Gypen et al., 2017; Reilly, 2003).

Difficulties in the areas of housing and employment, resulting from their low-income status lead to health issues among youth aging out of care, including mental health issues. Moreover, youth in care may also experience barriers when it comes to accessing health care (Collins, 2016; Reilly, 2003). These youth are at higher risk for developing mental health issues related to psychological or substance abuse (Bender et al., 2015; Kääriälä & Hiilamo, 2017). Hence, they are more likely than their peers to receive counseling for these concerns (Courtney et al., 2004). The literature further states that youth formerly in care frequently find themselves involved with the criminal justice system (Dworsky et al., 2012; Gypen et al., 2017; Montgomery et al., 2006; Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012).

Interventions (e.g., services, programs, and policies) have been created in an attempt to support former youth in care and give them a level playing field. The interventions prepare youth for transition into adulthood through services, which vary depending on the political context, funding, and location (Dworsky et al., 2012; Edge et al., 2014; Montgomery et al., 2006). Despite the plethora of services, programs, and policies that aim to remedy the problems that former youth in care face, research on these interventions is limited (Bender et al., 2015; Donkoh, Underhill, & Montgomery, 2006; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Manno, Jacobs, Alson, & Skemer, 2014; Scott, Moore, Hawkins, Malm & Beltz, 2012). A scoping review was chosen in order to examine the extent, range, and nature of research activity, and identify knowledge gaps, especially in an area where there is a limited number of randomized controlled trials (Levac, Colquhoun, & O'Brien, 2010).

The objectives of this scoping review were to examine and map the available evidence on the interventions available to youth aging out of the child welfare system and to identify avenues for future research. While there are many terms used in the literature to refer to children leaving the care of the government (e.g., care leavers, youth aging out of foster care), in this scoping review, the terms youth "aging" or "transitioning" out of "care" or the "child welfare system" are applied. The specific questions guiding this scoping review were: (1) What types of interventions (services, programs, policies) are used to support youth aging out of the child welfare system? (2) What are the characteristics of these interventions? (3) How are the interventions evaluated? The scoping review concludes with an overview of the findings, limitations of the interventions and the studies, and directions for future research.

2. Methods

2.1. Framework

The methodological framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) for scoping reviews served as a guide for this review. The following outlines the steps for a scoping review as stated by Arksey and O'Malley (2005):

- Stage one: Identifying the research question.
- Stage two: Identifying relevant studies. Scoping reviews are designed to be comprehensive. Therefore, published and grey literature sources are identified, which includes electronic databases, reference lists, and hand-searching of key journals, existing networks, organizations, and conferences.
- Stage three: Study selection. Inclusion and exclusion criteria are developed and adjusted accordingly as researchers become more familiar with the literature.
- Stage four: Charting the data. This stage involves "charting" important information identified in the data generated by the literature search. Specifically, creating categories to organize the information gathered from the literature sources. "Charting" of data may include making note of the study population, type of intervention, outcome measures utilized, study design, and results.
- Stage five: Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. An overview of the included literature is reviewed and presented.

Scoping reviews act as stepping-stones for future researchers because of its ability to identify gaps in the literature, and highlight key areas of research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

2.2. Search strategy

Searches were conducted in May 2016, and 13 databases were searched resulting in a total of 1978 articles found. These databases include: Academic Search Complete, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, CINAHL, Cochrane Library, Dissertations and Theses, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Family and Society Studies Worldwide, Google Scholar, Medline (Ovid), PsycINFO, Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science), Social Services Abstracts, and Social Work Abstracts. Four central concepts with related search terms were used in combination, and guided the search for the review: *Youth* (e.g., young people, young person, adolescent, teen, young adult), *Aging Out* (e.g., age out, aged out, aging out, transition, care leavers, leaving care), *Child Welfare System* (e.g., child welfare, children services, child and family services, social services, foster, child protection), and *Interventions to Support* (e.g., intervention, initiative, support, program, service, policy, policies).

2.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The titles of the 1978 articles retrieved from the literature search were scanned for relevance by two reviewers. The articles were then selected for further screening provided the articles included two or more of the four central concepts that guided the search. One hundred and seventy-six articles were initially considered for inclusion as they met the inclusion criteria designed for the review: literature published in English within the last 20 years, developed countries, ages 16–30 years, and population: youth transitioning out of care (excluding pregnant youth, youth in the criminal justice system, and emancipated youth). Articles included had to describe an intervention, and an evaluation of the intervention. To further establish relevance, articles were excluded if the interventions/policy changes were hypothetical or were considered as recommendations rather than implemented interventions. Articles describing policies regarding the emancipation process were also excluded. Dissertations/thesis and articles that lacked an evaluation component of the described intervention were also excluded. Finally, populations with physical disabilities were excluded due to a significant influence of hospital or medical-based interventions.

2.4. Data extraction

Two reviewers performed a comprehensive screen of each of the 176 articles independently using an extraction form that outlined the aim of the study, the location, the population group and size, the intervention presented, method of evaluation, effectiveness and outcomes of the said interventions and the limitations of the study. Through this process, articles were thoroughly screened for relevance and final

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