



# Is anybody there? Informal supports accessed and sought by youth from foster care☆☆☆



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 28 September 2015  
Received in revised form 9 February 2016  
Accepted 9 February 2016  
Available online 10 February 2016

### Keywords:

Former foster youth  
Transition to adulthood  
Informal supports for youth  
Support needs of foster care youth  
Program evaluation

## ABSTRACT

Young people's 'ageing out' of foster care has been described as stark and abrupt, in sharp contrast with the gradual process of transitioning to adulthood experienced by parented youth in the general population. Research has demonstrated that being supported during this transition is associated with a variety of health, social, and educational outcomes. The purpose of this article is to report former foster youths' perspectives on their informal supports, what difference these supports made for them, and what they believed would be useful in their transition to adulthood. Data came from semi-structured interviews with 43 former foster youth aged 19–26. Findings revealed that while approximately half the informants reported having support from family, most did not have family whom they regularly relied upon for emotional, practical and/or financial support. Further, while nearly all youths indicated that having support made a difference to them, many also noted that for daily living, they were on their own. The study's findings are an important reminder of the gulf existing between youth from care and parented youth in terms of their access to support during their journey to adulthood.

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## 1. Introduction

Across North America and Western Europe, it is well documented that the normative process for transitioning to adulthood for youth in the general population is gradual, fluid, and well-supported, unfolding in small steps and over many months or years (Arnett, 2007; Mann-Feder, Eades, Sobel, & DeStefano, 2014). For example, in Canada, the most recent census data have shown that 59% of young people age 20–24 are living in their parental home, either because they have yet to move out or because they have returned back home (Gaetz & Scott, 2012). Moreover, demographic trends have shown that the percentage of young people living in the parental home has consistently increased over the past 30 years (Statistics Canada, 2013).

Research has also shown that the delayed and non-linear pace of the transition process is at least in part a function of economic realities relating to costs of post-secondary education, training, housing, employment stability and relationship structures (Avery, 2010; Fallis, 2012). As well, numerous studies and reviews of the literature have reported that youth well into their 20s receive and count on a significant amount and range of emotional support and guidance from family, along with

practical and material/financial assistance (Fallis, 2012; Vancouver Foundation, 2013).

By sharp contrast, for youth who exit the foster care system at the age of majority, the 'transition' to adulthood is abrupt, stark, inflexible, and typically irreversible (Atkinson, 2008; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Fallis, 2012; Vancouver Foundation, 2013; Ward, Courtney, Del Valle, McDermid, & Zeira, 2009). In addition, the leave-taking is depersonalized in that it is based on chronological age, irrespective of developmental readiness or maturity. Simply put, it is a "process denied" (Rutman, Hubberstey, & Feduniw, 2007). For many youth leaving the government care system, the irrevocability of this transition means that they are left at a much earlier age without the level of personal, emotional, and financial support that their mainstream counterparts can rely on (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Mendes, 2003; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Osborn & Bromfield, 2007). Moreover, although there is great heterogeneity amongst youth in and from care, research has demonstrated that they generally experience poorer outcomes in a number of life domains, including housing and homelessness, education, employment, income, health, mental health, rates of incarceration and victimization, substance use, pregnancy, parenting and involvement with the child welfare system, and personal stability (BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2014; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014; Fallis, 2012; Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009; Rutman et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2009).

Social support has been conceptualized as a multi-dimensional concept, comprised of emotional, practical/instrumental, advising and informational, and self-evaluation/appraisal components (i.e., provision

\* Ethical approval: This study was approved by the University of Victoria Human Subjects ethical review committee.

☆☆ Conflict of information: The authors have no conflict of interest.

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of feedback that can influence self-esteem) (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). The presence of supportive and caring relationships with adults is considered essential in facilitating young people's passage into adulthood (Canadian Mothercraft Society, n.d.; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014); as well, social support is a protective factor that can help improve outcomes for vulnerable children and youth (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Kufeldt & Stein, 2005; Smith et al., 2015). Indeed, as documented in the Canadian, US, and international literature, having access to some combination of formal and informal support networks has been found to be one of the factors that can make a positive difference for youth aging out of care, including in terms of their educational and housing-related outcomes (Brownell et al., 2015; Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Kufeldt & Stein, 2005; Reid & Dudding, 2006). For example, a longitudinal study in Australia found that the presence of and continuity in social supports, such as those provided by family members, partners, mentors, foster parents, social workers, and community organizations, were significant contributors to positive outcomes for young adults several years after exiting the care system (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Osborn & Bromfield, 2007).

In addition, recent research also has documented the value of peer (and 'near peer') support for former youth in care and the ways in which it can both reduce social isolation and foster feelings of belongingness amongst this vulnerable population (Geenen et al., 2014; Snow, 2013; Snow et al., 2013). The experience of belonging, in turn, can lead to positive outcomes in relation to educational, health and mental health outcomes. For example, in Snow et al.'s (2013) Toronto-based Voyager Project, former youth in care who were university students were paired with incoming university students who were also former foster youth; the group provided peer support, mentoring and problem solving in relation to attaining educational goals. Lessons learned from this project include the value of peer support as a means to promote belonging, and the inter-connections between belonging and school achievement. Informed by and in keeping with this research, Snow and Mann-Feder (2013) have developed a promising conceptual framework that emphasizes the potentially pivotal role of peer support for former youth in care.

Nevertheless, although most jurisdictions in Canada have policies relating to preparing youth in care for the transition to independence, relatively little has been written about youths' access to and experience of informal supports following their 'emancipation' from the foster care system (Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013, writing from a US perspective, provides a notable exception.). This gap in information regarding youths' social support networks has meant that there is an incomplete picture of who youth turn to – amongst unpaid support people – upon leaving care, and youths' perspectives on this support and what types of (additional) support would be helpful through the transition to adulthood. The purpose of this article is to report former foster youths' perspectives on their use and experience of informal supports, what difference these supports made for them, and what they believed would be useful in their transition to adulthood. The guiding research questions were:

- What types of 'informal' support do former youth in care access regularly, and who provides this support?
- What are former foster youths' experiences of the informal support that they have? and
- What (additional) supports would youth from care find helpful to have in their transition to adulthood?

This article is based on data from a two-year external evaluation study of the *Link* program, run by Aunt Leah's Place in New Westminster, British Columbia (a municipality in the Greater Vancouver area) (Rutman, Hubberstey, & Hume, 2014). Aunt Leah's *Link* program is designed to provide individualized support for former foster youth aged

19 and older – i.e., the age at which youth reach age of majority and age out of government care in British Columbia.

It is critically important to improve knowledge regarding to whom youth from foster care turn for support as well as the adequacy, breadth and depth of that support from youths' perspectives, in order to improve transition-related planning, practice and to help ensure that these highly vulnerable youth have an effective support network as they enter adulthood.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design

The evaluation study employed a mixed method, time-series with comparison group design wherein individual interviews were conducted twice with former youth in care over a 14-month period. As well, in keeping with research exploring people's lived experiences, the project employed a largely qualitative research design (Morse, 1994; Sandelowski, 1986). The project adhered to the ethical review guidelines of the University of Victoria.

Because the focus of this article is on the informal supports accessed and sought by former youth in care (rather than on outcomes/impacts of the *Link* program), and because data analyses revealed no demonstrable differences in terms of youths' informal supports either between the two sub-groups of youth (*Link* program participants and the comparison group) or in youths' perspectives over time, the findings presented in this article are based on the total sample of youth informants.

### 2.2. Participants: Sampling approach, recruitment and demographics

A total of 43 former youth in care were interviewed. Of these study informants, 21 were *Link* program participants and 22 were youth from foster care who had not accessed the *Link* program. The study employed purposive sampling (i.e., primarily volunteer and 'nominated'/snowball sampling) to generate the group of former youth in care informants. For the *Link* participant sub-group, inclusion criteria were that individuals were former youth in care age 19 or older and enrolled in the *Link* program. For the evaluation's comparison group, inclusion criteria were that individuals were former youth in care and not currently accessing the *Link* program.

To recruit the sample of *Link* participants, current and recent *Link* program participants were informed about the evaluation study and invited to participate through a variety of means: by Aunt Leah's staff/*Link* staff, via social media, or through a poster about the evaluation that was posted at Aunt Leah's. To recruit the comparison group participants, the researchers contacted staff of youth-serving agencies within the Greater Vancouver area and requested staff to inform and invite youth from care to take part in the study. These staff provided interested youth with contact information for the researchers. In the end, most – though not all – of the 22 comparison group participants were accessing some form of assistance or services from a youth-serving program. Together, these strategies were effective in producing a sample of the planned size ( $n =$  approximately 20 for each sub-group of youth informants).

Youth in the study ranged from 19 to 26 years old. At the Time 1 interview (i.e., the first of two interviews conducted over 14 months as part of the time-series design), 37% were age 19–20, 53% were age 21–24, and 9% were age 25. Slightly more than half of the youth informants (58%) were male. In terms of ethnicity/cultural background, 47% of the sample self-identified as being of European descent, 37% were Aboriginal, 14% were of African descent (including African-European), and 2% were Asian/South Asian. Thirty percent of the sample of youth informants reported graduating from high school, which is on par with the BC provincial rate for high school graduation amongst youth in care (and is substantially lower than the graduation rate of BC youth overall, which is approximately 80%) (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2014). Nearly all of the youth

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