

Fostering Change

Perceptions on the challenges
facing British Columbia youth
transitioning out of government care

Results of the Vancouver Foundation Transitions Survey
October 2013

vancouver
foundation

Context

Vancouver Foundation believes the best way to reduce homelessness is to prevent it from happening in the first place.

Through our Youth Homelessness Initiative (YHI), we are focusing our efforts on a segment of our population that is at most risk of homelessness – young people who have transitioned out of government care, such as foster care and group homes. Former youth in care are over-represented among the homeless population in metro Vancouver. Numerous studies have shown that approximately 40% of homeless youth have at one time been in government care.

In British Columbia, when a youth in foster care turns 19, they are abruptly cut off from the system that has provided a home, adult connections and support. Their public guardian, our government, essentially says “we believe you are now old enough to take care of yourself.” It’s often a very lonely, isolating and frightening time of their lives. They are expected to make their way in the world, with little or no support or connections to their community.

Vancouver Foundation invites a range of stakeholders – youth, governments, community organizations, and people who want to make a difference – to create better opportunities for youth to successfully navigate the challenging journey from government care to adulthood.

Our vision is that every young person leaving foster care will have the opportunities and support needed for a successful transition to adulthood. We want doorways opened, not closed, to support youth aging out of foster care to pursue housing, employment, education, health, financial capability, social networks and permanent relationships.

Our Youth Homelessness Initiative is focused on preventing homelessness among youth formerly in government care by creating the right conditions and opportunities for them to succeed as adults.

The Youth Homelessness Initiative comprises a four-pronged approach:

- Meaningfully engaging youth to identify solutions.
- Providing community impact grants to projects demonstrating positive outcomes for youth.
- Contributing to increased public policy research and learning.
- Developing increased awareness and community engagement.

Transitions Survey: Public Opinion Research

In the spring of 2013, Vancouver Foundation surveyed 1,820 adult British Columbians to gain a better understanding of public attitudes, values and perceptions about youth transitioning to adulthood and more specifically, for youth aging out of government care in the province.

Vancouver Foundation worked with Sentis Market Research, the same opinion research company that helped us with our ground-breaking *Connections and Engagement* research on social isolation in the region in 2012. There were three key areas explored in the *Transitions Survey*:

First, measuring BC residents' perceptions of why young adults live at home and their readiness to make a successful transition from parental home to living on their own.

Second, tracking public perceptions of young people living in government care. This included assumptions about why young people end up in government care, the kinds of supports available to those young adults as they transition out of care, and assumptions about young adults' vulnerability to a range of problems, including homelessness.

Third, the perceived effectiveness of possible solutions to prevent young adults from becoming homeless as they transition out of care.

Facts about foster youth transitioning out of government care in BC

- Approximately 8,000 young people under 19 are in government care in BC.
- 55% of youth in government care are Aboriginal.
- This year, more than 700 youth in care will turn 19 and “age out” of the government system.
- 40% of homeless youth have been in foster care at some point in their lives.
- More than two-thirds of youth in care in BC will reach age 19 without a high school diploma.
- Almost half of former youth in care will go on income assistance within a few months of their 19th birthday.
- 65% percent of youth in care have been diagnosed with a mental health issue at least once in childhood.

What we found

The research study found that the vast majority of British Columbians take supporting their own children between 19- and 28-years-old as a given.

Most British Columbians believe that 19-year-olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live away from home and support themselves independently. Ironically, when it comes to youth in foster care who turn 19, and are no longer eligible for government support, British Columbians effectively set higher expectations for their ability to live independently than they do for their own children.

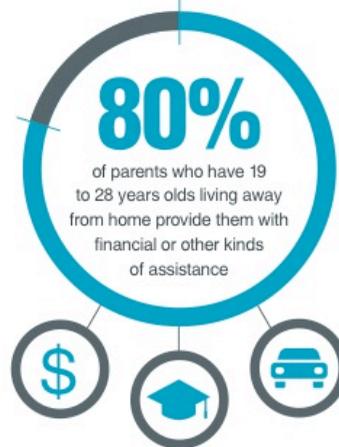
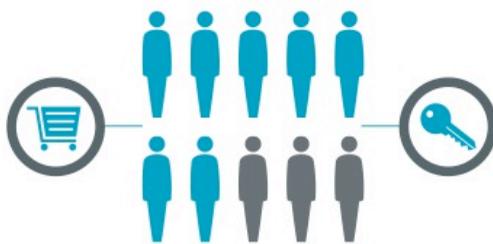
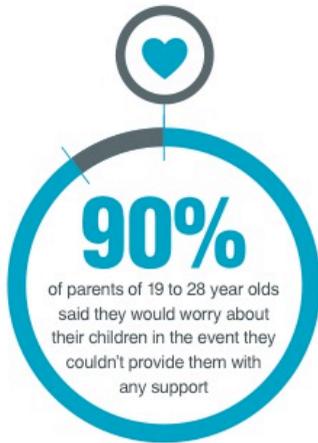
The survey underlines just how critical family networks are to the success of most young people transitioning to adulthood. Consistent with other research, young adults currently face rising costs of housing, education and transportation at a time when their earnings are lower than average. This squeeze puts pressure on their ability to live independently. It prolongs stay-at-home tendencies and often requires financial support from parents.

BC residents appreciate that the average 19-year-old still needs a lot of support if he/she is going to make a successful transition to living on their own. Further, they acknowledge the challenges that youth in care face, including high vulnerability to homelessness.

The majority of British Columbians (68%) back extending the age of government support until at least age 21, with 19% supporting extending the age to 23 or older. When it came to selecting the type of government support needed for youth to successfully transition to adulthood, the policy recommendations British Columbians tended to support did not address the root causes of homelessness or reflect the same type of support they provide their own children.

Clearly, young people transitioning out of government care need access to housing, education, skills training, employment, financial literacy, lifetime relationships with adults and community networks. If we are serious about addressing youth homelessness, we need progressive policies and practices that create pathways to opportunity for youth in care beyond their 19th birthday.

How BC Residents Think About Their Own Kids



How British Columbians support their own children into adulthood

Consistent with Statistics Canada figures, the *Transitions Survey* found that 36% of adults surveyed aged 29 or younger live at home with their parents or another relative. This means that among the approximately 660,000 BC adults in this age range, almost 250,000 live at home.

We asked all respondents about when they were ready to live on their own, when they thought youth were ready to live on their own, and we probed into those conditions or resources that were needed to make a successful transition.

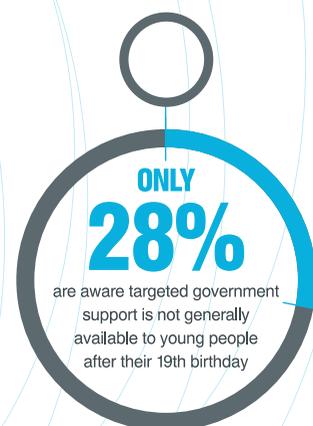
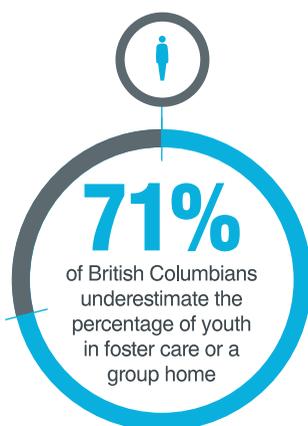
Here are some highlights from the survey:

- 70% of British Columbians believe that typical 19-year-olds living in their city or town do not have the necessary skills and resources to live away from home and support themselves independently.
- 90% of parents of 19- to 28-year-olds said they would worry about their children in the event they couldn't provide them with any support.
- Most parents who have 19- to 28-year-old children living at home provide support to their children in six areas: shopping and groceries (69%), free rent (69%), post-secondary education funding (60%), living supplies (56%), transportation (55%) and job advice (53%).
- While 19- to 28-year-olds living away from home receive less support than their counterparts living at home, their parents are still helping them in a variety of ways. In fact, 80% of parents who have 19- to 28-year-olds living away from home provide their children with some form of support.
- The vast majority of parents who have children under 19 fully expect that they will be supporting their children after they reach 19. In fact, 83% of these parents anticipate helping their children pay for post-secondary education.

What BC residents know about youth in care and aging out of government care

- For most British Columbians, youth in government care are largely invisible — two-thirds (67%) indicate that they don't know if foster kids live in their neighbourhood or if there are group homes in their neighbourhood.
- 71% of British Columbians underestimate the percentage of youth who are currently in foster care or in a group home.
- Only 28% of British Columbians are aware that government support ends when young people in care reach their 19th birthday.
- British Columbians see parents as the main reason kids end up in foster care or in group homes. Most residents (85%) attribute kids being in foster care to parental abuse and violence. Seventy-nine per cent attribute it to parental addiction, and 63% attribute it to parental neglect.
- British Columbians are far less likely to view broader social factors like poverty, homelessness and a lack of access to social services as the reasons why kids end up in the foster care system. One-third (32%) attribute kids being put into foster care as due to poverty. One-quarter (24%) attribute it to homelessness, and 13% attribute it to a lack of access to social services.

The Invisibility of Youth in Care



The caring gap

The *Transitions Survey* shows that BC residents view the transition of a youth from government care differently than they view the transition of their own child from home. Despite knowing the kinds of support that are needed by young adults (their own kids) to help them live independently, BC residents are reluctant to endorse solutions that would provide the same kinds of support to young people transitioning out of government care.

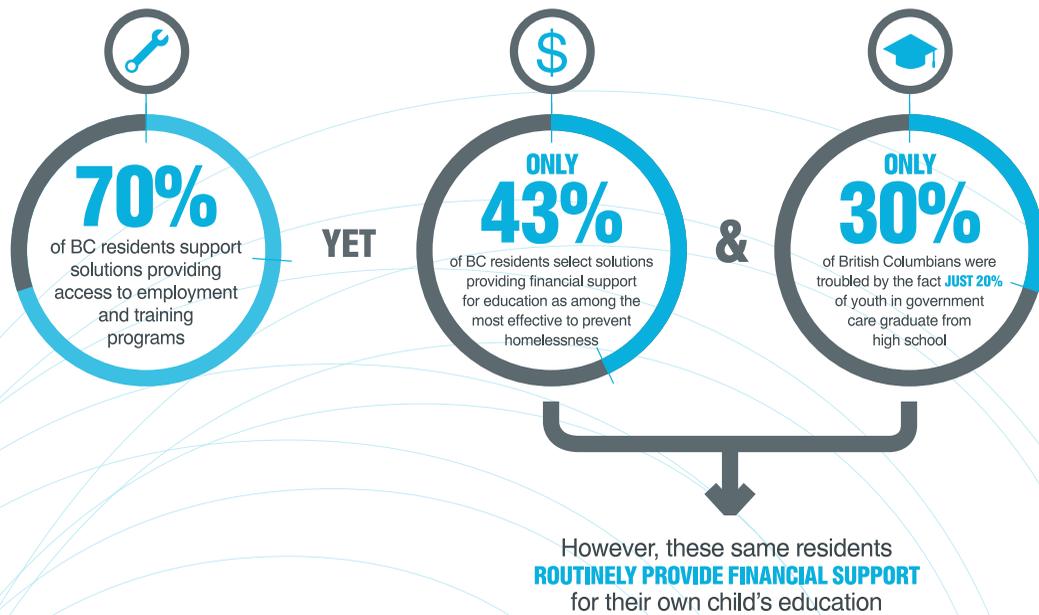
- Only 29% of respondents listed support finding safe, affordable housing as a way to prevent homelessness among youth aging out of government care. In contrast, 36% of youth ages 19-28 in BC live at home, and the majority of parents surveyed provide housing assistance to their own kids.
- While 70% of BC residents identified access to employment and training programs as a way to prevent youth homelessness, only 43% chose providing financial support for education as among the most effective solutions.
- 70% of British Columbians believe 19-year-olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live away from home and support themselves. Yet, only 29% of respondents listed support finding safe, affordable housing as a solution to homelessness among youth aging out of care.
- Despite the fact that British Columbians routinely provide support for their children's post-secondary education, even when residents are told that youth in care have a high school graduation rate of 20%, it's identified as a priority for investment by only 43% of the population.
- Even though the majority of BC residents (62%) selected the high rate of mental health diagnosis among youth in care as "the fact that they find most troubling about this population," only 26% of residents selected "access to mental health services" as among the most effective solutions to prevent youth transitioning out of care from becoming homeless.

Overall, we learned that parents of 19- to 28-year-olds would worry if their children were in the same situation as youth aging out of government care.

We also learned that knowledge of the issues appears to influence empathy. We found that those who know the current policy for youth aging out of care are almost twice as likely to back extending the age of support to 23 than those who do not know the current policy. And 88% of those who know the current policy believe youth who have been in care are at greater risk of becoming homeless.

The Caring Gap

British Columbians don't expect the average young adult to be ready for life on his or her own. Yet they see the solutions or help for their own kids very differently than for these "public kids".



Extending the age of support for youth in government care

Any jurisdiction that has kids in government care provides a range of support services. Many jurisdictions are taking serious steps to develop policies and practices that help youth successfully transition from foster/government care to adulthood.

Most British Columbians believe 19-year-olds generally are not ready to live on their own successfully. They acknowledge that youth who have been in government care experience a range of problems and are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. We asked British Columbians what age they think would be fair to extend public support to youth who are transitioning out of foster care.

- Only 14% of British Columbians are in favour of keeping the age at which government support is cut off at 19.
- 68% of British Columbians support increasing the age at which government support is cut off to 21 or higher.

Conclusion

The *Transitions Survey* underlines the importance of the emotional, social and financial support families provide to young adults through (and often beyond) their 20s. Most British Columbians think we should be doing a lot more than we currently are for youth transitioning out of care. Polling and focus groups reveal that, while the understanding of what works is mixed, most people recognize that the current situation facing youth leaving foster care does not produce good outcomes.

Everyone wants to be a good parent. Young people belong in homes – in their community – with opportunities to learn, grow and contribute through the caring support and guidance of nurturing adults. As the “state parent” of foster youth, we have a collective responsibility to support our young people along their journey to adulthood.

We invite you to consider this information and share it with others.

About Vancouver Foundation

With almost 1,500 funds and assets totaling \$814 million, Vancouver Foundation is Canada's largest community foundation. Our mission is to harness the gifts of energy, ideas, time and money to make meaningful and lasting impacts on communities. I

In 2012, Vancouver Foundation and its donors made more than 4,000 grants, totaling approximately \$46 million, to registered charities across Canada. Grant recipients range from social services to medical research groups, to organizations devoted to arts and culture, the environment, education, children and families, disability supports for employment, youth issues and animal welfare.

About Sentis Market Research

Sentis Market Research is a market and public opinion research firm located in Vancouver, with associates in Calgary and Toronto. The company was established in 2011 and provides services at all stages of the research process, from data collection to the implementation of strategies and action plans. For more information visit sentisresearch.com



This report can be found on Vancouver Foundation's website at:

vancouverfoundation.ca/fosteringchange

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For more on Vancouver Foundation's Youth Homelessness Initiative go to: vancouverfoundation.ca/yhi

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