Youth leaving care, residential stability and instability and homelessness

Étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés

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EDJeP : a brief introduction

The Study on the Future of Placed Youth (EDJeP) was developed by the Canada Research Chair in Evaluating Public Actions Related to Young People and Vulnerable Populations (CREVAJ) and its partners in order to fill a gap in knowledge of how youth in care prepare for independent living. It also explores the post-care period, which has received very little attention in Québec. In a context where Western societies are all prolonging youth and deferring the transition to adulthood, EDJeP is interested in the living conditions and the track to independence of youth ages 17 to 21 who were in placed in out-of-home care. These youth face a paradoxical imperative of autonomy when they reach adulthood. EDJeP is the first representative large-scale Québec study on this theme.

A three-phase longitudinal study. Of a target population of 2,573 Québec youth, a representative sample of 1,136 young people in out-of-home care were met in the first wave of interviews (response rate of 67.3% from among the 1,600 youth whose contact information we obtained). The interviews were based on a detailed survey that covers these young people's situations and experiences in various areas of life. These youth, who were 17 years old at the time of the first wave, were met again in 2019 (more than 800 youth have been interviewed to date), and will be met again in 2020 to monitor their progress toward autonomy.

A broad range of data sources. The data from these questionnaires will also be combined with data obtained in the youth integration project (PIJ) involving 2573 respondents, including those who participated in EDJeP, who met the eligibility criteria for the study. The administrative files of youth in youth protection (PIJ) were consulted in order to collect specific information about the service and care trajectories. We also obtained authorization from the Commission d'accès à l'information (CAI) to access administrative data that would let us track the trajectory of use of the services of the MESRS (education), MTESSS (last resort assistance), the RAMQ (social services and health) [1], along with other population data to better understand the transition issues that youth in care face, and to improve practices and policies. The cross-referencing of these dimensions is intended to enhance and adapt the services offered to youth who leave care, together with the associated social policies.

A national and international comparison. In addition to the longitudinal approach, EDJeP was designed to allow comparative analyses with two other important studies. First, a comparison with *the Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development* (QLSCD) let us analyze the trajectories of young Quebecers within the general population and compare them with those of youth who leave care. These comparisons should provide insight into the challenges that youth face when they age out of care.

In addition, major collaboration with the team leading the *Étude longitudinale sur l'autonomisation des jeunes après un placement* (ELAP) in France will allow an international comparison that will extend the knowledge gained from the study considerably.

Cooperation with youth. EDJeP is conducted in close cooperation with the members of the EDJeP youth committee. The committee is made up of 12 young people ages 18 to 35 who have all been in care and who wish to contribute to the EDJeP project in order to improve the services offered to youth who are leaving youth centres and beginning their path to autonomy. The youth committee advises the researchers and various committees and partners involved in the research. It aims to ensure that the participation of youth is significant and that their rights are considered in each phase of the EDJeP research, from project planning to execution.

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1. For each of these data sources, an equivalent random sample of youth not participating in EDJeP will be formed to identify similarities and differences in the service trajectory between EDJeP youth and their counterparts in the general population.

1 Youth leaving care, residential stability and instability and homelessness

For youth in care, their 18th birthday is not only a legal passage to adulthood but most importantly triggers the imperative to become completely autonomous overnight (Goyette, 2019 ; Dietrich, 2018). Many youth in care consequently face an abrupt termination of services, which may make their situation even more precarious. Although some successfully weather this difficult transition, others experience major difficulties and much housing instability. The various resources for homeless youth attest to this reality. In Canada, the definition of youth homelessness and the analysis of paths leading to homelessness underline the failures of the youth protection system, which accelerate the transition to homelessness (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016).

The present report draws on the data gathered in the second wave of The Study on the Future of Placed Youth (EDJeP) in order to investigate the links between the diversity of care experiences, housing instability and homelessness experiences in greater details. The first wave of interviews was conducted when youth were 16 or 17 years old and were still in care. The results of the present report are mainly derived from the second wave of interviews conducted between April and October 2019, when all almost all youth had become adults and had therefore aged out of care.

1.1 Homelessness and its definitions

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness asserts that a definition of youth homelessness is pertinent owing to the distinctive characteristics of this phenomenon. The Observatory thus states that youth homelessness "refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13-24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire stable, safe or consistent residence" (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016). We go further by distinguishing visible homelessness from hidden homeless and from housing instability.

In this report, visible homelessness will be defined, as in many other studies, as a situation involving sleeping in public or private places without authorization, for example a street, park or unoccupied private building (squatting) ; living in ad hoc shelters, such as cars, garages or makeshift shelters ; or the use of emergency shelters. In this report, youth were identified as having experienced visible homelessness if they replied Yes to one of the choices of the following question : **"Since you left care, have you slept...."** The three choices were :
— In the street ?
— In a default/ad hoc shelter ? (bus station, car, van, metro, etc.)
— In emergency shelters ?
The category Provisionally Accommodated describes situations where people are living in interim housing for people who are homeless, people living temporarily with others but without guarantee of continued residency ("couch-surfing"), living in temporary short-term accommodations without security of tenure (motel, hostel, rooming house), people in institutional care who lack permanent housing arrangements (for example penal or mental health institutions), and people who live in reception centres for newly arrived immigrants and

refugees. Lastly, people at risk of homelessness are those who, for a variety of reasons, are at imminent risk of becoming homeless, or whose housing situation is precarious. Although the questionnaire did not raise the question of hidden homelessness directly, we attempted to determine the housing situation of the young respondent. In fact, the situations described by the youth clearly convey their instability and even hidden homelessness. This phenomenon will be illustrated in the tables below.

2 Visible homelessness among the young study participants

When we met the youth for the second interview, 75 participants were still in care and 719 had left care. All the participants were asked the question below.

The table 1 reports the percentage of youth who answered Yes to these items depending on whether or not they were still in care at the time of the interview. The table also illustrates the proportion of youth still or previously in care who reported that they hadhaving experienced any one of the situations. Thus, 12% of participants who left care said that they had already slept in the street versus less than 3% (n=2) of those who were in care. Almost 12% of youth who left care say they had already slept in a place not designed for human habitation such as a bus station, car, van or subway station, versus 4% of participants who are still in care. Lastly, nearly 9% of youths who left care said they had already slept in emergency shelters, compared with 4% of participants who were still in care.

Overall, nearly, 20% (N= 138) of youths who left care said they had experienced one of these situations, compared with 8% of youth still in care. Evidently, the youth more directly affected by housing instability and homelessness experiences are those who left care. We will therefore focus on those youth in the rest of the report, namely the 719 youth who left care.

2.1 Duration and number of episodes of visible homelessness

For the 719 youth who had left care at the time of the interview, we are also interested in the number and duration of episodes of visible homelessness. The participants who said they experienced any of the markers of visible homelessness were asked the following question :

TABLE 1 – [While in care / Since you left care], have you ever slept :

	Still in care		Left care	
	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)
In the street	2.7	2	12.3	88
In a default/ad hoc shelter	4.0	3	11.9	85
In emergency shelters	4.0	3	9.2	66
Either one or the other	8.0	6	19.3	138

"You may have slept in the street, in a default/ad hoc shelter or in an emergency shelter for several nights. These nights can be grouped into "episodes" of one or more consecutive nights, or may have lasted several months. Thinking about these episodes, how many times did you find yourself in a situation where you slept in the street, in a default/ad hoc shelter or in an emergency shelter ?"

Among youth who reported at least one visible homelessness episode, the average number of episodes was 4. This average is 5 for males and 3 for females.

Some youth mentioned that they had left care shortly before we met them (21% said they had left care within the past six months), while others said they had left much longer ago (8.5% said they had left 2 or more years earlier). **The average duration since youth left care was 13.5 months, or slightly over one year**. This interval since leaving care is evidently important when considering episodes of visible homelessness.

The table 2 shows the percentages of youth who said they experienced any one of the visible homelessness situations, along with the number of episodes of homelessness according to the time elapsed since leaving care. First we can note that the percentages of youth who report having had an episode of visible homelessness generally tend to be higher among youth who had left care a longer time ago. More advanced analyses confirm a significant relationship between the propensity for having experienced a visible homelessness episode and the time elapsed since leaving care ($p < 0.01$). In addition, the number of episodes of visible homelessness also tends to increase the longer the youth have been out of care. Once again, more extensive analyses confirm that this relationship is significant ($p < 0.05$).

To summarize, the more time that elapsed since the youth left care, the higher the risk of their having experienced an episode of homelessness. For those who experienced an episode of visible homelessness, the longer the duration since they left care, the more episodes they experienced. Therefore these analyses show that **the risk of homelessness increases over time and that the risk of homelessness becoming chronic also increases with time**.

Overall, girls are slightly less likely than boys to report having experienced visible homelessness episodes : the percentages of girls who said they experienced such episodes is systematically lower than those of boys. However, in general, the data indicate a ratio of 80% of visible homelessness in males versus 20% in females. Our data show a balance between

TABLE 2 – Number of visible homelessness since the leaving care (%)

| | Number of episodes | | | | | | | | Sex at birth | | | |
| | At least one episode | | No episode | | One episode | | Two or more episodes | | Males | | Females | |
	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)
6 months or less	14	21	86	133	5.8	9	7.8	12	16	13	11	8
6 to 12 months	15	26	85	149	6.3	11	8.6	15	15	13	14	13
12 to 18 months	22	37	78	134	10.5	18	11.6	20	26	19	18	18
18 to 24 months	26	40	74	116	10.2	16	15.9	25	27	20	24	20
24 months and over	23	14	75	46	14.8	9	9.8	6	25	7	22	7
Total	19	138	81	578	8.8	63	10.5	75	21	72	17	66

boys and girls in their claims of having experienced homelessness. Thus, 72 boys say that they experienced at least one episode of homelessness compared with 66 girls.

Whereas nearly 46% of participants concerned experienced only one episode of visible homelessness, textbf54% of those who experienced at least one episode claim to have had two or more episodes. Lastly, more than 10.5% of the participants who left care reported at least two episodes of visible homelessness.

2.1.1 Duration of visible homelessness episodes

Participants who claimed to have experienced at least one episode of visible homelessness were asked the following question : **"How long did these episodes (periods) last ?"** Those who experienced several episodes were asked to consider the longest episode. The figure 1 shows that most respondents (62%) claim that their episodes, or the longest episode they experienced, lasted several days. However, 13% claimed that it lasted less than one month whereas nearly 25% stated that they had an episode lasting longer than one month. Evidently, time spent in a homelessness situation after leaving care is limited by the time elapsed since the youth left care.

To summarize, of the 719 youth interviewed, 34 respondents claimed to have experienced more than one situation of visible homelessness. Some of these youth claim that they were homeless for more than one year, whereas they left care between one and two years ago. Homelessness therefore seems to be their main "housing" situation since they left care.
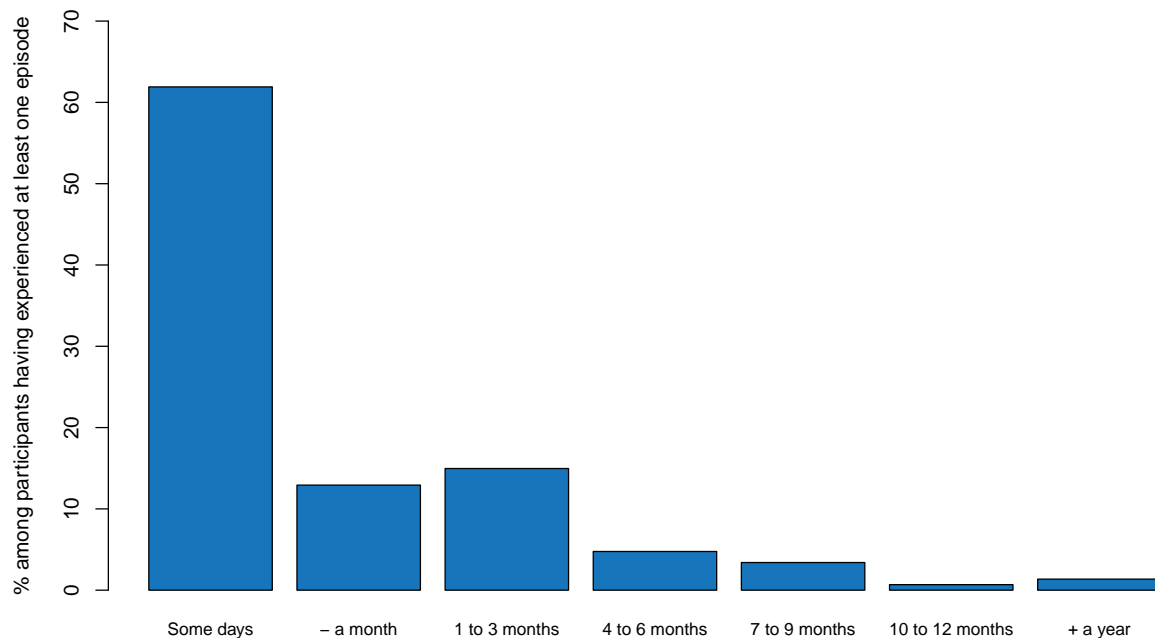

FIGURE 1 – Duration of longest episode of visible homelessness since leaving care

TABLE 3 – Distribution of places of residence after leaving care according to their temporary
nature or not

	No temporary solution		Temporary solution	
	%	(n)	%	(n)
Autonomous situation	67	124	32	60
With boyfriend/girlfriend or a relative	53	48	47	42
Supervised ap., group homes or intermediate resource	27	16	73	43
In or with a member of birth family	48	120	51	126
Stayed in or with a member of foster family	66	66	33	33
Other	48	12	52	13

3 Leaving care and housing instability

Beyond visible homelessness, we sought to better understand the housing experience of young people who age out of care. Among the survey answers proposed, some correspond to hidden homelessness situations (e.g. living in a community or interim resource, or in a rooming house) in that the duration of housing is temporary. Other choices seem to imply greater housing stability, such as remaining in their foster family after they reach adulthood.

To better consider housing stability from the youth's standpoint, we asked respondents "Was this living environment a temporary solution while you waited to find a more permanent place to live?" **Nearly 45% of the participants said that they considered their housing situation temporary** (see table 3). Although it is difficult to associate this temporary status with housing instability, we observed that almost half of the youth aspire to change their housing situation in a context where such changes are increasingly difficult in terms of the cost and scarcity of rent, especially for young people who do not necessarily have all the guarantees that landlords may request.

To better understand this housing vulnerability and situate youth on a continuum of stability, we sorted youth into three categories : youth in a situation of housing stability, youth in a situation of housing instability, and youth who experienced one or more episodes of homelessness. Youth who experienced at least one episode of homelessness are those who answered Yes to one of the choices pertaining to visible homelessness.

Differentiating youth who are experiencing housing stability and instability is more difficult, and requires us to make an external judgment about their situation. In the present case, this complexity is partly linked to the fact that the young study participants did not all leave care at the same time. This means that some youth achieved housing autonomy before others. The criterion of housing stability must be refined according to the time elapsed since the youth left care.

The figure 2 illustrates the demarcation criteria used. It presents the cloud of dots indicating the relationship between the number of residences reported since the youth left care according to time elapsed since care ended. The yellow dots correspond to participants who experienced at least one visible homelessness episode, whereas the blue dots indicate young people who did not report such episodes. The red dotted line shows the demarcation criterion that distinguishes participants who live in housing instability from those with a more stable situation. For a young person to be considered to be in a housing instability situation, the person had to have, in addition to the first place of residence upon leaving care, *more than one additional place of residence per year since leaving care*. Concretely, this means that to be considered to be living a housing instability situation, a young person who left care 12 months previously had to have had *more than two places of residence* (that is, technically 3) during the first year since they left care. A young person who left care two years earlier would have had *more than three places of residence*, and a young person who left care more than three years earlier would have had more than four places of residence.

Young people who resided in more places since they left care compared with our criterion (those situated above the red line) are thus considered to be in a situation of housing instability, whereas those whose number of residences is equal to or lower than the criterion since they left care are considered to be in a housing stability situation. However, young people who had at least one experience of homelessness (in yellow) are considered separately regardless of how many places they lived in since leaving care. According to this classification, **49% of the study participants were considered to be in a housing stability situation, 32% in an instability situation and 20% had at least one visible homelessness experience**.
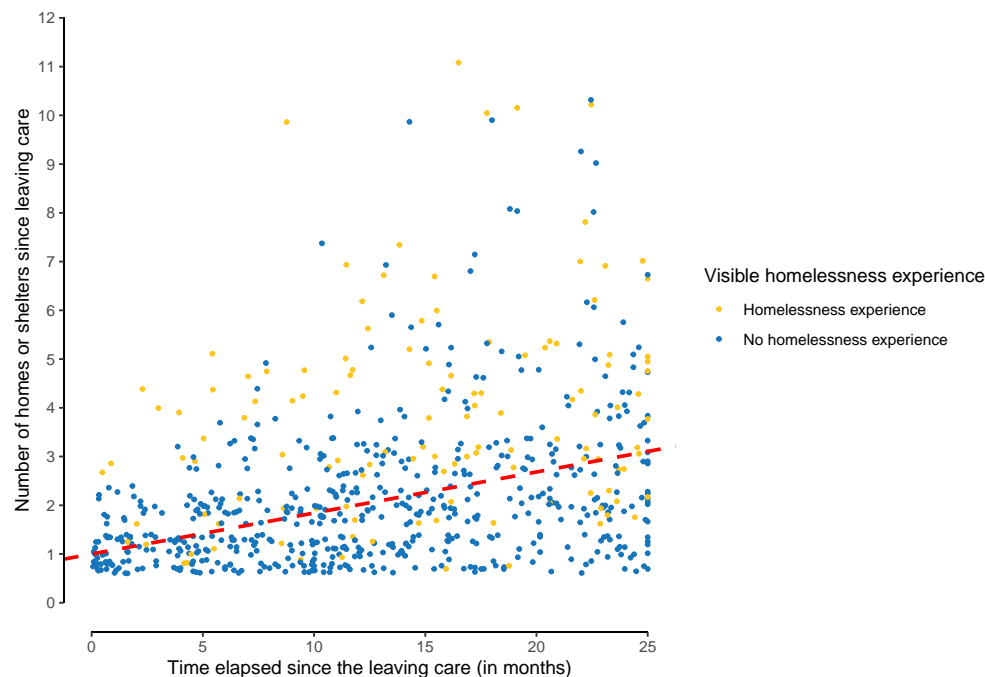
Source : Étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés (EDJeP).
osition of the points has been slightly randomized to improve the overall visualization of the chart.

FIGURE 2 – Housing stability and time since leaving care

Our data indicate that the youth with the most housing stability after leaving care are those who remained with their foster family or a member of that family after they aged out of care. Only 34% of these young people claim that the first place they resided after reaching adulthood was temporary, 4.5% of these youth reported visible homelessness, 15% reported housing instability and 80% reported housing stability, which represents the highest proportion observed. The transition to adulthood experienced by most young people who remained in their foster family after ageing out of care is most certainly that which is closest to the transition to adulthood of most of the young people in the general population who were not in care, especially if the youth had lived in that foster family for a long time.

The propensity to say that a place of residence was a temporary solution also differs depending on the place and context of the first living environment. Note that participants who claim to have remained in their foster family after care ended were significantly less likely to say that this was a temporary solution than those who returned to their birth family ($p < 0.05$), along with those who went to live with a member of their foster family ($p < 0.1$), or lived alone in an independent apartment ($p < 0.05$) or as a roommate in an independent apartment ($p < 0.05$). Conversely, participants who went to live in a community or interim resource were significantly more likely to say that this was a temporary solution than those who went to live with their birth family ($p < 0.001$).

We also observed that youth who experienced more housing instability and even homelessness once they left care also tend to report more instability in their placement trajectory. Our analyses indicate that nearly 27% of youth who experienced 10 placements (replacements or attempts at family reunions) are more likely to report homelessness episodes, whereas this proportion is only 11% for respondents who report between 1 and 3 placements. Among participants who experienced homelessness, the average number of changes in care settings is 5.9 during their time in care, compared with an average of 5.1 for those in a housing instability situation and 3.9 for those in a situation of housing stability.

We also asked the respondents if they felt they had received enough help to prepare them for the end of care. Half of the youth with housing stability reported said that they were helped sufficiently, compared with only 32% of youth who had a homelessness episode and 45% for youth with housing instability. **Conversely, 31% of youth who were placed in care at least once replied that they "would have wanted to receive more help to prepare for the end of your care," versus 27% of youth with housing instability and 18% of youth with housing stability**.

Overall, our data clearly indicate that housing stability is associated with different factors linked to the transition to adulthood. Nearly 44% of youth in a situation of housing stability were still studying during wave 2, compared with 27% of youth in a housing instability situation and 15% of youth who had experienced a homelessness situation (see figure 3). Similarly, the proportions of youth who were neither studying nor working increased for those who reported homelessness situations. Thus, people with at least one homelessness episode are twice as likely as youth with housing stability to be neither studying nor working, which reflects a situation mainly focused on survival.

3.1 Personal difficulties of youth

In addition to analyzing the association between youths' housing situation and their academic and occupational situation, we also wanted to determine whether the respondents exhibited varying degrees of personal difficulties depending on their housing situation. In terms of physical and psychological health, young people who had experienced a homelessness episode were significantly more likely to report health, physical and psychological problems in the past 12 months (32%) than were stable youth (21%) ($p < 0.05$) and youth in a situation of housing instability (24%) ($p < 0.1$). Despite this greater perception of difficulties, youth who experienced a homelessness episode reported noticeably more difficulties in accessing care. They were thus more likely not to have a family doctor, and more were not "followed up by a doctor or other professional" than were other youth. Lastly, youth who experienced homelessness were more likely to have been hospitalized in the past 12 months. In fact, their difficulties seem more marked. For instance, they claim to consume alcohol or drugs more often than the other respondents, in significant quantities. About 40% of all participants report consuming drugs every day or a few times a week, but this proportion rises to nearly 60% among youth who experienced homelessness. Conversely, only 8% of these young people claim that they did not consume drugs or alcohol in the past 12 months versus 24% of youth in a situation of housing instability and 24% of stable youth.

In general, these results illustrate the importance of improving accessibility to healthcare services for youth, especially for youth in homelessness situations.
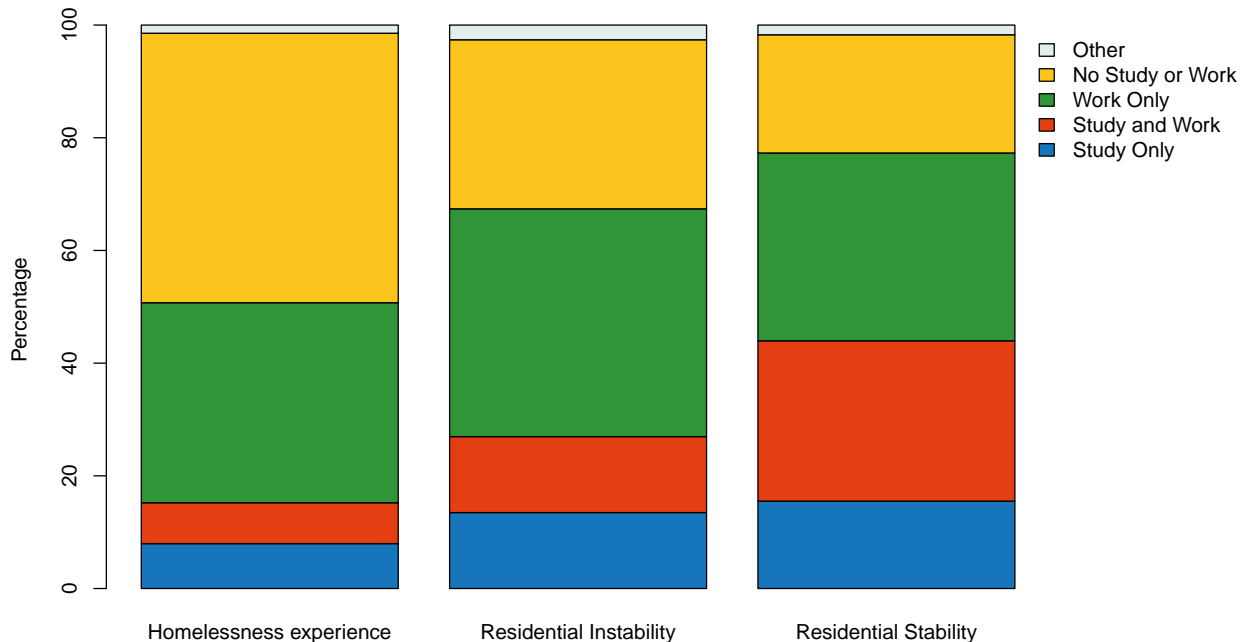

FIGURE 3 – Occupation status and housing stability

In addition to health difficulties, we were also interested in legal problems that youth may encounter. Here again, youth who experienced at least one homelessness episode were twice as likely to lack confidence in the youth criminal justice system than other youth ; and were twice as likely had to have been arrested by the police in the last 12 months.

In general, youth who experienced at least one homelessness episode have a more complex relationship with the legal system, which increases their vulnerability compared with other youth.

3.2 Sources of housing instability

We wanted to explore the factors that may explain housing instability experienced by youth after they leave care. These factors notably include the last care setting, which reflects the departure situation and the possible options when the youth ages out of care ; the youth's interpersonal support network, which can offer the young person leaving care essential support during the transition to autonomy ; and obtaining a Secondary School Diploma, which is a prerequisite for integration in the workforce today.

3.2.1 Influence of the last care setting

The last care setting certainly plays an important role in determining the situation that a young person leaves behind when ageing out of care. During wave 1, 56% of youth whom we met in wave 2 were placed in foster families, 27% were at a rehabilitation centre, 7% were in a group home and 8% were in interim resources. The figure 4 illustrates the predicted probabilities that youth leaving each of these settings would experience housing stability or instability, or would have had least one homelessness episode after leaving care. **The results demonstrate that regardless of the last care setting, most youth experience a situation of housing stability after leaving care**.

However, when we look at youth in a housing instability situation or who experienced a homelessness episode, leaving a rehabilitation centre or group home is significantly associated with these instability experiences.

Accordingly, our analyses show that youth who live in foster families are only half as likely to experience at least one homelessness episode.

3.2.2 Influence of the interpersonal support network

Interpersonal support may play a crucial role in the transition to adulthood of youth in care. We asked the participants to name up to five people with whom they are close and whom they trust. The number of people named provides a good indicator of the extent of the youth's interpersonal support network. On average, respondents named three trusted people. Our results demonstrate that youth who report having more than one loved one are significantly more likely to be in a situation of housing stability or instability than to have had a visible homelessness experience ($p < 0.01$ in both cases). The figure 5 illustrates the relationship between the number of trusted people reported by the youth and the probability of being in a situation of housing (in)stability.

Our results show that for each additional loved one named, youth are less likely to have experienced at least one homelessness episode by three percentage points, and are two
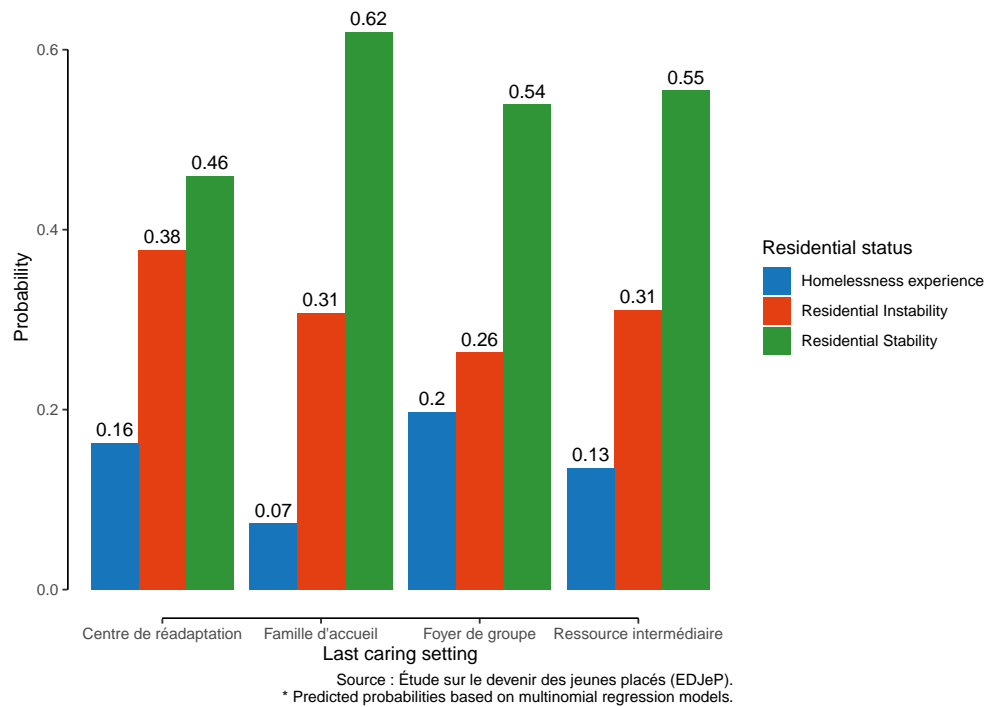
FIGURE 4 – Housing stability according to the last care setting – predicted probabilities

percentage points more likely to be in a housing stability situation. Accordingly, a boy who entered care between ages six and 12, who left a rehabilitation centre, who obtained a Secondary School Diploma and whose first living setting after leaving care was an independent situation is 26% more likely to experience visible homelessness if he has no trusted people. This probability decreases to 13% for youth who can name five trusted people[2]. Conversely, this same youth has a 39% chance of being in a housing stability situation if he cannot name any trusted people and 48% if he reports 5. This therefore suggests that, **even if youth may experience housing instability that might put them at risk, direct interpersonal support is an important protection factor to prevent homelessness situations. This result is consistent with studies that find that the social network is an important resource that can be harnessed to counter personal difficulties and those encountered during the transition to adulthood. Therefore, interventions should take into account the importance of the relationship network**. Reflection on social policies must consider the extent of young people's social circle, and the support available to them.

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2. Predicted probabilities are calculated according to a scenario for young people who lived in an autonomous situation after leaving a rehabilitation centre, who entered care between ages 6 to 12, were male, earned a Secondary School Diploma and were situated on the average for all the other variables.
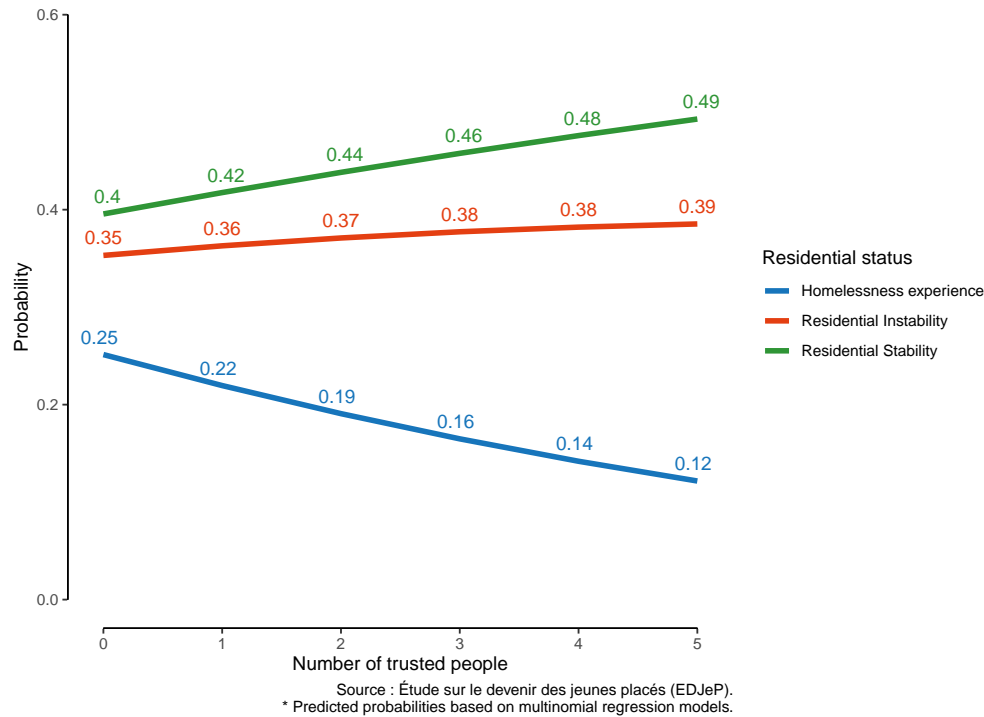
Source : Étude sur le devenir des jeunes placés (EDJeP).
* Predicted probabilities based on multinomial regression models.

FIGURE 5 – Housing stability according to interpersonal support – predicted probabilities

3.2.3 Influence of graduating from secondary school

Lastly, earning a Secondary School Diploma or the equivalent is often necessary to integrate today's workforce. We therefore wanted to evaluate the links between obtaining a diploma and the housing stability of youth who leave care. The results are unequivocal : **youth who completed secondary school or the equivalent are significantly more likely to be in a situation of housing stability or instability than of experiencing at least one homelessness episode** (p < 0.001 in both cases). Therefore, in addition to facilitating their workforce integration, completing obtaining a Secondary School Diploma is a crucial factor to ensure the housing stability of youth who leave care.

Not only are youth who experienced a homelessness episode less likely to have earned their Secondary School Diploma while in care, but they are also less likely to be studying or working after leaving care. Consequently, it seems that these youth are among the most vulnerable in the sample population because their experience in the system did not allow them to benefit from protection factors (such as education and social support). Among the youth who left care, this group also experiences situations of highest vulnerability (neither studying nor working, less social support, and more personal difficulties). Evidently, the homelessness experience is very unlikely to mitigate this vulnerability. Rather, it seems to aggravate the risk, especially if the youth remains in a homelessness situation for a long time.
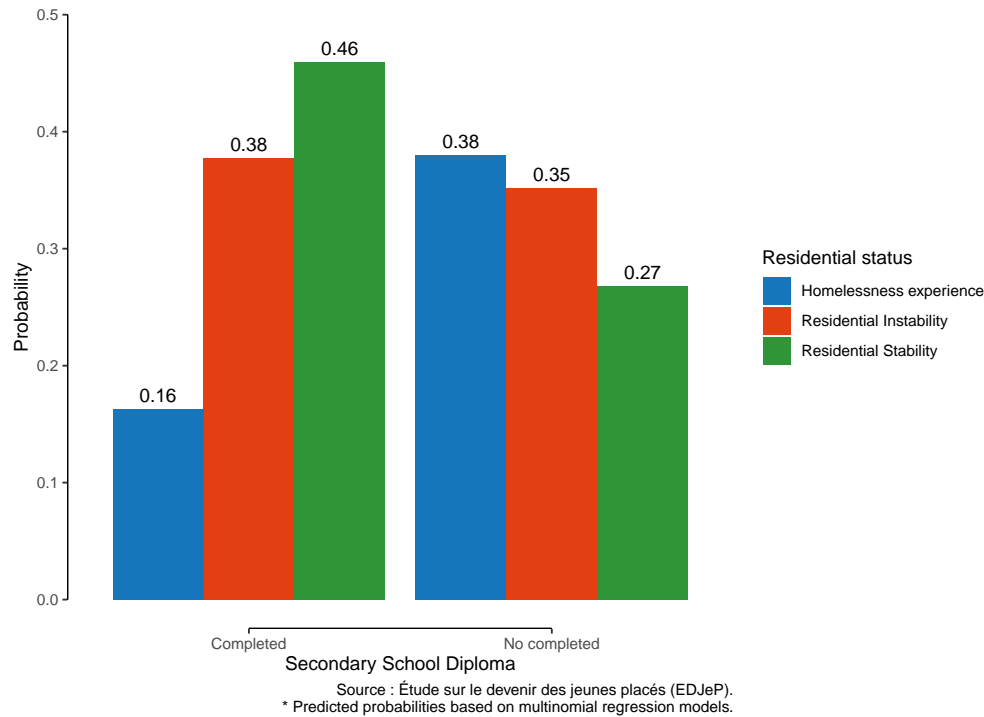
Figure 6 – Housing stability according to Secondary School Diploma (SSD) – predicted probabilities

4 Conclusion

Even if more than half of the respondents report stable housing situations (at least on average 13 months after leaving care), these youth are nonetheless in more vulnerable situations than youth in general in terms of education, social support and personal difficulties. One of the situations that provides the most protection against homelessness is when youth remain in foster families after ageing out of care. It is therefore important to consider that remaining in their foster family certainly provides a buffer against an abrupt termination of services, and thus protects youth in their progress toward independent adulthood by easing the transition rather than imposing it. Further, because the size of the social network is another key factor in protecting the youth in our sample against homelessness, social interventions must consider the importance of support from their relationship network.

Nonetheless, 20% of youth who age out of care experience one or more homelessness episodes. These youth, like those with housing instability, are more vulnerable in terms of personal difficulties, social support and education. In fact, the transition to visible homelessness, especially prolonged homeless situations, may aggravate these difficulties.

The study findings underscore the importance of assisting the most vulnerable youth as they prepare to leave care, along with supporting the transition of vulnerable youth to autonomy, to prevent the emergence of homelessness among youth who experience instability. Prevention strategies must therefore be applied both to youth at risk of transitioning to visible homelessness by working to stabilize their housing instability, and to youth who are in visible

homelessness situations and who must find assistance to attain housing stability as soon as possible. These protective efforts of preventing the youth from having to live on the street, or helping youth leave the streets as quickly as possible, is the only way to give these vulnerable youth a real chance at improving their housing situation and ensuring their access to the services they need within an intersectoral perspective.

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