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The Effect of Placement Instability on the Transition to Adulthood

Report from wave 1

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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)*, 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.

*. 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.

Highlights

Nowadays, most Western societies are prolonging youth and deferring the start of adulthood. In Canada, the 2016 census data show that 34.7% of people ages 20 to 34 were still living with at least one of the parents, compared with 30.6% in 2001. The figures in the United States are very similar : 34.1% of people ages 18 to 34 lived with at least one of their parents in 2016. By comparison, 48% of people ages 18 to 29 in the European Union lived with a parent in 2012. The international literature and research in Québec show that as they approach adulthood, not all young people in out-of-home care have the same possibilities to obtain support as do individuals who “stay at home.” Often, the transition to adulthood is thus marked by “institutional abandonment,” manifested by an abrupt termination of the support that youth need to become autonomous.

Many studies have shown that youth in the care of youth protection systems often experience major education setbacks. Our results published in November 2018 reached the same conclusion. For instance, 72% of young Quebecers of the same age were enrolled in Secondary V, versus only 17% of youth in care who participated in EDJeP. Among the diverse factors that can explain these worrisome results, instability of youths’ placement settings has often been singled out. The present report examines the effect of placement instability on youths’ track to adulthood. The results show that placement instability is closely linked to school experience, and that it markedly affects the future outlooks of youth, in particular their transition to autonomy.

Specifically, this report concludes that :

1. Many youth in care experience instability.

- On average, the 2,573 youth in our study population experienced 5.25 placements, excluding placements of under 72 hours. 14.3% of youth changed placements 10 times or more, with a maximum of 49 moves. Based on the total time since these youth entered care, the average number of changes per year of care is 1.56.
- When we include placements of under 72 hours, the average number of moves was 5.89, which amounts to an average of 2.01 changes in placements per year of care. One youth even reported changing placements 77 times.

2. Placement instability has a very strong impact on the lives of youth.

- Young people who experienced more instability were 25% less likely to acquire job experience while they were studying. They were also twice as likely to be neither studying nor working compared with youth on a more stable track.
- Youth with more instability were only half as likely to obtain a Secondary V diploma before reaching adulthood.

3. Placement instability creates a vicious circle that limits young people’s future

- Youth who experience greater instability are more likely to reside in a rehabilitation centre, a highly supervised setting.
- Even taking into account the fact that they tend to have more unstable paths, youth who spent a larger proportion of their time in care at a rehabilitation centre are generally in a worse situation than the others when it comes to preparation for independent living.

- By comparison, youth who lived in a rehabilitation centre for 100% of their time in care are 3.7 times less likely to obtain a Secondary V diploma before adulthood than otherwise identical youth who lived with a foster family for 100% of their time in care.

Placement Stability

While some youth are placed with a foster family at a very young age and remain there until adulthood, many other youth experience placement instability. For example, a young person may have been placed in a foster family at age 3, then return to their family of origin as part of a family reunification attempt, then be placed in another foster family at age 5 after the failure of the first reunification, and then be returned to their family of origin for a second attempt at reunification.

In order to evaluate the links between the placement instability and various important indicators illustrating the situation that youth face and their level of preparedness for the transition to independent living measured during wave 1 of EDJeP, we use administrative data from the youth integration program (PIJ), which lets us precisely measure the level of stability of the youths' path.¹ Specifically, we examined the number of moves reported in the young person's file, which represents the total number of continuous placements and family reunifications, but does not consider the placement settings per se; it also excludes placements of under 72 hours. For example, youth placed in a foster family at age 3, then returned to their family of origin as part of a family reunification attempt, and then placed with another foster family experienced three moves, regardless of whether or not they were placed with the same foster family twice. The number of moves in the young person's file is an excellent indicator of the stability of their placement trajectory.

Among all the youth for whom we received administrative data, the average number of moves is 5.25. The minimum number of moves is one, and some youth faced up to 49 changes. Once again, it is important to note that these figures exclude placements under 72 hours. Whereas most youth (67%) did not undergo a placement under 72 hours, one-third of the youth for whom we obtained administrative data did. If we take these short placements into account in the analyses below, the average number of moves would be 5.89, and one youth experienced 77 placements.

If we focus on the 1,136 youth who completed the EDJeP survey, the average number of moves is 5.75, with a maximum number of 35. Boys faced significantly more moves than girls ($p < 0.001$), with averages of 5.7 and 4.69 respectively.

Evidently, youth who entered care at a younger age are more likely to have faced a larger number of moves simply because they were in care for longer. Youth who were placed for the first time between ages 0 and 5 reported an average of 6.12 moves. This average is significantly lower, at 5.48, for those who were first placed between ages 6 and 12 ($p < 0.01$), and significantly lower yet again, at 4.37, for those placed for the first time at age 13 or older ($p < 0.001$).

1. We would like to thank Marie-Noële Royer, planning, program and research officer at the Institut Universitaire Jeunes en difficulté of the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal for preparing these data. They were obtained in compliance with our ethical approval.

TABLE 1 – Proportions of youth who faced changes in placement settings

	Administrative PIJ data (n=2573)		EDJeP only (n=1136)	
	%	% Cumulative	%	% Cumulative
1	19,63	19,63	15,49	15,49
2	13,08	32,71	11,09	26,58
3	12,61	45,32	13,29	39,88
4	9,20	54,52	10,12	50,00
5	9,60	64,12	10,21	60,21
6	7,61	71,73	7,22	67,43
7	5,71	77,44	6,51	73,94
8	4,52	81,96	4,93	78,87
9	3,69	85,65	3,96	82,83
10	3,13	88,78	3,43	86,27
11	2,22	91,00	2,73	89,00
12 & more	9,00	100,00	11,00	100,00

Table 1 reports the proportion of youth who changed in placements among all 2,573 youth eligible to participate in EDJeP (PIJ administrative data received) and the same proportions only for youth who completed the first EDJeP questionnaire. Figure 1 shows the diagrams in box plots illustrating the distributions of the number of placements by setting at the time of the data extraction. The horizontal line at the centre of each box indicates the median of the distribution. The extremities of the boxes indicate the lower and upper quartiles. The extremities of the vertical lines show the range excluding the extreme values, whereas the black dots indicate the extreme values.²

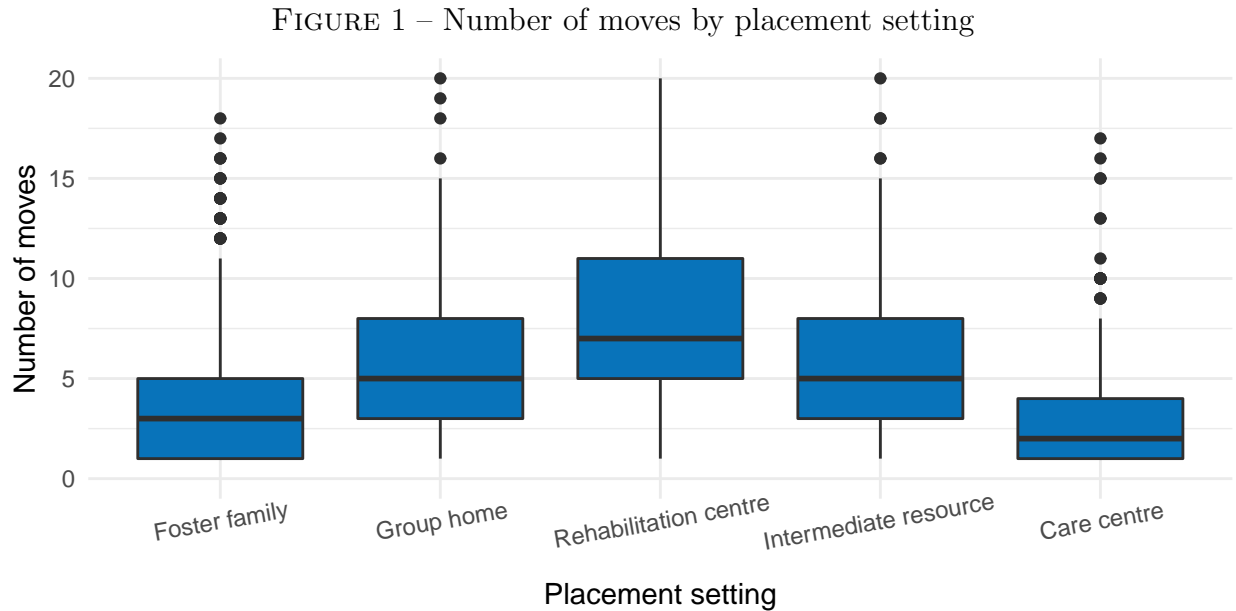
It is important to note that whereas there is a large concentration of youth whose number of moves is situated around the central values of the mean and the median, a non-negligible quantity of youth went through a very large number of changes. Among the youth who participated in the first wave of EDJeP, 17.2% faced 10 or more moves whereas 11% changed placements 12 or more times.

Youth who were living in a rehabilitation centre at the time of the PIJ data extraction had moved on average of 8.82 times, whereas those placed in foster families had a significantly lower average, namely 3.7 changes ($p < 0.001$). Clearly, youth with more instability are much more likely to be living in a rehabilitation centre, which is not surprising. As figure 1 indicates, the magnitude of the difference between youth placed in foster families and those in rehabilitation centres is impressive, and confirms the high placement instability of youths who are living in rehabilitation centres as they approach age 18.³

Whereas 51.52% of youths were first placed due to negligence, 17.46% were placed due to behavioural problems. The average number of moves for youth who were first placed

2. Values are considered extreme when they exceed 1.5 times the interquartile range.

3. The category “health institution” includes places like centres for intellectual deficiencies or dependence, and centres specializing in physical or mental health.



Source : Leaving Care in Quebec and France: A Longitudinal Study of Youth /
L'étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés (EDJeP).

* For readability purposes, the range of the Number of placement changes is restricted to 20.
** The data come from the administrative PIJ system (n = 2522), placements of less than 72 hours are excluded.

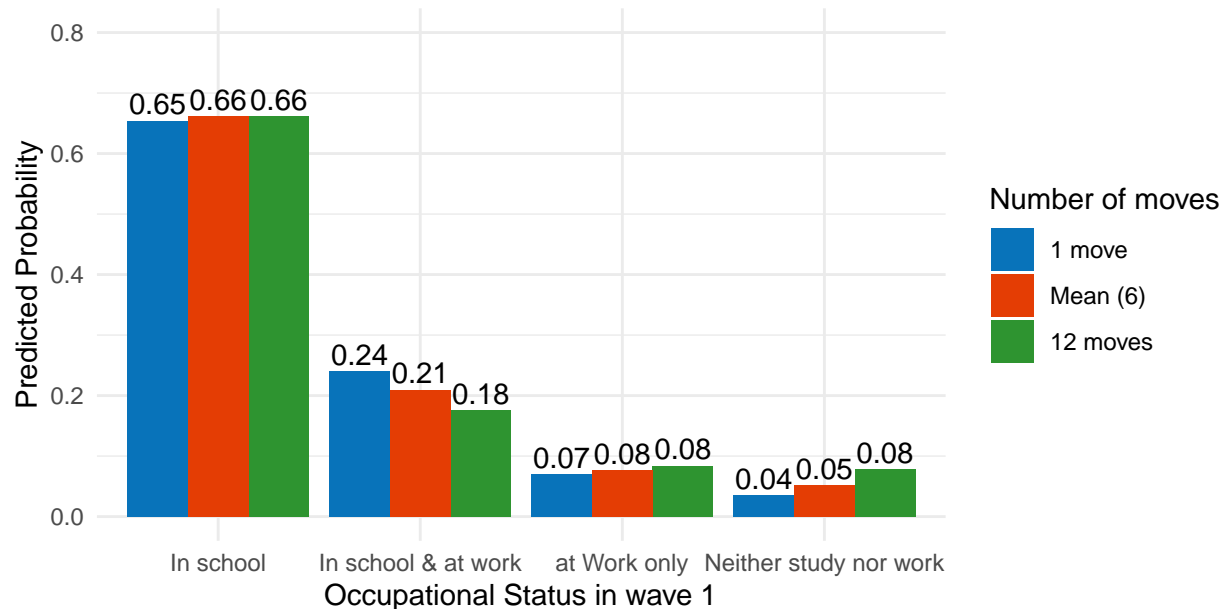
due to negligence is 5.48. Among youth placed due to behavioural problems, the number is significantly higher, at 6.75 ($p < 0,001$). Therefore, youth residing in a rehabilitation centre, who first entered care due to behavioural problems, tend to have undergone more placements than their counterparts. Youth placed due to behavioural problems are also more likely to be living in rehabilitation centres.

The international literature generally shows that placement instability creates a break in relationship continuity : this stability is essential for the development of positive social relations during the transition to adulthood. Below we will analyze the occupation status of the youth we met in wave 1. We will then examine their education track. In all cases we analyze the links between placement instability, as measured by the number of moves recorded in the youths' files, and our indicators of interest. The results unveiled are mainly derived from multivariate statistical models that take into account other important explanatory factors. This approach lets us isolate the specific relationships between instability and the indicators of interest more effectively.

Instability and occupation

In the first wave of interviews, 56.07% of EDJeP participants claimed to be students, 26.06% said they were studying and working, 8.01% said they were only working, and 9.86% said they were neither studying nor working. The average age of participants at the time of the first interview was 17.2. The youths' occupational status is evidently partly linked to their age,

FIGURE 2 – Probability of having a given occupational status by level of instability



Source : Leaving Care in Quebec and France: A Longitudinal Study of Youth /
L'étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés (EDJeP).
* Predicted probabilities calculated from a multinomial regression model.

but studies and work also provide important experience to ease the transition to autonomy. Whereas at age 17, many youth are still students, in some cases because they are obliged to attend school under the Education Act, acquiring work experience at the same time can be considered very useful in preparation for independent living.

Figure 2 shows the probabilities of being in one of 4 situations during wave 1 for youth who faced 1, 6, and 12 changes in care settings, with the other variables kept identical.⁴ Note that these probabilities are based on multivariate statistical models that take into account various important elements in order to isolate the specific relationship between instability and occupational status as accurately as possible. First, we can observe that the probabilities of still being in school vary little according to the number of changes in placements. Given their age and situation, many young people were still obliged to be enrolled in school during wave 1 of EDJeP; their student status is therefore not surprising.

However, we observe that the probability of combining studies and work decreases from 0.24 for youth who faced only one move to 0.18 for an identical youth who had moved 12 times. In other words, for two youths who share all the other characteristics, having experienced 12

4. The figure illustrates the predicted probabilities calculated based on the results of a multinomial regression model that takes into account age at first placement, number of placements, reason for first placement, total duration of continuous placement, proportion of time in continuous placement spent in a foster family, proportion of time in continuous placement spent in a rehabilitation centre, and age at the time of the first interview. The scenarios are calculated for a boy who entered care due to negligence, and all other values are kept at the mean for the sample.

changes in placements versus only one reduces the possibility of studying and working at the same time by 25%.

Conversely, the probability of being neither in school nor in the workforce increases according to the number of placements, from 3.58% for youths who moved only once to 7.8% for youth who experienced 12 placements. For youth with identical characteristics, individuals who moved 12 times are twice as likely to be neither studying nor working compared with their counterparts who moved only once.

Therefore, while the number of placements has a very low impact on the probability of still being a student in wave 1, the probability of neither studying nor working doubles when an otherwise similar youth goes from only one move to 12 placements. We also observe that 11% of the young EDJeP participants experienced at least 12 moves. Thus, 12 placements is not an extreme value, and the results illustrated indeed correspond to highly realistic scenarios. Considering that most youth were still obliged to be enrolled in school when we first interviewed them, it is quite possible that their occupational status may change when this constraint is lifted.

Instability and education

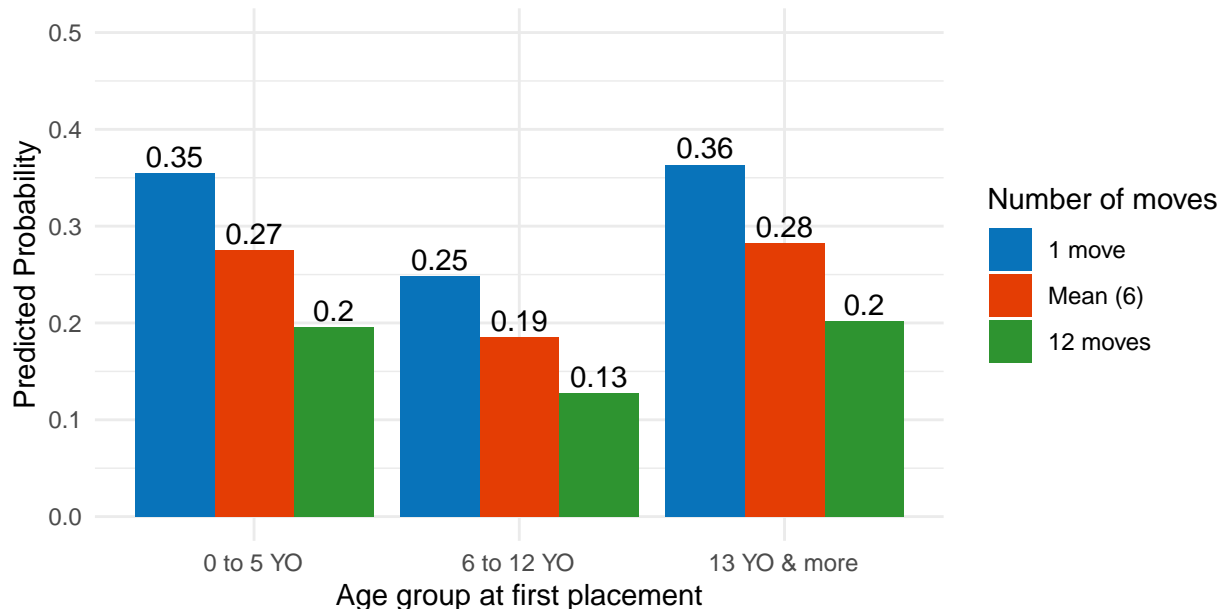
Obtaining a Secondary V diploma (SSD) or the equivalent undoubtedly plays a crucial role in equipping youth to enter the workforce as they transition to independent living. In fact, the SSD is often the minimum requirement for getting a job. As our first report demonstrates, many young people experience difficulties and most have major education setbacks.

Here we concentrate on the links between placement instability and the likelihood of youth obtaining an SSD or the equivalent. Specifically, we examine whether the youth obtained or are on track to obtaining an SSD or the equivalent before reaching adulthood. To be considered as having obtained or being on track to obtaining an SSD before age 18, a young person had to either already have received an SSD at the time of wave 1, or claim to still be studying and be enrolled at a sufficiently advanced level to be able to realistically complete Secondary V (or the equivalent) before they reach 18. For example, a youth age 16 who claims to be in Secondary 4 at the time of wave 1 is considered to be on track to finishing before age 18, but a 16-year-old who says they are in secondary 3 would not be able to finish on time. We are interested here in the probability that young people are in this favourable position at a crucial point in their transition to autonomy.

Figure 3 illustrates the results of the analysis according to the youths' age group when they entered care, and the number of changes in placements.⁵ First, we can note that regardless of the age when the youth entered care, the probability of being on track to obtain an SSD before age 18 decreases as placement instability increases. For example, a youth placed after age 13 who went through only one move has a 36% probability of obtaining the SSD before adulthood. This probability diminishes significantly, to 20%, for an otherwise identical youth who faced 12 changes in placements.

5. The figure illustrates the predicted probabilities calculated based on the results of a logistic regression that takes into account age at first placement, number of placements, reason for first placement, total duration of continuous placement, proportion of time in continuous placement spent in a foster family, proportion of time in continuous placement spent in a rehabilitation centre, and the individual's school year cohort.

FIGURE 3 – Probability of obtaining or having obtained the SSD before age 18



Source : Leaving Care in Quebec and France: A Longitudinal Study of Youth /
L'étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés (EDJeP).
* Predicted probabilities calculated from a logistic regression model.

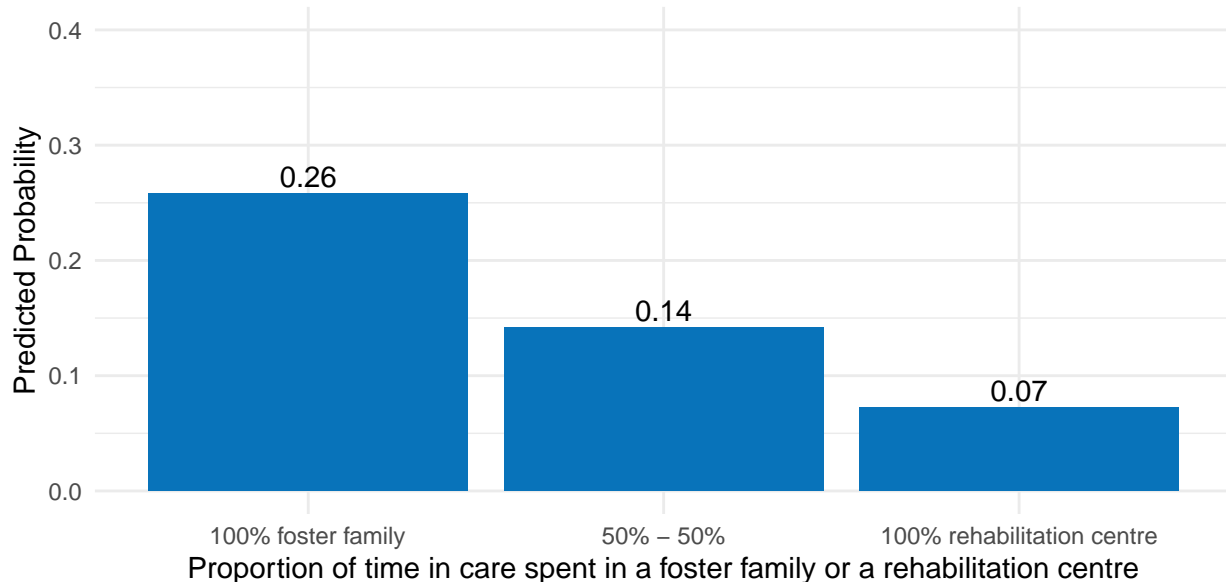
Further, the data show that youth who were first placed in care between ages 6 and 12 stand out from the others. Youth who entered care between ages 0 and 5 and those whose first placement was after age 13 have similar probabilities of having obtained or being on track to obtain their SSD. However, youth placed between ages 6 and 12, that is largely during their elementary school years, are systematically less likely to obtain their SSD before reaching adulthood. For example, whereas youth placed for the first time between ages 0 and 5 have a 35% probability of obtaining a SSD before age 18, otherwise identical youth who were placed between ages 6 and 12 have a 25% probability of obtaining a diploma.

It is important to note that these estimates are based on multivariate statistical models that take into account other important factors that may be linked to young people's school experience. The probabilities reported in the figure 3 thus compare youth who differ only by age at first placement or number of moves, who are otherwise identical concerning other key factors. This lets us best estimate the specific links between placement instability and education, excluding the impact of other crucial factors.

We have seen in figure 1 that when we first interviewed the youth, at roughly age 17, the youth residing in a rehabilitation centre in wave 1 had generally faced considerable instability, whereas those placed in a foster family had a more stable track. The results presented above already take into account the path and the placement settings of the youth, but it is evidently useful to grasp the specific impact of care settings on the young people's school experience, while adjusting for the level of instability of the youths' path, to ensure pertinent comparisons.

Figure 4 considers the probabilities of being on track to obtaining an SSD before adulthood for three hypothetical boys placed between ages 0 and five due to negligence, all having an

FIGURE 4 – Probability of obtaining or having obtained an SSD before age 18 by placement setting



Source : Leaving Care in Quebec and France: A Longitudinal Study of Youth /
L'étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés (EDJeP).

* Scenario : boy who entered care between 0 and 5 years of age for negligence, with an average number of moves and an average cumulative time spent in out of home care

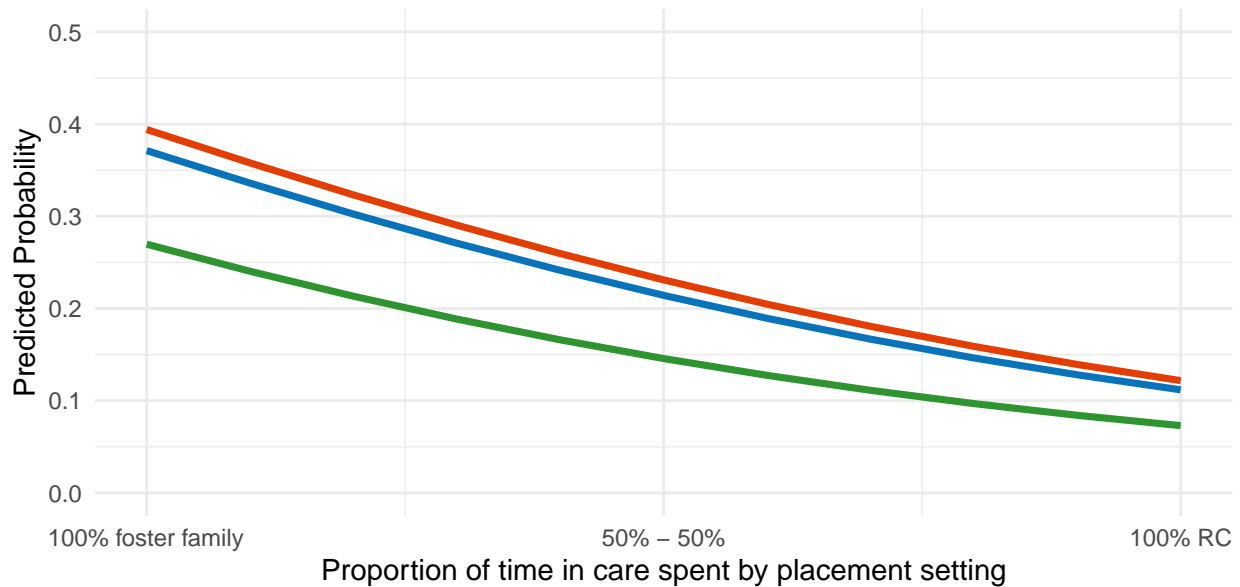
average number of moves (5.75) and an average continuous placement time (5.9). The three boys differ only according to the proportion of time in care that they spent in a foster family versus a rehabilitation centre : one individual lived with a foster family for 100% of his time in care, another spent 100% of his time in a rehabilitation centre, and the third spent half of his time in care in each of these settings.

According to this scenario, the boy who spent 100% of his time in a foster family has a 26% probability of having obtained or being on track to obtaining an SSD before adulthood. This probability decreases to 14% for a boy who spent half of his time in care with a foster family and the other half in a rehabilitation centre. For the boy who spent all of his time in care at a rehabilitation centre, the probability plunges to 7%. Therefore, this boy is 3.7 times less likely to obtain an SSD before adulthood than an otherwise identical youth who spent all of his time in care in a foster family.

The scenarios reported in figure 4 are mainly presented for illustration purposes. The probabilities reported would change if a different basic scenario had been selected. Regardless of the profile of the youth depicted in the scenarios, it is important to remember that the more time youth in care spend a rehabilitation centre, the lower their probability of being on track to obtain an SSD before reaching adulthood.

Figure 5 shows the complete relationship between the proportion of time in care spent at a rehabilitation centre and the probability of obtaining an SSD before age 18, according to the

FIGURE 5 – Probability of obtaining or having obtained an SSD before age 18 by proportion of time in care spent at a rehabilitation centre



Source : Leaving Care in Quebec and France: A Longitudinal Study of Youth /
L'étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés (EDJeP).
* Scenarios : girl in care with an average number of moves and an average
cumulative time spent in out of home care

age that the youth entered care.⁶ It is very clear that the likelihood of being on track to obtain an SSD decreases as the proportion of time spent at a rehabilitation centre versus in a foster family increases. Further, youth who entered care between ages 6 to 12 have a systematically lower probability of being on track to obtain an SSD before adulthood. Entering care at this age therefore seems particularly disruptive for youth.

Which youth experience the most placement instability ?

Evidently, placement instability has very marked effects on the outlook for the transition to adulthood. It is worth examining which youth face the most placement instability, and which are most at risk of experiencing a difficult transition to autonomy. Among the young EDJeP participants, the tenth decile is at 12 moves, and 11% of the youth who participated in EDJeP reported at least 12 moves.

Table 2 reports the proportions of EDJeP participants from different groups of interest that faced 12 moves or more. The first column provides the percentage of each group that experienced such instability and the second shows the difference between this percentage and the total proportion of EDJeP participants (11%) that experienced 12 moves or more. The

6. The probabilities here were estimated for girls placed in care due to negligence, with a total continuous placement time and number of moves situated at the mean.

second column therefore offers a good indication of the groups that generally have experienced more or less instability : a positive figure indicates above average instability and a negative number instability below the mean.

TABLE 2 – Proportions of groups with 12 or more placements

	% of group	Difference from the mean (11%)
Sex assigned at birth		
Male	14,4	3,41
Female	7,4	-3,59
Placement setting in wave 1		
Foster family	3,3	-7,71
Group home	2,7	-8,26
Rehabilitation centre	26,0	14,97
Intermediate resource	11,3	0,34
Other resource	20,0	9,00
Age at first placement		
Ages 0 to 5	16,3	5,27
Ages 6 to 12	11,5	0,50
Ages 13 and over	6,8	-4,25
Motive of the first placement		
Negligence	12,1	1,12
Sexual abuse	6,8	-4,18
Physical abuse	10,1	-0,92
Behavioural problems	12,8	1,75
Abandonment	15,0	4,00
Psychological abuse	4,8	-6,15
LSJPA status		
Non	4,4	-6,63
Yes	23,1	12,08
Ethnicity		
White	11,1	0,12
Black	7,0	-3,96
Other visible minorities	9,9	-1,14
Aboriginal	12,0	0,97

For example, the tables shows that 14.41% of boys who participated in EDJeP moved 12 or more times, which corresponds to overrepresentation of 3.41 percentage points. Youth placed in a rehabilitation centre made up 25.97% of those with the most placement instability. They are thus 14.97 percentage points higher in the group of individuals with the most instability than if their percentage was purely proportionate with their number.

We can also note an important difference according to the YCJA (Youth Criminal Justice Act) status. Thus, 11.97% of youth who were remanded by the Act moved 12 or more times.

Their likelihood of being in this category is therefore 0.97 percentage points higher than it would be if it were proportionally as numerous as the other participants.

Conclusions

Whereas clinical performance in youth protection focuses on issues related to access to services, our research is interested in the issues that affect young people in care, along with the links between services and placements received, issues related to preparation for independent living, support after leaving care, and the transition to adulthood. Our research is thus part of the studies on outcomes, and allows evaluation of the systemic issues related to youth protection services. Our first report has identified the major education setbacks that affect youth in care. The present report sheds light on one of the potential mechanisms through which these youth at risk may become even more vulnerable.

In this study, we focused on the links between placement instability and a variety of important elements in the transition to independent adulthood. Our results systematically show the important links between instability and more negative situations. Youth who had an unstable track are more likely to be neither studying nor working, and those enrolled in school have a lower probability of simultaneously acquiring work experience. Youth who experienced more instability thus have a much lower tendency of being on track to obtain their Secondary V diploma before adulthood, and they are more likely to be living in a rehabilitation centre. The longer they spend in these centres, the less likely they are to obtain a Secondary V diploma. Therefore, instability increases the chances that youth will spend more time in a rehabilitation centre. These results converge to inform reflection on youth protection approaches, notably regarding the role of placement in the clinical process.

Further, for some youth this placement instability is compounded by the termination of services at age 18, because youth protection services typically end at adulthood. In fact, several studies have shown that youth who age out of placement face an abrupt termination of services. They must then find their own home, or negotiate access to social and mental health services. Street youth represent an extreme example of individuals who struggle to access and maintain services and ties. Most studies find that between 40% and 60% of these youth had been in the care of youth protection services. Wave 2 of our EDJeP study, conducted in spring 2019, provides very recent Québec data regarding these dimensions.

In Québec some initiatives address this issue of access to services and continuity past age 18. Notably, the youth qualification program (PQJ) offers services to youth in care, ages 16 to 19, in all regions of Québec. However, this program does not offer services to all youth in care. In addition, some young people who benefit from placement in a foster family may, when they reach adulthood, stay in this family to continue their studies. Lastly, CIUSSS and CIUSSS have developed support initiatives to improve housing stability among youth. They include financial assistance for youth who wish to continue their education, and support for workforce integration.

Although these practices allow continuity of services and relations after age 18, we must acknowledge that the offering of this support is not universally available across Québec. In the rest of Canada and the United States, other jurisdictions have put in place extended care systems directed at youth in the care of youth protection services after they reach adulthood.

These services mostly follow a paradigm of universal social rights, and are therefore accessible to all. This type of support is not available to all youth in care in Québec, although the efficacy of these programs has been demonstrated by the international literature, including that concerning the education of youth in care.