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## The Covid-19 pandemic and needs of youth who leave care

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May 2020

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## Partners

EDJeP is the result of collaborations developed over the past fifteen years between our research team and many local, provincial, national and international partners. We would like to thank all our partners.

- Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur (MEES)
- Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale (MTESS)
- Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS)
- Institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ)
- Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux (CIUSSS)
  - CIUSSS du Centre-Sud de l'île de Montréal
  - CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale
  - CIUSSS de l'Estrie
  - CIUSSS de la Mauricie et du Centre-du-Québec
  - CIUSSS de l'Ouest-de-l'île de Montréal
  - CIUSSS de la Chaudière-Appalaches
- Centre intégré de santé et de services sociaux (CISSS)
 

— CISSS de la Montérégie Est	— CISSS de la Gaspésie
— CISSS de Laval	— CISSS de Lanaudière
— CISSS du Bas-Saint-Laurent	— CISSS des Laurentides
— CISSS de l'Outaouais	— CISSS de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue
— CISSS de la Côte-Nord	

## Research centres

- The McGill Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF)
- The Chaire de recherche jeunesse de l'École des hautes études en Santé publique (EHESP-CJ)
- The CNRS Printemps laboratory of the Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ)
- The Observatoire Jeunes et Société (OJS)

## Community and advocacy organizations

- The Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (CDPDJ)
- The Commission de la santé et des services sociaux des Premières Nations du Québec et du Labrador (CSSSPNQL)
- The Regroupement des organismes communautaires autonomes Jeunesse du Québec (ROCAJQ)
- The Réseau des Auberges du cœur du Québec (RACQ)
- The Réseau des Carrefours Jeunesse-Emploi (RCJEQ)
- The Fédération des familles d'accueil et ressources intermédiaires du Québec (FFARIQ)
- The Child Welfare League of Canada (CWLC)

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## Funding organizations

We thank the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada* (SSHRC) and the *Canadian Foundation for Innovation* (CFI) for financing this research. In addition, funding from the Chaire réseau de recherche sur la Jeunesse du Québec (Fonds de recherche sur la société et culture Québec, 2018-24) was used to expand the dimensions of the analysis.

## 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) <sup>1</sup>, 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.

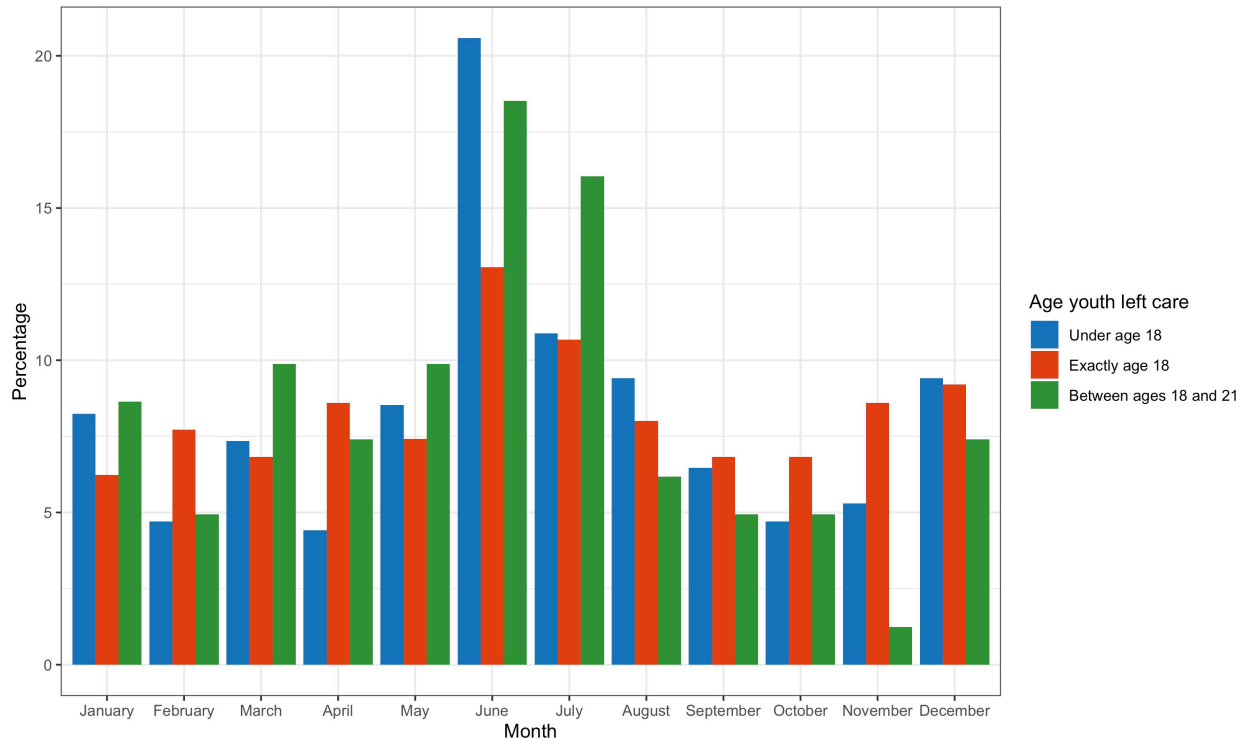
In addition, major collaboration with the team leading the *Étude longitudinale sur l'autonomisation des jeunes après un placement (ELAP)* in France will allow an international comparison that will extend the knowledge gained from the study considerably.

**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.

FIGURE 1 – Month youth leave care by age at departure



The Covid-19 pandemic is affecting the entire world. Countries have adopted social distancing measures to varying degrees, in an effort to limit the spread of the virus. The measures put in place in Québec surely have a major social and economic impact, similar to those implemented elsewhere, but not everyone is equal during this pandemic. The most vulnerable populations are being disproportionately affected. In Québec, young people in out-of-home care must leave their care setting when they reach adulthood. At age 18 they no longer qualify to receive youth protection services. This situation often forces youth to make a sudden transition to fully autonomous adulthood despite the fact that in the rest of society, this transition has gradually been delayed in recent decades. Young people in care, whose situations are often precarious due to their difficult life path, thus face additional social expectations that one would never think of imposing on other youths. The current context of the pandemic has amplified the challenges for youth who age out of care. Many Canadian provinces have adopted moratoriums on abruptly cutting off services for youth who must leave their care setting during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> In Québec, such practices do not seem to prevail, even though our data demonstrate that youth who leave care are experiencing serious difficulties due to COVID-19.

Similar to the responses to the health crisis that stem from solid evidence and epidemiology, we have gathered new data as part of the LCQF study (T1, n1136, T2, n831 ended in

2. For [British Columbia](#); for [Saskatchewan](#); for [Manitoba](#); for [Ontario](#); for [Newfoundland and Labrador](#). For Alberta on March 30, 2020, Minister Rebecca Schultz tweeted : “Children’s Services has made it a priority to help young people manage through #COVID19. That’s why two weeks ago we made sure that no one will age out of care for at least 3 months. Financial agreements have been renewed and placements extended. #ableg.



January 2020) to demonstrate that the pandemic situation is accentuating the housing shortage, hindering young people's ability to access social and mental health services, limiting the pursuit of studies, and making access to employment considerably more complex. The COVID-19 crisis may also force many youth into situations that cause them to be needlessly apprehended by the justice system. The pandemic is also reinforcing their psychosocial and socio-economic problems. A response to this situation is required urgently because our data show that most youth age out of care during the summer months.

Each year, about 2,000 young people leave prolonged out-of-home care as they near or reach age 18.<sup>3</sup> The LCQF data nonetheless indicate seasonality in the pattern of youth leaving care. Figure 1 shows that the largest proportion of youth age out of care in June or July. 59% of the participants interviewed in wave 2 of LCQF who were no longer in care had left care between March and August of that year. We can therefore estimate that about 1,180 youths would be leaving care during the first phase of the pandemic.

## Access to housing and housing instability

The first challenge that young people face when they are about to leave care is finding a place to live. During wave 2 of the LCQF study, we asked youth who had already left care at the time of the interview where they lived immediately after leaving care. We also asked them if they considered this place as “a temporary solution while you waited to find a more permanent place to live.” More than 45% of the youths who had left care replied YES, suggesting that a large portion of youth who leave care start adulthood in a situation of housing instability.

As Figure 2 illustrates, one-quarter of youth said they had returned to live in their family of origin, and half of that group considered this setting as a temporary solution. 12.5% of youths were able to remain in their foster family after care ended, and one-third of them considered this situation temporary.

Housing instability among youth who leave care is well documented in our recent report issuing from wave 2 of the LCQF data collection (Goyette, Bellot, Blanchet, & Silva-Ramirez, 2019). The study notably finds that 19% percent of youth who age out of care experience at least one episode of homelessness in the year after they leave care, and that 32% experience housing instability. Only 49% claim to be in a situation of housing stability since they left care. Therefore, more than half of the youths who left care experienced at least one episode of homelessness, corresponding to major housing instability, in the months after they left care.

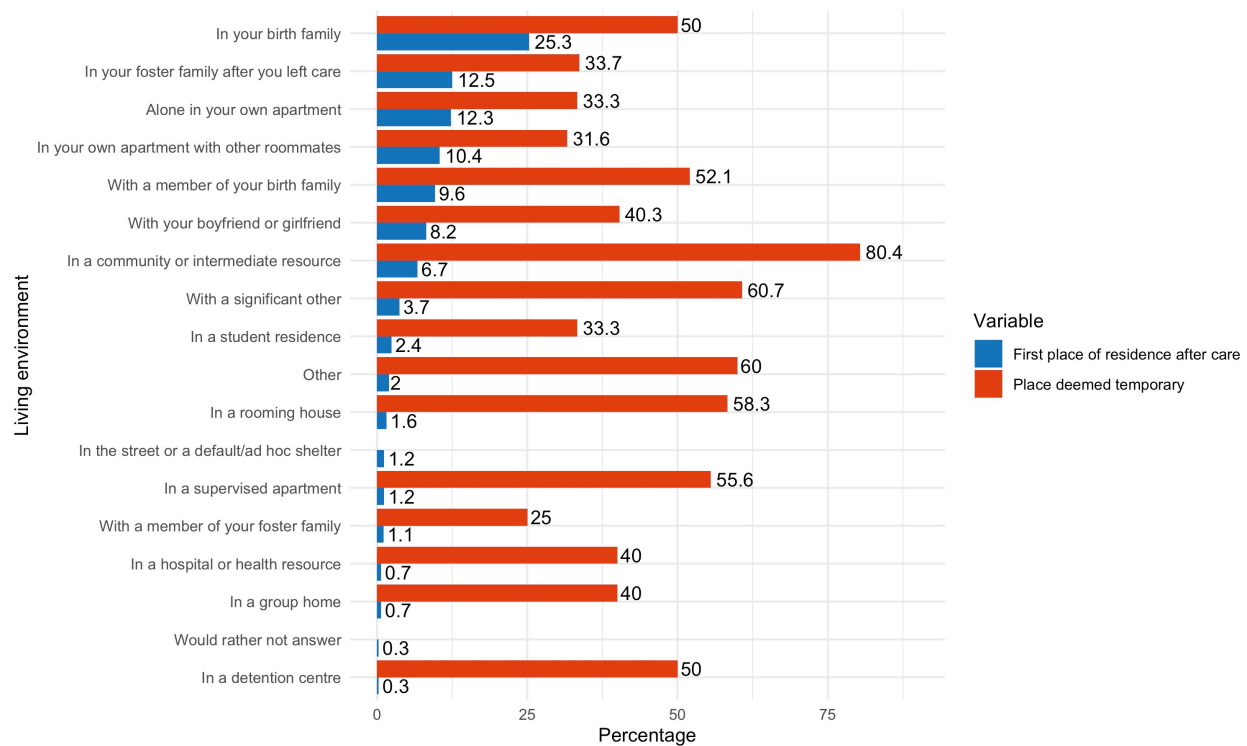
Whereas we can expect that confinement measures will remain in force, and given that a housing shortage already exists in Montréal, it is clear that the young people who must leave care in the coming months will be contending with an extremely difficult context. Consequently, if no actions are taken to support these youth, we can expect that even larger proportions of this segment will experience housing instability, including homelessness.

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3. This estimation is very conservative because it is based on the definition of the population studied in our LCQF research project.



FIGURE 2 – First place of residence after care and its temporary nature



## Mental health

The Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) (Statistics Canada, 2020) evaluated the mental health status of children ages 12 to 17 for 2018. The results show that in Canada, 7.7% of youth considered their mental health to be poor or fair, compared with 5.7% of youth in Québec.<sup>4</sup>

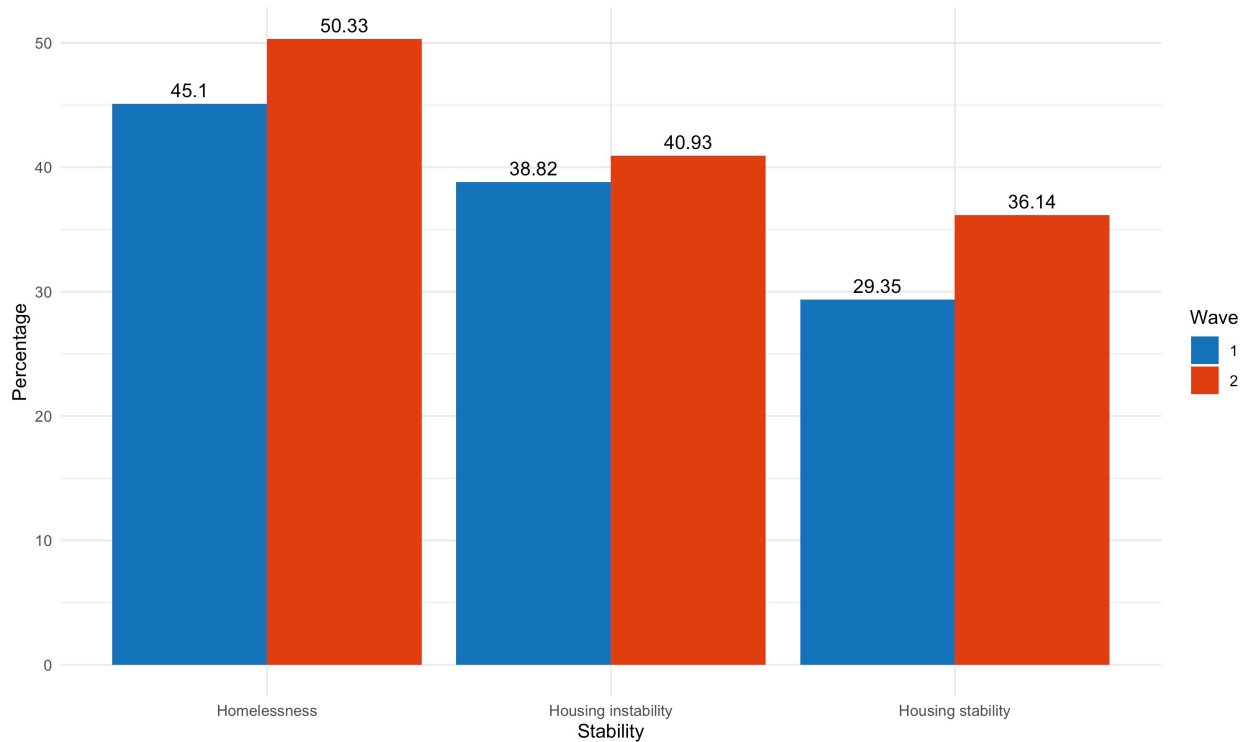
In the LCQF study, we asked youth if they had experienced mental health problems in the past 12 months. 32.2% of the participants said they had had mental health problems during wave 1, while they were still in care. This proportion increased to 39% during wave 2, at which point most of the youth had aged out of care.

Our data thus corroborate the findings of other studies that show that youth placed in out-of-home care have major psychosocial difficulties. The context surrounding the pandemic seems to be exacerbating these difficulties in the population, especially among those who are already vulnerable. In addition, the crisis situation prevailing in the health and social services network is certainly playing a role in hindering access to services that could protect and support these youth.

Our analyses also show that among the wave 1 participants, who were still in care, 29.35% of youth in a situation of housing stability reported mental health problems, compared with 38.82% of youth with housing instability, and 45.10% of youth who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness. Subsequent statistical analyses indicate that youth in a situation

4. The question was : “In general, would you say your mental health is... ? 1 : Excellent. 2 : Very good, 3 : Good, 4 : Fair, 5 : Poor, 8 : Would rather not answer, 9 : Don’t know.”

FIGURE 3 – Prevalence of mental health problems reported in waves 1 and 2 by housing stability situation in wave 2



of housing stability have significantly fewer mental health problems than do their counterparts in a situation of housing instability ( $t = 2.39$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and those who had experienced homelessness ( $t = 3.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

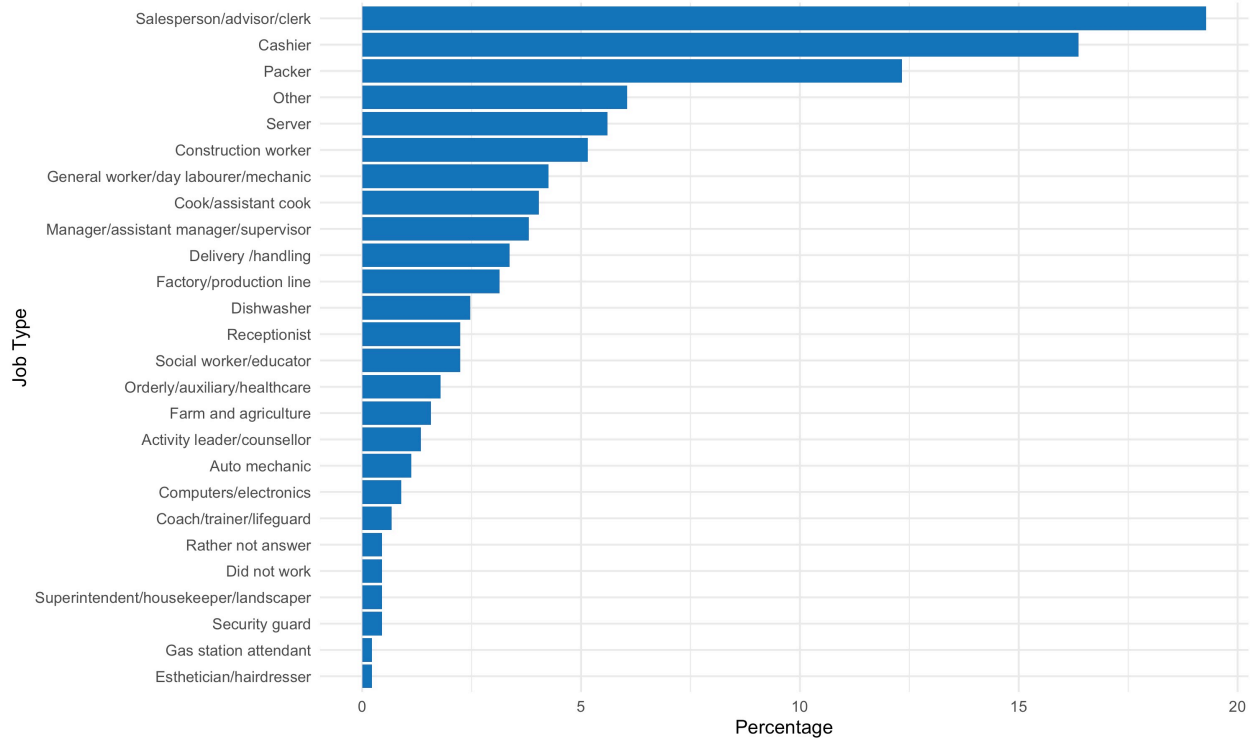
Further, during wave 2 (youth aged 19 on average), the percentage of participants who reported having mental health problems was 36.14% among youth with housing stability, 40.93% among youth with housing instability, and 50.33% among youth who experienced homelessness. Subsequent analyses also suggest that youth with housing stability have significantly fewer mental health problems than do those who experienced homelessness ( $t = 3.02$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Given that we know that youth who leave care are already more likely to experience psychosocial distress, that the context of social and physical distancing can reinforce these problems, and that services have become more difficult to access, it is urgent that the government adopt measures to support youth who leave care.

## Access to employment and income

When we met them in wave 2, 14% of youths who left care were students only, 19% combined studies and work, 36% were working but not in school, and 29% were neither studying nor working. Among those in the workforce, slightly more than half said they were working part-time (53.4% worked less than 35 hours a week) and 44.8% reported working full-time.

FIGURE 4 – Employment sectors of youths in the workforce

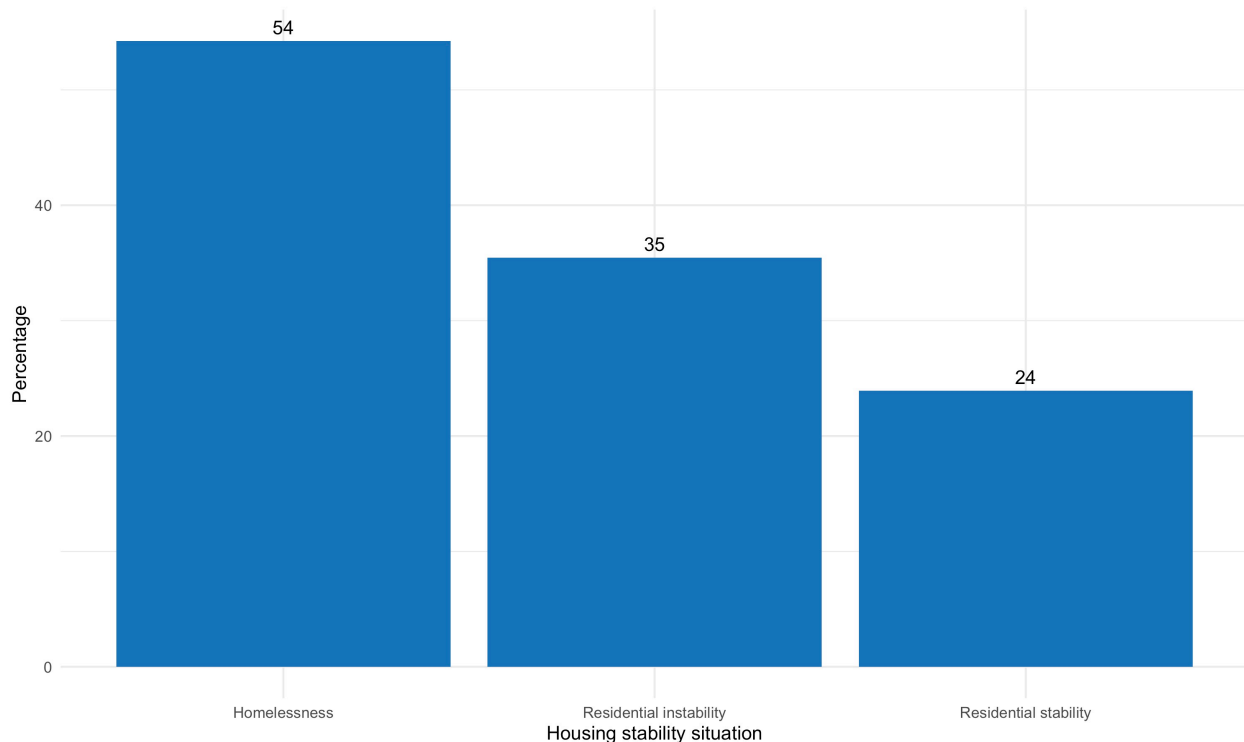


In addition, the LCQF data clearly demonstrate that youth who had jobs during wave 2 tended to work in the services sector. We asked the participants to describe their main jobs in their own words, and then ranked these jobs in the categories reported in Figure 4. We observed that four of the most frequent employment sectors are in the services sector : 19% of youth were working as a sales person, advisor, or clerk, 16.4% worked as a cashier, 12.3% worked as a cook or assistant cook, and 5.6% worked as a server. These jobs were all hard hit by the closures imposed by the Québec government as part of the confinement measures. In February 2020, the unemployment rate among Quebecers ages 15 to 24 was 7.3%, but it climbed to 18.5% in March 2020. By comparison, the unemployment rate increased from 5.1% in February to 8.8% in March for all Quebecers ages 15 and over.<sup>5</sup> These data confirm that the pandemic initially disproportionately affected youth employment, and we can expect that the situation is even more difficult for youth in care.

It is therefore clear that the pandemic situation can disproportionately affect youth who leave care by hindering their ability to find employment. Given the central role of the labour market from both a financial and social standpoint, the current pandemic situation will likely make the status of youth leaving care even more precarious at a time when they are already very vulnerable.

5. [Statistics Canada data.](#)

FIGURE 5 – Probability of having been arrested by the police in the last 12 months by housing stability situation after leaving care



## Involvement with the legal system

Vulnerable youth who are forced to leave care in a pandemic context that makes their housing and job search even more difficult are more likely to face situations where, despite themselves, they may enter the justice system, particularly those who are forced to live in the streets. Beyond the higher prevalence of mental health problems among youth who have experienced at least one episode of homelessness after leaving care, the LCQF data show that these youths are twice as likely to be arrested by the police within 12 months of their leaving care. 24% of youth who had stable housing after ageing out of care reported being arrested by the police at least once in the 12 months following the end of their care. This proportion climbs significantly to 35% among those who report housing instability ( $p < 0.01$ ), and reaches 54% for youth who report at least one episode of homelessness ( $p < 0,001$ ).

*La Presse* reported on April 11 that many homeless youths have received fines of over \$1,500. They were penalized for grouped together, which violates the social distancing rules, but they had nowhere else to go. The LCQF data suggest that youth who leave care are very likely to encounter such situations. Numerous experts have clearly stated that these practices are counterproductive, and that they arise from a process of social profiling that make youth who are already in precarious situations even more vulnerable. In a press release on April 15, the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse stated that “discriminatory profiling remains prohibited even when health and civil emergency measures are in place. These measures may not directly or indirectly infringe on the right to equality.

Social profiling includes any action by people in a situation of authority to apply a measure disproportionately to segments of the population notably due to their real or presumed social condition.”

## Conclusion

The LCQF data clearly show that youth who leave care when they reach adulthood very often find themselves in a highly vulnerable situation regarding housing stability, mental health and access to employment. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the current pandemic situation, which increases the likelihood of youth being needlessly apprehended by the justice system. Many youth organizations have already observed an increase in requests for support from youth since the start of the pandemic, along with heightened anxiety and a greater sense of insecurity.

There is an urgent need to take action to support youth who have recently left care or are leaving care in the coming weeks by foreseeing protection and assistance mechanisms in terms of post-care housing, income and social services, especially given that the current legislation provides for the continuation of protection for these youth. After the crisis, it is equally important to reflect on and take more sustainable actions on issues related to services directed at youths who leave Youth Centres and out-of-home care, as many people who spoke at the Laurent Commission argued. Over the next few weeks, our research teams, in tandem with partners and youth, will be studying the effect of confinement on youth in care, on young adults who leave care, and on youth workers’ practices.