

June | 2022

Homelessness, judicialization and marginalization of ex- placed youth in Quebec

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To cite this report :

Goyette, Martin, Alexandre Blanchet, Céline Bellot, Jérémy Boisvert-Viens, Annie Fontaine, 2022, "Homelessness, judicialization and marginalization of ex-placed youth in Quebec", Chaire de recherche sur l'évaluation des actions publiques à l'égard des jeunes et des populations vulnérables.

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)
- Centres intégrés de santé et de services sociaux (CISSS)
- 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 Laval
 - CISSS du Bas-Saint-Laurent
 - CISSS de l'Outaouais
 - CISSS de la Côte-Nord
 - CISSS de la Gaspésie
 - CISSS de Lanaudière
 - CISSS des Laurentides
 - CISSS de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue

Research centres

- L'institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ)
- Le Centre de recherche sur l'enfance et la famille de l'Université McGill (CRCF)
- La Chaire de recherche jeunesse de l'École des hautes études en Santé publique (EHESP-CJ)
- Le laboratoire CNRS Printemps de l'Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ)
- L'Observatoire Jeunes et Société (OJS)

Community and advocacy organizations

- La Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (CDPDJ)
- Commission de la santé et des services sociaux des Premières Nations du Québec et du Labrador (CSSSPNQL)
- Le Regroupement des organismes communautaires autonomes jeunesse du Québec (ROCAJQ)
- Le Réseau des Auberges du cœur du Québec (RACQ)
- Le Réseau des Carrefours Jeunesse-Emploi (RCJEQ)

- Fédération des familles d'accueil et ressources intermédiaires du Québec (FFARIQ)
- La Ligue pour le bien-être de l'enfance du Canada (LBEC)
- En marge
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Funding Organizations

This research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), and Making the Shift, to whom we are grateful. In addition, funds from the Chaire réseau de recherche sur la jeunesse du Québec (Fonds de recherche sur la société et culture Québec, 2018-24) are being mobilized to expand the dimensions of analysis.

Ethical authorizations

The project received approval from the research ethics committee of the Institut universitaire jeunes en difficulté du CIUSSS center sud de l'île de Montréal (MP-CJMIU- 16-02) in July 2016. In addition, each of the 16 regional health and social services institutions responsible for youth protection in Quebec authorized data collection in their institution and access to medical records (youth protection trajectories). Finally, the research consent form signed by the youths interviewed during the EDJeP data collection waves authorized the research team, following a favorable opinion from the Commission d'accès à l'information, to access and cross-reference the administrative data with each other and with the questionnaire data.

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 longitudinal study From a target population of 2573 youth, we obtained contact information for 1687 youth that allowed for the completion of three waves of questionnaires in addition to an intervague questionnaire. In the first wave of interviews conducted between 2017 and 2018, 1136 youth participated while still in care and averaging 17 years of age (response rate of 67.3%). In the second wave of interviews conducted between 2019 and 2020, we interviewed 844 youth while 91% of them were out of placement and on average 19 years old. Then, a short questionnaire was administered between the second and third waves, to which 714 youth responded. Finally, we reached 560 of these youth for the third and final wave of interviews between 2021 and 2022 when they were all discharged from placement and averaged 21 years of age.

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.

Young people who leave the youth protection system after an extended placement often face many significant challenges that the vast majority of their counterparts of the same age do not. In what we call the “paradoxical imperative of autonomy,” youth who age out of care must make an abrupt transition to full independence in adulthood even though their life trajectory has considerably weakened the elements they would require for harmonious social integration. Once they reach the age of 18, many young people who leave out-of-home care feel as if the few resources available to them suddenly disappear. Ensuring the continuity of services and links is crucial to easing young people’s transition out of the youth protection system.

Unfortunately, many youth experience service disruptions. We have previously shown that a significant number of youth become homeless in the months after they leave care (Goyette et al., 2019). Our research consequently explores the “tipping points” that poorly planned exits from institutions (MacDonald et al., 2020) can create, along with the lack of preparation for independent living among youth in care (Goyette, 2019), discontinuities in youth mental health services, and the association between the criminal justice system, social problems and occupancy of public space (Bellot et al., 2022; Goyette, Blanchet, Bellot, 2020).

Recent research clearly demonstrates that homelessness is often the result of complex processes combining individual difficulties, social and service disruptions, and structural factors such as lack of affordable housing and economic insecurity (MacDonald et al., 2020). International studies maintain that these challenges are exacerbated for youth formerly in care.

The first Canada-wide study of youth homelessness found that 57.8% of participants reported having used child welfare services at some point. Compared with national data indicating that 0.3% of the general population receives child protection services, youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely to report interactions with the child protection system (Nichols et al., 2017). In addition, a longitudinal study of youth in foster care in the United States finds that youth who leave care are at high risk for homelessness during the transition to adulthood. Between 31% and 46% of study participants had experienced homelessness at least once by age 26 (Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney 2013).

In this context, we sought to reassess the issues associated with housing instability and homelessness among youth leaving care in Québec. This report uses data from wave 3 of the longitudinal study of youth in care in Quebec and France (EDJeP), gathered between June 2021 and January 2022. At the time, the average age of youth on the EDJeP panel was 21 years; they had thus exited care several years earlier. We will first look at the youths' housing situation and how it has changed since wave 2 of data collection, when their average was 19 years, to paint a general portrait of these youth in their different housing situations. We will then focus on key elements associated with housing instability and homelessness, and we will analyze how these factors are associated with the situations youth experience in the years after they age out of care. Finally, we will examine the links between homelessness and housing instability and mental health issues, as well as the links to involvement in the criminal justice system.

Measuring homelessness and housing stability

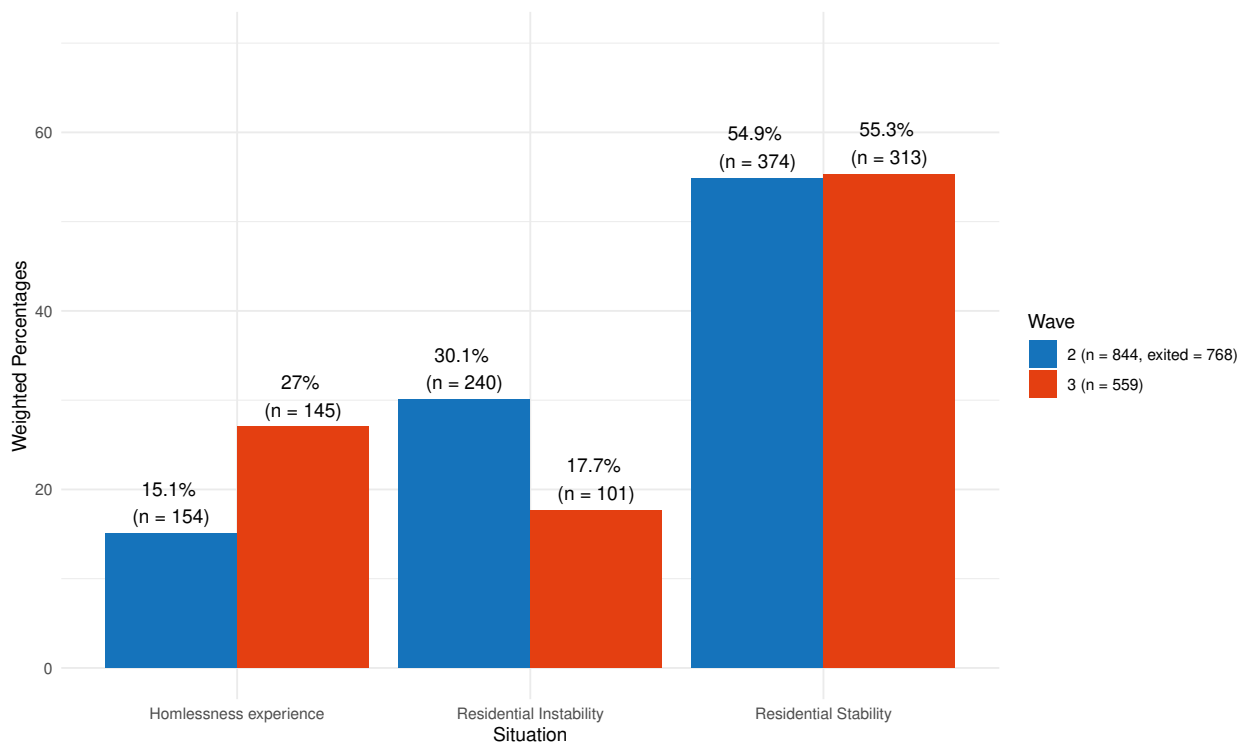
In waves 2 and 3, youth were asked whether, since leaving care, they had ever slept “on the street” (1), “in a default/ad hoc shelter (train station, car, van, subway, etc.)” (2) or “in emergency shelters” (3). In each wave, youth who answered yes to any of these questions were considered to have experienced homelessness.

We then sought to distinguish between youth who did not experience homelessness by whether they reported a situation of housing stability or instability. This distinction was based on the number of living arrangements reported by the youth since leaving care. We considered that a rate greater than $1 + 1 \times$ years since aging out of care would indicate a situation of housing instability. Thus, a youth who moves from the first residence after placement to a second living arrangement within the first 12 months would be in a stable situation. A youth with 3 homes in 12 months would be unstable, and a youth with 3 living arrangements in 24 months would be stable. Figure 1 shows the frequencies, raw percentages and weighted percentages of this measure for waves 2 and 3.

Changes in youths' housing stability

In wave 2, 768 of the 844 youths interviewed had left care. Following the procedure described above, 154 youth were considered to have experienced at least one episode of homelessness after they exited care. When weighted, this figure corresponds to 15.1% of youth who aged out of care. In wave 3, when all youth had left care, 145 of the 560 youth who completed the interview were considered to have experienced at least one episode of homelessness.¹ When weighted, this proportion corresponds to 27% of youth formerly in care. Conversely, the proportion of youth exiting care who were considered to have experienced housing instability since they left care dropped from 30.1% in wave 2 to 17.7% in wave 3. The proportion of youth considered to be experiencing housing stability remained stable, at nearly 55% of youth in both waves. These results are illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 – Residential stability status



Source : EDJeP data wave 2 (n = 840) and wave 3 (n = 560)

1. We had access to data from the youth integration program (PIJ) for all 2,573 youth who met the criteria for participation in the EDJeP study. This data on the target population allowed us to calculate weights for each wave of the EDJeP sample. The weights for each wave take into account gender at birth, PQJ (youth qualification program) status as identified in the administrative data extraction, the last placement setting recorded in the youth's file at the time of data extraction, and the care facility where the youth was placed

Overall, the data suggest a transfer from situations of housing instability to situations involving at least one experience of homelessness, but the reality is somewhat more complex. Table 1 compares the housing stability situations in waves 2 and 3. It shows that 15 percent of youth who were still in care in wave 2 experienced homelessness at least once by wave 3. This percentage is similar to that observed in wave 2 among youth leaving care. Nearly 76% of youth who had experienced homelessness in wave 2 were still classified as homeless in wave 3, 9.74% were now considered to be in an unstable housing situation, and 14.32% were identified as being in a stable situation. Nearly 24% of youth who had an unstable housing situation in wave 2 had experienced homelessness at least once by wave 3, 30.9% had an unstable housing situation, and 45% found stable housing. Finally, **among youth who had stable housing in wave 2, 16% had experienced homelessness at least once by wave 3, 11% had unstable housing in that wave, and nearly 73% had maintained their stable situation.**

TABLE 1 – Residential stability in wave 3 (row) vs. residential stability in wave 2 (column) - Percentages weighted by wave 3

| | Raw frequencies | | | | Weighted percentages | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|
| | Still placed | Homelessness | Instability | Stability | Still placed | Homelessness | Instability | Stability |
| Homelessness | 8 | 69 | 32 | 36 | 15.16 | 75.94 | 23.90 | 16.02 |
| Instability | 13 | 10 | 49 | 29 | 18.88 | 9.74 | 30.93 | 11.06 |
| Stability | 33 | 15 | 85 | 180 | 65.96 | 14.32 | 45.17 | 72.92 |

Overall, 59.9% of the youth (n=331) maintained a stable situation in wave 3 equivalent to the one they reported in wave 2², 22.9% (n = 118) saw their situation deteriorate, and 17.2% (n = 110) reported an improvement in their situation. **We therefore cannot say that the youths' situation improved in wave 3; on the contrary, we note that housing stability decreased.**³

2. Conservatively, we consider here that the youth who were still in care were in a situation “equivalent” to housing stability if they officially had a place to live. Table 1 indicates that this was the case for 33 youth

3. The questions aimed at identifying youth who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness asked whether the respondents had experienced such an episode “since leaving care.” Youths who reported in wave 2 that they had experienced an episode of homelessness should therefore technically have replied the same way in wave 3, but this was not the case for 25 of these youth. The variation in these responses could be interpreted in various ways, but it is likely that the conditions that caused the homelessness episodes reported in wave 2 and “forgotten” in wave 3 did not recur

Regardless of whether the response was given in wave 2 or wave 3, table 1 demonstrates that 170 youth reported experiencing homelessness after leaving care. This number is equivalent to 33.38% of youth who were formerly in care. **We can therefore say that more than one third of youth who spend an extended amount of time in the youth protection program experience at least one episode of homelessness in the first few years after they age out of care.**

Who are these young people ?

In wave 3, 31.2% of men reported experiencing at least one homeless situation, compared with 21.2% of women. This is a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) that is consistent with the findings of several studies of homelessness.

TABLE 2 – Residential stability trajectory by gender

| | Raw frequencies | | Weighted % | |
|--|-----------------|-----|------------|-------|
| | Women | Men | Women | Men |
| Always in homelessness situation (w2 and w3) | 31 | 38 | 8.84 | 12.58 |
| New homelessness situation in v3 | 39 | 37 | 12.42 | 18.63 |
| Former homelessness situation (w2) | 12 | 13 | 2.96 | 3.87 |
| Always unstable | 27 | 22 | 7.72 | 10.61 |
| Unstable once | 81 | 46 | 25.33 | 17.14 |
| Always stable | 125 | 88 | 42.72 | 37.16 |

Table 2 reports the proportions of men and women in each of the possible stability / instability / homelessness trajectories. It shows that more than 35% of men experienced at least one episode of homelessness in either wave 2 or 3, compared with 24% of women, a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) of 11 percentage points. **Conversely, women are less likely to experience homelessness than their male counterparts are, but are significantly more likely to have experienced housing instability ($p < .05$).**

The living locations in wave 3 may shed light on the differences in housing stability between women and men. Table 3 reports the living arrangements reported by wave 3 participants grouped by location type and by gender. Similar proportions of men and women lived in their own apartments, were still living with their foster families after aging out of care, or lived in

TABLE 3 – Place of living in wave 3 by residential stability

| | Raw frequencies | | Weighted % | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----|------------|-------|
| | Women | Men | Women | Men |
| Other | 2 | 0 | 0.59 | 0.00 |
| With lover or his/her family | 117 | 56 | 34.54 | 19.69 |
| In an autonomous apartment | 116 | 89 | 34.74 | 34.63 |
| Foster family | 14 | 22 | 7.29 | 8.78 |
| Birth family | 33 | 51 | 12.62 | 24.13 |
| Lieu collectif ou lieu précaire | 33 | 26 | 10.21 | 12.76 |

a group home or in a default shelter. However, significant differences emerge between those living with their boyfriends or girlfriends or the partner's family, and those living with their birth families. **Nearly 35% of women reported living with their partner or the partner's family compared with 19.6% of men.** This difference of more than 15 percentage points is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Further, 24% of men reported returning to their birth family after aging out of care, versus only 12.6% of women ($p < .05$). This result is consistent with previous findings on the activation of support in the transition to adulthood of women leaving care. The present research thus highlights the importance of considering the effects of isolation in abusive relationships on girls (Goyette et al., 2009a and b; Goyette Turcotte, 2011).

Youths' last placement location is revelatory of their overall placement trajectory. Table 4 reports information on the housing stability trajectory according to the last placement location recorded in the youth's PIJ file in our data, just prior to the first wave 1 interviews. These last placement locations were grouped into two categories : youth who ended their care in a foster family versus all other "group" placement settings (group home, rehabilitation centre, etc.). It is clear that youth whose last placement is a group setting are significantly more likely to experience homelessness. **At age 21, in wave 3, 44.28% of youth leaving group settings had experienced at least one episode of homelessness, compared with 18.5% of those leaving foster care. This difference of more than 25 percentage points is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).**

TABLE 4 – Residential stability trajectory by last placement setting

| | Raw frequencies | | Weighted % | |
|--|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Foster family | Group setting | Foster family | Group setting |
| Always in homelessness situation (w2 and w3) | 19 | 50 | 5.86 | 16.91 |
| New homelessness situation in w3 | 28 | 48 | 10.25 | 22.62 |
| Former homelessness situation in w2 | 10 | 15 | 2.38 | 4.75 |
| Always unstable | 26 | 23 | 7.73 | 11.30 |
| Unstable once | 113 | 47 | 33.45 | 20.35 |
| Always stable | 123 | 57 | 40.32 | 24.07 |

TABLE 5 – Residential stability trajectory by placement instability

| | Raw frequencies | | Weighted % | |
|--|-----------------|------------|---------------|------------|
| | \leq median | $>$ median | \leq median | $>$ median |
| Always in homelessness situation (w2 and w3) | 24 | 45 | 6.67 | 15.44 |
| New homelessness situation in w3 | 29 | 47 | 11.02 | 21.12 |
| Former homelessness situation in w2 | 7 | 18 | 2.03 | 4.98 |
| Always unstable | 17 | 32 | 5.01 | 13.89 |
| Unstable once | 93 | 67 | 31.04 | 23.58 |
| Always stable | 118 | 62 | 44.23 | 20.99 |

We have previously shown that placement instability is associated with a lower likelihood of graduating from high school and a higher probability of being neither employed nor in school after age 18 (Goyette et al. 2019, Goyette et al. 2021). Placement instability, as measured by the number of living arrangements in a youth's file, is also associated with increased risks of having experienced housing instability or homelessness. **Table 5 shows that 44.23% of youth whose number of placement changes is equal to or less than the median experienced housing stability in waves 2 and 3. This proportion decreases by more than half, to 21%, among youth whose placement trajectory was more unstable than the median, a difference that is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).** In addition, 41.5% of youth with a more unstable placement trajectory than the median experienced at least one episode of homelessness, compared with 19.7% of youth with a more stable placement trajectory. This large difference is also statistically significant ($p < .001$). The proportion of youth who experienced housing instability in waves 2 and 3 was also significantly higher among individuals who experienced more placement instability ($p < 0.05$).

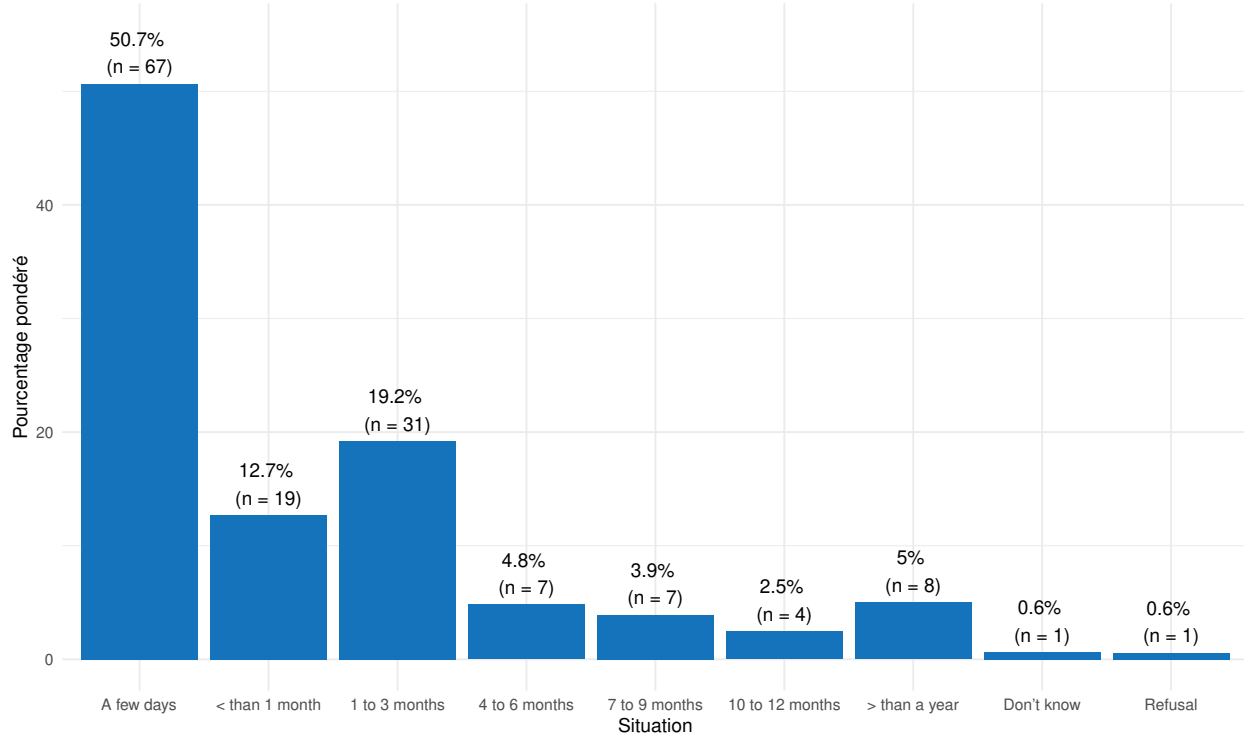
Homelessness episodes

Although difficult to quantify formally, the severity of homelessness episodes can be evaluated by looking at the duration **of the longest episode reported by the participants**. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the duration of homelessness episodes reported by youth in wave 3. Among the youth who experienced homelessness, half reported an episode that lasted a few days or less, while 12.9% reported a maximum episode that lasted more than a few days but less than a month. However, **more than one-third of youth who experienced homelessness reported an episode lasting more than one month.**

The impacts of housing instability

Housing stability is an absolutely necessary foundation for a smooth transition to independent adulthood. Studies have shown that housing stability is instrumental to youths' employment integration (Goyette et al. 2007; Goyette et al., 2006). As shown above, this crucial stability is by no means guaranteed for young people who spend extended periods in

FIGURE 2 – Duration of homelessness episodes reported in wave 3



Source : EDJeP wave 3 data (n=560)

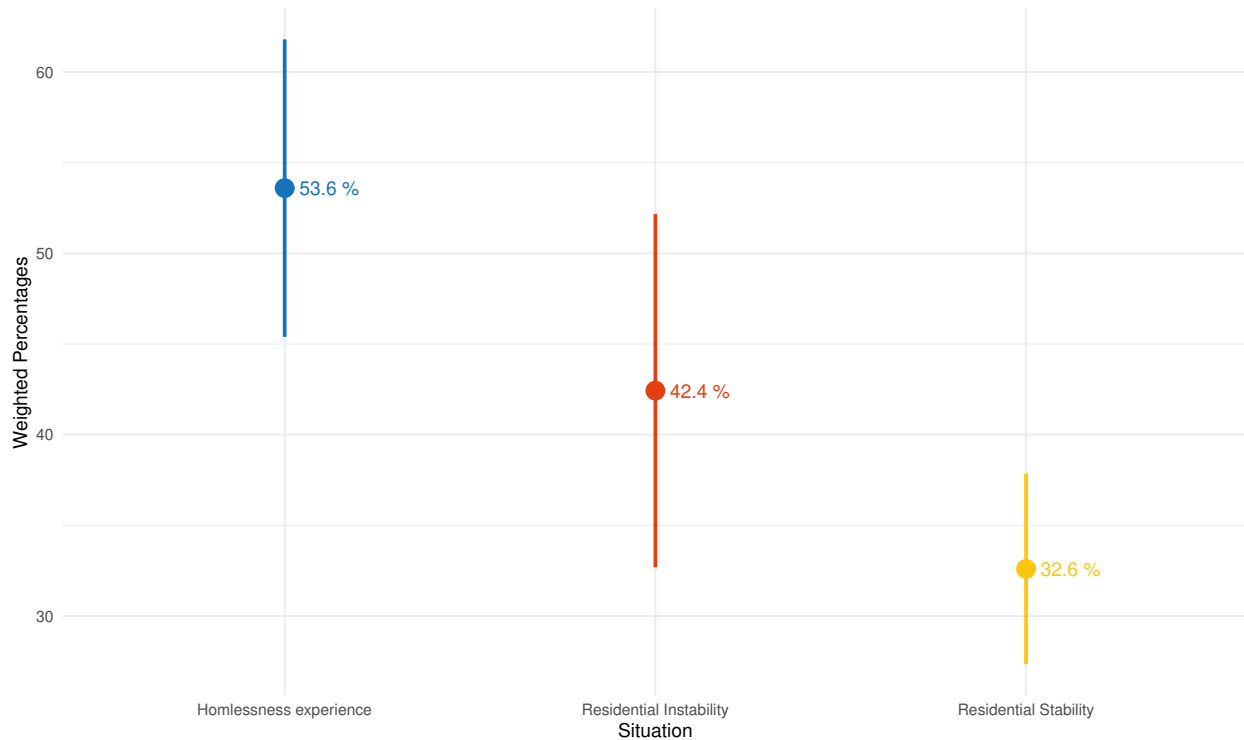
out-of-home care. This issue will likely have important consequences on other spheres that are essential to enable young people to confidently embark on a constructive trajectory that would enable them to thrive in adulthood.

Mental Health

While underlying mental health issues may increase the likelihood of housing instability and homelessness (MacDonald et al., 2020; McGuire et al., 2018), the stress of housing instability and homelessness may also contribute to producing or exacerbating mental health difficulties. We previously reported that housing instability and homelessness were associated with increased mental health problems before and after the youth exited care, as measured in waves 1 and 2 (Goyette, Blanchet, Bellot, 2020). Figure 3 shows the percentages of youth who reported experiencing “psychological health” problems in the past 12 months in wave 3. **It clearly indicates a significant variation in the proportion of youth reporting mental health difficulties depending on their level of housing stability. Thus, 53.6% of youth who**

experienced an episode of homelessness in wave 3 reported having had psychological health problems in the past 12 months. This proportion drops significantly to 32.6% among youth with stable housing.⁴

FIGURE 3 – Residential stability and psychological health problems reported in wave 3



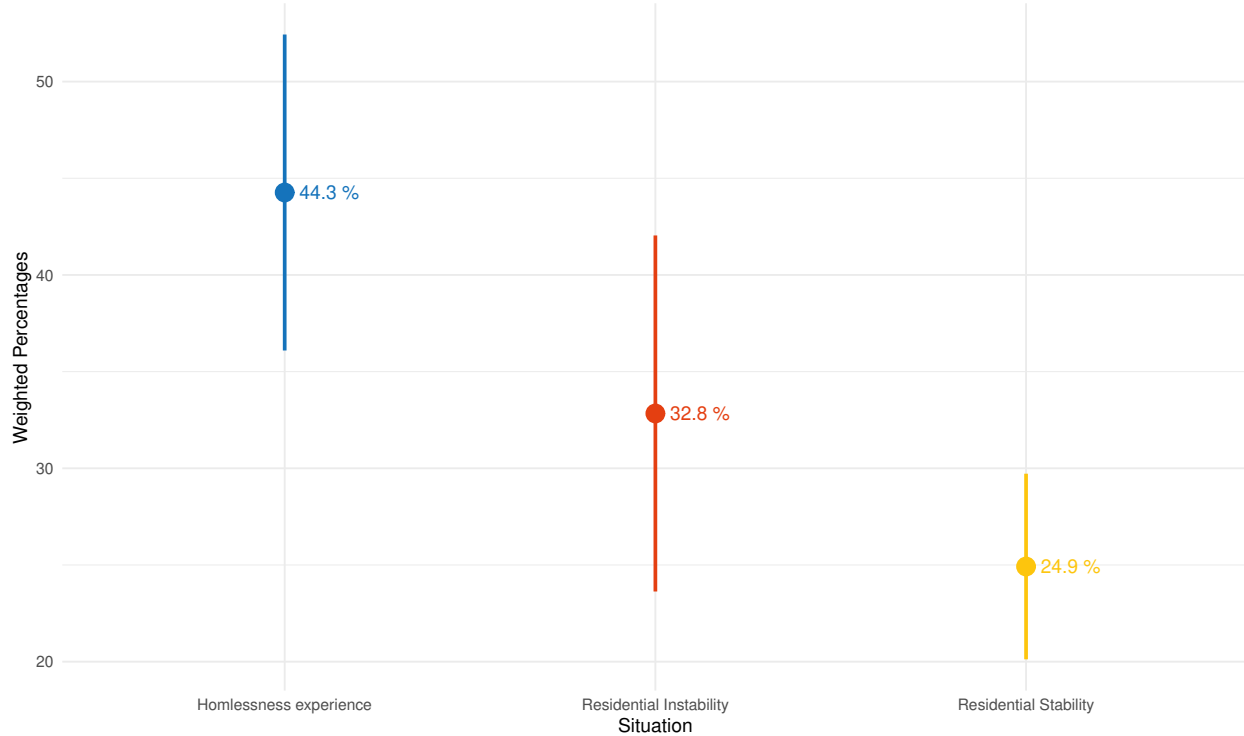
Note : The figure reports the weighted percentages and the associated 95% confidence interval.

Housing stability and justice system involvement

People experiencing homelessness are more likely to be involved in the justice system. In fact, our report on the situation of youth in the pandemic context noted that youth with a stable housing situation had a 24% probability of having been arrested by the police in the last 12 months; this probability reached 54% for youth who have experienced at least one episode of homelessness (Goyette, Blanchet, Bellot, 2020). A recent report by Bellot et al.

4. We also measured mental health using indicators validated in other studies (self-reported measure of mental health used in the General Social Survey, measure of stress from the Perceived Stress Scale 4 (PSS-4), measure of anxiety from the 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) scale used in the ELDEQ study, and measure of depression based on the 13-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) scale, also used in the ELDEQ). We obtain similar results to those reported here for all measures except depression

FIGURE 4 – Residential stability and arrest in the last 12 months in wave 3



Note : The figure reports the weighted percentages and the associated 95% confidence interval.

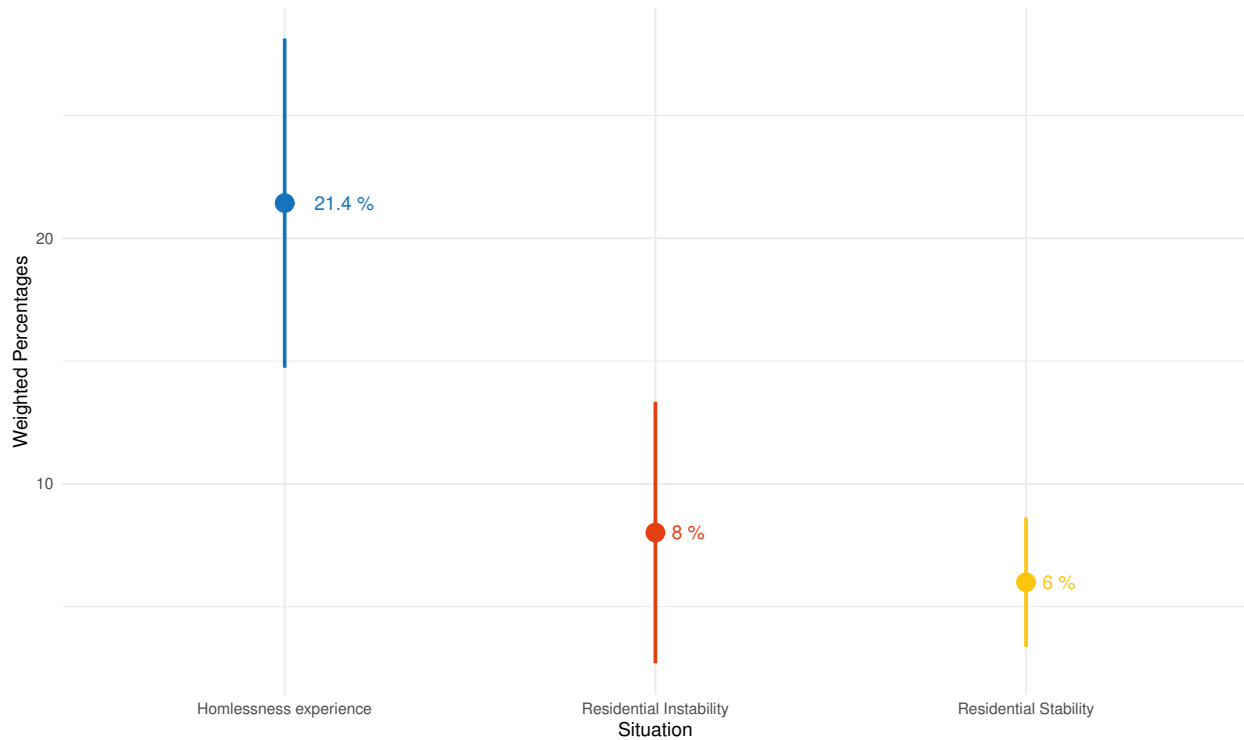
(2022) finds that homeless people received large numbers of tickets for failing to comply with health measures implemented during the Covid-19 crisis, and that youth aged 18 to 24 were issued nearly a quarter of the fines, even though they represent only 10% of the population.

Because EDJeP wave 3 data were collected during the pandemic, we also wanted to assess whether the housing stability status of youth formerly in care was also associated with increased risk of justice system involvement. The proportion of youth who reported being arrested in the past 12 months is shown in figure 4 by housing stability status.

44.3% of youth who experienced homelessness reported being arrested. This proportion drops significantly ($p < .05$) to 32.8% among youth in unstable housing situations, and is significantly lower ($p < .001$) among youth with stable housing, 24.9% of whom reported being arrested.

In addition, 21.4% of youth who had experienced homelessness in wave 3 mentioned that they had been detained in an adult prison since they turned 18. Among youth in unstable housing situations and those in stable situations, 8% and 6% respectively reported having

FIGURE 5 – Residential stability and detention in an adult prison since coming of age



Note : The figure reports the weighted percentages and the associated 95% confidence interval.

stayed in prison. Youth who have experienced homelessness are therefore substantially more likely to have been incarcerated, and the difference with youth in stable and unstable housing situations is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.001$ respectively).

Conclusion

In contrast with analyses of clinical performance, which focus on the issues of access to youth protection services at the “entrance,” our research contributes to the reflection on what happens to young people in the future, after they “exit” care. Despite the fact that the youth protection system requires an annual investment of more than \$1.2 billion in operating expenses, to date no solid research has looked at what occurs after the youths leave care, provided either within the family or out-of-home.

In order to partially fill this knowledge gap regarding the trajectory of youth formerly in care, our report extends the analysis of the prevention of youth homelessness (MacDonald et al.,

2020), preparation for adulthood, and support for youth who age out of care (Goyette, 2019), together with these young people's access to mental health and general health services. It also explores the tipping points and protection factors of youth homelessness (MacDonald et al., 2020). Our report thus shows that housing instability and homelessness among youth who leave care is a complex public health issue. While the report of the Laurent Commission on the Rights of the Child and Youth Protection (2021) recommends “humanizing rehabilitation services,” “breaking down silos to work effectively,” “improving collaboration between ministries,” and “supporting youth in the transition to adulthood,” including the implementation of a prolonged and multidimensional post-placement system, “our society must ask itself whether access to quality support for youth in care is a privilege or a right” (Fontaine Goyette, 2022).

Pressing problems of homelessness among youth formerly in care

The results presented above show that more than one third of youths who have been placed in care under the youth protection system have experienced at least one episode of homelessness prior to or during our wave 3 data collection (average age 21). Note that this proportion is 44% for youth whose last placement was in a group setting (group home, rehabilitation centre). In addition, a substantial proportion (36.6%) of those who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness reported that the longest episode they had experienced exceeded one month. Finally, nearly 70% of the youth in our cohort have experienced housing instability at some point (in wave 2 or wave 3).

Although data that would allow for a strict comparison of the situation of youth who leave care and youth in the general population are lacking, a report from the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* provides one point of comparison : For Québec as a whole, it is estimated that 0.9% of people aged 15 and over living in a non-institutional household have experienced a visible episode of homelessness in their lifetime, and that 7.0% have experienced a form of hidden homelessness (Gravel, 2020).

Given that **0.9% of youth 15 years and older** experience an episode of visible homelessness, versus **33% of youth who exit care between the ages of 18 and 21**, it is abundantly clear that youth who age out of care experience episodes of homelessness at a disproportionately

higher rate than does the general population. These striking findings are consistent with what actors have observed in the field, and are consistent with international research.

The first Canada-wide study of youth homelessness found that 57.8% of participants reported having used child welfare services at some point. Compared with national data indicating that 0.3% of the general population receives child protection services, youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely to report interactions with the child protection system (Nichols et al., 2017). In addition, a longitudinal study of youth in foster care in the United States found that youth who leave care are at high risk for homelessness during the transition to adulthood. Between 31% and 46% of study participants had experienced homelessness at least once by age 26 (Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney 2013).

The magnitude of these statistical differences on the risk of experiencing homelessness underscores the starkly unequal opportunities that youth face as they age out of care. It also highlights the urgency of focusing on their living conditions, and advocates for collective accountability for youth who have been in care.

The consequences of homelessness

In addition, youth who have experienced homelessness at least once were significantly more likely to report living with mental health problems (53% vs. 33% for youth with housing stability). These results are similar to those obtained among youth who were 19 years old during the EDJeP study. Housing stability also seems to be an issue for young adults receiving services for a first or new mental disorder in early adulthood because “having been placed in a youth centre strongly contributes to their likelihood of experiencing a precarious and destabilizing housing situation” (Roy, 2021).

These results argue in favour of linking the processes of access to mental health and overall health services more closely, in order to develop bridges between youth protection, front-line and specialized adult mental health services, and community organizations that focus on youth and mental health. The findings also underline the importance of identifying young people’s needs while they are still in care, in order to provide access to appropriate services (Afifi et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2018).

Finally, experiences of homelessness are associated with significant involvement with the criminal justice system. Our data show that 44% of youth who had experienced homelessness in wave 3 of the EDJeP study reported having been arrested by the police in the past 12 months, compared with 25% of youth whose housing situation was stable. Further, 21.4% of youth who had experienced homelessness in wave 3 reported having gone to jail since they left care, versus 8% and 6% for youth with unstable and stable housing situations. This dynamic of over-involvement with the justice system among youth who have experienced homelessness has been affirmed in one of our earlier reports (Goyette et al., 2020).

In addition to having to make the sometimes abrupt shift to independent living, often with limited support from the youth protection system upon their exit, a significant proportion of youth who age out of care accumulate another “tipping point” : Youth who leave prison have a higher risk of either housing instability or homelessness (MacDonald et al., 2020). When envisioning ways to prevent youth homelessness, one must think about planning for life after care and housing integration simultaneously. Exiting care and leaving prison require preparation, planning, and a specific focus on access to housing. In short, the data presented in this report show that the most vulnerable young people sometimes have to deal with multiple institutional exits that are too often poorly planned or supported. This triggers a spiral of vulnerability and marginalization that is increasingly likely to accentuate and crystallize other personal difficulties that these youth face. Thus, with each break, these young people undergo a disaffiliation process that makes their social and work integration all the more difficult, which in turn reinforces existing social inequalities that adversely affect these youth. Once again, we cannot overemphasize the importance of implementing a housing continuum that meets the full spectrum of the youths’ social support needs and protects them from becoming involved with the criminal justice system, which mainly compounds their difficulties rather than supporting their social integration.

Protective factors

Our report also shows that foster care is an important protective and stabilizing factor. Youth who complete their placement in foster care are significantly less likely than other youth to experience an episode of homelessness after they leave care (18.5% versus 44.3%). In

addition, among youth whose situation was stable in wave 2, nearly 73% had maintained this stability during wave 3. This suggests that it is necessary to invest in protection measures quickly and early in the housing trajectory, because this protects youth against homelessness, involvement with the criminal justice system, the aggravation of mental health problems, under-education and financial difficulties. Finally, as in our 2019 report, the wave 3 data presented in this report suggest that completing high school is a crucial component of satisfactory labour market integration. We have already clearly demonstrated that youth in care have significant educational delays compared with youth in the general population (Goyette and Blanchet, 2018). Clearly, housing stability is once again associated with a significant increase in high school graduation rates. The proportion of youth who earn high school diplomas is 22.6% among youth who have experienced homelessness, versus 32.3% among those who have experienced housing instability and 41.6% among youth whose housing situation is stable. Not surprisingly, significantly more young people with housing stability graduated from high school compared with youth who experienced homelessness.

A call to action

To summarize, youth who leave care face many more difficulties, and to a much more significant extent, than do their peers in the general population. Even so, supports for youth who age out of care are limited, especially in the context of the widespread housing crisis and rising cost of living.

This longitudinal study that follows young people as they leave care shows that these individuals experience situations where positive and negative factors intertwine. Some of these situations are harmful while others provide support and integration that can reinforce processes of either disaffiliation or social affiliation during the transition to adulthood. Although the weight of each of these situations in the trajectory is difficult to measure, the accumulation of elements, both favourable and unfavourable, undeniably contributes to reinforcing inequalities within the group of young people formerly in care. For some youth, the progressive path of their future lets them achieve the same success as their peers in the general population with regard to living conditions, because they were able to access various opportunities for integration and the development of their full potential. Conversely, for others, a series of

situations of adversity increasingly limited their possibilities of integration, making it harder and harder for them to improve their situation despite their aspirations.

Given the finding that a portion of our youth is being left to fend for themselves, and that their future and development are being compromised, it is urgent that society take steps to resolve this unacceptable situation. The evidence presented in this report, similar to the recommendations of the Laurent Commission, is a call for decision-makers to take action to ensure that the future of each young person counts.

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