THE ASSOCIATION OF
**NATIVE CHILD AND FAMILY
SERVICES AGENCIES OF ONTARIO**
(ANCFSAO)

PUBLIC REPORT

MAA-DAA-QUN-NAAG: ETERNAL FLAME

IMPROVING HOUSING OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF CHILD WELLBEING AND CHILD WELFARE TO INDEPENDENT LIVING

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Authors: Chasity Hewitt-Brown, Roshaneh-Fatema Jaffer, Elena Lifshits Carrera, Tara Black, Barbara Fallon, Kaneisha Echum, Kodah Jacobs, Sebastian Lasher, Autumn Wilson, Sheylannah Klentz, Constance Goodwin, Jason Sides, Zakkarry Joseph, Blake Sickles, Jadyn Hardie-Bardy, Kaitlin Lickers.

Author Affiliations: The Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario (ANCFSAO), ANCFSAO's Provincial Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (IYAC), and Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto

Contact Information: ecarrera@ancfsao.ca; tara.black@utoronto.ca

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Abstract

Indigenous homelessness is far more complex than the colonial notion of homelessness and includes a wholistic approach experienced via Indigenous lens, knowledge and ways of living. For Indigenous children and youth in, or leaving, state or out of home care, rates of homelessness or precarious housing are higher than for non-Indigenous individuals. This qualitative study utilized Participatory Action Research (PAR) to identify the barriers faced by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth transitioning out of care and examine current practices employed by child and family wellbeing agencies and other community partners in Ontario.

Stories were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of three key informant groups: agency workers, community partners, and Indigenous youth with lived experience of homelessness. Stories were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, rendering three categories containing 15 themes: (1) early intervention and prevention methods, (2) culture and relationships, and (3) gaps and barriers. The project addresses a gap in existing research by amplifying the voices of those with lived experience and front-line workers as the true experts in the sector. Findings indicate that Indigenous young people in care and transitioning out of care can be better supported by programs that are strengthened through early intervention and prevention methods and by addressing service gaps. There is a crucial need for interventions that consider cultural and identity-based factors in their design.

Keywords*: Indigenous youth, homelessness, aging out of care, participatory action research, child welfare, child protection, child maltreatment

Explaining the Project's Gifted Name:

Maa-Daa-Qun-Naag: Eternal Flame

As part of our cultural protocol, tobacco was offered to Elder Clarence White Sr. for the request to engage in ceremony and ask the creator and ancestors to receive a name to be gifted for the project. A gifted name both represents and guides our work, and the meaning and teaching of the name is an important foundational component of Indigenous research.

Elder Clarence accepted the tobacco symbolizing his agreement to undertake this spiritual work and following conducting of ceremony, within the next day, received a vision. In his vision he saw a building/house and when the doors opened, he saw two young people - male and female, approach the house. When the inner doors opened again, he saw two elderly people sitting in the very centre of an empty, large room, around a fire. They did not say anything to each other or to the young people. They just smiled.

Clarence had understood that this was in response to the tobacco offering and the request to receive a name for the housing project. For the young people it represented a physical place, "Kaa-Maa-Daa-Qun-Naag" and in the house there was a fire that represents the eternal flame. The fire represents the eternal and permanent, something that never goes away. In our culture, the fire also represents the essence of our spirits. In the Medicine Wheel, at the very centre of the four quadrants of the four directions and the four areas comprising our wholistic wellbeing (mental, emotional, physical and spiritual) – where the four quadrants meet in the centre is our spirit – the fire. We are all living spirits, and the structure of a building envisioned in the dream represents that safe space when individuals have a home or a ∕place they are always able to return to. It is a place where one will find our grandparents and ∕elders, culture and their identity – belonging and knowing who they are. The grandparents and elders will always be there and will welcome us home no matter the journey.

The meaning of a home and grandparents and elders, particularly for youths, is that they provide that unconditional love, support, and warmth when we need it. This project represents what the young people need in times where they have no one or a place to go, to find that comfort and to heal from traumas, reconnecting with their self via connectedness to culture and community. Lastly, the fire is also representative of one's capacity to self-regulate, respond to internal and external factors and triggers. Managing one's fire and its size is related to a young person's capacity to be resilient and as they mature find the right response within themselves, without getting that fire get huge and entirely out of control. On the other hand, a tiny fire that has no warmth or strength is the extinguishing of one's spirit. As we support our young people through the stages of life and transitioning out of care, our responsibility is to nurture their fires and guide them to ensure they can thrive.

At the time when the name was gifted via ceremony to the research team, in the lodge hosted on its traditional land by the Mississaugi First Nation, Clarence sang a song in the Anishinaabemowin (or Ojibwe language) that accompanied the name and which spoke about the flame of the fire and that you can hear the sparks of the embers and the crackle of the fire, even with your eyes closed. That is how strong our spirits are and our connections to our ancestors, culture and identity. It is not something that can be put out by removing a child from one's community and family and placing them in another, different one. They will always seek that connection and to find out who they are, without which their spirit will never be at peace and therefore healing cannot be truly done.

Introduction

Many First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities' traditional child-rearing and family systems follow the tenet that the entire community supports the journey of childcare (Ormiston, 2002; Pregent, 2012). To understand how child welfare systems in Canada are misaligned with Indigenous child-rearing practices, the context and practices related to care, kinship, and identity are important. Many First Nations, Métis and Inuit concepts of care/caretaking differ from Euro-Western concepts. For example, the notion that adoption is a suitable means of caretaking conflicts with ideas of kinship and childrearing where responsibility for the child is shared within the community (di Tomasso & de Finney, 2015). di Tomasso and de Finney (2015) highlight the Indigenous value of "honouring the children" (p. 24), wherein children are not just part of the nuclear family but rather part of a wider *kinship network of relations.* In keeping with this value, studies find that Indigenous youth who age out of care have a smoother transition when they are connected to their roots and family relations (Fast, Trocmé, Fallon & Ma, 2014). However, for many Indigenous children who enter the Canadian, Euro-Western child welfare system, "the system does not strengthen or allow for continuity of Indigenous nations and their self-determination" (Fast, Allouche, Gagne & Boldo, 2019).

This misalignment with the child welfare system is rooted in ongoing colonial violence leading to the disruption of Indigenous kinship systems (Crichlow, 2002; Fast, Allouche, Gagne & Boldo, 2019; Justice, 2008). Child welfare systems in Canada are rooted in values of patriarchy, capitalism, and individualism (Justice, 2008). Sinha and Kozlowski (2013) suggest that if we are to understand the experiences of First Nations youth in the Canadian child welfare system, we must understand how the arrival of European settlers deeply disrupted systems of care by removing children from their homes (Crichlow, 2002). Residential schools were developed to assimilate Indigenous children into European culture under the guise of "education" (Bennett, Blackstock & De La Ronde, 2005). These child removal policies have had devastating effects on First Nations, Métis and Inuit families, both during their implementation and long afterwards, as many individuals experienced homelessness, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse coupled with the need for public acknowledgement of these harms and thus, a need for necessary social supports for Indigenous families (Blackstock et al., 2007).

These horrific policies and practices have translated into social, economic, political, and cultural oppression of Indigenous people and an overrepresentation of First Nations children and youth in child welfare systems in Canada (Fallon et al., 2021; Fast, Allouche, Gagne & Boldo, 2019; Quinn, Fallon, Joh-Carnella & Saint-Girons, 2022; Trocme et al., 2006). Reports find that First Nations children are only 5% of the population but account for 30-40% of children in the child welfare system (Sinha, Trocmé, Fallon & MacLaurin, 2013). According to the First Nations Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect in 2019 (FNCIS-2019), First Nation children were 17 times as likely to be involved in a child welfare placement compared to non-Indigenous children (Fallon et al., 2021). Fast and colleagues (2019) found that 80% of Indigenous youth who age out of care do not graduate high school and experience high rates of suicide, homelessness, substance misuse, incarceration, and continued involvement with the system (Blackstock et al., 2007; Feduniw, 2009).

According to Ontario legislation (CYFSA, 2017), youth in care are expected to achieve independence and self-sufficiency by age 18, at which point they must leave the support systems they have relied upon during their time in care (Government of Ontario, 2024a). In contrast, youth not involved in care typically do not face the same expectations, as they often have access to familial support until they are prepared to transition to a more independent living arrangement. Furthermore, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth transitioning out of care face compounded disadvantages due to the limited availability of culturally tailored programs specifically designed to support this critical phase of

transition (Quinn, 2022). These disadvantages place First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth transitioning from care at heightened risk of experiencing a range of adverse circumstances, including homelessness, poverty, inadequate and unsafe living conditions, substance use, discrimination, poor mental health outcomes, abusive relationships, and vulnerability to human trafficking (Bastien, 2024; Rambajue, 2021; Roudometkina & Wakeford, 2018).

Indigenous child and family wellbeing agencies (ICFWBAs) and non-Indigenous child protection agencies, referred to as Children's Aid Societies (CAS), are entrusted with the responsibility of preparing youth for the transition to independence beginning at age 13, a mandate established through Ontario's Ready, Set, Go (RSG) program (Government of Ontario, 2024b). Launched in April 2023, this program aims to assist youth transitioning out of care by providing essential life skills, financial support, and access to opportunities that facilitate the pursuit of postsecondary education, skilled trades training, and employment (Government of Ontario, 2024b). This study seeks to identify the barriers faced by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth transitioning out of care and to examine current practices employed by ICFWBAs and other community stakeholders (e.g., homelessness shelters) in Ontario. The findings aim to inform the development of best practices and address existing policy gaps in supporting these youth during their transition from out-of-home care to independence. The project addresses a gap in existing research by amplifying the voices of those with lived experience and front-line workers to create the narrative as the true experts in the sector.

Methods

Co-designing the Study

This study utilized a Participatory Action Research (PAR) method of inquiry where the researchers and youth from an Indigenous youth council worked together to challenge the current status quo experienced by Indigenous youth in care. The Indigenous youth council, composed of 15 youth aged 16-24 years with lived experience in care and transitioning out of care, played a pivotal role in guiding and co-designing the research. In addition, the ongoing guidance, consultations and support of the Elders Advisory Committee and a few dedicated Elders were instrumental in shaping the project and strengthening the cultural support, sensitivity, and competence. The expertise of the Indigenous youth council members guided the research design, including the development of research methods, formulation of research questions, identification of key stakeholders, collection of stories and analysis, and knowledge exchange activities. Note that youth who co-designed the study found the term 'data' did not do justice to the stories that people shared, and so we refer to data as stories in the context of this study.

We applied for and received approval from the University of Toronto's Health Sciences Research Ethics Board. The youth from the Indigenous council co-designed the study, including identifying priorities for the research, identifying key informant groups, designing interview questions, leading interviews, and note-taking, conducting analysis, and engaging in knowledge mobilization and dissemination. In addition to co-authoring this paper, youth participated in two knowledge mobilization workshops in December 2024, with 135 participants held in Toronto, Ontario.

This study was guided by the Seven Grandfather Teachings, which are love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, wisdom, and truth. These principles "emphasize the interconnectedness and balance between the mind, body, and spirit and the harmonious relationship between the individual, community,

and the land" (Goss et al., 2024, p. 7). These principles guided our ethics and relationships with the Indigenous youth, stakeholders, and the decisions we made throughout the study.

Shankley and colleagues (2023) highlight the importance of working reflectively with those with lived experience, or peer researchers. Mindful reflection and conscientiousness are imperative to contributing meaningfully and harmonizing relationships, in line with the Seven Grandfather Teachings (Goss et al., 2024). In addition, reflection is an important first step to understanding how young people understand and define their own trauma. The subjective understandings these experts offer can lead us all towards forming solutions to issues they may be facing. Integrating the insights and perspectives of peer researchers is crucial to decentring the power of the expert, which involves "valuing knowledge from below and decolonising knowledge production which is dominated by Western thought" (Shankley, 2023, p. 6). Peer research is an essential method to work towards social justice if we are intentional about employing trauma-informed research approaches and learning from communities.

This approach to research seeks to ground collection of stories and learnings by engaging with youth and those involved in child welfare as well as those within the circle of care to strengthen advocacy and empower youth. Furthermore, this study is rooted in the First Nations Principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP®). These governed how stories were collected, protected, and will further govern how information from this study will be used and shared.

Research Questions

Research questions were co-designed by youth from the Indigenous youth council and staff with support from researchers. The two questions, along with their sub-questions, are as follows:

1. What early intervention/prevention methods can be applied to children in care as they move into young adulthood and are empowered to make the right and safe choices once exiting care and into independent living?
   a. To prevent homelessness?
   b. To eliminate and reduce trafficking and violence against Indigenous women and girls?
   c. To reduce cycles of violence experienced and committed by Indigenous boys and men?
2. How do we ensure identity, Indigeneity and relationships, both cultural and personal, are nurtured throughout the lives of children and youth in care systems?

Objectives

There were three objectives to this research study. The first was to gather information on how to prevent homelessness for youth who exit child welfare care. The second objective developed over the course of the study was to create recommendations to influence policy and practice specific to First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations involved with child welfare. The last objective was to gather information on gaps in care as youth transition from care to independent living.

Key Informant Recruitment

Youth researchers identified key informants to interview for the study: youth transitioning out of care with past lived experiences in the child welfare system, frontline workers, Elders, Knowledge Carriers/Keepers, cultural workers, First Nations child and family representatives (band representatives), and community partner workers. Qualitative data, referred to as stories, were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews with eight agency members and two community partners, as well

as focus group discussions with thirteen youth. All participants were recruited through a convenience sample of the Indigenous child wellbeing and child welfare sectors and internal networking circles, various organizational communication channels, and social media. Participants were required to be at least 16 years of age at the start of the study, residing in Ontario and part of one of the key informant groups. They were contacted by email and those who expressed interest in participating were invited to a session with the research team. There, researchers explained the study and consent process and asked participants to read an information letter and consent form. Participants were told who to contact if they had any questions and had the opportunity to discuss their concerns and questions with the research team.

Interviews and Analysis

Interviews began with basic demographic questions and then focused on intervention and prevention methods concerning Indigenous youth homelessness. Questions (see Appendix) explored intervention/prevention methods, gaps and barriers, culture and relationships, life skills, and education. Agency member and community partner interviews took place virtually and lasted one-hour in length while youth interviews took place in-person in focus group format facilitated over two hours. Participants were invited to ask additional questions and add to their answers. Interviews were facilitated by pairs of youth researchers, who both conducted the interviews and engaged in notetaking, alongside a research team member.

Youth-written notes on the interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) method of reflexive thematic analysis. Note that transcripts were not collected, rather, youth wrote notes during the interviews to build trust. Thematic analysis is the process of searching through and arranging notes and other materials that the researcher gathers to increase understanding of a phenomenon. This iterative process involves coding or categorizing, reviewing, and collating codes into themes, reviewing and defining themes, creating a thematic map, and writing up results. Thematic analysis allows us to identify, analyze and report patterns within the stories. It is an effective method for deriving insights from people's views, opinions, knowledge, and experiences. More specifically, we engaged in "reflexive thematic analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which highlights the role of the researcher in knowledge production, and acknowledges that reflexivity, subjectivity and creativity are assets. Since the study was co-designed with youth who had lived experience and trained as peer researchers, the team valued subjectivity and encouraged all researchers to be reflexive about what they brought to the findings. Peer researcher training explored the six-step process of thematic analysis as well as the nuances of reflexive thematic analysis. We considered common pitfalls in qualitative research and discussed the fact that researchers can never be fully removed from the information that we collect. Peer researchers were provided a handout with key reminders, including questions to ask oneself when reviewing themes (e.g., is this a theme or code; what is the quality of the code, what are the boundaries, is there enough information).

Youth were trained in thematic analysis by a university research team member and actively contributed to the analysis process. The analysis was conducted through two meetings per week, each 1-2 hours in length, over the course of seven weeks.

Results

Results were organized into three categories, each corresponding to a research question or objective listed above, namely: 1) early intervention/prevention, 2) culture and relationships, and 3) gaps

and barriers. Fifteen themes were developed during data analysis and will be expanded upon in this section. Participants are referred to by their chosen pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Category 1: Early Intervention/Prevention

Theme 1: Feelings of safety

Participants described the importance of feeling safe and secure within their living situations. Feelings of safety varied depending on the circumstances. For some, safety was connected to their family's presence, animals, cleanliness and access to resources. One participant noted feeling physically safe but not culturally safe outside of their apartment. Many participants described feelings of unsafety linked to instability, family conflict, trauma, mental health and gender-based violence. Casper, a youth participant, noted that in their previous living arrangement with their mom they were kicked out multiple times and were surrounded by drugs, verbal abuse and observed domestic abuse, which triggered their mental health challenges. Some youth felt unsafe living with ex-partners. Others felt unsafe due to substance use which they found triggering, especially when linked to generational cycles of trauma and addictions. Some youth felt unsafe due to violence among neighbours. For example, Big Z shared that sometimes they hear noises and wonder if it is intimate partner violence; they also witnessed gang violence in their area. Violence, mental health and substance use must be addressed to improve housing outcomes for youth.

Theme 2: Life-skills

Youth described the importance of building their own capacity through life-skills and skill-building workshops as preventative practice. For example, participants noted the importance of knowledge related to budgeting and financial literacy. They wanted to understand how to balance commitments and build readiness. They noted wanting education on substance use, sexual education, workforce options, time management, job readiness and job support skills, and on understanding responsibility. Youth and agency workers mentioned the importance of offering these resources in an engaging, fun and age and developmentally appropriate ways.

Community workers and member agencies mentioned finance, budgeting and other life skills workshops they offered. Blue, an agency worker, described teaching youth how to open a bank account and obtain and use a credit card. Others referred youth to experts to build certain skills. For example, Teal, an agency worker, encourages youth to see a financial advisor. Financial literacy was also supported by Youth in Transition workers, as Overalls (an agency worker) noted. Their agency offers regular educational opportunities for staff and opens some of these sessions up to youth. Their agency has also implemented monthly mandatory workshops for youth focused on life skills, information on drug use, sexual education from local health teams, and creating space for youth to connect with one another. Overalls mentioned their agency offering youth days with RSG [Ready-Set-Go] checks and other helpful lessons.

Theme 3: Ensuring plans are youth directed

Interviewees made clear that interventions must be youth directed. All participants noted the importance of accessibility, including age appropriate or developmentally appropriate content and activities like providing colouring books for younger children or altering language in financial literacy discussions. Accessibility also includes increasing visual accessibility and using accessible language, especially if the youth have a disability. Participants also noted the importance of building capacity within agencies. For example, transitional homes could be provided within agencies if they had access to

sufficient funding. AM, an agency worker, mentions that there is a need to have a better network of support for youth and having engagement with service providers to improve connection with youth. Apple, another agency worker, expresses a similar sentiment, stating that agencies should ensure that there is transition housing to go to before youth get their own housing. In addition, AM calls for greater information sharing across departments (e.g. protection, prevention) to reduce the need for external supports.

Ensuring that plans are youth directed was described in terms of establishing choices, meeting youth where they are at and understanding readiness to receive support. Teal, an agency worker, strives to support job readiness through resume workshops. Many agency workers noted the importance of meeting youth where they are at, to best offer these trainings. Youth should be able to choose who they want in these conversations and have access to specialized supports. Participants similarly emphasized the importance of increased awareness regarding rights and services. Interviewees offered conflicting perspectives on the level of awareness, demonstrating gaps and/or inconsistencies in the way that this awareness is fostered within relevant agencies amongst youth.

Theme 4: Referring to external/internal resources

Agency and community workers said they often refer youth to external and internal resources to support their transition to independence. They stressed the need for agencies to build internal capacity to provide transition housing rather than rely on external referrals.

Agencies mostly supported the transition through internal processes. Ontario's Ready Set Go (RSG) program was mentioned many times, including methods like saving RSG cheques for the future, explaining the RSG agreement to youth in accessible language, coupling this resource with post-majority care (i.e. a federal program under Indigenous Services Canada that also provides supports past the age of majority). However, one community partner felt discouraged with RSG because they frequently saw youth going into shelters and/or homelessness.

Theme 5: Prevention

Agency and community workers mentioned various Indigenous youth homelessness prevention strategies that concerned strengthening culture, working on timing, preparation strategies, and wholistic supports. They described efforts to incorporate cultural teachings like offering smudging in agencies, as well as understanding the importance of balance and the medicine wheel. In terms of timing and preparation, they stressed the importance of recognizing urgency as sometimes youth need housing immediately. In addition, importance of ensuring that the youth have a strong understanding of the gaps in their path to independence was identified and discussing with youth their readiness to assume certain responsibilities. Agencies also noted the importance of preparing youth for crisis after hours so that workers can be certain that the youth have all the resources they need to support themselves and feel safe. Examples of resources include emergency numbers, on-call numbers, teaching them how to do wellness checks, who to reach out to with questions, and knowing what to do in a crisis. Some workers noted the importance of proactively applying for housing resources before transitioning to independence so that youth are aware of supports available to them and sign up immediately. Having time to prepare for independence was also noted as important and doing follow-up work once the youth transitioned was vital.

In terms of wholistic methods, Oaks Jewel, a community partner mentioned that they try the wrap-around method, which includes trying to always identify mental health supports, reconnect them with their family if they are ready, whether that is moving back home or supporting reconciliation with

family or kinship. AM, an agency worker, said they work on wholistic supports by centering youth plans around the medicine wheel and ensuring that youth have a good balance in their life. AM discussed the importance of taking care of their four corners: spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing (through doctor/health provider visits, finances, connecting to therapists).

Theme 6: Eliminating trafficking and violence

The issue of gender-based violence emerged in two interviews with youth who shared their experiences transitioning from care. Casper, a youth participant, described witnessing domestic violence in their family home after leaving care to live with their mother, feeling unsafe in the home yet faced with limited alternative housing options. Another youth, referred to as Big Z, recounted their experience of being in an abusive relationship and the urgent need to escape.

Oaks Jewel, a youth shelter staff member, recounted their experience supporting a young mother involved in human trafficking who was attempting to escape. Through culturally relevant interventions, including connecting the young mother to their Indigenous heritage, assisting with obtaining their status, and fostering a supportive social network within her community, she was able to successfully escape the control of her trafficker and create a safer environment for herself and her child. It should be noted that individuals who face human trafficking may not share their experiences until after the situation, potentially due to fear, limited options and resources, and abuse.

Category 2: Culture and Relationships

Theme 7: External Support

Having community heroes in one's life was identified as an important factor. Funi, a youth shelter staff member, shared their personal experience of homelessness during their youth, emphasizing the importance of having supportive community figures to rely on. Funi reflected that without the intervention of these community heroes, their journey—from being evicted from their parents' home due to their 2SLGBTQIA+ identity to finding stability with their partner—would have been far more difficult. Similarly, Mel identified their community's chief as a key "community hero" who played a pivotal role in their post-care transition. The chief assisted Mel in securing employment, facilitated introductions to community members, gave them purpose by encouraging them to chop wood for community members, and provided valuable guidance in navigating life within their First Nation community after their return.

Youth also described the support they received from agency staff. While many youths expressed feelings of insufficient support from workers, some said they received meaningful assistance, particularly within ICFWBAs, as compared to CAS. Youth who transitioned from CAS to ICFWBAs appreciated receiving more culturally relevant support, which enhanced their connection to their cultural identity and spiritual wellbeing.

Many agency staff also discussed the practice of referring youth to external supports, such as sister agencies, Elders and Knowledge Carriers/Keepers, and other Indigenous organizations to connect youth with culturally relevant resources tailored to their needs and preferences. This engagement aims to strengthen youth's ties to culture, enhance their physical, spiritual, emotional and mental wellbeing and provide opportunities for storytelling and guidance throughout their transitional journeys. One youth, Casper, recommended that foster parents actively encourage youth to develop relationships with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Carriers/Keepers, thereby deepening connections to their cultural identity.

Youth shelter staff Oaks Jewel highlighted the scarcity of cultural supports within their community, noting a marked decline in available resources as one moves further away from the city. Additionally, they reported that access to many supports is hindered by limited transportation options and that cultural supports which once existed have since shut down, creating a significant gap. While there are increased opportunities for youth to engage with these supports through online platforms, Oak Jewel emphasized that the virtual experience does not provide the same level of connection as in-person interactions.

Theme 8: Prevention through connection to culture

Some youth articulated the importance of practicing their culture through activities such as smudging, engaging with Elders and Knowledge Carriers/Keepers, learning to prepare traditional foods, participating in ceremonies, creating sacred bundles, land-based activities, offering prayers, preparing for powwows, engaging in cultural dancing, and using traditional medicines. Other youth expressed regret that they were not provided opportunities to connect with their culture during their time in care or were removed from their First Nations community to live with Christian practicing families and were only beginning to explore these cultural practices after leaving the child welfare system.

Agency workers emphasized the importance of meeting youth where they are in terms of cultural engagement, recognizing that many Indigenous youths, particularly those from urban settings, may not have had exposure to cultural practices and may not feel ready to engage with them. Instead, these youth often require support in navigating the system and prioritizing their immediate need for survival, rather than focusing on cultural learning. When youth express a desire to learn more about their culture, ICFWBAs prioritize connecting them with individuals who can support this cultural exploration. Additionally, these agencies incorporate cultural elements into all aspects of their support for youth. AM described their agency's practice of grounding youth plans in the teachings of the medicine wheel, ensuring that youth achieve balance in their lives across physical, emotional, mental and spiritual domains.

A youth shelter staff member, Oaks Jewel, noted that some shelters prohibit smudging and do not provide access to traditional foods or ceremonies, further restricting youths cultural expression and wellbeing. Oaks Jewel also reported that some youths do not feel comfortable self-identifying as Indigenous during intake, which complicates efforts to tailor case management approaches in a culturally relevant manner.

To provide effective guidance and access to culturally relevant support, agency staff must receive appropriate training and develop a deep understanding of the communities they serve. Some offered trainings that agency workers spoke to included workshops, cultural activities and orientations. However, the most effective learning events were led and supported by Elders and Knowledge Carriers/Keepers. Other elements that were noted as effective within trainings was understanding the distinctions between the cultures and practices of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, and engaging in hands-on learning.

Theme 9: Relationship-building

Interviewees shared best practices for agency workers and frontline staff in building relationships with youth. Additionally, participants discussed how the nature of these relationships can significantly influence youths' outlook and success during their transition from care. Notably, the interviews revealed a gap between agency workers stated objectives and the experiences reported by youth.

Many agency workers discussed strategies for navigating difficult conversations, particularly related to the transition from care. These conversations require a sensitive and thoughtful approach, with

youth often being more receptive when engaged in activities they enjoyed. One agency staff member, Hunter Orange, described their strategy of taking youth out for meals, going on relaxing drives, and listening to music. This approach helps create a calmer and more comfortable atmosphere, facilitating a smoother transition into the conversation at an appropriate time.

Youth shelter staff member Oaks Jewel emphasized the critical importance of case managers establishing trust and rapport with youth prior to initiating discussions about housing, a process that requires considerable time and patience. Oaks Jewel noted that building trust with youth requires attentiveness to their individual interests and demonstrating genuine interest in these areas. Another method for building trust, as suggested by agency staff member Danat, involves ensuring that youth feel a sense of agency in decisions that impact them. This approach emphasizes meeting youth where they are, allowing them to guide conversations in accordance with their comfort levels. Furthermore, we heard from both youth and agency staff the importance of being reliable and dependable for youth by showing up when you say you will and ensuring you respond to youth when they reach out.

Many agency and youth shelter staff members also emphasized the importance of establishing balance through clear boundary setting and effectively communicating expectations. Frontline worker Funi discussed the delicate balance between offering support to youth and avoiding burnout due to excessive dependency. Funi suggested that staff should clearly communicate to youth that there will be times when they cannot be present, and it is important for youth to understand that staff will not be available to them forever.

Youth have important roles to play within their respective familial, community and extended social circles, therefore it is critical to both – guide and inform them of their respective responsibilities, appropriate to their unique age, developmental stage and situation, as well as hold them accountable to teach them about their roles in the reciprocal relationships they are a part of and establishing of boundaries. The result of not investing in this area of youth development is a lack of preparedness and poorer outcomes. Agency staff member Hunter Orange noted that they frequently go above and beyond to secure housing for youth; however, some youth miss meetings, such as apartment viewings or appointments with landlords. Hunter Orange emphasizes to youth the importance of attending not only critical housing-related meetings but also mandatory presentations, workshops, and other agency activities. Youth shelter staff Oaks Jewel stressed the importance of communicating shelter rules and expectations to youth during intake. Often these rules and expectations are like those within society or a family home such as adhering to a curfew and being respectful to neighbours by keeping noise levels down.

Theme 10: Nurturing self, identity and connection to community

Participants noted the importance of nurturing self, identity and connection to community as key factors in preventing homelessness. This involved self-care, understanding their identity, living within their home community, connecting with their extended community, and for programs to invoke a wholistic view of the youth they offer supports and services to. Some participants noted that cultural teachings such as participating in prayers, smudging, having protection bundles, preparing for pow wows, participating in round dances, and using cultural medicines helped them nurture themselves. Being connected to the community, by themselves, or through family members or Chiefs was also an important factor. Funi, a community partner, noted the importance of trying to understand the bigger picture of the youth's situation when doing agency work. Funi noted that many families rely heavily on their communities, but some view the community as a source of trauma, so it is important to understand the unique path that the individual walks.

Category 3: Gaps and Barriers

Theme 11: Insufficient resources

Participants expressed a need for affordable and available housing to support youth. Danat, an agency worker, said that the government needs to create more affordable housing for youth and set a standard across the board for change, such as better adult services for youth transitioning out of care into adult services. Many youths mentioned that it was hard to find housing, the unaffordable market rates and a high shortage of housing availability. Participants also noted inadequate or unsafe housing in their present situation. Hunter Orange, an agency worker, noted that youth do not have much financial assistance or references to vouch for them. Blue, an agency worker, noted that the biggest barriers for youth are financial as youth do not have a lot of money. Participants mentioned a need for resources and funding on reserve to address the overwhelmed housing system, and further support within shelter programs. Participants also noted a need for improved credit and guarantors to support the youth in acquiring housing and related services, transportation, and funding to improve school-work balance that may be impacted by these barriers. In addition, geographic barriers were noted as a limitation.

Theme 12: Insufficient support

Insufficient support and prevention services were found to pose significant barriers in housing support for Indigenous youth. One area of support that was discussed included support from foster parents. Some youths had been kicked out of their foster parents' homes with no plan for alternative living arrangements, and one youth recounted coming back to their foster home with their bags packed only to then be dropped off at a homeless shelter. This led the youth to question their family's sincerity, commitment and support. Some youth turned to their parents to avoid the rules of foster care, according to agency worker Danat, whether it was safe or not. Agency worker Hunter Orange noted that some families may not want the youth residing with them or the youth may not want to reside with their family.

In terms of services, youth noted barriers include a need for support from staff, the shelter system, and improved communication and follow-up and follow-through from workers. AM, an agency worker, said that sometimes the relationships youth have with their workers are not very supportive, they may be given five minutes to speak with them and then not hear from them in a while. Many youths said they had to navigate the system alone or had workers who disappeared or stopped responding. One youth, Ramen, noted an instance when a worker delayed supports by not submitting paperwork on time and not responding to Ramen's concerns over their housing situation. Ramen described extensive gaps in service, saying that there was no housing supports, no advocacy, transition support, mental health support was limited and not timely. Agencies did not have sufficient communication and decision making on who was responsible for supporting Ramen. Timelines for support were long, the only exposure to culture was being given sweet grass, and Ramen believed that the worker had little to no cultural knowledge. Many youths recounted similar experiences where services were limited or where they faced an unsupportive agency.

Theme 13: Child welfare gaps

All participants spoke to gaps in child welfare supports. Youth described not feeling prepared to transition to independence and facing many expectations as they age out of care. They shared the difficult experience of facing overwhelming choices, the challenge of prioritizing what to tackle first, the stigma associated with being in care and limited informational resources on the Ready-Set-Go program. Youth also mentioned shouldering significant care responsibilities, such as having to raise their own

siblings, nieces and nephews, in addition to themselves. Often, youth were given short-term, band-aid solutions rather than long-term supports. For example, some youth may stay in hotels, Airbnb's, or motels, which are not long-term options, and become extremely expensive. Some youth turn to families for a place to stay, but their families are not willing to house them long-term. This can be particularly jarring after exiting care, as youth often experienced a "safety net" where they were well assisted in care. Overalls said that the youth have grown up in a system that operates under ministry guidelines with constant support. Overalls also spoke to the challenge of securing financial supports through government programs that were constantly changing with shifts in policy and leadership. Workers were often concerned with the pressure and time required to maintain compliance with legislation and expressed worry that excessive compliance standards got in the way of providing the outcomes-based care youth needed. For example, some resources required to collect and report on data including an address or documents as proof of the youth residence, which did not however have a follow-up requirement to help those who were on the streets facing homelessness. Legislation also sets age restrictions, such as within the Ready-Set-Go program which is only available to youth until their 23rd birthday.

Youth were told the support they received from the agency was conditional on good behaviour and could disappear at any time, leaving them with a sense of precarity. For example, one youth said that if they were not responsible, they were told that someone can take away their support.

Lastly, Funi, a community worker, says that youth are in an intergenerational trauma cycle for generations due to having been in child welfare and do not see any other way.

Theme 14: Youth access

All participants noted the importance of ensuring youth access -- not only to affordable housing, but also to relevant information. Access to information was a large theme. Many government, institutional, and legal documents are written in highly inaccessible language. Hunter Orange, an agency worker, said that ministry resources tend to be wordy, so it is on the staff to break it down and make it more accessible. The prevalence of inaccessible documents and resources further undermines youth's understanding of their rights. Fish, a youth, noted that when you are 18 and there is no one to go to discuss anything, youth do not know what their rights are. Another youth, Strawberry Girl, said that there was no awareness, as workers did not tell them anything and so they did not know about resources such as financial supports. Another youth, Ramen, said that they had no awareness of the need to transition. This demonstrates a gap in youth awareness and warrants further investigation into how youth are made aware of their transition to independence, what resources are given to them, which of those are explained well (as some youth mentioned having to learn about programs on their own), what avenues of communication they have with their workers, and if there are any efforts to connect them to their community to support their transition.

Youth interviews demonstrated a limited understanding of housing rights when interacting with discriminatory landlords. Youth found it important to establish good relations with landlords, if possible, and wished for landlords to increase their awareness of youth housing programs to reduce their own unconscious biases. Fish, a youth, described an especially challenging transition, where Fish and their older sister did not have any information on safe housing or tenant rights. They found a place to stay, and the landlord took an illegal security deposit and did not respond to them when they attempted to get it back. They did not know what their rights were.

A community worker, Danat, noted that there is discrimination from landlords to the agency as they are working with youth and may have had a bad experience with another youth before. Another agency worker, Overalls, stated that it is hard to find housing, because no one wants to rent to someone

who is 18 years old. Finances are also limiting, since RSG is there to support youth, but it does not go far and so their access to safe housing is limited. Teal, an agency worker, noted that a lot of landlords have racism mindsets and do not want to rent to our youth who have subsidized income like RSG. Sonny, another agency worker, notes that RSG is not seen as an income by some landlords and the agency must write letters explaining what the program is, entitlements amounts and duration and other relevant details.

Agency workers identified the need for public awareness campaigns to educate property owners about existing government housing programs. Sonny suggests that the Canada Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) program is a good service to delegate funds to persons in transition and send money directly to landlords. Sonny continues to say that agencies should hold space for youth in care, but these opportunities come far and few in between.

Theme 15: Mental health, maltreatment, and substance misuse

Overalls, an agency worker, noted the need for substance use supports, as there is never enough housing, and they frequently run into challenges around securing ways of keeping kids facing substance use issues safe when they do not have a failsafe, resulting in youth often placed at shelter houses or other unsafe places.

Agency workers also noted a need for more mental health supports and some noted poor experiences with mental health supports. AM, an agency worker, said that it is difficult for the youth's mental health and wellbeing, as some youths cannot be supported immediately and will be left in a state of survival in fight or flight mode. In addition, participants noted long waitlists for accessing supports. However, AM noted that despite the long wait times, they would ensure that youth were made aware of the supports available to them and would get them signed up immediately so that they would be prepared for when the time came for them to have that housing. Many youths noted that follow-up on the side of the worker is incredibly important in ensuring a smooth and supported transition.

Some youth experienced abuse from their partners, and substance use in their current living situation. Blue, an agency worker, said that some people cannot create a good connection with their base at home and other factors such as substance abuse can cause youth to need to move out. Family substance use was triggering and unsafe, as Blue noted that youth often want to leave due to current circumstances of where they are now (i.e. substance abuse in the home).

Discussion

This research sought to identify early intervention and prevention strategies that child wellbeing agencies, community partners, and youth may employ. These interventions can be applied to children in care as they move into young adulthood, empowering them once exiting care and into independent living. It is important to reiterate here that 'independent living' is considered and looks different for Indigenous peoples that for other races due to the communal and highly co-dependent and reciprocal relationship of individual to their extended families, communities and relations. Therefore, the results are to be interpreted within the context of relational circles and ways of living.

The results of this study demonstrate the need for external resources and programs for youth accompanied by increased communication; safety in their living situations; ensuring plans are youth directed and that programmes are equipped with the capacity to go beyond the 'bare minimum' and

'check boxes' without meaningful wholistic consideration of the complexity of the situations and needs of children and youth in care.

In addition, the interviews highlighted that a strong connection to culture is vital in supporting youths' housing transitions. This connection not only fosters resilience but also enhances youths' overall wellbeing, providing them with the strength to navigate various challenges. Establishing cultural safety within youth environments is essential to fostering meaningful connections to their cultural identity; without this, such connections may be hindered.

Interview transcripts also highlighted the necessity and impact of relationships on the trajectory of exiting care. Taking the time to build trust with a young person could be the difference between a youth who is responsive, participating and engaged in their service planning with their worker and agency versus one who is disengaged and worse – turning down supports and spiraling into a cycle of behaviour with detrimental outcomes. Relationships and trust building up front also contributed to the ability of workers and caregivers to establish a healthy reciprocal relationship with the young person and establish responsibilities, boundaries and accountability. It is important to remind that in Indigenous communities the health of the individual and their community is co-dependent. An individual who is aware of their role and is a contributing member within the community is able to build resilience skills throughout their life journey to navigate challenging situations. In turn, a family and community would guide and value the individual for their contribution, adding to their self-confidence and ultimately affirming their role within that society. This in turn forms healthy habits and builds wholistic wellbeing across the four quadrants of the medicine wheel - the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing.

This research demonstrates the urgent need for increased funding to expand the availability of affordable housing, with a particular need for resources and funding specifically in First Nations communities.

Indigenous homelessness is rooted in many underlying factors. Thus, Indigenous homelessness requires a complex and multifaceted approach that remedies systemic child welfare gaps, addresses the intersections of human trafficking and gender-based violence, enhances youth access to affordable housing and information, and increases supports for mental health.

Indigenous youth are at an elevated risk of experiencing or witnessing gender-based violence due to the pervasive effects of intergenerational trauma within their families and communities. Intergenerational trauma leads to poor outcomes and is the reality of many Indigenous youths. Greater attention needs to be brought to address the impacts of colonization and subsequent traumatic events on youth in care. Additionally, Indigenous youth, especially women and two-spirit individuals, face a disproportionately elevated risk of becoming victims of human trafficking, as their vulnerabilities are often exploited by traffickers (Bastien, 2024; Rambajue, 2021; Roudometkina & Wakeford, 2018).

The findings of this study align with work by Doucet (2022) and the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates to inform the creation of conditions where youth in and from care can be part of a society where they are valued, invested in and interdependently supported throughout their entire lives.

There is a lack in the systems that youth are navigating and the resources they are provided access to. Some individuals face barriers in access as a result of status. For example, a community worker mentioned one young person whose community did not accept their father's status, so they were not able to be a registered status member. This prevented them from accessing home community/services.

The current study has the potential to impact policy and practice, as the design of this study reflects the priorities of youth who have lived experience of homelessness and transitioning to

independence. Evidence surrounding specific programming and agency-specific processes have the potential to improve the quality of care being offered. For example, when identifying gaps and barriers, young people suggested increased staff and increased funding for both child welfare and prevention programs.

Both researchers and staff seek to uphold the values of decolonizing research and working towards preventing Indigenous youth homelessness. Co-designing this study with youth was part of the research team's efforts to decolonize research. We want to work towards better applying a trauma-informed approach and decolonizing approach to research with Indigenous populations, especially from an institutional perspective.

Knowledge Mobilization

In keeping with our commitment to informing changes in policy and practice, study findings were shared through a knowledge mobilization workshop at a conference widely attended by Indigenous Child and Family Wellbeing workers. Members of the Indigenous youth council co-facilitated the workshop alongside adult researchers. The workshop, which was attended by 135 child welfare professionals, including Indigenous child and family wellbeing agency workers and sector experts over two separate days, aimed to share the study's purpose, co-design process, and key findings. The workshop was also facilitated at an academic conference, and a Master of Social Work (MSW) class.

Limitations

This study also sought to investigate human trafficking, amongst issues of homelessness and violence, through the research questions. However, human trafficking did not surface as a theme. The research team suspects that this was because those who may have experienced trafficking may not disclose this, may not participate in this research, or may not have the capacity to participate. Thus, a limitation of this study may be that we were able to speak to those who had the capacity to engage in these conversations.

There were also some limitations in terms of the stakeholders that youth expressed wanting to interview during our consultations together, such as volunteer drivers, child and youth workers, but they were hard groups to reach, so it was not possible to include them in this study.

Youth noted limitations of this research, related to the long institutional processes of ethics and research. However, majority of the youth expressed that it was an empowering experience to be involved in this process, and that it felt meaningful to be able to help other youth through this work. Researchers from the University of Toronto noted some limitations as well. They noted that there they wanted to work towards decolonizing research, for example, noting that educational institutions are colonial places that present barriers such as ethics "approval" of Indigenous research.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify early intervention and prevention ideas, highlight service gaps and offer recommendations to prevent homelessness among Indigenous youth transitioning out of care. Findings demonstrate the critical need for increased funding to expand the availability of affordable housing. Addressing Indigenous youth homelessness requires a multipronged approach that remedies systemic gaps in child welfare, integrates cultural knowledge and practices into programming, and enhances youth access to crucial information, resources, and supports. Future research should focus on understanding the perspectives of additional stakeholders, such as volunteer drivers, Elders, and Knowledge Carriers/Keepers to further understand the complexities of Indigenous youth homelessness. Future research should also focus on the implementation of trauma-informed approaches to child welfare research, including understanding the balance of autonomy, children's rights and addressing re-traumatization in colonial research.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questions for Youth/Young Adults in Care or with experience in care but in process of transitioning or having exited

Circumstantial /Situational Positioning Questions:

1. Age
2. Which agency did you/are you receiving/received services from?
   - ☐ Is it an Indigenous agency or CAS?
3. What is your preferred housing arrangement at this stage in your life and is it aligned with your current arrangement?

Interview Questions

1. What are your current living arrangements - (e.g. who do you live with? What type of home/arrangement are you in?)
2. Do you currently feel safe in your living arrangements?
   - If not, what contributes to your feeling of unsafety?
3. If you are no longer residing with a caregiver, at what age did you transition to a more independent living arrangement? What/who helped you along your journey? Can you think of a pivotal moment that was most helpful? What supports are/were lacking for you?
4. What was your awareness around the types of services you were involved with the agency /worker at different stages of your young adulthood?

Examples: you may consider the following when you are thinking about your awareness of the shift from protection services to voluntary youth agreement:

- What did you know around what the services offered, what you were entitled to and how to access? Around financial assistance? Other supports?
- Were you provided resources specific to aging out?
- Were the resources appropriate and understandable to you?
- Has anyone followed up with you to gauge whether you understood what you were given and were able to apply it?
- Were you given sufficient heads up about the transition?
- What was the messaging around transitioning and independence in your case? E.g. is it around 'freedom', 'adulthood' or in terms of 'responsibility' and 'expectations' and 'work'? What does independence look like to you?
- Who was your go-to at times when you needed help? (does not have to be part of agency)
- Did/Do you have a safety back-up plan when on your own?
5. Who was part of your circle of care? Have you been connected with your community?
6. What cultural/spiritual teachings and supports do you need to be able to feel comfortable in your home?

Appendix B: Questions for Community Workers

Interview Questions

1. Have you supported an Indigenous youth who transitioned from being in care with finding housing?
2. What kind of identity-based information do you ask when supporting someone to find housing?
3. What approach do you take to support youth with finding housing? (case management, wholistic, etc.?)
4. How do you ensure a wholistic approach to finding housing? (e.g. mental health supports, needs assessments, cultural supports, etc.)
5. How do you take the youth's culture, in-care experience, and other contextual factors into consideration when supporting them to find housing?
6. Do you find it valuable to build a relationship with the youth that approach you to find housing? If so, how do you build that relationship? If not, what are your main priorities?
7. Can you tell us a story of success and how they got there?
8. What are key components of a successful transition to independence?
9. Do you offer follow-ups to confirm that a transition has been 'successful'? If not, why not?
10. Can you tell us a story that did not go well and how they got there?
11. How accessible are your services and what criteria needs to be met for youth to gain access to your services?
12. Do you have long waitlists for your services?
13. How are policies, expectations and rights explained to youth?

Appendix C: Questions for Member Agencies and Youth in Transition Workers

Interview Questions:

1. How do you create safety within conversations relating to transitioning and independent living?
   a. At what age do you start having conversations with youth about transitioning to independence?
   b. What activities do you do to accompany these conversations, if any?
2. What supports do you ensure are in place for youth before having these conversations?
   a. What financial supports do you recommend to youth who are transitioning to independence?
3. How does your agency support worker education about traditional family practices?
4. What workshops do you feel help youth feel prepared?
5. How should policies, expectations, rights be explained to youth?
6. Is there a difference between what transition should look like vs. what it is now? If yes, please explain.
7. Is there a safety back-up plan when youth are on their own?
8. What challenge do you see your youth consistently facing when transitioning and how are you helping them overcome this barrier? (personal references)
9. What challenges do you face when supporting youth with transitioning to independence?
10. What is the messaging to youth around 'transitioning?
    a. E.g. is it around 'freedom', 'adulthood' or in terms of 'responsibility' and 'expectations' and 'work'?
    b. Do you feel that this messaging could be improved upon? How so?