

# The cost of inaction for youth 'aging out' of Ontario foster care is estimated at \$2 billion

January 4 2022, by Linda Mussell, Marsha Rampersaud

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Last spring, the Ontario government [committed to redesigning the child welfare system](#) to better prepare youth leaving state guardianship. As we head towards a provincial election in June 2022, few details of the proposed redesign are available. We urge voters to pay attention to action or inaction on this issue—not only for ethical reasons but for

monetary reasons too.

We undertook cost-analysis and interview research to help guide policy debate. In a [new report](#), we estimate the costs of inaction on this issue and provide youth-informed recommendations.

For youth under state guardianship the state has assumed the role of the parent. But state parenting [falls short](#) of how most people would treat their children. This includes cutting support when youth turn 18.

## **Aging out**

There are approximately [11,700 children and youth under state guardianship in Ontario](#). Black and Indigenous children are highly represented, with Indigenous children comprising [30 percent](#) of kids under Ontario guardianship alone.

Each year, around [1,000 youth "age out"](#) of the system. For many, the transition is difficult, creating lifelong adverse outcomes including low educational attainment and income, unstable housing and homelessness, worse physical and mental health and criminalization.

Drawing on the work of [Melanie Doucet](#), a social work scholar and former youth under state guardianship, we use the term "[aging out](#)" to mean youth who are turning 18 and will lose access to certain services and supports. We use quotation marks to denormalize the term.

## **Sector redesign**

In March 2021, the province committed to [redesigning child welfare](#), releasing its plan in July 2020. In February 2021, a [moratorium was placed on "aging out" of guardianship until Sept. 30, 2022](#), so that youth

can continue to receive supports and services after they turn 18 during the pandemic.

No other changes for youth "aging out" have been made. Youth who "age out" by the end of September will face significant challenges.

In the [words of Cheyanne Ratnam](#), the co-founder and executive director of the [Ontario Children's Advancement Coalition](#), and a former youth under state guardianship, "Child welfare is the largest pipeline into other violent systems, such as homelessness, prison and poverty."

## **Report findings**

Our report, [launched at a session](#) held by Ontario's [Office of the Children's Lawyer](#) on Dec. 8, 2021, explains the situation in Ontario.

It applies the approach of economist Marvin Shaffer and colleagues, which estimated the costs of youth "aging out" in [British Columbia](#). We estimate that in Ontario the cost of inaction totals more than \$2 billion.

The figures we present draw on the limited data available, and we believe the numbers are likely much higher. We draw on Statistics Canada data, peer-reviewed academic research and data released by non-profits to produce these figures. Much of this report was shaped by the voices and experiences of youth who "aged out" and youth in transition workers.

One youth, Jesse, says: "From the time you're 17 to 21, that's the most fragile time you should be involved with youth ... I can bet you \$10 million if my life was aided a little more from 17 to 21, I can guarantee you I'd probably be in college right now, I probably wouldn't have a (criminal) record...."

Five hundred and sixty youth who "age out" each year [don't finish high school](#), experience lost earnings over their lifetime and become trapped in precarious work options.

We found that each youth who "ages out" of state guardianship stands to lose between \$705,000 to \$1,880,000 in earnings over their lifetime. Based on the combined total of taxable lost earnings of youth leaving state guardianship over their lifetimes, the province stands to lose approximately \$118 million to \$315.8 million in tax revenue.

The majority of youth "age out" to poverty. Five hundred and seventy youth "aging out" each year [rely on income supports](#) —the lifetime cost to the province is around \$235 million.

Five hundred and eighty youth "aging out" each year will [experience homelessness](#). Over their lifetimes, they may cost the province approximately \$629.8 million in emergency shelter.

During the report launch we heard from frontline workers who can offer little more than a tent to some youth leaving the system amidst the housing crisis.

Approximately 460 youth in state guardianship [experience criminalization](#). Provincial imprisonment of these young people costs the province approximately \$19.6 million to \$36 million annually; and over their lifetimes, that number could be nearly \$1 billion.

These are just some of the areas the province may incur costs, the total estimated costs based on the adverse outcomes youth leaving state guardianship face in their lifetimes is more than \$2 billion.

## Recommendations

Our report presents 18 recommendations provided by youth who "aged out," youth-in-transition workers, people who used to be under state guardianship and people who work in the sector. Future youth-led data collection is needed to inform policy change, as there is little available in Canada.

One key recommendation is to rethink the norm of independence at 18. From interviews with youth, all describe profound isolation, loneliness and few caring relationships underpinning the challenges they face. We must shift to a [model of interdependence](#)—fostering non-professional caring relationships for youth under state guardianship that extend long after 18.

One youth, Riyadh, says: "Half the time I felt like nobody loved me, you know? I think people are just telling me they love me and they care about me but I don't think they do, you know, because if they did, why am I in an emergency shelter?"

In addition, youth need continued financial support and services, and increased monthly funding adjusted for cost of living. The youth we heard from are unable to maintain housing and get post-secondary education due to financial hardship, lack of interpersonal support and trauma.

Change is needed earlier for families, reinvesting some of the \$2 billion Ontario is spending could keep more families together. It will cost less to reinvest early on, and it will help disrupt this trend of hardship for generations of [youth](#) to come.

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