

# 5 Nobody “Signs Out of Care.” Exploring Institutional Links Between Child Protection Services & Homelessness

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## Introduction

In Ontario, youth between 12 and 18 years of age, can apply to the courts for a review of their child protection status (R.S.O. 1990, c.C. 11 s. 65.1(4)). Between 16 and 18 years of age, young people can apply to the Courts to terminate a Society or Crown wardship order. Some youth approaching 16 years of age do, in fact, want to end their involvement with the child welfare system and become legally independent.

Young people involved with the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) in Ontario commonly talk about “signing out of care” when they turn 16. This expression makes it hard to see the complicated institutional work that is involved in ending a wardship order with child protection services, not to mention the challenges youth face after leaving care. This chapter examines child welfare policy, practice, and legislation from the standpoints of former “youth in care” who were homeless at the time of the research. Four stories of young people’s involvement with child protection services ground an investigation of Ontario’s child welfare system. Keelyn<sup>1</sup>, Aiden, Janella, and Sylvia’s experiences show us how provincial legislation and local practices and policies shape young people’s efforts to secure housing, make money, finish school, and engage in relationships with others (e.g. their biological parents, intimate partners, children). I hope to demonstrate that no one simply “signs out” of care.

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1. All of the names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

This chapter has been written to be useful to professionals and communities who want to understand why so many of the homeless youth they assist have been involved with the child protection system. Young people's stories reveal how experiences of homelessness or housing instability are influenced by their interactions with multiple institutions/institutional processes. If people are interested in creating solutions to youth homelessness, they need to understand how various institutional systems (e.g., child protection, social assistance, sheltering) currently influence young people's life outcomes. Inter-institutional or systems-level research and planning is key to solving youth homelessness, particularly if the goal is to *prevent* youth homelessness – that is to intervene before a young person ends up in a shelter or on the streets. The systems-level analysis this chapter offers is intended to support cross-sector planning and service-delivery.

## Chapter Overview

The chapter begins with a review of current research that highlights a relationship between involvement with institutions (including child protection services) and youth homelessness. From here, I provide a brief overview of the child protection system in Ontario. In the Findings section, I use ethnographic data<sup>2</sup> to provide a context for the frequency with which young people involved with child protection services end up “signing out” or “aging out” of care into homelessness or unstable housing.

The young people who participated in this research project commonly used the expression “I signed out of care” to describe how one ends a relationship with the child protection system. In attempting to learn how a young person “signs out of care,” I discovered that young people and their families navigate complex institutional and bureaucratic processes that they do not fully understand. In order to help youth leaving care achieve positive outcomes (e.g., stable housing, education, employment), we need to do a better job of helping young people and their biological families understand the institutional processes they encounter. In order to do this work well, institutional leaders (e.g. executive directors and managers) and frontline service providers need to understand these processes themselves. People who work in the homelessness sector have a clear understanding of how the sheltering system works, but may have incomplete knowledge of how the sheltering system intersects with the immigration, child protection, or education systems. Similarly, people who work in education understand how educational processes work, but may not understand how these are influenced by, or intersect with, social assistance, mental health, or youth criminal justice

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2. Ethnography is an observational research method used to gather information on a particular group – in this case, homeless youth with links to child protection services.

processes. This chapter will help people understand the *inter*-institutional processes that shape their own and their young clients work.

## Systems-Involvement and Homelessness

A high percentage (approximately 40%) of young people who become homeless have had some involvement with child protection services, including foster care, group home placements and/or youth detention centres (Dworsky, 2010; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz et al., 2009; Karabanow, 2004; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Lindsey & Ahmed 1999; Nichols, in press; Mallon, 1998; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Evenson & Barr, 2008; Serge et al., 2002). Young people involved with the child protection system are vulnerable to school failure, involvement with the youth criminal justice system, housing instability, unemployment, early parenthood, and financial struggles, as well as poor mental and physical health (Osterling & Hines, 2006; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). Young people who have had significant systems involvement (e.g., mental health, youth criminal justice, child protection) often experience disruptions in their mental health care as they transition between systems (Munson et al., 2011).

Similar to the inter-institutional work that youth involved in child protection services have to do, youth who are homeless navigate multiple institutional relationships, often with difficulty and poor outcomes for the youth (Nichols, 2008; in press). A person's experience of homelessness is linked to their involvement in schools, mental-health facilities, courthouses and jails, and social assistance programs and/or child welfare agencies (Karabanow, 2004; O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004). More than half of Canadian young people who are homeless have been in jail, a youth detention centre, or prison (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Seventy-five percent of young people who are homeless and over 18 years of age do not have a high school diploma (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Psychological assessments of a sample of 60 Canadian homeless youth revealed that 48% of respondents had clinically significant mental health symptoms, according to the results of two self-report surveys (Hughes et al., 2010). Youth who are homeless and who have both mental health and substance abuse issues may also be at increased risk of continued housing instability and health insecurity, as well as being victims of violent crime (Drake et al., 1991 in Goldstein et al., 2012).

## Child Protection in Ontario

Child protection policy, legislation, and programming vary province by province. There are also local differences within each province. In Ontario, child protective services are provided by 53 Children's Aid Society (CAS) agencies.

Individual agencies are provincially regulated through the *Child and Family Services Act* (CFSA). CAS organizations are required to investigate allegations or evidence of harm, protect children under the age of 16, look after young people brought into its care under the Act, supervise children who remain in the family home, and/or ensure young people are adopted (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s. 15 (3)). If someone is in the “care” of the CAS, it means that a Society or Crown wardship order or a Temporary Care agreement has been put in place by the Ontario Family Courts. The term, “child in care,” refers to a child or young person who is housed and cared for by the CAS.

Local policies and practices regarding care and custody are established by Children’s Aid Societies (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s.15 (2)), which “promote the best interests, protection and well-being of children” on behalf of the Ministry of Child and Family Services (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s.1 (1)). The practices and policies of individual Societies are guided by statutes contained in the *Child and Family Services Act* (Ontario Ministry of Child and Family Services, 1990) together with the Crown by way of legislation such as the *Children’s Law Reform Act* (1990) or the *Family Law Act* (1990). Practices and policies also reflect the local contexts in which Societies operate. For example, the Child and Family Services Act requires that services provide “early assessment, planning and decision-making to achieve permanent plans for children in accordance with their best interests” (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s.1 (2)). However, wait-lists for psychological and psychiatric assessments, a lack of permanent housing options, and a failure to integrate planning and delivery of various services in some areas mean that assessment, planning, and placements do not actually occur in “accordance with [youth’s] best interests.”

## Care Agreements and Wardship Orders

Temporary Care Agreements are voluntary agreements between young people, their families, and the CAS. These short-term agreements (usually less than 6 months, but up to a maximum of 24 months) cannot be made past a young person’s 16<sup>th</sup> birthday and cannot last beyond a young person’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s. 29 (6)).

Various orders may be established when the courts find that a young person is in need of protection<sup>3</sup>. Supervision orders allow young people to remain in the care and custody of a parent or other adult, “subject to the supervision of the Society” for between 3 and 12 months (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s. 57 (1)). A supervision order would be put in place, when the courts decide that it is best for a child to remain in the family home, with ongoing supervision and support from a child

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3. [http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_90c11\\_e.htm#BK54](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90c11_e.htm#BK54)

protection officer. A Society wardship order places a young person under the care and custody of the Society for a specified period of time. A Society wardship order cannot be in place for more than 24 months (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s. 57 (1)). After 24 months the order expires. At this point, young people are either returned to the “care and custody” of their parent or guardian or a status review is conducted and the young person becomes a ward of the Crown.

Under a Crown wardship order a young person is placed in the care and custody of the Society until the order is terminated by the courts through a status review (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s. 65 (2)) or expires when a person marries or turns 18 (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s. 71(1)). A Society *may* provide young people with extended care and custody after the expiry of a Crown wardship order (at 18 years of age), but it is not obligated to offer extended supports.

In the next section, I describe the research study that has informed this chapter. With the details of the study set up for readers, I spend the rest of the chapter explaining how child protection policy and legislation shape young people’s experiences of homelessness.

## The Study: “All My Life I’ve Slipped Through the Cracks:” The Social Organization of Youth Work

This research project was conducted with a youth emergency shelter (YES) in a small Ontario city. The research (2006-2008) was an institutional ethnographic investigation (i.e. an observational research method used to gather information on a particular set of institutional relations) of public and social service organizations that are used by young people who are homeless.

As part of the larger study, I conducted interviews with 27 young people and 14 frontline service providers (two police officers, two educators, seven shelter workers, a crisis worker, a mental health nurse, and a CAS worker). The data for this chapter came from interviews with young people and service providers, a focus group discussion with six young people involved in the CAS as Crown wards, participant observation (e.g. spending time with young people as they go about their ordinary lives) and informal conversations with young people and service providers (recorded in field notes).

This chapter draws primarily on the experiential knowledge<sup>4</sup> (i.e. knowledge

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4. My aim was not to determine the “truthfulness” of people’s accounts or to pass any judgments about the stories they provided. I entered into the project with the aim of learning something about child protective services from young people’s interactions with them and other connected institutions and processes.

gained by youth through their experiences with CAS) of four youth: Janella, Keelyn, Sylvia, and Aiden. Janella was 15 years old, Aiden was 24 years old, and Sylvia and Keelyn were both 17 years old at the time of our interviews. Keelyn was pregnant with her second child. I also analysed a number of texts including: local policy, provincial legislation, institutional reports, and daily-use forms (e.g. intake and discharge forms, incident reports, observational notes or “dailies” from child protection services, the shelter, schools, mental health institutions and so forth). The combination of interview and text data allows for an analysis of institutions and organisations – in this case, the child welfare system – from the standpoint of the young people and service providers whose work<sup>5</sup> is shaped by their interactions with it.

## Findings

I began all of my interviews with youth by asking how they came to know about and stay at YES. When I asked Keelyn this question, she explained that she had been living in a group home in Middlesborough “and then like last June I got out of CAS finally. I went to court and stuff and they let me out” (interview).

### Leaving “Care”

Like many young people, Keelyn’s use of a homeless shelter began with the end of her relationship with the child welfare system. It is common that a person’s first use of a youth emergency shelter happens as they leave institutional care (CAS, criminal justice, or mental health facilities). In order to understand how the child welfare system is organized in such a way that young people leaving it end up in the shelter system, one needs to understand how care is legislated or established through provincial and regional levels of government and the court system, and also how it interacts with policy in other institutional arenas (e.g. social assistance, education, probation). The institutional factors that influence youth homelessness cut across systems.

### Society Wardship Orders and Temporary Care Agreements

Many of the young people I worked with over the course of this research applied to stay at YES after leaving CAS care. Many others began staying at the youth shelter while they were still involved with CAS. The first floor of the youth shelter has traditionally been paid for by CAS and occupied by young people in CAS custody.

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5. Here the term, “work” refers to any activity that takes time and energy. It does not simply reference the work for which people get paid, but all of the things that people do as they go about their days and nights (e.g. applying for welfare, finding food when one’s Ontario Works funds have been spent, and so forth).

Relations between CAS, YES, young people, and their families are coordinated (in part) via wardship orders established through the family court system and voluntary agreements established between individual families, youth, and the Society.

A Society wardship Order is granted when a “child<sup>6</sup>” is found to be in need of protection (R.S.O., 1990, c C.11, 57(1)). When a young person is made a Society Ward, it means that the courts have decided that he or she is in need of protection for a limited period of time. Once a child is declared a ward of “the Society,” CAS is responsible for “the child’s care, custody and control” for up to 24 months (R.S.O. 1990, c.C. 11, s. 63(2))<sup>7</sup>. Before a Society wardship Order expires, the CAS agency that applied for the Protection Order must apply for a status review to designate the young person as a Crown ward, ensure that the child is legally adopted, or arrange for him or her to be returned to the custody of a legal guardian (Youth in Care Canada, 2009).

When I asked Aiden to tell me about the first time he used the youth shelter, he explained that it was after the expiry of a Society wardship order:

*Aiden: The very first time [I used the shelter], I was kicked out of my mother’s. CAS released me from their care and I had nowhere else to go, so I stayed at the YES shelter ... [I was] 15 or 16 when they [CAS] discharged me.*

*N: So you weren’t yet a Crown ward?*

*Aiden: They couldn’t make me a Crown ward – rather, they kept me as a Society ward. In the end they couldn’t find a place to put me, so at the very end, they put me in Tom’s Motel (interview).*

At the end of his term as a Society Ward, Aiden was “returned to the custody of a legal guardian,” his mother. However, conflict between him and his mother, which started before the Society wardship order, had not been resolved while he was away from home. Shortly after Aiden returned home, his mother “kicked him out” and he ended up at the youth shelter looking for a place to stay.

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6. A young person under 18 years of age is defined as a child for the purposes of CFSA, except the Part that pertains to Protection Orders. In this Part, a young person is only a child until he or she turns 16. All agreements between a child and the CAS expire when the child turns 18 years of age or gets married (whatever comes first). Extensions by 6 months are granted locally and *Extended Care and Maintenance Agreements* may be established between young people (18 years or older) and their local CAS in certain circumstances and only until a young person is 21 years of age (Ontario Ministry of Child and Family Services, 1990). These agreements require the young person to be working and/or attending an educational or training program.
  7. A Society wardship order cannot exceed 12 months (if the child is under 6 years of age) or 24 months if the child is over 6 years and under 18 years of age (R.S.O, 1990, c.C. 11 s.70(1)). The wardship order can be extended for a maximum of six months (R.S.O, 1990, c.C. 11s.70(4)).

Aiden was 16 years old when he applied to stay at the shelter; therefore, CAS was no longer required to provide him with institutional guardianship. Youth emergency shelters provide emergency shelter to people who are between 16 and 24 years of age. Between the ages of 16 and 18 years, a young person living without the support of a guardian is an “independent minor” in terms of the *Ontario Works Act* (1997). Independent minors can use the province’s shelter system, which is funded by Ontario Works.

Like most of the people who stay on the shelter’s second floor, Aiden used his time at YES to establish eligibility for Ontario Works (OW) social assistance<sup>8</sup> and find a room in a rooming house. He finished high school and went on to college/university. In order to add to his OW income, he also sold drugs, which eventually led to his involvement with the youth and adult criminal justice systems both as an “offender” and as a “victim.” During this period in his life, Aiden dropped out of school and began using drugs. At 24 years of age, Aiden struggles with addiction and periods of homelessness.

Had Aiden become a Crown ward, CAS would have remained Aiden’s legal guardian until he was at least 18 years old or until someone applied to terminate the wardship order through the courts (as part of a status review). The fact that he was in school meant he would have been eligible for extended care and maintenance supports to cover the costs of his post-secondary education (as well as room and board). Rose, the CAS case-manager at the shelter, explains that CAS is reluctant to take someone on as Crown ward when they are, as Aiden was, 14 or 15 years old (field note).

Referring to a young woman who was then staying at the shelter as part of a Temporary Care agreement with CAS, Rose explained that when Janella was last released from criminal custody, her mother refused to let her return home. Since Janella was 15 years old, CAS was legally obligated to become her temporary guardian until she was 16. A Temporary Care Agreement was put in place. The agreement required consent from Janella, her mother, and the Society. Rose believes that CAS did not file an application to have Janella’s status changed to a Crown Ward because she was going to be an extraordinarily expensive and time-consuming client.

Legally, the Society has a duty to promote the “best interests, protection, and wellbeing” of any young person who is less than 16 years of age, but in

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8. As we will see in Keelyn’s account, the process of establishing eligibility for Ontario Works as an independent minor is quite complex. First contact with the system is made via telephone. Later OW investigates a young person’s family and economic circumstances in order to determine whether or not he or she is eligible to apply for OW. It is at this point that a young person begins the application process.

Rose's experience young people nearing their 16<sup>th</sup> birthdays are unlikely to be designated Crown Wards. My aim is not to prove (or disprove) Rose's way of thinking; I want to understand how this knowledge (that CAS is reluctant to seek protection orders for adolescents) has been shaped by her involvement with CAS as the shelter's case-manager for youth in care.

A Temporary Care agreement is, obviously, temporary. It can only be extended (for a maximum of six months) with the consent of the Society, the youth, and his or her parent. The only way for Janella to remain under the care and custody of the Society beyond an extension of six months is if the Society believed that she was in need of protection and "brought the child before the courts," established a protection order, and terminated the Temporary Care agreement (R.S.O. 1990, C. 11 s. 33(3)). However, in Part II of the CFSA, a "child" in need of protection (R.S.O. 1990, C. 11 s. 37(1)) is defined differently than a "child" in the first Part of the Act. In Part I (which pertains to agreements), a young person is a "child" until he or she turns 18. In Part II (which pertains to orders), a young person is designated as a "child" until she/he turns 16. Once a young person is 16 years of age, there are no legal grounds to establish a protection order.

Janella refused to attend school and failed to show up for her CAS, medical, psychological, and legal appointments, attend probation meetings, or appear at her court dates. While she was under their care, the CAS was temporarily obligated to ensure that Janella met these institutional responsibilities *and* to cover the costs for appointments that she missed (field note). Providing Temporary Care for Janella was, as Rose suggests, expensive and time-consuming. Rose's observation that few youth become Crown Wards during adolescence is also perceptive; however, it is not because of the difficulty of caring for adolescents that few are designated as Crown Wards. The small number of young people who become Crown Wards as adolescents is actually a result of the Society's inability to secure a protection order once a young person is no longer deemed to be a "child" (i.e., under age 16) under this part of the Act.

Even young people who have been placed under the care and custody of the Society through Crown wardship orders can find their status up for review once they turn 16. The status review process can be initiated by the Society if:

- The child has exhausted all Society resources
- Is over sixteen (16) years and
- Is refusing to co-operate with the Society.
- The youth on independent living enters into a common-law relationship (equivalent to marriage). (C04.05.12 – Preparation for Independent Living of a Crown Ward, 2006:5)

Janella's approaching 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, combined with her refusal to "co-operate with the Society," make her an unlikely candidate for a status review prior to the expiry of her Temporary Care agreement. Because the agreement expired shortly after her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday and a status review was not begun before this date, she was ineligible for protection under the CFSA<sup>9</sup>.

When Janella's Temporary Care agreement expired, she established eligibility for OW, and applied to have them cover the costs of her staying at the youth shelter. Since she had been living at the shelter while under the temporary care of the CAS, she was simply moved from her single room on the first floor of the shelter to a double room on the "general residents" floor. Shortly thereafter, Janella was discharged from the shelter for failing to return before curfew.

Shelter staff are unable to discharge young people under the care of the CAS for failing to follow shelter rules. In fact, the shelter is not allowed to discharge CAS clients in any circumstances. When a wardship order or care agreement ends, young people who have completely ignored shelter rules are often discharged from the youth shelter immediately upon their "graduation" to the second floor, where for the first time, they are held accountable to house rules. Also, for the first time, then, these young people find themselves homeless. After she was discharged, Janella continued to violate her Probation Orders and incur new charges. When I last ran into her during the summer of 2008, she was heading off to a drug rehabilitation program as a condition of her most recent Probation Order.

### Crown Wardship Orders

The termination of a permanent wardship order (as opposed to temporary care) can also influence later experiences of homelessness and/or involvement with the shelter system. Keelyn's first stay at the youth shelter followed the termination of her Crown wardship order. Just before she turned 16, Keelyn applied for a Status Review. She explains "once you're 16 with CAS, you can sort of go to court and sign yourself out;" but then adds that "you can't really do anything. Like I've been going [to court] since I was 16 and I didn't get out [of CAS custody] until last June [when I was 17]" (interview). This idea that you can simply "sign out of care" once you are 16 is popular among youth who are involved with CAS, particularly those who are not yet 16 years of age (CAS focus group).

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9. "...where the child was under the age of sixteen years when the proceeding was commenced or when the child was apprehended, the court may hear and determine the matter and make an order under this Part as if the child were still under the age of sixteen years" (R.S.O. 1990, c. C.11, s. 47.).

It is striking that both Keelyn and Sylvia, another young woman who initiated the process of terminating wardship, use the expression “signing out” of care. Sylvia tells me that a “worker came down and one of the staff members from the group home, and my mom and my dad came because they both had to sign papers for me to get a court date to leave Children’s Aid because I was turning 16” (interview). But as Keelyn and Sylvia continue to describe the process of ending their involvement with CAS, it becomes apparent that one does not simply “sign-out” of care.

**Sylvia.** Sylvia assumed that signing papers and receiving a court-date meant the termination of her wardship agreement with the CAS. Neither she nor her biological family fully understood the process or its timelines. The papers she signed only started the process of having her status with CAS reviewed. The application process for a status review of Crown wardship is done through the provincial family court system, not through a local CAS agency. When an application for status review is brought before the courts, and if it is “in the child’s best interest,” the courts *may* terminate or change a Crown wardship order (R.S.O. 1990, C.11, s. 65.2(1)).

*The Ontario Status Review for Crown Ward and Former Crown Wards* application form assumes that in most cases “the applicant will be a children’s aid society” (Ontario Ministry of Child and Family Services, 2006: 1). It also assumes that “the respondent” is a parent, and states that “a court case has been started against [him or her] in this court” (Ontario Ministry of Child and Family Services, 2006: 1). These assumptions do not apply to the cases of Sylvia and Keelyn. As such, the application form is immediately more difficult for these two young women to understand.

Sylvia tells me that after submitting the status review application, she moved back in with her father, thinking that the wardship order was terminated. She explains that her worker, “...sent papers saying that I was out of care and everything – although I wasn’t. My dad, when he got those papers saying I was out of care, he kicked me out. He just wanted to collect that extra month’s money. So I moved into the shelter” (Sylvia, youth, interview). Sylvia’s story is full of confusing explanations like this one. I include them because I want to make it clear that neither she nor her family understood what they were doing, institutionally. Terminating a permanent wardship order is complicated work.

With further prompting, I found out that “the papers” CAS sent actually gave a date for Sylvia to appear in court. Contrary to her first explanation, they did not mean the termination of a Crown wardship order. Sylvia’s understanding of the process was that the children’s lawyer would take care of the review process and that if she did not hear anything from CAS, then this would indicate that her wardship had been terminated. She did not attend the hearings. She simply “assumed [she] was out.”

After being kicked out of her dad's house, she determined that she was homeless and applied to stay at the youth shelter. While she was staying at YES, she received a letter from CAS "saying that I had to call my worker. If not, [it stated] that she'd put a Missing Person's Report out on me" (Sylvia, youth, interview). When a "youth in care" is AWOL (absent without leave), CAS is required to file a Missing Person's Report with the local police. Once this Report has been submitted, the police become responsible for finding the "missing" individual and bringing her into custody. Even though Sylvia's worker had tracked her down at the shelter (i.e. she was not missing), the worker needed to provide written proof that she was following the appropriate, legislated (R.O.S. 1990, C.11, s.41(1)) protocol or steps for a young person who is AWOL.

In the end, Sylvia decided not to pursue the status review. She remained in CAS care until the Crown wardship Order expired when she turned 18 years old. At this stage, she was not considered by her CAS worker to be "a good candidate" for an "Extended Care and Maintenance" agreement with the CAS because she was unable to hold a job and refused to attend school (Mallory, CAS worker, interview). The Society is not obligated to provide extended care and maintenance to young people after the expiry of a Crown or Society wardship order. When her wardship order expired, Sylvia was moved onto the general residents' floor at YES, and then promptly discharged from the shelter for breaking the rules.

**Keelyn.** Keelyn recounts a similarly long involvement with the family court system. She explains that although she submitted the application for status review when she was 16 years old, the Crown wardship Order was not terminated until she was 17. Like Sylvia, Keelyn "never actually went to court." During the court proceedings, a children's lawyer represented her "case." After a year without seeing any progress, she says that she decided to go to court, herself: "I was all dressed up and stuff in case I had to go into the courtroom, but I didn't have to. I just sat in the hallway and my lawyer was like, 'yah, they've decided to let you out'" (Keelyn, youth, interview).

When Keelyn "tried" to apply for welfare after her wardship order was terminated, things began to get more complicated for her. Youth who leave care at 16 years of age can attempt to establish eligibility with the province's social assistance program, Ontario Works (OW). The process of establishing OW *eligibility* comes before the process of applying for benefits. Young people hoping to establish eligibility must have the appropriate documentation. To establish eligibility one needs to submit institutional identification (e.g. a provincial health card, birth certificate, and social insurance number); institutional documentation of "special circumstances" requiring a young person

to live outside the parental home<sup>10</sup>; and current immigration documentation, in the case of youth who were not born in Canada. Those who lack appropriate documentation will have difficulty establishing OW eligibility and will therefore be unable to apply for benefits (Nichols, 2008).

Because Keelyn, herself, had requested to have her Crown wardship status terminated, her eligibility for OW was questioned:

*[OW] had to review [my eligibility] and stuff because they were like, 'you were in CAS, so you had funding and housing and everything, and you left willingly, so we don't know if we can accept you.' So I was like, 'well at the end of the year – because I was going to have the baby – they [CAS] were going to let me go anyway, right. They just let me go earlier because I requested it.' Then they [OW] just overlooked it and were like 'ok everything's fine then.'*  
(Keelyn, youth, interview, original emphasis)

By initiating the review of her Crown wardship status, Keelyn unknowingly influenced her eligibility for OW. Because Keelyn had had “financial support available” through the CAS, and had requested to leave CAS care, thus giving up that support, the OW administrator was not easily “satisfied” that the circumstances of Keelyn’s application to OW were “no fault of the applicant” (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2009:2-3).

Her application was further complicated by OW’s practice of paying for housing directly in the case of OW beneficiaries who are less than 18 years of age. With her Crown wardship order terminated, Keelyn intended to come back to Middlesbrough, the city where she had previously lived in a group home: “I wanted to move back up here, and [OW] said, ‘ok then once you move to Middlesbrough and get a place and everything, *then* apply.’ But I couldn’t because in order to get a house, I needed to be on welfare to get money for a house” (Keelyn, youth interview).

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10. In the case of OW applicants who are less than 18 years of age, the Administrator must be “satisfied that special circumstances exist requiring the applicant to live outside the parental home” (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services 2009: 1). Special circumstances include: physical, emotional or sexual abuse (requiring third party documentation); “irreconcilable differences” and clearly demonstrated “withdrawal of parental support”; parent’s inability to provide “adequate care and support”; or no “familial home” or “financial support available” through “no fault of the applicant” (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2009, pp. 2-3). Special circumstances must be demonstrated institutionally by agencies like CAS, or confirmed by parents, through an OW initiated assessment of “family circumstances” or through third party verification (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2009: 4). In other words, the OW administrator must be able to access evidence of the special circumstances warranting a young person’s OW eligibility.

Until a young person has completed and filed an “intent to rent” form, signed by a landlord for a specific place of accommodation, OW will not proceed with his or her application. Independent minors do not receive OW funding directly. All funds are processed through a “responsible adult or agency” (such as a Salvation Army volunteer) (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2001b:13), and rent is paid directly to a landlord in order to ensure a paper trail.

These practices are governed by the *Ontario Works Act*, which specifies conditions for payments to third parties (S.O. 1997,c.C. 25, 17(1), 18(1)). Keelyn’s inability to get an “intent to rent form” from a potential landlord meant that OW would not give her social assistance funding, despite considering her eligible to apply for benefits. She did not have to “get a place and then apply”, as she indicates above. She simply needed to initiate the paperwork, in order to allow OW to pay some of her benefits directly to a landlord.

In the end, she returned to Middlebrough without money or a place to live. After she was “admitted” to the youth emergency shelter, she applied to have OW cover the cost of her stay there. She was well into her first pregnancy when she met and began a romantic relationship with Dean, a 23 year old man who was also staying at the shelter. She moved out of the shelter with him, and he applied to have OW include her and her baby in his social assistance package. Significantly, at the time of our interview, Keelyn had yet to successfully complete the OW application process on her own. She told me that she “didn’t really even apply for welfare until [she] met Dean and [she] got put on his cheque” (Keelyn, youth, interview). Statements like “I got put on his cheque” work much like the phrase “I signed out of care.” They obscure complex institutional processes, which shape young people’s efforts to be housed, make money, take care of their children, and so forth.

Keelyn’s comment that she was put on Dean’s cheque also signals a transformation of their relationship, institutionally, so that Dean could claim her and Ashton as his “dependents” and the three of them become a “benefit unit.” An OW audit requirement is that financial assistance not be “paid directly to applicants or participants under the age of 18” (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2009: 1). Had Keelyn applied for OW benefits on her own, she would have needed to “meet the eligibility criteria for an applicant under the age of 18.” But because she applied with Dean who is older than 18 years of age, “A trustee [was] not required in this situation.” (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2009:10). While Dean was not Keelyn’s trustee, his involvement in her life meant that they received her OW benefits directly.

Dean would have seen his social assistance increase significantly by entering into a spousal arrangement with Keelyn (and a care-giving relationship with

her son, Ashton). Keelyn, on the other hand, still did not understand how the social assistance system worked. Over the course of my research, it was not uncommon for young women to tell me that their boyfriends (who were older than 18 years of age) collected OW support for the two of them (field note).

Keelyn's being a parent, when combined with her age, further defined the conditions through which she was eligible for OW. To be eligible for OW she was required to take part in the province's Learning, Earning, and Parenting Program (LEAP): "Participation in LEAP is mandatory for parents aged 16-17 who have not completed high school and who are Ontario Works participants or are part of a benefit unit receiving financial assistance under Ontario Works" (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2009:9). Learning, Earning, and Parenting programs are designed to help young parents (between 16 and 25 years of age) access supports for education, employment, and parenting.

As part of this program, Keelyn had to attend a school for young mothers, located in a Middlesbrough church basement. When I asked if Ashton was in childcare while she attended classes, she explained that "What happens is that you kind of just have him crawling around doing his own thing with the other babies. He's in a swing or you're holding him" (Keelyn, youth, interview). Keelyn had to care for her son while trying to do her schoolwork; it is not surprising that she was not much closer to completing her diploma at the time of this interview than she was before Ashton was born.

In Keelyn's story, we see how child protection services, homelessness services, education, and welfare intersect. While I did not include it in this chapter, her story also outlines how her Crown Ward status shaped her involvement with the youth criminal justice system. Because her probation agreement included an order to abide by the rules of her group home, every time she was late for curfew or disobeyed the house rules, the police could cite her for a probation violation.

## Conclusion

Sylvia, Aiden, and Janella's experiences in and directly after care were shaped by the conditions of their involvement with the CAS. Using their experiences, along with Keelyn's, allowed me to construct a fuller picture of the ways in which connections to various systems affect young people's experiences leaving care. Young people's previous interactions with the child welfare system impact their experiences leaving care and their efforts to live independently.

I deliberately organized this chapter to tell young people's stories as they told them, rather than attempting to use these stories to build a linear account.

Each interview was framed by a single question – how did you first connect with the youth shelter? The lack of clear direction in their stories reflects the barriers in their efforts to find and sustain housing. Each account offers another glimpse of the complicated institutional processes that shape these efforts.

Many practitioners and institutional leaders (e.g. managers, directors, principals) understand their own area of work, but only partly understand how their professional work with youth shapes and is shaped by young people's work in other institutional settings. An inability to see how various institutional settings work with youth can have negative consequences (e.g., homelessness, school drop-out) for young people required to interact with multiple institutions/institutional systems.

A solutions-oriented approach to youth homelessness requires that we understand how the organization of institutional care results in youth homelessness. Focusing our planning and prevention work on individual young people is less effective than focusing on our institutional responses to homelessness and the complex circumstances that lead to it. As this chapter indicates, preventing youth homelessness requires a strategic, inter-systemic approach that addresses the challenges young people face when involved in multiple systems.

Indeed, some provincial governments across Canada are pursuing integrated planning and service-delivery models. In Alberta, for example, the coordination of planning and program delivery explicitly aims to end homelessness. The province's 10-year Plan to End Homelessness recognizes that particularly for youth, the navigation of multiple uncoordinated services is difficult work. The Plan advocates for a "client-centred" model, which is achieved by streamlining intake processes and integrating case-management across a system of care. In this model, service providers work as "systems navigators," helping youth access the services, programs, and supports they need. Before the creation and adoption of the 10-year Plan, the province initiated the Alberta Children and Youth (ACYI) initiative to support collaboration across government ministries. The initiative aims to support a coordinated government-wide effort to address issues of health and wellbeing among the province's children, youth, and families.

In other provinces (e.g. New Brunswick and British Columbia), there is a similar focus on increasing the coordination of services for youth, particularly those youth who are understood to be "at risk." The province of New Brunswick has committed to support an integrated service delivery model for at-risk youth with complex needs. A 2009 report, *Reducing the Risk, addressing the need: Being responsive to at-risk and highly complex children and youth*<sup>11</sup> lays out

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11. <http://www.gnb.ca/cnb/promos/risk/ReducingRisk-e.pdf>

a plan to create an integrated, youth-centred approach to program and service delivery. This plan involves the use of inter-professional Child Development Teams, composed of at least four different professionals in the areas of mental health, education, social work, and child and youth work. British Columbia has developed similar cross-ministerial guidelines to support educational planning and support for the province's youth in care. These guidelines have been developed to support information sharing and collaborative planning.

Obviously, the creation of provincial guidelines and plans does not translate directly into coordinated service delivery at a municipal or regional level, but it is striking that Ontario does not currently have a plan to address the lack of coordination between systems affecting homeless youth. Further, Ontario policies regarding the coordination of services for youth only address the coordination of mental health services. In order to prevent the flow of youth from one institutional system to another (e.g. from the child protection system to the youth homelessness sector), Ontario needs to adopt cross-ministerial guidelines for supporting positive outcomes among the province's youth in care.

As a starting place, I suggest a coordination of policy and service delivery across the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Child and Family Services, and the Ministry of Community and Social Services. A preventive inter-systemic approach to improving the "after-care" outcomes for youth who have been involved with the child protection system would position the Ministry of Education at the centre of this model. Research has demonstrated a causal relationship between policy interventions (e.g. raising the mandatory age of compulsory education) that increase educational attainment among people with historically low levels of schooling and greater life earning (Ridell, 2006). Participation in post-secondary education is one of the most effective predictors of employability, productivity and earning, and is also associated with longer life expectancy, better health, and reduced criminal involvement (Riddell, 2006). Improving the educational experiences of youth "in care" and adolescent wards of the Crown may therefore be the key to breaking the link between child welfare involvement and homelessness.

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