



**NOBODY "SIGNS OUT OF CARE".**

# **EXPLORING INSTITUTIONAL LINKS BETWEEN CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES & HOMELESSNESS**

**Naomi NICHOLS**

## What do you need to know?

In Ontario, youth between the ages of 16-18 can apply to the Courts to terminate a Society or Crown wardship order. 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. Currently in Ontario there is little coordination between the institutions that youth leaving care must interact with, often having negative consequences for youth, including homelessness.

## What did the researcher do?

This research utilized a combination of observation, interviewing and textual analysis in order to gather information on a particular set of institutional relations. The researcher partnered with a youth emergency shelter (YES) in a small Ontario city. Interviews were conducted with 27 young people, 14 frontline service providers (2 police officers, 2 educators, 7 shelter workers, a crisis worker, a mental health nurse, and a Children's Aid Society (CAS)

worker). A focus group was also held with six youth participants involved in the CAS as Crown Wards. Participant observation methods were also utilized, where the researcher spent time with the young people and had ordinary conversations. Various relevant texts were also analyzed (such as local policy, provincial legislation, institutional reports and forms used daily at the shelter).

### WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?



This chapter examines child welfare policy, practice, and legislation from the standpoint 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. These experiences demonstrate 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). No one simply "signs out" of care, but must navigate complicated institutions, often with little knowledge of how to do so.

#### ARTICLE SOURCE

Nichols, N. (2013). Nobody "Signs Out of Care." Exploring Institutional Links Between Child Protection Services and Homelessness. In Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Buccieri, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice* (75-93). Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

# What did the researcher find?

Young people who participated in this study often used the expression “I signed out of care” to describe how one ends a relationship with the child protection system. The findings reveal, however, that in attempting to “sign out of care”, young people and their families navigate complex institutional and bureaucratic processes that they do not fully understand. This inability to understand how various institutional settings work and interact

with one another can have negative consequences for the youth, including school drop-out and homelessness. 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 must understand how care is legislated through provincial and regional levels of government and the court system, and how it interacts with policy in other areas, such as social assistance,

education and probation. While many practitioners and institutional leaders (e.g. managers, directors, principals) understand their own area of work, they often only partly understand how their professional work with youth interacts with other institutional settings. In order to prevent youth homelessness, a strategic, inter-system approach that addresses the challenges young people face when involved in multiple systems is needed.

## What can we do with this research?

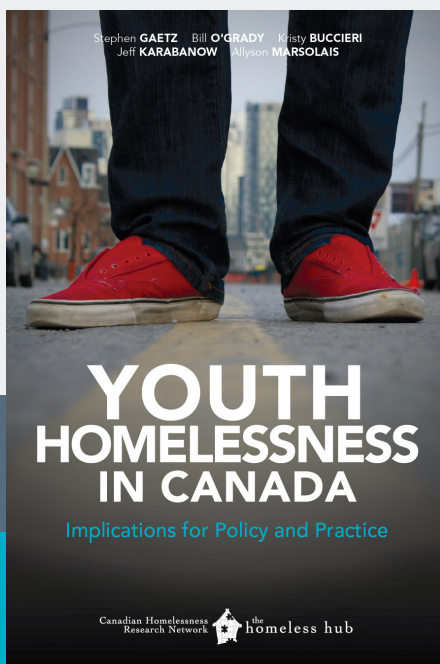
This research makes a strong case for the necessity of creating a provincial strategy or plan to address the lack of coordination between systems affecting homeless youth. In order to prevent youth homelessness, institutional leaders in the shelter system (such as executive directors and managers) need to understand how their system works with others, such as child protection, immigration and education systems. This can be

used to explain to professionals and communities why so many homeless youth they work with have been involved in the child welfare system, and to advocate for a coordinated systems approach to addressing youth homelessness. This involves, but it not limited to, 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.

### About the researcher



NAOMI NICHOLS received a Ph.D. in Education in 2011 from York University. She is currently employed as an Applied Social Scientist in the Learning Institute at the Hospital for Sick Children and an Adjunct Professor in the Queen's-Trent Concurrent Education Program. Her research interests span the areas of youth homelessness, human service provision for marginalised communities, educational processes and “youth at risk,” community-academic research collaborations, research impact, and health systems.



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