

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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New report finds social connections linked to better outcomes for youth in care

Using data from the BC Adolescent Health Survey, McCreary Centre Society, in partnership with Vancouver Foundation, have today released ***'We all have a role: Building social capital among youth in care.'*** The report highlights the importance of social capital (networks and relationships) for young people who are in the care of the BC government.

The study found that positive social connections can support youth to make better choices about health risk behaviours, and have more optimism about the future. Positive relationships with peers and supportive adults, and within schools and communities were all found to be linked to better health, including improved mental health, reduced substance use and a greater likelihood of youth planning to graduate and continue into post-secondary education.

The more types of social capital youth in care had, the better their health picture. However, different types of social capital were particularly associated with different outcomes. For example, the strongest form of social capital which reduced the likelihood of youth binge drinking was having friends with healthy attitudes to risky behaviours.

Similarly, it can be challenging for youth in care to maintain strong family connections, yet the single most influential type of social capital associated with positive mental health was having positive family relationships, and combinations of social capital that included family connectedness were strongest.

Not all youth have access to family support, yet if youth in care had a local adult in their community who cared about them they were more likely to think they would be in school in five years' time (41% vs. 27% of those who did not feel there were local adults who cared about them).

Although youth in care were less likely than their classmates to report feeling safe at school, feeling connected to school, and having positive relationships with peers, they reported better outcomes if they had any of these types of school social capital than if they had none.

Annie Smith, Executive Director of McCreary Centre Society, comments *"Too often people feel helpless to support our most vulnerable youth or feel that it is exclusively the responsibility of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, but the findings really show us that we do all have a part to play. Whether we come in contact with young people in care through our work, our children's friends, or in our neighbourhood, by simply being there for them, listening to them and making them feel included we can go a long way to improving their lives."*

"As obvious as this might seem, relationships matter. We need a rich public conversation about the important role of social relationships in the lives of young people in care and how we can ensure all young people feel meaningfully connected and engaged in their relationships with peers, family, schools and communities," says Vancouver Foundation CEO Kevin McCort.

BACKGROUND

The 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) was completed by almost 30,000 youth aged 12-19 across BC. It included over 1,000 youth who had been in the care of the BC government, and 300 who were currently in a foster home, group home or on a Youth Agreement.

The survey provides information on the health picture of young people in BC, and about risk and protective factors that can influence young people's healthy transitions to adulthood.

The survey is designed to consider emerging youth health issues, and to track trends over time. It includes 130 questions asking youth about their physical and emotional health, risky behaviours and health promoting practices. It also asks about broader issues such as feelings of safety, relationships and engagement in activities.

Key Findings

Youth who enter government care have often experienced trauma and loss, and can then experience additional stressful events such as moving from one foster home to another, which impact their ability to develop and maintain social capital.

Although youth in care are at risk for having lower social capital than their peers not in care, there were some improvements in factors that can negatively affect social capital. The percentage of youth in care who changed address in the past year was lower in 2013 than when the BC AHS was last conducted in 2008, as was the percentage who moved frequently. There was also a decrease in the percentage of youth going to bed hungry, lower rates of youth attempting suicide and reporting a history of abuse, and a greater percentage of youth rating their health positively.

Youth who had even one form of social capital reported better health than those without such relationships. Yet the cumulative effect of having a greater amount of social capital across the domains of family, school, community, and peers, showed that everyone has a role to play in improving connections and outcomes for youth in care.

Youth in care felt less connected to their families than those who had never been in care. However, when they did have a connection to their families they reported better overall health and mental health. For example, they were less likely than their peers to have self-harmed or attempted suicide and to report extreme levels of stress.

Youth in care often have poorer educational outcomes than their peers. Among youth aged 16 and over, the presence of a caring adult in their community was not only associated with having post-secondary plans but also with not skipping school.

Youth in care who reported feeling safe at school, having positive relationships with school staff, and having positive relationships with school peers reported better overall health and lower substance use than their peers without this social capital.

Having friends with prosocial attitudes was also protective. For example, youth in care whose friends would be upset with them if they got arrested were less likely to have been in custody (12% vs. 24% of those whose friends would not be upset).



A copy of the report is available at www.mcs.bc.ca. Webinar presentations of the findings are also scheduled for, 22nd June at 8.30am, 23rd June at 11am, 25th June at 9am and 2pm and 2nd July at 10am and 3pm - details at www.mcs.bc.ca.

The report was funded through Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Change initiative - www.fosteringchange.ca - which is aiming to improve policy, practice and community connections for young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

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About McCreary Centre Society

McCreary Centre Society is a non-government, non-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research and community-based projects. Founded in 1977, the Society sponsors and promotes a wide range of activities and research to address unmet health needs of young people.

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About Vancouver Foundation

Vancouver Foundation is dedicated to creating healthy, vibrant and livable communities across British Columbia. The Foundation does this by connecting the generosity of donors with the gifts of energy, ideas and time through community focused projects.

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