

McCreary study of BC youth who have been in care released

A new report released today by the McCreary Centre Society shows that youth who go through the BC government care system are facing a number of difficult challenges in their lives but with support from peers and adults they can experience better health outcomes.

The report entitled *Fostering Potential: The lives of BC youth with government care experience*, uses data from the province-wide 2008 BC Adolescent Health Survey and examines the health picture of nearly 1,000 BC students who have been in government care (in foster care, group homes, or on Youth Agreements).

“We know that young people who enter the care system are among the most vulnerable in the province, and have often experienced trauma, abuse and loss,” said Annie Smith, Executive Director of McCreary Centre Society. *“But I hope this report shows that not only are many incredibly resilient, but also that there are lots of practical ways that we can support them at school and within their communities, if we help them build their strengths, offer them some stability and meaningfully engage them in activities.”*

The study showed, for example, that youth who had been in government care who were involved in sports, volunteer work or other extracurricular activities where they felt engaged and valued reported better physical and mental health, and fewer risk behaviours, than those who were not engaged in such activities. School connectedness and supportive peers were other important protective factors.

Youth who moved less often during the past year reported better health than those with less stable living situations. Even one less move appeared to make a difference when compared to peers who moved more frequently.

The study also reinforced the importance of food security, as well as having caring adults in young people’s lives, even when youth cannot live with their family. Findings showed youth who were living with adults, even if those adults were not related to them, reported better health, better nutrition, and fewer risk behaviours than those who were living independently.

Although this and other studies have shown that Aboriginal youth are over-represented among youth in care, this report also unexpectedly found that immigrant youth were over-represented, with nearly 1 in 4 youth with care experience having been born outside of Canada. Also, more than 1 in 10 youth with care experience identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Former foster parent Michelle Fortin who is the Executive Director of Watari (a social profit based in the Downtown Eastside which aims to facilitate positive change in the lives of at-risk children, youth, and their families) sat on the advisory committee for the report: *“Youth in our care, that is, youth who have the challenging reality of being raised out of their family homes and with*



The McCreary Centre Society is a non-government, non-profit organization committed to improving the health of B.C. youth through research, education 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.

Contact

*Annie Smith
Executive Director*

*3552 Hastings Street
East
Vancouver, B.C.
V5K 2A7*

*Office: 604-291-1996
ext 225
Cell: 604-728-9494
Email:
annie@mcs.bc.ca*

www.mcs.bc.ca

professionals, should ideally have at least as good, if not better outcomes than those brought up at home. I am hopeful that this balanced look at the data from BC youth who have spent time in care of the government, will provide some insight into the parts of the system that can be strengthened and supported for the next group moving through the system. It is never easy to change, but this report offers us some clear directions so that we don't have to limit the health, education and safety outcomes for our most vulnerable children and youth."

The findings suggest that, like all other children and youth, young people in government care need connections with caring adults, the chance to develop skills and feel competent, and the opportunity to feel part of their school and their community, in order to foster their healthy development.

Minister Mary McNeil commented *"Nothing is more important to the Ministry of Children and Family Development than the safety and well-being of those in our care. We know there are areas that need our continued attention and areas in which we can and must do better. That is why we continue to fund reports like this one so that we can apply this valuable research in an effort to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of services to children, youth, and families across the province."*

The report will be launched at a webinar on Dec 13th at 8am. It will also be available to download on the McCreary website at the same time.

Additional webinar presentations of the results are scheduled for 3pm on December 13th, noon on December 14th, 8am and 3pm on December 15th and noon on December 16th.

BACKGROUND

Fostering Potential: The lives of BC youth with government care experience

The data for this report came from the 2008 BC Adolescent Health Survey (AHS) which provides the most comprehensive picture of the physical and emotional health of BC youth, including risk and protective factors. This independent report was funded by the Ministry of Child and Family Development.

The BC Adolescent Health Survey is conducted every 5 years by the McCreary Centre Society. Over 29,000 BC public school students in grades 7-12 completed the survey between February and June 2008. Previous surveys have been conducted in 1992, 1998 and 2003. The survey was administered by public health nurses in 50 of BC's 59 school districts.

Nearly 1,000 youth in the 2008 survey reported having ever been in the care system, whether in foster care, group homes, or on youth agreements.

As with previous McCreary BC Adolescent Health Survey reports, the results of this report will be used by government agencies, schools and communities to plan and assess youth programs and services. The survey provides up-to-date, comprehensive information on the health of young people in BC, as well as risk and protective factors that can influence their healthy transitions to adulthood.

The 2008 AHS included 147 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their current physical and emotional health, risky behaviours and health promoting practices. Healthy development for youth includes many contributing factors, and the survey also asks about broader issues such as family connectedness, school safety and peer relationships.

Key Findings

- Despite the challenges they face, the majority of youth with care experience reported good or excellent general health (68%), planned to continue on to post-secondary education (57%), exercised at least 3 times a week (63%) and practiced safer sex (if they were sexually active).
- Youth who have had contact with the care system in the past year may be facing a number of current challenges in their lives, such as high rates of substance use, hunger, pregnancy involvement and violence victimization. Also, young people who live without any adults in their home appear to be particularly vulnerable to negative health outcomes and experiences.
- However, if youth with recent care experience felt engaged and valued in the activities they took part in, they reported better physical and mental health and fewer health risk behaviours than those who did not feel engaged.
- Having a stable home over the past 12 months improved health outcomes for youth with care experience. For example, the percentage of youth with care expe-

rience who self-harmed was more than halved if they had not moved or run away in the past year (20% vs. 41%).

- Even moving one less time over the course of the year was associated with better health. For example, youth with care experience who moved once were less likely than those who moved twice to report health risk behaviours such as regular binge drinking, and youth who moved twice reported higher self-esteem and lower rates of attempted suicide than those who moved three or more times in the past year.
- Youth with access to better nutrition—for example, always eating breakfast before school, eating fruits and vegetables, drinking water, not going to bed hungry because there is not enough food in the house—reported better mental and physical health, were less likely to engage in risk behaviours and reported more positive school connections.
- Youth with care experience were more likely to report good or excellent health if they took part in sports, had supportive adults to talk to or had post-secondary educational aspirations.
- Having supportive peers and adults in their lives was linked to improved mental and physical health for youth with care experience. Even if youth had no supportive adults in their family, the presence of a supportive adult outside their family (such as a coach, teacher or friend’s parent) made a positive difference. For example, females without an adult in their family they could confide in, but who had another adult to turn to were less likely to self-harm, consider or attempt suicide and were more likely to have post-secondary aspirations.
- Social workers can be a particularly important source of support for youth in care. For youth with recent care experience, having a helpful social worker in their lives during this time was associated with better health. For example, youth who had sought help from a social worker and found the support helpful were less likely than those who had unhelpful support to report suicidal ideation or attempts, regular binge drinking, regular marijuana use and negative effects from substance use. Youth who found their social worker helpful also reported higher self-esteem and were more likely to report their health was good or excellent.
- Peers play an important role in not only supporting their friends with care experience but also in health promotion. For example, sexually active youth who reported that their friends would disapprove of them getting pregnant or causing a pregnancy were less likely to have had multiple sexual partners in the past year, were less likely to have used alcohol or drugs before having sex, and were more likely to have used a condom the last time they had sex.
- Finally, 16% of youth who were in care within the past year were currently living without any adults. Yet the report found that the presence of any adult in the home where youth lived was linked to better health for the youth, whether that adult was a member of their family or not.

The full report is available as a pdf from www.mcs.bc.ca