

Pushed Out of the Nest...Another Way in Which the Life Experiences of Youth in Care Are Different From Those of Other Canadian Youth

By Raymond Lemay

A review of the article by Monica Boyd and Doug Norris, titled "The Crowded Nest: Young adults at home," Canadian Social Trends, Spring 1999, 2 - 5.

The wards of the state who are placed in the care of Children's Aid Societies have experienced considerable neglect and abuse. These negative life experiences and life conditions do have consequences and, not surprisingly, recent research shows that these youth have considerable difficulties in school and in demonstrating appropriate behaviours. Life success is a great challenge for these youths who are less likely to accede to the typical roles that we take for granted such as "wage-earner," "spouse," "parent," "community member," "tax payer," etc... Over the past few years, agencies and the Ministry of Community and Social Services have developed extensive independence preparation programs that have the stated objective of getting youth ready as soon as possible for independent living so that they are ready to leave the care of the state (home) by their twenty-first birthday.

This programmed preparation for independence of youth in care stands in stark contrast to the process that most typical youth in Canada go through to achieve independence. There seems to be a typical pattern that—some people believe—guides the process of achieving adulthood: "Leaving high school, going to college or university, getting a full-time job, becoming economically self-sufficient, getting married - all these are commonly accepted indicators of being an adult. Since these changes often go hand-in-hand with leaving the parental home, many people also think of "moving out" as being part of the transition to adulthood."

However, growing numbers of Canadian youth very simply stay home. Moving out is less and less a part of the transition to adulthood. Since 1981, when 16% of young women aged 20 to 34 lived at home, the

number has grown to 23%. Over the same period, the number of young men aged 20 to 34 residing in the parental home rose from 26% to 33%.

Today, almost half of all unmarried young adults aged 20 to 34 live at home with their parents. Moreover, we are told that the average age of young unmarried people staying at home is getting progressively

It should be instructive for us all that typical Canadian youth—who by and large have not been through the traumatic experiences of abuse and neglect and who usually find themselves in intact families and with few life disruptions—choose to stay at home, mostly for economic reasons, to complete their university and college studies. It would seem that staying at home is now part of the process of ensuring school success, employment and a better future.

However, the experience of typical Canadian young adults seems irrelevant to the circumstances of the wards of the crown who are, arbitrarily and without any kind of understanding or recognition of where they come from, forced to leave care by laws that prescribe independence at age 21. Youth in care who have fewer coping skills and are usually less able to adapt, are obliged to leave care and to meet the challenge of independence at a much earlier age and without being able to count on the family home as a secure extension of parental solicitude and benevolence. Remarkably, many youth still in care are even encouraged to live alone and independently as early as age 16 when the overwhelming majority of typical youths are able to exert their strivings for independence within the warm and snug confines of the family home.



The youth of the crown deserve better. In compensation for past disadvantages, the state should set up programs, develop policies and pass legislation that would level the playing field for former wards assisting them to graduate from high school and earn admission to a college or university. They should be provided with special support to learn the job skills required for successful employment. And they should be provided with real assistance to get their first job, which is what many parents of typical Canadian youth have been doing for years.

The state as parent must learn a lesson from its taxpayers—citizen-parents—who accept for longer and longer periods of time to keep a place, provide security and money to their children to ensure a better

future. The state must demonstrate the same high expectations that all parents have for their own children, and provide opportunities that are consistent with these high expectations. To be successful, child-welfare policy must demonstrably eliminate the gap between the life-conditions and life-experiences of youth in care with those of other Canadian youth.

About the author

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On July 8th, 1999 Aon Reed Stenhouse Inc. hosted a charity Golf Tournament. The proceeds of the Tournament went to support Youth In Care Connections Across Ontario. Our thanks to Aon Reed Stenhouse Inc. for their support. Pictured above is John Huether, Executive Director Peel CAS who participated in the Golf Tournament and accepted the cheque on behalf of OACAS and Youth in Care Connections Across Ontario.