Is anybody there? Informal supports accessed and sought by youth from foster care☆,☆☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Young people's 'ageing out' of foster care has been described as stark and abrupt, in sharp contrast with the gradual process of transitioning to adulthood experienced by parented youth in the general population. Research has demonstrated that being supported during this transition is associated with a variety of health, social, and educational outcomes. The purpose of this article is to report former foster youths' perspectives on their informal supports, what difference these supports made for them, and what they believed would be useful in their transition to adulthood. Data came from semi-structured interviews with 43 former foster youth aged 19–26. Findings revealed that while approximately half the informants reported having support from family, most did not have family whom they regularly relied upon for emotional, practical and/or financial support. Further, while nearly all youths indicated that having support made a difference to them, many also noted that for daily living, they were on their own. The study's findings are an important reminder of the gulf existing between youth from care and parented youth in terms of their access to support during their journey to adulthood.

1. Introduction

Across North America and Western Europe, it is well documented that the normative process for transitioning to adulthood for youth in the general population is gradual, fluid, and well-supported, unfolding in small steps and over many months or years (Arnett, 2007; Mann-Feder, Eades, Sobel, & DeStefano, 2014). For example, in Canada, the most recent census data have shown that 59% of young people age 20–24 are living in their parental home, either because they have yet to move out or because they have returned back home (Gaetz & Scott, 2012). Moreover, demographic trends have shown that the percentage of young people living in the parental home has consistently increased over the past 30 years (Statistics Canada, 2013).

Research has also shown that the delayed and non-linear pace of the transition process is at least in part a function of economic realities relating to costs of post-secondary education, training, housing, employment stability and relationship structures (Avery, 2010; Fallis, 2012). As well, numerous studies and reviews of the literature have reported that youth well into their 20s receive and count on a significant amount and range of emotional support and guidance from family, along with

practical and material/financial assistance (Fallis, 2012; Vancouver Foundation, 2013).

By sharp contrast, for youth who exit the foster care system at the age of majority, the 'transition' to adulthood is abrupt, stark, inflexible, and typically irreversible (Atkinson, 2008; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Fallis, 2012; Vancouver Foundation, 2013; Ward, Courtney, Del Valle, McDermid, & Zeira, 2009). In addition, the leave-taking is depersonalized in that it is based on chronological age, irrespective of developmental readiness or maturity. Simply put, it is a "process denied" (Rutman, Hubberstey, & Feduniw, 2007). For many youth leaving the government care system, the irrevocability of this transition means that they are left at a much earlier age without the level of personal, emotional, and financial support that their mainstream counterparts can rely on (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Mendes, 2003; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Osborn & Bromfield, 2007). Moreover, although there is great heterogeneity amongst youth in and from care, research has demonstrated that they generally experience poorer outcomes in a number of life domains, including housing and homelessness, education, employment, income, health, mental health, rates of incarceration and victimization, substance use, pregnancy, parenting and involvement with the child welfare system, and personal stability (BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2014; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014; Fallis, 2012; Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009; Rutman et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2009).

Social support has been conceptualized as a multi-dimensional concept, comprised of emotional, practical/instrumental, advising and informational, and self-evaluation/appraisal components (i.e., provision

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of feedback that can influence self-esteem) (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). The presence of supportive and caring relationships with adults is considered essential in facilitating young people's passage into adulthood (Canadian Mothercraft Society, n.d.; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014); as well, social support is a protective factor that can help improve outcomes for vulnerable children and youth (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Kufeldt & Stein, 2005; Smith et al., 2015). Indeed, as documented in the Canadian, US, and international literature, having access to some combination of formal and informal support networks has been found to be one of the factors that can make a positive difference for youth aging out of care, including in terms of their educational and housing-related outcomes (Brownell et al., 2015; Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Kufeldt & Stein, 2005; Reid & Dudding, 2006). For example, a longitudinal study in Australia found that the presence of and continuity in social supports, such as those provided by family members, partners, mentors, foster parents, social workers, and community organizations, were significant contributors to positive outcomes for young adults several years after exiting the care system (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Osborn & Bromfield, 2007).

In addition, recent research also has documented the value of peer (and 'near peer') support for former youth in care and the ways in which it can both reduce social isolation and foster feelings of belongingness amongst this vulnerable population (Geenen et al., 2014; Snow, 2013; Snow et al., 2013). The experience of belonging, in turn, can lead to positive outcomes in relation to educational, health and mental health outcomes. For example, in Snow et al.'s (2013) Toronto-based Voyager Project, former youth in care who were university students were paired with incoming university students who were also former foster youth; the group provided peer support, mentoring and problem solving in relation to attaining educational goals. Lessons learned from this project include the value of peer support as a means to promote belonging, and the inter-connections between belonging and school achievement. Informed by and in keeping with this research, Snow and Mann-Feder (2013) have developed a promising conceptual framework that emphasizes the potentially pivotal role of peer support for former youth in care.

Nevertheless, although most jurisdictions in Canada have policies relating to preparing youth in care for the transition to independence, relatively little has been written about youths' access to and experience of informal supports following their 'emancipation' from the foster care system (Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013, writing from a US perspective, provides a notable exception.). This gap in information regarding youths' social support networks has meant that there is an incomplete picture of who youth turn to – amongst unpaid support people – upon leaving care, and youths' perspectives on this support and what types of (additional) support would be helpful through the transition to adulthood. The purpose of this article is to report former foster youths' perspectives on their use and experience of informal supports, what difference these supports made for them, and what they believed would be useful in their transition to adulthood. The guiding research questions were:

- What types of 'informal' support do former youth in care access regularly, and who provides this support?
- What are former foster youths' experiences of the informal support that they have? and
- What (additional) supports would youth from care find helpful to have in their transition to adulthood?

This article is based on data from a two-year external evaluation study of the Link program, run by Aunt Leah's Place in New Westminster, British Columbia (a municipality in the Greater Vancouver area) (Rutman, Hubberstey, & Hume, 2014). Aunt Leah's Link program is designed to provide individualized support for former foster youth aged

19 and older — i.e., the age at which youth reach age of majority and age out of government care in British Columbia.

It is critically important to improve knowledge regarding to whom youth from foster care turn for support as well as the adequacy, breadth and depth of that support from youths' perspectives, in order to improve transition-related planning, practice and to help ensure that these highly vulnerable youth have an effective support network as they enter adulthood.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

The evaluation study employed a mixed method, time-series with comparison group design wherein individual interviews were conducted twice with former youth in care over a 14-month period. As well, in keeping with research exploring people's lived experiences, the project employed a largely qualitative research design (Morse, 1994; Sandelowski, 1986). The project adhered to the ethical review guidelines of the University of Victoria.

Because the focus of this article is on the informal supports accessed and sought by former youth in care (rather than on outcomes/impacts of the Link program), and because data analyses revealed no demonstrable differences in terms of youths' informal supports either between the two sub-groups of youth (Link program participants and the comparison group) or in youths' perspectives over time, the findings presented in this article are based on the total sample of youth informants.

2.2. Participants: Sampling approach, recruitment and demographics

A total of 43 former youth in care were interviewed. Of these study informants, 21 were Link program participants and 22 were youth from foster care who had not accessed the Link program. The study employed purposive sampling (i.e., primarily volunteer and 'nominated'/snowball sampling) to generate the group of former youth in care informants. For the Link participant sub-group, inclusion criteria were that individuals were former youth in care age 19 or older and enrolled in the Link program. For the evaluation's comparison group, inclusion criteria were that individuals were former youth in care and not currently accessing the Link program.

To recruit the sample of Link participants, current and recent Link program participants were informed about the evaluation study and invited to participate through a variety of means: by Aunt Leah's staff/Link staff, via social media, or through a poster about the evaluation that was posted at Aunt Leah's. To recruit the comparison group participants, the researchers contacted staff of youth-serving agencies within the Greater Vancouver area and requested staff to inform and invite youth from care to take part in the study. These staff provided interested youth with contact information for the researchers. In the end, most – though not all – of the 22 comparison group participants were accessing some form of assistance or services from a youth-serving program. Together, these strategies were effective in producing a sample of the planned size (n = approximately 20 for each sub-group of youth informants).

Youth in the study ranged from 19 to 26 years old. At the Time 1 interview (i.e., the first of two interviews conducted over 14 months as part of the time-series design), 37% were age 19–20, 53% were age 21–24, and 9% were age 25. Slightly more than half of the youth informants (58%) were male. In terms of ethnicity/cultural background, 47% of the sample self-identified as being of European descent, 37% were Aboriginal, 14% were of African descent (including African-European), and 2% were Asian/South Asian. Thirty percent of the sample of youth informants reported graduating from high school, which is on par with the BC provincial rate for high school graduation amongst youth in care (and is substantially lower than the graduation rate of BC youth overall, which is approximately 80%) (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2014). Nearly all of the youth

informants in this study lived in significant poverty. Lastly, more than half (52%) of the *Link* participants in this study stated that they were parents: eight participants had one child, and three had two children. In addition, two *Link* participants (10%) were pregnant. By contrast, only two people (9%) in the comparison group (both female) had a child. The high percentage of participants with children amongst the *Link* participant sub-group likely reflects the fact that Aunt Leah's provides housing and other supports to young parents in/from care.

2.3. Data collection process and instrument

Individual interviews with youth were conducted face-to-face at an office at Aunt Leah's or another youth-serving organization, or in a safe, private space of the informant's choice. When it was not possible to conduct in-person interviews, phone interviews were conducted at a time of the informant's choice. All youth participants in the study were offered an honorarium for the interview, which lasted approximately 30–45 min. The Time 1 interviews took place between November 2012 and June 2013; the Time 2 interviews were conducted from October 2013 to January 2014. Informants were interviewed by one of the project's Co-Principal Investigators or by a Research Assistant with a Master's degree in social anthropology.

The Interview Guide (i.e., the data collection instrument) was custom-created for this study, although questions and topic areas were informed by an internationally renowned questionnaire (Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment) designed to assess the strengths, capacities and support needs of youth in/from foster care (Nollan et al., 2000), as well as an innovative, visual tool to assessing strengths and needs amongst socially excluded groups (Cole & Coons, 2011). The Interview Guide contained fixed choice and open-ended questions exploring a variety of areas of youths' lives, including: housing and living arrangements; educational status and plans; employment/income; skill development; self-confidence and sense of belonging; formal services accessed since aging out of care; and youths' perspectives on their family and informal supports, what difference having these supports made for them, as well as what type(s) of supports were still needed.

Prior to data collection, a draft version of the Interview Guide was reviewed by the project's Advisory Committee, which included former youth in care and Aunt Leah's program staff, and revisions to the Guide were made based on the Committee's feedback. As well, the Interview Guide and process was pilot tested with two former youth in care, and further modifications were made to ensure the wording of questions was accessible and youth-friendly.

2.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were performed on all quantitative data. As well, qualitative data analysis techniques were used on the semi-structured and open-ended interview questions. Written notes from all interviews were read multiple times by all members of the research team members to begin the process of identifying themes and issues and to get a sense of the whole. The team then returned to the transcripts to identify preliminary themes, guided by the precept borrowed from grounded theory that we must look for 'what the participants anguish the most over' (Keddy, Sims, & Noerager Stern, 1996). We clustered these themes into related categories of meaning and highlighted naturally occurring patterns in the data; these patterns formed the basis of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At all of these report-back sessions, it was evident that our analyses resonated with participants' experiences and perspectives.

We used several means to ensure the rigor of our research process and hence the validity of our data. The research team engaged in multiple discussions and memo-writing (presenting and critiquing one another's emerging reflections, insights and ideas about the data) and examined the findings within the context of the literature and practice wisdom. In addition, the thematic analysis was reviewed and confirmed

with the Advisory Committee as well as a means to strengthen the study's rigor (Sandelowski, 1986). At these report-back sessions with Advisory Committee members, some of whom had lived experience of growing up in foster care and others in working with vulnerable and marginalized youth in/from care, it was evident that our analyses resonated with advisors' perspectives. While this study, given its relatively small sample size, does not attempt to claim generalizability to all other jurisdictions, we believe it accurately depicts the experience and situation for youth from foster care within our region, and that it would also resonate elsewhere.

This article provides a summary of findings related to the 'informal' (unpaid) supports, including support from family, received by study participants and is based on interviews with a total of 43 youth at Time 1.

3. Results

3.1. What informal supports do youth from care report using/receiving regularly?

Youth informants were asked, as an open-ended question, what type(s) of 'informal' (unpaid) supports they accessed or received on a regular basis.

Overall, as shown in Table 1, a thematic analysis of the data revealed that the most frequently identified sources of informal support were family and friends. Roughly one half of study informants reported receiving regular support from family member(s) or friend(s). There were no age or gender differences in the patterns of findings in terms of sources of support.

Beyond family and friend(s), relatively few of the study's youth informants reported having other sources of informal support on a regular basis. Approximately one quarter of the informants (n = 10) named former foster parents or mentors, peer mentors and colleagues from youth-driven organizations such as the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks as key supports. As well, five youths (three females and two males) named their partner and five (three females and two males) named their partner's family as a support. Only four youths (9% of the sample) named their former social worker as a support person.

At the same time, at both Time 1 and Time 2, there were a few youth (n = 3) who reported having no supports that they regularly accessed — including family or friends; all of these young people were male.

3.2. What type(s) of support do youth from care report receiving from family?

To better understand the type(s) of support that youth from foster care received from their family and youths' experience of this support, the researchers undertook additional thematic analyses of informants' responses to the open-ended questions regarding support.

The most frequently reported type of support received from family was emotional support. In describing support from family, many

Table 1
Study informants' response to "Are there 'informal' support people that you regularly go to (or could go to) for support".

Type of support person	% informants (n = 43)
Family	60%
Friend	56%
Mentors/peer mentors	14%
Former foster parent	14%
Partner's family	12%
Partner/girlfriend/boyfriend	12%
Former social worker	9%
Roommate/neighbor	9%
None	7%

youth said that their mom, dad, or sibling(s) were "someone to talk to". Several youth also noted, however, that they talked and got support by phone because they were not in the same geographic area as their family. Two youths spoke of getting emotional support from a grandparent, but also noted the grandparent's frail health or physical distance as limiting factors to the support received. Most informants also indicated that family provided emotional support only, rather than multi-faceted support, including emotional, financial, housing-related and practical day-to-day support.

To provide additional context to the findings related to this question, it is important to note that when discussing relationships with and support from family, many informants qualified their comments by indicating that only specific family member(s) were safe in their estimation and/or sufficiently emotionally healthy to be able to provide them with support. For example, a number of informants only maintained their relationships with one parent; the other parent was either absent from their life or the relationship was negative or psychologically harmful. Similarly, many informants' description of their relationships with family reflected their ambivalence and experiences of conflict and/or broken trust.

After emotional support, the next most frequently mentioned type of support received from family was financial support. However, only 16% of youths (n = 7) reported receiving financial support from family. Moreover, a few youths suggested that the financial support came "with strings attached"; one youth said that he received financial help from his mother, but that she then got angry at him for his spending choices. Two youths stated that a grandparent provided them with financial support. As well, two youths noted that their parent/family provided emotional support and "a little bit of financial support".

Four youths reported that their parent(s) provided them with housing-related support — i.e., a place to live. At the same time, several informants indicated that the housing-related support that they received from family was tenuous and apt to break down, due to longstanding volatile relationships and/or the problematic life circumstances of the youth's family. For example, one informant reported moving back home with his parents after first aging out of care, but this situation was short-lived due to his parents' difficulties with addiction:

I moved in with my mom; she was doing Meth and using my money from welfare.

Similarly, another youth stated:

Just before aging out of care I was at Support Link; they helped me to negotiate living with my mom, and I moved in with her for about three weeks. But then I had to leave.

Amongst the youth who reported receiving support from their partner's family, they described the support as being emotional, practical, financial and/or housing-related.

Lastly, two participants reported receiving help from their mothers in relation to child care: one young woman was living with her mother, who was the primary caregiver for the young woman's child, and the other young woman's mother was caring for her children for several months while she attended a residential treatment program.

3.3. What type(s) of support do youth from care report receiving from friends?

To better understand the type(s) of support that youth from foster care received from their friends and peers, we undertook additional thematic analyses of the responses of those informants who indicated that they received support from friends. In keeping with the types of support received from family, the most frequently reported type of support that informants received from friends was emotional support. For most informants who spoke of this type of support, it was described as having people with whom to "just hang out", to attend drop-in programming,

to play sports and/or to eat meals. In addition, for at least four informants, the support was described as emotional caring; for example, one informant said about her friends: "It's nice to have people who care about me and are available."

As well, for at least two informants who were young mothers, the encouragement and support provided by friends was depicted as being extremely important: friends were the people to whom these informants turned to provide advice and reassurance, and to help promote their self-confidence — and friends were all the more important because these informants felt as though they did not have parents or other family to turn to for positive guidance or support. In the words of these two informants:

Two of my friends have children so I turn to them for advice about my son. They are very encouraging. Friends are in my life because they love me, and I am in their lives because I love them. They are positive people and they are supports for me. It makes a big difference, especially since I don't have family.

When I'm exhausted from school, work and parenting, my friends are really supportive and encouraging. They tell me that I'm doing a great job. I turn to my friends for advice and support. We've been through lots with me and they know me well.

Finally, several informants (n = 4) stated that their friends provided them with key material/practical support – i.e., housing and food and money – which often came at a critical time and helped to prevent homelessness or a crisis situation.

3.4. What difference does it make to have support?

The researchers also asked youth informants to talk about what difference they thought it made to have the support(s) they had – both 'formal'/paid and 'informal'/unpaid – in their lives.

All but two youths (95% of informants) indicated that having support was very important to them and made a big difference in one or more ways. A number of informants also noted that having support from friends, their partner's family or other community resources (e.g., a mentor from a youth-focused organization) was particularly important, given that they didn't have family whom they could rely upon for support. In these youths' words:

It's important to have at least one parental figure — my girlfriend's parents took me in and accepted me.

I had dinner with seven women — it's a dinner to recognize them and the importance of them in my life. …Also, it's the sense of permanency. When you're in foster care, you don't have a family you can go back to.

As well, several youths noted the importance of having access to mental health services and to supports that helped in the area of food security and healthy eating. Themes of how support made a difference and a sample of youths' comments follow.

3.4.1. Support helps prevent homelessness, trouble with the law, substance use; helps me stay focused, 'on a good path'

One of the most frequently voiced themes regarding what difference support made was that, from informants' perspective, support helped youths to reach out and accept help related to housing issues and/or difficulties of problematic alcohol or drug use, and thus helped them avoid homelessness, steer clear of criminal activity, and "stay on a good path". Informants indicated that others' practical and financial support – along with acting as positive role models – enabled or were associated with these positive outcomes in various key areas of life. Informants stated:

I have learned to reach out. I'm able to ask for help, so I get help with housing. Since then I haven't been homeless. I'm much safer. I'm no longer involved in drugs and hardly drink.

I'm getting so much support; it's huge and really making the difference for me. There are people who help me to not be diverted and stay on a good path.

Everything — if I didn't have additional financial support (from parents, friends) I probably would steal.

3.4.2. Support helps me keep my job or focus on school

In a similar vein, several youths stated that the support they received from family or through their involvement with youth-focused organizations enabled them to remain employed or pursue their goals related to post-secondary education.

If it wasn't for my grandmother, the money she gave me allowed me to keep my job because the money went to bus tickets.

I started with 45 hours of volunteer work and three years later I am on my way! I got work experience, practical support and emotional support.

3.4.3. Support helps my mental health, increases self-worth, sense of connection and belonging, feeling loved

Several youths stated that having other people provide support had the effect of boosting their morale, self-esteem and sense of connection with others. To these youths, the offers/acts of support signaled that they were worthwhile as people and inter-connected with others in a community — that they belonged. For example, these informants said:

It's simply telling me that I'm still worth something, which is definitely hard for me to feel on my own, that I'm worth anything really.

My friends make me feel safe, that I belong. I wouldn't give them up for anything.

Church — spiritual support, provide resources, e.g., baby clothes, food. I feel special, welcomed and accepted, part of a family.

3.4.4. Support means I'm eating well

Two youths stressed the profound importance of having support in that this enabled their food security.

My friend feeds me. I go over to her place and she cooks. I don't have a hot plate where I am.

Food — being provided with food, for me, was just significant.

3.4.5. Support helps me avoid my child(ren) going into foster care

Lastly yet importantly, in both instances in which young women's mothers were caring for their child(ren), the informants believed that their children likely would have gone into foster care had their mothers not been available to provide support.

It means that my kids are coming home and will be staying with me.

3.5. What type(s) of additional support do youth from care say would be helpful?

As a final question relating to support, youth informants were asked what type(s) of additional support would be helpful to them at this point in their life, following aging out of foster care. As shown in Table 2, the most frequently named areas of support that study

Table 2
Youth informants' responses to "Are there area(s) in which you would like (additional) support?".

Type of (additional) support deemed helpful	% informants (n = 43)
Employment	28%
Budgeting/financial literacy	28%
Education	21%
Mental health	19%
Legal/advocacy (e.g. re: child welfare/custody issues)	19%
Income	16%
Housing	14%
Parenting/childcare	5%
None	14%

informants said would be helpful was in relation to employment and budgeting/financial literacy.

Along these lines, these informants said:

I would like some help in understanding how to build a business.

It would be great to have help with taxes and financial things — it would have been good to learn about this while I was in care.

Other areas of additional support that a number of informants said they would find helpful included education, income, and, support in accessing mental health services. For example, these informants stated:

I would like more help to figure out what to do regarding education. I get a run-around when I try to do this on my own.

If I could afford it, I would want counseling that is affordable for depression and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). It's very difficult to find someone good who works on a sliding scale.

As well, several of the youth informants who were also parents expressed that they wanted additional support related to legal issues, particularly regarding gaining or retaining custody of their child(ren):

I need help with the legal fight for my son.

Lastly, a noteworthy finding was the relatively low percentage of informants (14%) who said that they did not need additional supports or services.

4. Discussion

Although it may be a truism to say that everyone needs support in their life, it also has been demonstrated that youth in foster care – a group that arguably needs even more support than their 'parented' peers due to their particular life experiences and challenges faced both prior to coming into care and during their time in foster care – have far fewer supports than their peers after they reach age of majority, especially given that the care and support that they received from their government-based 'parent' typically ends or markedly diminishes when they age out of care (BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2014; Collins & Ward, 2011; Courtney, 2009; Courtney, Lee, & Peretz, 2011; Fallis, 2012). Indeed, in the current study, although nearly all of the youth informants indicated that having support made an important difference to them, many also noted that for material/financial matters and day-to-day living, they were on their own.

Approximately 60% of the youth informants in this study identified family member(s) as individual(s) who provided support. In some respects, this may be viewed as positive in that the study's findings demonstrated that many youths from care do maintain ties with family and can and do seek out parent(s), sibling(s), grandparent(s) and other extended family when they need support.

Nevertheless, the findings also indicated that, even amongst those who reported receiving support from family, this support was largely emotional – "someone to talk to" – in nature; that is, family did not provide informants with significant material/financial and/or housing-related support. Moreover, the findings showed that, upon aging out of care, a large percentage of the youths in our sample (approximately 40%) did not report having family whom they regularly relied upon for emotional, practical and/or financial support. By sharp contrast, the vast majority of 'parented' young adults in British Columbia age 19 to 28 are able to count on family support in relation to: housing (e.g., 69% had free rent), post-secondary education funding (60%), and day to day living such as free groceries (69%), as well as guidance and someone to talk to (Vancouver Foundation, 2013). Thus, the findings from this study are an important reminder of the gulf that exists between youth from care and parented youth in terms of their receipt of or access to family support.

Similarly, the study's findings in relation to types of additional assistance that youth would find helpful illustrated that after aging out of care many young people cope with (unmet) support needs in relation to education, employment, income, housing, legal advocacy, access to health care, and forming positive relations and a sense of belonging. These findings are in keeping with both Canadian and international literature that has demonstrated that youth from foster care report that they would have liked more support than they received upon exiting care (Collins & Ward, 2011; Courtney et al., 2011; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2011).

In addition, the study's findings regarding youths' desire for additional support in relation to accessing affordable mental health care was notable and congruent with the existing research and medical literature (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012; Collins & Ward, 2011). Given that research has found that at least 50% of youth from foster care struggle with serious mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012), it is critically important that foster youths' health and wellness needs are proactively identified and that youth are connected to quality health and mental health services and resources, as well as positive peer and 'near peer' relationships that promote feelings of social connection and belonging, both while they are in care and after they age out (Snow et al., 2013; Geenen et al., 2014).

4.1. Implications for programming, practice and policy

A key implication of this study's findings is the importance of ensuring that transition planning for youth in care is proactive, comprehensive, and fully the norm rather than the exception (Atkinson, 2008; BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2014). The study's findings also point out the importance of exploring the existence of, and actively working with youth to strengthen, ties with siblings, grandparents, extended family, partner's family, and (peer) mentors who have experience of the foster care system. Indeed, this study's findings provided some additional support for the emerging conceptual framework put forward by Snow and Mann-Feder (2013) that peer support can be an invaluable means of promoting belonging and positive social connections, which in turn can positively influence other health and educational outcomes for former youth in care.

Programs such as the *Family Reconnect* program offered by Eva's Initiatives in Toronto have successfully provided homeless youth and their families opportunities to reconnect and/or come to terms with issues that led to the youth leaving home in the first place (Winland, Gaetz, & Patton, 2011). Improved family relationships and/or accepting that reconciliation may not be possible, access to needed mental health resources and improved life skills and living circumstances, including housing, were some of the positive impacts of *Family Reconnect's* focused efforts to support youth to reconnect with their families (Winland et al., 2011).

The study's findings also speak to the importance of ensuring that there is continuity in support for youth both while they are in care (i.e., before they reach age of majority) and when they age out of foster care, and that, preferably, supports can be accessed from the same people, and for the same types of life issues over time. This approach was found to be a hallmark of the program model at Aunt Leah's Place in Greater Vancouver; Indeed, Aunt Leah's model/principle of "not aging out youth" – i.e., not having an upper age limit to their programs – meant that youths accessed the *Link* program as needed, and the intensity of their usage ebbed and flowed over time, in keeping with ebbs and flow of support that 'parented' youth receive from their families. This approach also was a key component of the promising practices that emerged from the evaluation study (Rutman et al., 2014). Not setting age limits helped foster permanency in relationships, which in turn is fundamental to self-esteem, community connectedness and engagement.

Further, policies and legislation that ensure that former foster care youth have universal access to support and care (e.g., health and mental health care) are indicated by this study's findings. Not surprisingly, this call for expanded support for youth after they age out of care has been strongly recommended by a growing number of Canadian and international researchers, practitioners, and government-based advocates (Batsche et al., 2014; BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2014; Conference Board of Canada, 2014; Courtney, 2009; Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012).

4.2. Conclusion

This study has contributed to greater understanding of the support-related experiences and ongoing support needs of youth after they age out of foster care. Nevertheless, further longitudinal research is needed to better understand these youths' transition processes and outcomes after exiting care (BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2014). Moreover, additional research focusing on questions such as 'to whom youth from care turn for support' and 'how can these supportive relationships be nurtured and expanded' is needed to contribute to program and policy development and ultimately to youth well-being. From economic as well as social justice perspectives, it is imperative that youth from care experience safe and enduring support networks on par with their parented peers, so they can access the range of education, employment, housing, income and community resources needed in the transition to adulthood.

Acknowledgments

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