

## Providing meaningful opportunities for youth to engage in evaluation design

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**Thematic importance:** Youth from government care (i.e., involved in the child welfare system) and particularly those who identify as Indigenous experience inequities compared to youth who have never been in care, including higher rates of poverty, homelessness and mental health challenges, and lower high-school graduation rates. It is important these youth are included in decision-making pertaining to research, policy, and interventions aimed to address the inequities faced by youth in and from government care.

**Introduction and objectives:** This presentation focuses on engaging youth with care experience in evaluating the programs they access. Two evaluations—co-created by youth, and based in British Columbia, Canada—will be discussed.

The first is the Youth Research Academy (YRA), for youth aged 16–24 with care experience. YRA members are trained to carry out research projects of interest to youth in and from care and the agencies that serve them. Each cohort consists of up to eight youth and two Indigenous peer mentors. They are employed 8–10 hours a week, for nine months, and gain skills and experience conducting research and evaluations. The objective is for YRA members to gain knowledge and skills that will help them succeed in achieving their education and employment goals after they graduate from the YRA, and for them to be meaningfully engaged in research that can impact youth with care experience. The first cohort was involved in designing the evaluation of the YRA.

The second initiative is a Housing First program for youth 19 and older who transitioned out of government care and were homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Housing First approach offers affordable housing to individuals experiencing homelessness, and provides the supportive services and connections they need to maintain housing stability. Youth with care experience were involved in developing the methodology and measures for the evaluation.

**Method:** Members of the YRA learned about conducting evaluations, including survey development. The first cohort created two surveys to evaluate the YRA (baseline and final survey). They identified expected outcomes and developed the items based on what they hoped to gain from their involvement in the YRA. Subsequent cohorts completed these anonymous and voluntary surveys, and also made modifications (e.g., when the YRA transitioned to an online format during the pandemic, survey questions were added about members' experiences participating virtually). To date, 37 baseline surveys (six cohorts) and 21 final survey (5 cohorts) have been completed.

For Housing First, 12 youth with care experience participated in a workshop where they learned about survey development, and then co-created the evaluation survey. The survey was part of a mixed-methods evaluation. Twenty-six program participants completed a survey, which represented the majority of youth in the program.

**Results, conclusions and implications:** Involving youth in creating the evaluations helped them gain skills (e.g., 100% of YRA members reported gaining survey-development skills), helped to motivate other youth to complete the surveys, and ensured the data collected was culturally relevant, useful, and meaningful to program participants and service providers.