

Focus on Education

“A lot of youth in care have it in their minds that they’re not ‘worth it’, which is one reason why I think a lot of youth from care [don’t attend post-secondary school]. They think, ‘Oh, I wouldn’t be able to do it anyway – **especially financially**’. That’s a big worry for a lot of youth in deciding whether or not to go to post-secondary school.” – Breanna

Background

Youth from care participate in post-secondary education — approximately half the rate of the general population, mainly due to the profound and complex barriers they face as they struggle with the impacts of abuse, neglect, abandonment, instability and childhood trauma.ⁱ And in Ontario, just 46% of kids raised in the child welfare system graduate high school, compared to 83% of the general population.ⁱⁱ

However, the biggest roadblock standing in their way to post-secondary education is financial. In Canada, the cost of post-secondary education is estimated at \$35,000 per year—77% of this cost comprises rent, food, transit, and phone fees.ⁱⁱⁱ

If a young person has the ambition, drive, and aspiration to continue their education, Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada (CAFC) doesn’t believe that costs should stand in the way of that ambition, nor do most Canadians.

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Access to education means everything to me; it gives me the possibility of creating a future that’s nothing like my past, even for my kids. Post-secondary education opens up doors to employment opportunities that would not be possible for me if I wasn’t able to go to university. Also, I just love school, so being able to continue my studies is great for me in terms of happiness and interest.

– Breanna, Youth Advocate and recipient of Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada funding



Canadians agree that young people deserve support to pursue their post-secondary education ambitions.



Earlier this year, Ipsos conducted a poll on behalf of Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, asking Canadians about their perspectives on post-secondary education support for youth from care. It found that an overwhelming **93%** agree that youth in government care should receive equal access to educational opportunities.

Moreover, 81% support waiving tuition fees for young people from government care registered at a post-secondary institution.

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

The long-term impacts on youth growing up in care can be profound. Kids raised in care are nearly 200 times more likely to experience homelessness^{iv} and earn \$326,000 less income over the course of their lifetime.^v They are also at significantly higher risk of long-term mental and physical health challenges.

Equitable access to post-secondary education holds the key to a brighter future. It can open doors to meaningful careers, build community and networks, foster long-term stability, and break the cycle of poverty that, in some cases, has been generational. CAFC believes that a post-secondary degree significantly enhances their lifetime earning potential and economic stability, and Canadians emphatically agree.

86% agree that post-secondary education can break the cycle of poverty for youth who have experienced the child welfare system.

An investment in young people and the country

Access is not just a matter of individual empowerment; it's an economic imperative.

This is echoed by 90% of Canadians who agree that post-secondary education for youth from care is beneficial to Canada's future economic prosperity, and they're not wrong.

91% agree that receiving a post-secondary education is beneficial for the prospects of youth in Canada.

Post-secondary education plays an important role in contributing to this country's social and economic growth, generating higher income tax revenue and reducing long-term health and social services costs. University graduates aged 25 to 34 earned an average of \$18,868 more per year than similarly aged high school graduates.^{vi}

According to the Conference Board of Canada, over ten years, the total economic gap between young people aging out of care and the average Canadian cohorts would represent a difference of \$7.5 billion in earning potential.^{vii}

Beyond a distinctly economic imperative, educational attainment, which can impact employment and income, strongly determines an individual's health and well-being across their life span, making education a critical social determinant of health.

Dr. Jacqueline Gahagan, Associate Vice-President of Research at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, adds:



While education is widely considered a key determinant of health and a human right, we continue to see those with experience in the child welfare system in Canada experiencing a disproportionate burden of low educational attainment. With this burden comes lifelong disadvantages in terms of health, social, and economic outcomes. In order to break this cycle, Canada needs to increase investment in the educational outcomes of all youth, including those with experience in care.

Working together to create a more equitable system

Lived experts, nonprofit organizations, and dedicated champions within academic institutions like Dr. Jacqueline Gahagan and others across the country have been advocating for years for improving access to post-secondary education.

Currently, British Columbia is the only province that has legislated waiving tuition fees for all youth from care, regardless of age. And, several institutions are exploring different approaches, like bursaries, to unlock resources and funds for former youth in care.

Since 1995, the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada's Post-Secondary Education program has invested in scholarships, bursaries, and graduation awards for students from care. **But we know we can do more.**



"We recognize the significant gaps in support for youth in the child welfare system as they pursue post-secondary education. Our \$24.4 million investment over nearly three decades has equipped us with deep experience and a clear understanding of the challenges these young people face," said **Valerie McMurtry, President and CEO, Children's Aid Foundation of Canada**. "We've built strong networks and are in a position to take a leading role by convening coalitions, securing and distributing resources, and increasing accessibility. With the insights from our national advisory council, we're committed to a reimagined PSE strategy that not only addresses gaps but also drives long-term change that ensures every student from care has the opportunity to succeed."



Our new Post-Secondary Education strategy is built on the following three pillars:

- 1** Strengthening our existing national Scholarship and Awards program by increasing the overall funding pool and making our awards more accessible to more students from care, focusing on Indigenous and Black youth, who are overrepresented in government care.
- 2** Simplifying the process and investing in navigation supports so students can tap into other financial resources and support systems.
- 3** Engaging in advocacy efforts to increase funding and improve accessibility to additional support for students from care pursuing post-secondary education.



As we begin to implement these strategies, we will collaborate with non-profit, corporate, philanthropic, academic, and government partners to create more equitable pathways to post-secondary education for the young people we serve. Organizations like the Child Welfare Political Action Committee of Canada (CWPAC), a group led by lived experience experts, advocates, and child welfare experts, track and advocate for [tuition waivers](#). Since 2019, they have partnered with over 50 post-secondary institutions to offer more than 600 spots for former youth in care to further their education, but demand is outstripping supply.



The CWPAC developed partnerships with colleges and universities across Canada to offer tuition waivers because we know that education can be a critical pathway to success for current and former youth from foster care. Investing in their education is an investment in their potential, empowering them to break the cycle of poverty and achieve their dreams. By supporting them, we are not just changing individual lives; we are strengthening our communities as a whole.

- Meaghan Martin, Executive Director of Child Welfare Political Action Committee

In the Atlantic provinces, in addition to [researching](#) tuition waivers, Dr. Gahagan has also been working to increase collaboration between education and child welfare systems and highlighting the importance of holistic wraparound supports to improve educational outcomes for young people from care.

This is something that also resonates with Canadians who believe it is important for governments to provide a variety of support services for youth transitioning out of government care and into post-secondary education, including:



ⁱ Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS), 2014, data point refers to 19- and 20-year-olds
ⁱⁱ OACAS Gateway to Success Cycle Three, 2014
ⁱⁱⁱ Estimate based on data from Statistics Canada: Canadian students, tuition and additional compulsory fees, by level of study (statcan.gc.ca); Youth Futures Education Fund for Former Youth in Care (uwbc.ca); Rising tuition, student debt weigh heavily on post-secondary students | CBC News; CAFC analysis of scholarship application data.
^{iv} Gaetz, S., O’Grady, B., Kidd, S., & Schwan, K. (2016) Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/WithoutAHome-final.pdf>
^v The Conference Board of Canada, 2014. Investing in the Future of Canadian Children in Care
^{vi} Statistic Canada, October 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211004/dq211004c-eng.htm>

Your support matters

Regardless of where they live in Canada, young people who aspire to continue their education deserve a chance to do so, and there are several ways you can help.



Become an ally:

You can sign up to be an ally to youth at cafdn.org/sign-up-for-our-newsletter, where you can get involved and stay up to date on the issues impacting youth leaving care such as equitable access to post-secondary education.



Donate:

You can help young people receive the support to further their educational journey by donating at cafdn.org/backtoschool.

