



# YOUTHSPEAK 2023

A REPORT CARD ON THE WELLBEING  
OF BC YOUTH IN CARE

JUNE 2024

Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks  
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FEDERATION  
OF BC YOUTH  
**IN CARE**  
NETWORKS



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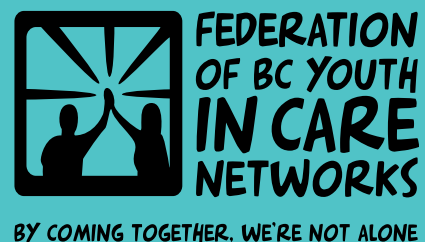
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Note: All quotes within this report are from participants of the YouthSpeak.

Thank you to all the youth in and from care who took the time to share their experiences, insights, and ideas. We are so grateful for your expertise and are committed to making sure it is heard!

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The Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks (FBCYICN) is a youth-driven, provincial, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of young people in and from government care in BC, between the ages of 14 and 28.

# HISTORY OF YOUTHSPEAKS

YouthSpeaks evolved from two projects: “KidSpeak” (1997 – Alberta) and “Voices from Within” (1998 – Ontario). Both of these projects engaged youth in care through a survey about their experiences. The results were compiled into a report that was shared with government, service providers, and decision makers.

BC’s Office of the Child Youth and Family Advocate (now called the Rep’s office) read these reports and decided that BC should do something similar. The Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks partnered with McCreary Centre Society to create a framework for the first BC YouthSpeak, which was held near Kamloops, BC, in 1999 and included a survey, an in-person consultation, and a series of workshops.

Following the first event, a YouthSpeak manual was developed to guide the planning and facilitation of future events across BC. Between 1999 to 2023, the Fed has offered a total of eight YouthSpeaks. While each YouthSpeak has looked a little different, they have all focussed on amplifying the voices of young people, raising awareness of the care experience, and fuelling advocacy.

For service providers and decision makers, YouthSpeaks are an opportunity to listen to young people in and from government care and make informed decisions by acting on their ideas and insight. For young people, YouthSpeaks provide a space to speak out and share about their experiences in care. As both an engagement opportunity and a data collection method, YouthSpeaks show young people that their experiences, opinions, and ideas matter, and that their voice is powerful.



YouthSpeaks amplify the voices of young people, raise awareness of the care experience, and fuel advocacy.



# INTRODUCTION

There are all kinds of important measures of youth wellbeing that we can look to in order to understand how young people from care are doing (graduation rates, child protection reports, number of youth in care, etc.). But arguably, the most valuable data we can gather is from listening directly to youth. Youth from care are the experts of their experience and they have so much to share that can help us build the system of support that they truly need.

Listening to young people is also our responsibility! Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings, and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously. One of the ways that we take on this responsibility at the Fed is by hosting regular YouthSpeaks.



YouthSpeaks are an opportunity to find out about the experiences, needs, barriers, and ideas of youth in and from government care. The rich stories and ideas gathered during YouthSpeaks help identify the key issues impacting youth in care today, and young people's solutions for moving forward. This data is shared with decision makers and service providers to fuel positive change in the care experience.

This YouthSpeak was organized around the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks (FBCYICN, or "the Fed") Youth Wellbeing Framework, which describes what we are working towards as an organization: **wellbeing rooted in safety, health, identity, connection, and self-determination for all young people in and from care in BC.**

1. **Safety:** Youth are safe, and their basic needs are met
2. **Health:** Youth are happy, healthy, and have a sense of well-being
3. **Identity:** Youth have a strong awareness of themselves and their voice
4. **Connection:** Youth have stable, positive relationships and a sense of belonging
5. **Self-Determination:** Youth can successfully lead fulfilling lives



For each of these five outcome areas, youth shared with us what is working well, what's not, and what solutions they had. We are so grateful to all the youth from care who took the time to share with us. It is an honour to hear your experiences and to witness your passion for improving the system for your care siblings. We are committed to moving your ideas forward and making sure your voices are heard!

*Thank you.*



# REPORT CARD

Outcome Area	Grade	Young People's Needs
<b>Safety</b>	<b>D</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better screening, training, and accountability for care providers</li> <li>• No group homes</li> <li>• Listen to young people and involve them in decision making</li> <li>• Remove wait-lists and restrictions to accessing supports</li> <li>• Financial and housing supports for independent living</li> <li>• Safe and caring homes</li> <li>• Transportation</li> </ul>
<b>Health</b>	<b>D+</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase access to therapy and mental health resources</li> <li>• Extend health benefits and increase limits</li> <li>• Family doctor for all youth</li> <li>• Post-19 health supports and services, and better transitions between child and adult services</li> <li>• Respectful, caring, and knowledgeable health-care workers</li> <li>• Address wait times for health care</li> <li>• Better health care for 2SLGBTQIA+</li> <li>• Autonomy in health-care decisions</li> </ul>
<b>Identity</b>	<b>B-</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address the stigma of being a “foster kid”</li> <li>• Better inclusion of and support for 2SLGBTQIA+</li> <li>• Funding to explore interests, hobbies, and dreams</li> <li>• Support for community and cultural connections</li> <li>• Opportunities to stay in their communities whenever possible</li> <li>• Long-term connections to supportive adults</li> <li>• Greater acceptance of and respect for all identities</li> <li>• Better screening, training, and accountability for service providers</li> </ul>
<b>Connection</b>	<b>C</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to long-term, consistent, caring adults</li> <li>• Better support to maintain family and community connections</li> <li>• More opportunities to connect with youth in and from care</li> <li>• School and community referrals for youth in care to get connected</li> </ul>
<b>Self-Determination</b>	<b>C</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth voice and choice in their plan of care and future</li> <li>• Employment supports</li> <li>• Individualized education supports</li> <li>• Encouragement and acknowledgement of achievements</li> <li>• Attentive transitions supports into adulthood</li> <li>• Opportunities to have a pet</li> </ul>

# KEY FINDINGS

## OVERALL THEMES

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Several themes emerged across the five outcome areas that young people discussed. The top three common themes are summarized below.

### Access Barriers

- Unfortunately, many young people struggle to access the supports they need and often qualify for. They spoke of long wait times for services and funds, and access limitations due to location (usually rural communities).
- Young people also felt that supports should have more inclusive criteria so that all youth in or from care can access them. Often, criteria based on age, time in care, or care status leave out young people who really need the support.
- Young people need consistent relationships, and many spoke of high staff turnover (social workers, foster parents, etc.) being a significant problem in the care system which often impacts their ability to get the supports they need.

### Mistreatment

- Regrettably, many youth continue to experience intimidation, threats, racism, discrimination, and abuse in their interactions with service providers in the care system. This is a system that is meant to keep young people safe and cared for. They need workers who will treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve.
- Youth spoke frequently of the need for better screening and training for service and care providers.

### Quality Assurance and Accountability

- Young people don't feel there are adequate systems in place to address their concerns with the care system. In particular, they spoke of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) complaints process as being ineffective and the need for better oversight over child protection workers and foster parents who sometimes cause harm.
- Many felt there were no viable options if they didn't get along with or were having problems with their social worker or foster parent.
- Knowing that so many young people still experience harm within the care system, there needs to be better accountability systems in place that are easy to access and that young people trust.



## Young People's Safety Needs

- Better screening, training, and accountability for care providers (MCFD workers and foster parents)
- No group homes
- Listen to young people and involve them in decision making
- Remove wait-lists and restrictions to accessing supports
- Financial and housing supports for independent living
- Safe and caring homes
- Transportation

## What's Working

- Agreements with Young Adults (AYA)
- Hub/wraparound service delivery
- MCFD after hours, and access to support staff at all times of day
- Knowing your rights

## Discussion

Many of young people's safety concerns relate to their experiences in care with care providers (foster parents, MCFD staff, and workers). During the consultation, youth described abuse, neglect, disrespect, lack of understanding, intimidation, not being listened to, judgment, and unsafe living environments—all of which they experienced in the care system.<sup>1</sup> Young people want better screening for foster parents/placements, staff to have a trauma-informed practice, workers with care experience, and greater accountability for MCFD when care is not meeting young people's rights and needs. While supports and services are fundamental to young people's wellbeing, if they are not provided by well-trained, competent, and compassionate individuals they do not achieve their purpose.



**I can't say this enough: but more intense screening of foster parents, vigilant social workers looking for signs of abuse/neglect, and making sure that the foster placement is held accountable!!!!**

1 Fed Staff were available during the consultation to offer youth support and follow-up on disclosures.

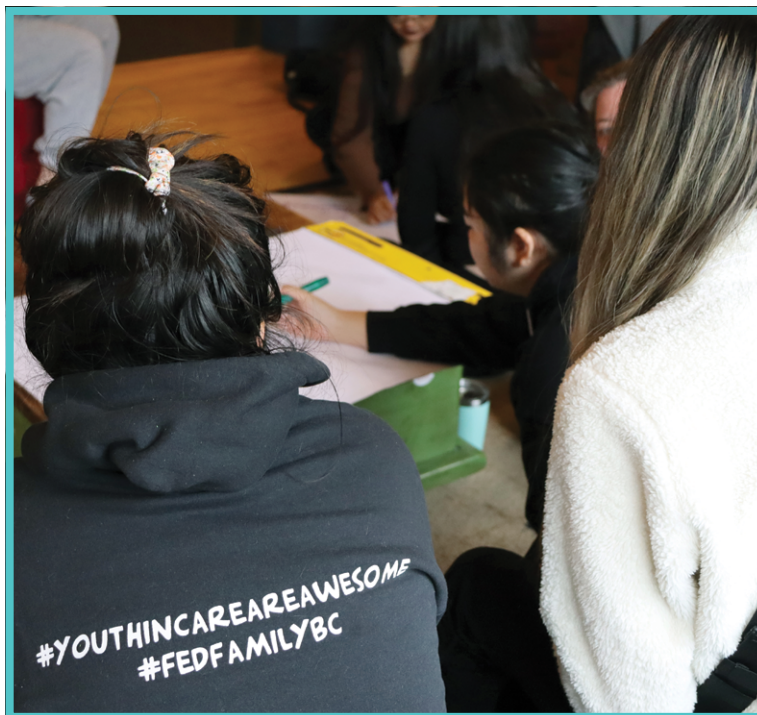
I think some social workers are not well-equipped to understand the needs of ours. Some don't have empathy, and that makes us feel unsafe.

MCFD always wants to put youth back with your blood family even though youth know it is not safe and healthy.



In addition to better practice, young people are looking for less restrictive access to supports, particularly services for young adults such as housing and income/employment support. Many young people feel that access requirements limit their ability to get the support they need. They mentioned wraparound supports and youth hubs as effective service delivery models.

Finally, young people need greater supports for independence, particularly with rising costs related to food and housing. Funding programs need to match inflation rates. Young people are often forced to live in unsafe environments because they don't have alternative options.



Increase monthly AYA and independent living support funds to accommodate the increased cost of living and food.

I think that being closer to my family and in the same town was super important for me; it made me feel safer and that I knew how to get around, that's what made me feel safe.



## Young People's Health Needs

- Increase access to therapy and mental health resources
- Extend health benefits and increase limits
- Family doctors for all youth
- Post-19 health supports and services, and a better transitions between child and adult services
- Respectful, caring, and knowledgeable health-care workers (and those with lived experience)
- Address wait times for health care
- Better health care for 2SLGBTQIA+
- Autonomy in health-care decisions

## What's Working

- Health benefits
- Access to mental health services
- Peer support
- One-to-one/youth workers
- Support to get to health-care appointments
- Youth-focussed clinics

## Discussion

Access to timely, high-quality, and barrier-free physical and mental health services was one of the most frequent themes of the YouthSpeak, and showed up in discussions across all five outcome areas.



Mental health care, in particular, is a top priority for young people and was mentioned far more than physical health. Youth in care want increased access to counselling and psychological supports (psychiatrist, psychotherapist, etc.) and feel the current service delivery models do not always work for them (Foundry turning away “difficult” youth, need access to trauma counsellors long-term, losing access to counselor in transition to adulthood, wait times, etc.). They also spoke of the need for different types of therapy that are not always offered at youth clinics or covered by their health benefits. Youth highlighted the need for increased mental health services for male-identified folks who sometimes have difficulty talking about their emotions and can face greater stigma associated with mental health challenges. Young people were clear: their mental health needs are not currently being met!

I hope there can be focus on what's making youth turn to substances; a lot of the time it's from adverse childhood experiences. Treatment usually focuses on healing addiction but doesn't provide extensive trauma therapy.

Counselling wait-lists are ridiculously long, even for youth who need them.

Destigmatizing men's mental health struggles.

When reflecting on their health-care experiences, young people referred to long wait times, restrictive eligibility requirements for services (age, fees, etc.), and lack of access to basic medical care (no family doctor, not enough youth beds at hospitals, being turned away due to disorders, desire to access virtual doctors, etc.). Many youth mentioned the need for extended health benefits, and for those with access, the need for additional funding on their plan which only covers the most basic treatments.



There should be family doctors in all regions in the provinces and designated for people from care to access.

More 19+ mental health services.

My hope is for youth to heal their trauma in a healthy way, and understand that their past does not define their future.

Foundry isn't accepting "difficult" youth and leaving them behind.

Young people also spoke of needing more autonomy in their health care. They want to be able to make decisions, have personalized experiences, and have their confidentiality respected. This means being able to make private decisions related to contraception and family planning, having a say in when mental health services are/aren't needed, having culturally-safe medical services, and having access to harm-reduction resources. All young people have the right to participate in decisions impacting them, but youth are being left out of the process.

Medical model—which is western—is imposed on our Indigenous children and youth. Move towards culturally-inclusive care.

Not enough info encouraging healthy thinking and proactive planning in regards to human body and health.

Being able to get an abortion or birth control without being judged or questioned by the doctors or your legal guardian or who you live with.





## Young People's Identity Needs

- Address the stigma of being a “foster kid”
- Better inclusion of and support for 2SLGBTQIA+
- Funding to explore interests, hobbies, and dreams
- Support for community and cultural connections (not just for Indigenous youth)
- Opportunities to stay in their communities whenever possible
- Long-term connections to supportive adults (that don't disappear at age 19)
- Greater acceptance of and respect for all identities
- Better screening, training, and accountability for service providers

## What's Working

- Tuition waiver/funding to access school
- Being able to express yourself without judgment
- Respect for gender and sexuality identity and preferred names
- Access to affinity communities (on/off line)
- Support to explore Indigenous culture

## Discussion

Young people shared that they want more opportunities to explore their cultures and identities—particularly those who have been removed from their communities. This is important for Indigenous young people who want to be able to learn traditional knowledge, practices, and ways of life. But, it is also important for non-Indigenous youth who also want connection to their culture, communities, and history. Currently, young people do not feel there is enough financial support or encouragement to explore their culture or identity.

Young people said they often experience intolerance, racism, and homophobia within the care system by staff and foster parents (foster parents unwilling to use correct pronouns or name, judging youth based on how they look, etc.). They pointed out that gendered placements are not always safe or suitable for non-binary and gender-nonconforming youth, and that young people are often placed in homes that are not supportive of their identity.

We don't get much individualized support or opportunities to help develop our identity.

There needs to be more cultural help for youth who are of other cultures.



Young people don't feel there is enough accountability within the system for staff and caregivers who are intolerant and disrespectful. 2SLGBTQIA+ youth want support to legally change their name and IDs, youth want to be able to do DNA test to learn about their ancestry, and youth want greater access to traditional foods in group homes.

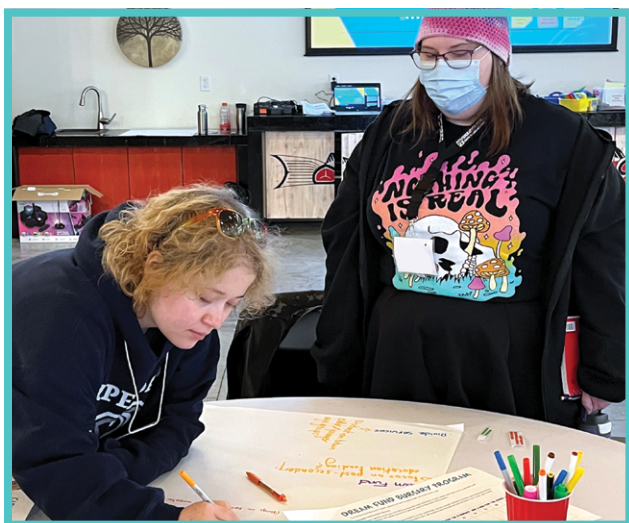
Youth also spoke of the stigma they experience as a youth from foster care. They often feel negatively judged because of experiences that are beyond their control. When it comes to identity, youth don't want to only be seen as a foster kid, a case file, or a number, but recognized for the unique individual that they are.

Currently, the tuition waiver program is seen as one of the key supports for young people's identity exploration and development. It was mentioned many times as young people spoke to what is working well.



Education for social workers, foster parents, and other service providers working with youth around BIPOC or LGBTQ+ matters. More intensive screening about if a foster home can accommodate a youth's identity and beliefs. Holding homophobic and racist service providers and foster parents accountable.

I hope that we can continue to educate the world about the spark we hold, how strong and beautiful we are. I hope that we can continue to fight off the stigma that comes with living in care, to the point where every youth can express their identity with pride.



## Young people's connection needs

- Access to long-term, consistent, caring adults (mentors, youth workers, less staff turnover/ not losing supports at 19, long-term placements, etc.)
- Better support to maintain family and community connections (travel funding, placed with siblings, etc.)
- More opportunities to connect with youth in and from care (locals, clubs, etc.)
- School and community referrals for youth in care to get connected (the Fed, YIC clubs, etc.)

## What's working

- Mental health supports and counselling
- The Fed (FBCYICN)
- Adult allies/social workers/youth workers
- Peer support and the youth in care community
- Maintaining connection to family

## Discussion

Support to maintain family connections while in care is a top priority for youth. Young people want to stay in their communities, close to family and friends that they know. If this is not possible, they need support to stay connected with important people in their life. They shared stories of being separated from siblings who were placed in different homes, and not being able to get travel funding to see loved ones during family emergencies. Youth want support to maintain their family connections and need timely approval processes and finances to make it possible. They also want, like other young people, to be able to have friends over; a normal childhood experience which many youth in care don't have access to. It's hard to maintain social connections outside of school when youth can't invite their friends over.



Takes WAY TOO LONG  
to get funds for travel/  
family expense.

Kids need to  
be connected  
with family and  
community.

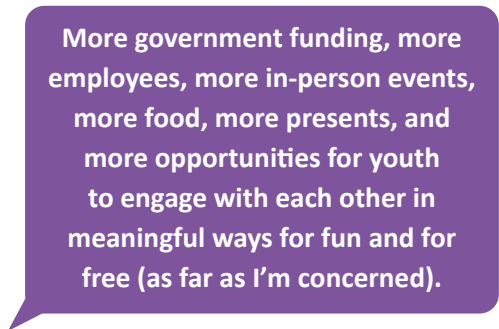
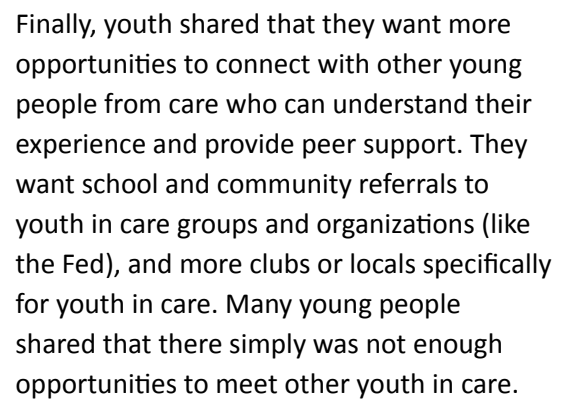
Future children in care who  
have siblings are put in the same  
placement or really close to  
each other (siblings are really  
important while growing up).



YouthSpeak 2023

**More consistent social workers/  
foster placements.**

Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks



# SELF-DETERMINATION

Grade:

C

## Young People's Self-Determination Needs

- Youth voice and choice in their plan of care and future
- Employment supports
- Individualized education supports
- Encouragement and acknowledgement of achievements
- Attentive transitions supports into adulthood
- Opportunities to have a pet

## What's Working

- Counselling
- Education and funding to access post-secondary
- Youth Agreements, Agreements with Young Adults
- Youth worker/social worker that believes in you
- Encouragement and acknowledgement of achievements
- Having a plan and goals



## Discussion

When it comes to their self-determination, young people overwhelmingly want greater voice in their care plan and future. Many young people shared that they aren't listened to, given choices, or engaged in their plan of care and want adult service providers to take their concerns, needs, and interests seriously. Some feel they are put in unsafe and unhealthy situations despite telling workers it is not a good home for them.

Allowing youth to add input to their own care and safety plans. Giving youth in care surveys in order to determine how they feel about the care that they are receiving, and giving them the opportunity to voice their opinions and make change about their care plans.

Keeping kids at home is not always the safest or healthiest option. The youth ALWAYS knows if they should/can go home or not.

Young people want to be involved in their transition planning, starting young. Furthermore, they shared that transitioning from care should be based on readiness, not age. Many youth feel they are not adequately prepared for basic life skills (rent, taxes, health care, etc.) when they leave care. One of the challenges related to navigating the pathway from government care is the transition from youth to adult services. Often, this means a change in service or service provider which can be destabilizing. Opportunities like Youth Agreements, Agreements with Young Adults, and Strengthening Abilities and Journeys of Empowerment (SAJE) Support Agreements were all named as helpful programs for youth transitioning to adulthood.

They just throw kids from care out into the world with no access to knowledge about rent, taxes, and accessible health care.

Continue sharing acknowledgment to youths that are working hard whether with work, school, or even transitioning to adulthood.

Meaningful relationships with an adult support play a significant role in preparing young people for their future and independence. Young people value mentorship, encouragement, and acknowledgement for their achievements and their attempts. Some spoke of the important role that youth workers have played in keeping them motivated and helping them fulfill their goals. Others felt they didn't have enough time, support, or positive encouragement from their workers to feel confident or to think positively about the future. One youth emphasized the need for not just consistent, but persistent, support to keep youth from "falling through the cracks."

When it comes to their education, youth want individualized supports like Individual Education Plans (IEPs), alternative schools, smaller class sizes, access to assessments, support for learning needs, and funding for technology. Many mentioned how valuable the tuition waiver program has been. While many supports for education were named, youth need more support finding and maintaining employment when they finish school.

Not following up [on] youth who clearly, or not very clearly, may be getting down. . . or who may have that small chance to be slipping thru the cracks.

As a youth in post-secondary, receiving letters and gifts from my university (due to me being on the tuition waiver) has been helpful and encouraging to finish strong in my school year. Acknowledgment of my efforts.



Finally, a number of youth spoke about wanting the opportunity to have a pet and/or have access to therapy animals. Many young people do not have access to this common childhood experience, which can build responsibility, planning, and caretaking skills.

Finding jobs should be better.

I would love a dog.



## CONCLUSION

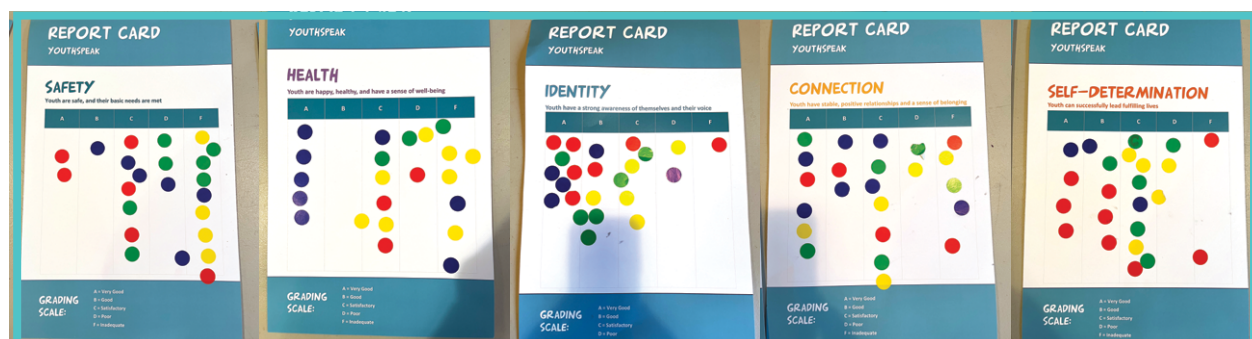
Built on colonialist beliefs and practices, we have inherited a child welfare system that we know has caused significant harm. Through decades of advocacy led by the strong voices of young people, the care system continues to evolve and adapt to incorporate more effective and diverse perspectives and practices. But the message we've heard from young people in and from care who participated this YouthSpeak is clear: there is still so much work to be done! If we remove children from their families and communities, we must be offering them a better alternative, and sadly, this isn't always the case.

**If we remove children from their families and communities, we must be offering them a better alternative.**

In particular, young people gave Safety a **D** grade! Currently, we are failing to provide youth the most basic level of care: keeping them safe, and having their basic needs met. In fact, many young people are experiencing harm within the care system. How can we expect them to have healthy habits, explore their interests and identity, develop meaningful connections, and reach their goals if their very basic safety needs are not being met? We need to do better.

Not far behind was Health, with a **D+**. Mental health was one of the most prominent themes in the YouthSpeak, with a clear message that young people are struggling. Youth in and from care have often experienced traumatic childhoods, and they need access to diverse, culturally-relevant, and consistent mental health resources to support them in their journey to adulthood.

Young people in care have the right to experience safety, health, identity, connection, and self-determination. They must be thoughtfully and attentively supported across all of these areas of wellbeing so they can truly thrive now and into their adulthood. Let's show them we are listening!



**Thank you to all the young people who took the time to share their experiences of being in care, and their hopes and ideas for the future.**

**Your voice is powerful, and it matters!**

# RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

## Our Commitment

At the Fed, we are so thankful for our youth membership that took the time to share with us. We have heard what is working well, what is not, and what success could look like. Our commitment to using this insightful feedback is as follows:

- **Strategic Alignment:** We will intentionally incorporate these ideas into our Strategic Plan and our Annual Plans so that we are working towards the vision that young people have laid out for us.
- **Advocacy:** We will continue to advocate for what young people have told us they need with decision makers and partners who work with youth.

## Our Ask

- **Listen:** Read the report and listen to the experiences, needs, and suggestions from young people. In particular, read the quotes to hear young people in their own words. Their messages are powerful and they have thoughtful suggestions and solutions to make the care system more responsive to young people's needs.
- **Share:** Share this report widely with service providers and decision makers. Make sure young people's voices and experiences are heard.
- **Advocate:** Young people have told us what they are experiencing and what they need. Let's amplify their voices and advocate for policy and practice changes that will help implement solutions.
- **Act:** Young people want to see changes. Let's act on their insight and ideas through our individual actions, our programs and services, our funding structures, our policies, and our practices.



# METHODOLOGY

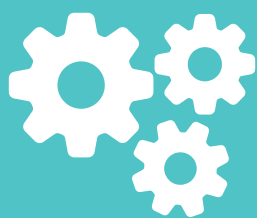
This YouthSpeak involved an in-person consultation held at the Fed's Youth Retreat #80 in the fall of 2022, followed by a survey to our provincial membership that ran from late 2022 to early 2023. In total, 64 youth in and from care across BC were engaged.

## Consultation Process

A focus group-style consultation was held at our provincial Youth Retreat. Participants were asked to reflect on how youth in and from care are doing related to each of the Fed's Youth Wellbeing Outcomes. For each outcome area, they discussed: What's working? What's not working? What are your hopes, ideas, and solutions? Finally, each participant assigned the outcome area a grade of A, B, C, D, or F.

## Survey

The digital survey was distributed to the Fed's provincial membership via email marketing. In the survey, youth were asked the same set of questions as the consultation. (There was not an opportunity to "grade" the wellbeing areas in the survey.)



What's  
working?



What's not  
working?



What are your  
hopes, ideas,  
and solutions?





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**FEDERATION  
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*BY COMING TOGETHER. WE'RE NOT ALONE*

The Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks (FBCYICN) is a youth-driven, provincial, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of young people in and from government care in BC, between the ages of 14 and 28.