

**Final Report for CERIS on project :**

***Unaccompanied Refugee Youth in Transition from the Child Welfare System***

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**I) Synopsis:**

Canadian child welfare authorities are responsible for supporting unaccompanied or separated children and youth who arrive in Canada as refugees or who remain in Canada after a sponsorship breakdown. In addition, a number of youth are taken into child protection from families who lack Canadian status. The common outcome of these scenarios is that there are youth who, at the point of transition from care, lack Canadian status and are thus in highly vulnerable positions. They are ineligible for health care, unable to work, subject to international student fees if they continue their education, and live in constant fear of deportation.

This project was designed to explore the dimensions of this problem in both the literature and the records of service agencies, to develop a pilot database for tracking affected youth, to learn the perspectives of these youth and agency staff through individual interviews and to develop recommendations for policy and practice.

**II) Brief overview of the research undertaken and results obtained:**

The CERIS proposal outlined three components of the research project, namely the development of a pilot database for tracking the immigration status of youth in or in transition from care, a literature review that included an examination of practices in other jurisdictions, and interviews with agency staff who assist youth in obtaining Canadian status and with youth who receive such services. The following sections summarize what was accomplished in each of these areas.

**IIa) Pilot Database**

*“Coming out of care and coming into our service, they think they have status but they’re not sure”* PARC staff

*“So when (child welfare workers) have immigration paperwork.. added on to the normal day to day work with their caseloads I can see how it could be hard for them to keep track of.”* PARC staff

Data were available from the Pape Adolescent Resource Centre (PARC) and from the Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Toronto (CCAS), current as of June 2004. A review of these data, together with the information obtained in interviews with the youth and staff, suggest that there is no fully operative, centralized database in the child welfare system in Toronto that would track the immigration status of youth in care. Youth tend to believe that the issue is being taken care of by their worker and worker turnover over the period of the youth’s time in care works against continuity of attention to the issue. While the youth is in care vulnerability is minimized so ensuring that the youth obtains Canadian status while in care is not a service priority.

It therefore became apparent during the project that maintaining thorough and complete records on the immigration status of youth in care represents a major challenge.

Maintaining this information must be seen as a fundamental component of service provision. Both service providers and the youth themselves need to be aware of the significance of the immigration status of youth in care. Two approaches that were explored were using database software (Microsoft Access) and spreadsheet software (Microsoft Excel) and their relative advantages explored. The principal advantage of a database over a spreadsheet is the increased flexibility in manipulating, sorting and reporting information. The principal disadvantage of a database is that file sizes tend to become very large very quickly, reducing their portability. In addition, spreadsheet software is more likely to be found in basic office software suites.

## **IIb) Literature review**

A review was conducted of the national and international literature on separated and unaccompanied children and youth in the care of child welfare and child protection systems, as found in academic journals, reports from agencies and non-governmental organizations, reports in the popular press and reports from responsible governmental departments and ministries. The expectation in this project was that the situation in

Toronto would reflect the overwhelming emphasis in the literature on children and youth who arrive unaccompanied at a port of entry and are taken into care. As we explored the situation in Toronto it became apparent that youth without status in care in Toronto represent a population that has heretofore been largely ignored in the literature, namely youth who arrived with their families but who were taken into care prior to obtaining status. This may be due to the absence of a port of entry within the catchment area of Toronto child welfare authorities, since the airport and the closest border crossings are located in other Children's Aid Society districts. The need to document this situation and the to conduct comparative research at agencies that have ports of entry within their jurisdiction is essential.

Information gathered in this section also provided an opportunity to do preliminary comparisons of current practice in the three principal receiving provinces of Ontario, Québec and British Columbia. A service model that has been developed in Québec by SARIMM (*Service d'aide aux réfugiés et aux immigrants du Montréal Métropolitain*) should be emulated in Ontario in that it provides both social and legal support to the youth as well as offering consultations, advocacy and staff training to front line workers assisting youth.

### **IIc) Interviews with youth and staff**

Interviews were conducted with four staff and two youth at Pape Adolescent Resource Centre. PARC staff were generally willing to share their experience and observations in interviews that ranged from approximately 20 minutes to approximately 45 minutes. In spite of prominently displayed posters and word of mouth recruitment, only two youth were willing to be interviewed. Reasons for this reluctance and ways to strengthen the voice of youth in this area will need to be explored. Youth who lack status may be very reluctant to do anything that would draw attention to themselves and increase their vulnerability as they leave care. Recent events in Toronto, including the arrest and subsequent deportation of a political activist while she was on a university campus would certainly have the potential to raise questions about any promises of anonymity and confidentiality that a researcher might offer. There is no way to determine the extent to

which any particular factor influenced the reluctance of youth to take part in the interviews but the issue should be addressed.

PARC staff believe that as many as 20% of the youth they serve may have immigration issues that increase their vulnerability. As suggested in Section 1 above, staff believe that youth may not be fully aware of the implications of a lack of status and that many appear to assume that their child welfare worker is taking care of things when this may not in fact be the case. Many people associated with the child welfare system in Ontario apparently believe that Children's Aid lacks the ability to apply for status on behalf of youth in care who are Crown Wards. Fortuitous circumstances, not foreseen in the original project proposal, led to an interview with the former Minister of Immigration, the Honourable Elinor Caplan. She suggested that this belief is neither warranted nor in the best interests of the child if legal guardianship rests with the child welfare authorities. Youth who were interviewed presented in considerable detail the fears, frustrations and often the lack of information that they live with on a daily basis. The importance of support and opportunities for empowerment was a significant theme.

### **III) Research output and Dissemination Activities**

- i) An article describing this project was invited for inclusion in the Fall 2005 issue of *VocalPoint*, a publication of the Society for Children and Youth of British Columbia.
- ii) A presentation of components of the project was made at the joint conference of the American Evaluation Association (AEA) and the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES), as part of the Collaborative, Participatory and Empowerment Topical Interest Group presentation stream.
- iii) A proposal to present the project, emphasizing the potential for interprovincial collaboration, has been submitted to the International Child and Youth Care Conference scheduled for Montréal in Fall 2006.
- iv) an expansion of the AEA/CES presentation is being written for submission to the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*.

#### **IV) Some Implications for Policy and Practice**

The project has highlighted the vulnerability of a small but significant group of youth in transition from the child welfare system. The system must increase its efforts to systematically track these youth while they are in care, and ensure that they have obtained Canadian status prior to leaving care. This means that the awareness of the issue and its significance must be raised within the system. A specialized group of experts and advocates, as illustrated by SARIMM in Québec, should be available to work with and train front line staff on issues related to immigration. University-based researchers who work with vulnerable and at-risk populations who may be subject to deportation must be able to confidently and convincingly offer the promise of anonymity and confidentiality without the fear that the information they gathered would somehow end up facilitating the deportation of the respondent.

#### **V) Comment on Collaboration**

The collaborative partner on this project, the Pape Adolescent Resource Centre (PARC) provided workspace, access to records, bulletin boards for recruitment posters, staff time for interviews and general staff support. Mr. Irwin Elman, PARC Supervisor, was co-presenter at the AEA/CES conference in Toronto. PARC has a long history of providing services to youth in transition from care in Toronto, and the project itself was motivated by the concerns of PARC staff who were trying to serve youth who needed to have their status issues resolved.

#### **VI) Training opportunities for students**

Three students were hired as Research Assistants on the project. One was a graduate of the Child and Youth Care program at Ryerson who is currently in the MSW program at the University of Toronto. The second was a Centennial College student who had been a youth in care and had received services at PARC. The third was a McGill student in Montreal who was fluent in French and able to obtain information on SARIMM. The Research Assistants were involved in conducting, transcribing and summarizing interviews and in conducting literature searches.