



Coming of age in a pandemic era: The interdependence of life spheres through the lens of social integration of care leavers in Quebec during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper explores how the COVID-19 pandemic affected care leavers in Quebec, a social group already facing obstacles to social integration. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 48 participants and analysed through Castel's zones of vulnerability model. Results suggest that youth who entered the pandemic with more vulnerabilities were more affected by it in all dimensions of their lives. However, results also suggest that the presence of a strong social support network protects even the most vulnerable ones from being overly afflicted, highlighting the importance of interventions that reinforce care leaver's social support network during times of crisis.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, interdependence, care leavers, transition to adulthood, youth

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2020, the world's population has faced major economic and social disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For youth leaving care, this pandemic has been an additional obstacle on their paths to achieve their aspirations. Integration into the workplace has become more precarious for youth in care owing to job losses (Greenson et al., 2022) and difficulties in finding a job, especially during the early months of the pandemic. This situation has tended to improve over time, partly owing to vaccination campaigns (Rosenberg et al., 2022). For those who are studying, employment precariousness sparks fears that they will be unable to pursue their education because they cannot afford the tuition fees (Ruff et al., 2022).

In addition, reduced access to their families and social environments, as well as access to professionals who offered support before the pandemic, created a sense of isolation for these youth and a weakening of their safety net of social support (Roberts et al., 2021; Ruff & Linville, 2021). Social and work integration difficulties care leavers face, and the lack of preparation for independent life (Goyette, 2010) underscore the importance of a robust support network as a key element for protecting their well-being since the support network seems to be a necessary lever to protect these youth (Goyette, 2012).

In the Canadian province of Quebec, research shows that 5.5% of all children and youth (aged 0–17) were placed in out-of-home care during the last two decades (Esposito et al., 2023). When they leave their care settings around the legal age of majority (18 years old), they face many challenges in their transition to adulthood (Goyette & Turcotte, 2004; Mann-Feder & Goyette, 2019; van Breda et al., 2020). Acknowledging the challenges faced by them when leaving care, most Canadian provinces have extended care and services beyond the age of majority, and since the onset of the pandemic requested a moratorium to ensure that youth continue to have access to the services they received under the child protection system, which did not happen in Quebec (Goyette et al., 2020).

In this context, this article aims to highlight the interconnected nature of the challenges faced by these young people in several spheres of their lives during the pandemic. More specifically, this article seeks to show the interrelated dynamics of socio-professional integration (education and employment) and social support experienced by these youth.

OUT-OF HOME AND TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD IN QUEBEC

Quebec's child protection system is governed by the province's Youth Protection Act (YPA), which aims to safeguard children whose security or development is, or may be, at risk by regulating government intervention in private family life. According to the act, placing a child outside of their home is considered an exceptional measure, and the goal should be family reunification (YPA, 2007, Section 2). When family reunification is unfeasible within a specific timeframe, child protection workers must develop alternative permanency plans that meet each child's specific needs (Ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux (MSSS), 2016, p. 3). According to Section 4 of YPA (2007), the decision should focus on providing permanent stable living conditions and relationships that meet the child's age and developmental needs while ensuring continuity of care. These alternatives may include adoption, tutorship, placement until the age of majority (with a foster family, extended family or a significant third party; in residential settings in a resource offering specific care) (MSSS, 2016, p. 3).

Underlying the importance of supporting care leavers in their transition to adulthood, the provincial Special Commission on the Rights of the Child and Youth Protection (2021) recommended setting up a post-placement program to support young people up to age 25 in their transition to autonomy (p. 275). The recent introduction of Bill 15 by Quebec's legislature (*Assemblée nationale du Québec*, 2022) requires planning the transition to adulthood of youth leaving care 2 years before their 18th birthday as well as offering them the possibility to extend their stay in care if need be.

Indeed, challenges faced by care leavers in Quebec have been extensively documented. When leaving care, they must independently build stability in various spheres of their lives, namely academic, residential, relational, work-related, financial or even health-related (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Care leavers, whose issues are mirrored in several Western countries (Goyette et al., 2007), are particularly likely to face problems of integration in the workforce (Cameron et al., 2018). They must also contend with difficulties in pursuing their academic career. Data from a representative sample of care-leavers in Quebec (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022) show that they tend to lag significantly behind in their education and are at much higher risk of dropping out than youth from the general population. In addition, a significant proportion of these youth experience housing instability or homelessness (see Mech's meta-analysis, Mech, 2001). In Quebec, 33% of former foster care youth will experience at least one episode of visible homelessness by the time they reach age 21, while estimates among the general population are at 0.9% (Goyette et al., 2022).

Despite the importance of the stability and longevity of social relationships (Best & Blakeslee, 2020), youth in care find it difficult to develop and maintain a social support network. Placement experiences can weaken ties with significant others, which in turn can reduce the number of friendships or cause them to refrain from seeking help from their families (Frechon & Lacroix, 2020). For example, frequent travel during placement increases youth's distance from family and friends, hindering their chances of forming meaningful relationships (Robin et al., 2015). In addition, youth placed in a transitional living program were more likely to have both formal support as well as a foster family member in their support network when compared to those not placed in the same program (Rosenberg, 2019). Since an important factor for developing a strong support network after leaving care is the quality of relationships established with family members and friends (Parent et al., 2016), there is clearly a disparity in access to support for care leavers entering adulthood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL VULNERABILITY AS A DOUBLE DROPOUT PROCESS

In this research, we used Castel's zones of vulnerability model (Castel, 1994) to better understand the social vulnerability of youth with former foster care experience in the context of the pandemic and by considering the dynamic between socio-professional and support network levels of fragilization. According to Oris (2017), « the concept of vulnerability emerged from the study of natural disasters » (p. 1), capturing on the one hand the interaction of multiple factors in this phenomenon, and on the other hand, the variable and unequal impacts of a crisis depending on groups' coping capacity (Martin, 2019). Since this crisis had a variable impact on precarious populations, it seems relevant to explore the place of precarious working conditions and the weakening of social supports on the social vulnerability dynamic (Paugam, 2009). Castel's model distinctive feature is that weak and unstable integration into

the main mechanisms of resource distribution in contemporary society places people in a situation of uncertainty and high exposure to the risk of poverty and ultimately social exclusion (Ranci & Migliavacca, 2010).

Castel's zones of vulnerability model (Castel, 1994) show how vulnerability is a dynamic condition that results from a 'dual process of disengagement: from work and from relational integration' (p. 13). This dual notion suggests that individuals' social integration relies on both work and social support and protection (Martin, 2019). The relationship to work is examined as a sphere of socio-occupational integration that includes both work and studies since they are interrelated and imply a specific source of protection. In contrast, the relational sphere includes young people's network of proximity, what Martin (2019) calls 'relational capital', which in some cases also includes their formal support network (e.g. street workers).

Castel's (Castel, 1994) dynamic model encompasses four zones or spheres of integration: a) integration (people integrated into the labour market and into a support network), b) assistance (people distant from the labour market but integrated into a support network), c) disaffiliation (people distant from the labour market and isolated) and d) vulnerability (people in a precarious work situation and in fragile relationships). Zone d can be seen as a tipping point towards disaffiliation or social integration. Note that this model does not construe the process of exclusion as a fixed component: while it is possible to slip into disaffiliation, it is also possible to emerge from it.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted a qualitative approach to our research design, to understand the processes involved in youth lives. Considering youth's lives as processes allows us to consider multiple factors that influence their lives in a non-linear way (Longo, 2016). More specifically, two groups were formed based on three differentiation criteria. The first group, which we named 'Group A' ($N=24$) was composed of youth who reported not having obtained a high school diploma, having experienced at least one episode of homelessness and having experienced at least one mental health problem. The second group, which we named 'Group B' ($N=24$), included youth who reported having graduated from high school, not having experienced homelessness and not having experienced any mental health problems.

A few reasons explain our research design rationale for this project. Not completing high school is associated with socioeconomic disadvantage (Campbell, 2015), while poverty and mental health problems are mutually reinforcing (Ridley et al., 2020), suggesting that youth entering the pandemic with mental health issues and no high school degree could have a harder time navigating challenges during the pandemic. Finally, stable housing is an important determinant of quality of life, including relationships with friends and family (Baumstarck et al., 2015) as well as access to a high school degree and work experience (Goyette & Blanchet, 2018).

Considering links between high school completion, homelessness and mental health among former foster care youth in Quebec (Goyette et al., 2021), entering the pandemic with previous homelessness experience might give youth less support to cope with the challenges they face during the pandemic. Thus, creating two groups differentiated by their level of vulnerability allows us to better understand how the pandemic affected care-leavers' experiences—from their own point of view—in the academic, professional and social relational dimensions of their lives.

Participants

In this study conducted between June and November 2020, 48 youth, aged between 19 and 21 years old when they took part in it, were interviewed. Overall, both groups' participants share similar characteristics. Most participants in both groups identified as being white youth (20 for Group A and 21 for Group B) as well as francophone (24 for Group A and 23 for Group B). An equal amount from both groups come from relatively rural regions of the province (18 for both groups) compared with urban centres (6 for both groups). In Group A, 16 participants identified as women and 7 as men, while in Group B, 12 identified as women and 11 as men. No data are available concerning religious affiliation as well as sexual orientation of the participants.

Recruitment

Youth were recruited as part of a subsample of the *Étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés au Québec et en France (EDJeP)*, a national longitudinal study on care-leavers in Quebec. They were selected based on the responses provided to the quantitative questionnaire administered during the second wave of that study. In compliance with ethical standards, only participants who consented to be contacted again to participate in other related research projects led by the principal investigator were called. Approval from the Research Ethics Board of the Institut universitaire jeunes en difficulté was obtained for both the original EDJeP study (MP-CJMIU-16-02) as well as for the conduct of this research with a subsample of EDJeP (MP-CJM-IU-16-22).

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted exclusively by ZOOM or telephone, and consent was obtained verbally and recorded. Interviews lasted an average of 90 min and followed a semi-structured format, covering several dimensions of their life experiences during the pandemic (education, employment and income, housing situation, social and family relationships, mental health and access to services). Each participant received \$30 in compensation at the end of the interview. Interviewers used a logbook to document the interview context and to record their personal analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants' names were replaced with fictitious first names.

An in-depth thematic content analysis was performed using Nvivo data processing software, following the data reduction method proposed by Paillé and Mucchielli (2012). Each interview was coded according to theoretically defined themes and emergent themes and later organized into categorical trees. Key findings were consolidated into an analysis memo. Subsequently, as Huberman and Miles (1991) recommend, content was validated by two other members of the research team with diverse academic backgrounds, to ensure that all team members shared the same interpretations. Disagreements were thoroughly discussed, and a mutually satisfactory conclusion was reached regarding which interpretation to adopt.

Following this, a comparative analysis was performed following Cécile Vigour's (2005) three steps: (1) gathering and contextualizing the information, (2) interpreting the similarities and differences between both groups and (3) presenting the findings of the comparative research. Finally, an analysis was conducted to position the trajectories of both groups of youth within Castel's distinct vulnerability zones. This enabled the identification of four specific paths that

resulted from the pandemic, located between the two extremes of the spectrum: (1) strong integration path, (2) integration under stress path, (3) risk of disaffiliation path and (4) Path towards disaffiliation.

RESULTS

Our results are presented in the following two subsections. The first section represents how participants from both groups lived different experiences during the pandemic. It allows us to understand how entering the pandemic with different levels of vulnerability affected their experiences. The second section categorises participants into four different thematic groups based on those experiences using Castel's (1994) model. This allows us to understand how the pandemic seems to have influenced their paths either towards social integration or disaffiliation.

Disparate pandemic's effects among groups

The results revealed that the pandemic exacerbated the difficulties foster care leavers faced in various spheres of life, including their educational and career paths as well as in their relational sphere. As we will see below, different levels of pre-pandemic vulnerability led to different life experiences for participants in Group A and Group B.

Youth's educational trajectories during the pandemic

Comparing interviews between participants from both groups suggests that educational careers were disproportionately affected according to pre-pandemic needs and obstacles they already had. For Group A participants, the pandemic played a major role in their ability to carry out their plan. Only two thirds of them were studying when the pandemic started, and most of them were returning to high school. The first lockdown in Quebec resulted in an interruption of classes followed by the implementation of remote study measures in most cases.

Almost none of the participants from Group A said that they had the material or psychosocial resources to study remotely. Many did not have enough space to study at home. Some had to purchase their own equipment (one even had to take a loan to buy a computer), which was a major challenge given their financial precariousness. Some had to use their cell phones to attend classes due to the unavailability of a computer or Wi-Fi connection. Some participants recalled struggling to master technology and software used by their teachers.

Because it's too complicated, and with time the motivation's gone. So that... me, instead... because the teachers y'know are also mixed up. They don't really know how it works. And sometimes, because I did exams, and even with the exams it was complicated, like, I had to make an appointment, and then it didn't work. And then I would show up at school and then I had to go back home, because that wasn't what they had heard with the teacher, and like... communication is really not there!

[Lou]

These challenges were exacerbated for those who also told us they already had learning disabilities [e.g. attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)], which in turn was further enhanced by difficult access to the appropriate medication. This led many participants to put their studies on hold and wait for the pandemic to pass. In addition, motivation to pursue their studies was not enough for many participants. Louise explains that her inability to find stable employment, difficult access to basic services and a lack of support network during that time forced her to suspend her plans.

Before the pandemic, yes, I was in college. But it closed, so I dropped out a bit due to that. But otherwise, I was on a good track anyway before COVID. [...] I was in CEGEP [College of general and professional education in the province of Quebec] and I was doing parameters. It had been about two months, and then COVID came along and screwed everything up. [...] I was down. I would say that I felt more alone. The loneliness was heavy.

[Louise]

These examples illustrate how the pandemic seemed to create an additive effect on many challenges participants already faced, making their study projects an uphill battle. It is therefore not uncommon for some of them to stress the importance of support to help them pursue their studies. For example, one participant stated that having a street worker could help him resume his plan, which was based on a positive experience. Another mentioned that his employers' strong encouragement for him to return to school gave him the motivation to not give up.

So just to give you an example, they [the employer] told me, because at first I wasn't sure if I was going to go back to school, they said: "If you go back to school, we'll give you a raise."

[Gabriel]

Among Group A participants who were not studying, most indicated they would like to finish high school, but their situation prevented them from doing so, having neither the material nor the social conditions to carry out their plans. Their situation seemed to be indirectly impeded by the pandemic.

The situation for Group B participants seems different. Most of them said that they were already studying in college or university or began when the pandemic began. Consequences were mostly felt due to the shift to a distance education, reducing their motivation to pursue.

When we learned that it was still online at the beginning of the school year, I was a little discouraged at first, so I said "well, do I continue?" but no, I'm going to continue now.

[Inaya]

Although most participants said that they had the necessary equipment to follow online courses (computer, internet connection, etc.), some of them mentioned that the closure of campuses prevented them from accessing certain essential resources, both material and pedagogical. For example, one participant had difficulty accessing essential software, while another said she and her fellow students could not access spaces for experiments, such as laboratories. As explained by Juliette, they felt that these conditions reduced the quality of their learning experience.

As one of my courses is just online, so the labs are, we watch videos instead of really practicing with the teacher and the animals, but it's still different, because it's all at a distance, so the teacher gives one hour of class, and then the rest of the course is basically everyone for him or herself, we do the work assigned.

[Juliette]

Participants also explained that studying in non-designated workspaces (such as a bedroom) leads to an increase in procrastination as well as fatigue from spending long hours in front of a computer.

Well, I'm definitely in a different work environment, which is my room, with a whole bunch of distractions that come with it. So of course there, I was a little less motivated because I had access to my video game consoles, I had access to TV, things I don't have when I'm in a classroom, so it was a little harder to find the motivation, but I found it anyway.

[Lucas]

Note that despite all the negative experiences described above, some Group B participants still mentioned positive consequences of the educational measures resulting from the pandemic (e.g. being able to better balance school and work because of not having to travel, being able to sleep longer).

Youth's occupational trajectories during the pandemic

Interviews also clarify how the pandemic exacerbated difficulties that participants face in their occupational paths. We also observe disproportionate consequences felt between both groups. Group A participants seemed to be the most affected: almost all of them reported having to deal with disruptions in their occupational paths, manifested by them cumulating a series of jobs during the pandemic. Many said that looking for a job and holding onto one was quite challenging, which generated uncertainties for them regarding their future careers. Thus, many participants reported being afraid of losing their jobs, and of not being able to carry out their plans.

The fact that I'm going to an apartment, I really can't lose my job. So, that's it... At first, I thought about going into grocery stores, because it's obvious that grocery stores are the last thing to close, except that I wasn't the only one who had that mentality, and I'll tell you that live grocery stores are full of employees. They are full. I've been to all the grocery stores in the region, they're all full! And either they don't want to hire new people so as not to contaminate the employees...it's really gotten intense now.

[Gabriel]

For many of them, the employment experience resembled a quest to survive, pushing them to string together work experiences and even take on jobs on the 'black' market in order to cover their living expenses. Total precariousness and strong uncertainties in the realization of life plans seem to be among the many challenges that fully occupy their complicated daily lives during a pandemic. For many, these concerns coexisted with physical or mental health problems or dilemmas related to parenthood. Jade explains that she had to choose between taking the risk of working and subsequently, losing her job or staying on social assistance to be able to meet her child's basic needs.

And I don't want to get caught or lose my job because of [COVID]. I have a child. Again, it comes back to my job as a mom. If I have a job, I have more [welfare] and it will be hard to get my disability back. So we agree that I'm not going to start messing around with that.

[Jade]

The reality seems quite different for Group B participants. They reported that they had either a stable employment or education and felt they had enough support—either from friends, family or financial aid—to pursue their life plans. Some were already working for several years, while others recalled not worrying about finding a job.

Because, let's say, every time I've had a job, someone always comes up to me and says, "Oh, are you free on such and such a day?" and then I get offered a job. That's what happened with my last three jobs, so I didn't have any problems with that.

[Maël]

Although they seemed to demonstrate stronger resilience during the pandemic, this does not mean that they were not affected by it. Although few in number, some mentioned their fear of losing their job or even having experienced depressive episodes marked by the discontinuity of their work experience.

I keep losing my job, getting a job, losing a job again. I don't know if I'm gonna keep the job I just got... It's kinda hard to know. And [sigh] planning to go out and give out resumes online and all that, it really stresses me out. I don't know why, and sometimes it leads to depression instead of...

[Nina]

Similarly, among those who reported difficulties along their trajectories from the outset, some indicated being able to adapt by mobilizing strategies to pursue their aspirations, either by turning to informal work experiences or by relying on social assistance. Added to this, the disparities observed raise the question of social support as an important lever for resilience and stabilization of life paths.

Youth's social relations during the pandemic

Both groups seemed to have been differently impacted in their social relations during the pandemic. Group A participants seem to have also faced heavier consequences in this regard. Several of them told us that they felt isolated because they had very few or no people to rely on during that time. They recount stories of major relationship breakdowns, be it deterioration of family relationships, romantic break-ups or death.

While several Group A participants told us they had no relations with close family members before the pandemic, others indicated they felt strong pressures on their fragile relationships. Gabriel explains how spending all his time at home with his mother exacerbated their already toxic relationship.

Let's say I told you that I lived here 60 hours a week here and we had 20 conflicts, well now we spend 120 [Hours a week together], so we have double that. Yeah, it's

the same war all the time, so... usually, let's say we had a dispute, before the pandemic, that I could leave, well during the pandemic, I couldn't!

[Gabriel]

Additionally, most Group A participants declared they had limited interaction with their extended family members prior to the pandemic. Those who maintained contact with extended family members (or re-established contact) report that the pandemic created additional pressure on those relationships, weakening them. Lou's example shows how physical distancing measures nullified all her previous efforts to reconnect with her extended family members.

Well, it's because I actually grew up and I wasn't really close to my family, or my parents, and because of the [Director of Youth Protection] and everything, and when I fell into an apartment, I got back in touch with them all. I wanted to change my life and I wanted to get to know my family and to reconnect with them, but with the Covid, the ties were broken and... I'm back to not talking to them...

[Lou]

Some Group A participants also expressed how the pandemic caused a reduction in their social circles, in some cases motivated by a desire to avoid negative relationships. Distancing from certain individuals gave them time to reflect on those relationships. In addition, they explained that school closures made it difficult to maintain relationships with their peers. This led them to express a profound sense of loneliness during the pandemic. Léa explained how this reactivated past isolation traumas from her foster care experience.

I spent three years in a youth center locked up between four concrete walls, not even a window, five feet by five feet. So I'm a person who hates loneliness, we can agree that it's not my strong point! I need... Well, it's because I've been so... I call it sequestration in the youth centers, sorry, but you were really sequestered. In the long run, you create a little fear of solitude, and that's why... that's what it is, it just makes you... that's what it is, I feel locked in, I have nothing to do, I'm bored, it makes me depressed.

[Léa]

Many Group A participants had only a fragile network, consisting of front-line services and community organizations, as well as friends (many of them also in vulnerable situations) who were unable to provide important support for them due to service interruptions and their own vulnerabilities. For them, service interruptions also meant being cut off from their primary support network.

I don't talk to my family much anymore. For me, [community housing resource] were like family. The fact that the pandemic meant that I couldn't go and see them anymore, it was a bit heartbreaking because I was tempted to go and see them. But it was a really good place I think. You feel good when you're there.

[Louise]

In contrast, Group B participants indicated that they had contact and relationships with their close family members before the pandemic began. They also reported no apparent long-term consequences of the pandemic on those relationships, some even reporting that spending more time

together actually strengthened them. They said that they mostly had little contact with members of their extended family before the pandemic began. When they did keep contact, it was usually with their grandparents. However, COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time and fear of contamination made it hard for them to maintain this contact.

I often go see my grandmother outside on her patio two meters away. Because you know, older people are more likely to... [be vulnerable.] Yeah, I don't take the risk of getting closer.

[Gabriel]

Group B participants initially indicated that having strong family relationships and were not really affected by the strains induced by the pandemic. Moreover, most of them reported limited consequences of the pandemic on their friendships because of their use of virtual communication technologies. It seems that while school closures made maintaining in-person contact with friends harder, virtual communication with friends helped preserve those friendships.

During school, we called each other a lot, a lot, a lot, since we were doing homework together, that kind of thing. When the summer started we talked less and obviously with the pandemic, we did a lot less activities to avoid contact. So I spent a lot more time at home or at work than with my friends this summer, more than normal. But with all the social networks that exist today, I didn't feel like I said cut off from the rest of the world, that kind of stuff.

[Lucas]

Finally, we should also note that no Group B participants mentioned feelings of loneliness during the pandemic.

Impacts seen from Castel's model of zones of vulnerability

While we previously highlighted disproportionate consequences of the pandemic on youth who already faced significant challenges, this section goes further by analysing the results based on Castel's zones of vulnerability model (1994). Considering the effects of the pandemic on educational and occupational trajectories, as well as social relations yielded the identification of four distinct 'paths' of integration that fall between the two poles of the social integration-disaffiliation continuum (see Figure 1): (1) *Strong integration path*, (2) *Integration under stress path*, (3) *Risk of disaffiliation path* and (4) *Path towards disaffiliation*.

At one end of the continuum, we have 'social integration', meaning the individual is inserted in an educational and/or professional project as well as inserted in a social support network. At the opposite end of the continuum, we have 'social disaffiliation', meaning the individual is not at all inserted in an educational and/or professional project and is not inserted at all in a social support network. Our results suggest that social support is central to inter-group variability in determining the characteristics of participant's paths as is demonstrated by details concerning the four integrations paths below.

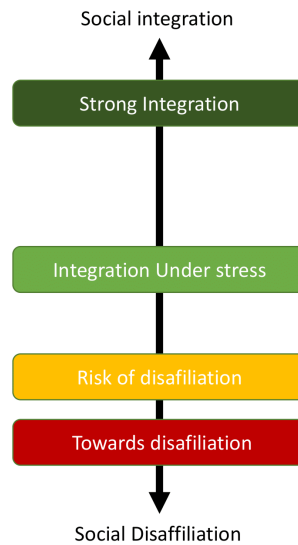


FIGURE 1 Illustration of a continuum of social integration for care leavers during a pandemic. Each arrow represents a direction towards both extremes (total integration and total disaffiliation). The coloured rectangles represent each of the four paths identified in this study as well as their position on the continuum.

Strong integration path

Participants in this path—who are all in Group B ($n = 16$)—seem to have relatively strongly established career and academic plans, despite the challenges encountered in their studies and the reduction in motivation linked to the pandemic. This strong social integration can be partly explained by the strong ties they maintain with their social circle and the support they receive from it. While they may have encountered obstacles, results suggest that the support network could be a protective element in overcoming these obstacles.

Risk of disaffiliation path

Some participants from Group A ($n = 6$) seem to be on a path suggesting risks of disaffiliation due to interruptions in their studies during the pandemic, causing some to find it difficult to continue their courses at a distance, compounded by the lack of material resources (e.g. computer equipment). Their work integration plan also seems impeded by the health measures that caused layoffs and job instability. For these young people, results suggest that the pandemic has weakened their social relationships considerably, leading in some cases to the suspension of relationships with members of their social circle.

Path towards disaffiliation

Several participants from Group A ($n = 9$) who seem to have experienced isolation could be heading towards social disaffiliation if they are not already disaffiliated. They seem to be the most socially isolated and an absence of an educational plan, which could be due to a lack of resources to invest in or resume their studies. They also seem to suffer from a high level of

job insecurity, characterized by an insufficient income and number of working hours, which leads some of the youth to report seeking work on the black market. The lack of a robust support network for these young people to navigate through the crisis is also evident in their dwindling connections with individuals in their social circle. Furthermore, when they receive support, it is typically provided by a significant other with whom they seem to have a dependent romantic relationship.

Integration path under stress

Participants from both Group A ($n = 9$) and Group B ($n = 8$) following this path show signs of precariousness. More concretely, this path is manifested by difficulties in pursuing studies, which may lead to dropout. It is also characterized by employment and financial insecurity as well as uncertainty about their life plans. However, this seems to be counterbalanced by the presence of a protective support network that enables them to continue pursuing their work and educational integration path and thus reduce the risk of isolation or even social disaffiliation. This support network also seems strong, illustrated by resistance to pressures arising from social distancing measures on those relationships.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN PURSUING ASPIRATIONS AFTER LEAVING CARE

This article seeks to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of youth with former foster care experience. Results suggest that the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities of many of them in terms of their schooling, their integration into the workforce and their relational environment, in line with several studies that have examined the impacts of the pandemic (e.g. Greeson, Jaffee, & Wasch, 2020; Greeson, Jaffee, Wasch, & Gyourko, 2020; Lotan et al., 2020). However, results suggest that some participants (Group A) were more severely affected, many being exposed to difficulties in their schooling or regarding youth's integration into the workforce and weakened their employment and financial situation. However, the most important factor that seems to influence their ability to cope with the health crisis is the strength of their social support network. Indeed, when participants from both groups had access to support from both formal and informal groups, they reported having better capabilities to pursue their integration paths and resist downward pressure imposed by the pandemic's restrictions. A heightened difficulty in accessing formal or informal support (Roberts et al., 2021) has led to isolation, consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g. Roberts et al., 2021; Ruff & Linville, 2021).

In line with Castel's (1994), examining the educational and occupational paths of young people through a lens of social integration provides a more comprehensive understanding of how the pandemic affected them. This requires understanding how 'relational capital' generates the conditions for social integration (Martin, 2019). Thus, social relationships as a source of support, from both formal and informal networks, appear to play a central role in care leaver's integration paths. As Roberts et al. (2021) point out, isolation tends to increase among individuals who lack access to family or social support, and weak ties can lead to relationship breakdowns. Furthermore, results show that the ability to draw on a social support network is a real asset in enabling youth to better cope with the challenges they face as they transition to adulthood

(Hedenstrom, 2021; Jones, 2014). They underline the need to understand how an individual's multiple lifespheres interact with each other during his life.

However, if this study helps us to better understand how youth multiple lifespheres interact with each other during their lives, it has some limitations. Firstly, considering the exploratory nature of this study, finding would not be transferrable to all care leavers. Second, this study takes place after the first few months of the pandemic, before multiple other periods that came with even harsher restrictions in Quebec, which considering our results have the potential to exacerbate even more vulnerabilities that participants faced. Finally, the study solely focused on the perspectives of youth.

Despite these limitations, this article has several research and practical implications. It expands on existing literature on how the pandemic affected care leaver's life courses in multiple dimensions of their lives. To go further, future research should consider how gender identities, ethnic and cultural origins as well as geographic areas of inhabitation also influenced young people's experience of the pandemic. This could enable a better understanding of the complex interplay of these dimensions for care leavers at the intersection of these dimensions. In addition, exploring the viewpoints of social and health service professionals and decision-makers would allow us to apprehend the intricate dynamics involved in providing support during times of crisis.

On a practical level, the results of this research provide insight for professionals working with care leavers on the challenges they faced during this crisis. In this regard and in line with recommendations to recognize youth's right to express themselves and inform policymakers (CSDEPJ, 2021), results invite professionals to actively advocate for the development of tools and strategies that foster youth participation throughout the intervention process. This could lead to the implementation of preventive measures and a support network for care leavers, addressing their needs upon leaving care and empowering them to effectively pursue their aspirations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, Victor Fernandes, Anta Niang, Rosita Vargas Diaz and Martin Goyette; methodology, Victor Fernandes, Anta Niang, Rosita Vargas Diaz and Martin Goyette; formal analysis, Victor Fernandes, Anta Niang and Rosita Vargas Diaz; data curation, Victor Fernandes, Anta Niang and Rosita Vargas Diaz; writing—original draft preparation, Victor Fernandes, Anta Niang and Rosita Vargas Diaz; writing—review and editing, Martin Goyette, Victor Fernandes, Anta Niang and; supervision, Martin Goyette.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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