

Young Mothers In/From Care Project

**Proceedings of the April 3, 2001
Forum on Policy and Practice**

Prepared by:

Deborah Rutman
Susan Strega
Marilyn Callahan
Lena Dominelli

Child, Family and Community Research Program
School of Social Work
University of Victoria
Box 1700, Victoria, B.C. V8W 2Y2
250-721-8036 (phone)
250-721-6228 (fax)

Drutman@hsd.uvic.ca sjstrega@uvic.ca Mcallaha@uvic.ca
ld@socsci.soton.ac.uk

A project funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council
(SSHRC)

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Overview of Project Findings	4
Brief history of policies affecting young mothers in/from care	4
Workers' experiences and perspectives	7
Young mothers' experiences and perspectives	10
Overview of small group discussions	12
What needs to change in policy and practice?	12
What are some first steps?	13
What can I do?	13
Wrapping up and an invitation for action	14

Introduction to Forum Proceedings

The Young Mothers Research Project is about young women who have children while in the care of the BC Ministry for Children and Families [MCF]¹. The research has focused on three areas: first, how young mothers in care experience their lives while in care, their transition out of care and MCF as 'parent' and 'grandparent'; second, how those who work with these young women (social workers and other service providers) perceive existing programs and policies and describe their practice experiences; and finally, what policies and practices are most essential to shaping these young women's lives and how they might be strengthened or changed.

On April 3, 2001, the project held a day-long Forum on Policy and Practice. The purpose of the Forum was two-fold: first, to bring together research participants, including young mothers, community-based service providers, MCF workers and policy makers to hear about and comment upon our project findings from a variety of perspectives; and second, to generate policy and practice alternatives that could make things better for young mothers in care or in transition from care. Due to the disproportionate number of Aboriginal young mothers and their children in care, the Forum paid particular attention to the situation of young First Nations women.

Approximately 50 people participated in the Forum, including young mothers and young 'mothers to be', community-based youth serving practitioners, Aboriginal service providers, front line MCF workers, MCF policy analysts/developers, researchers, and other community members. The morning session commenced with an opening by Jacquie Green, a First Nations faculty member with the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria who is from the Haisla Nation. Following this, members of the project team provided an overview of the research findings, focusing on: an analysis of past and current policies relevant to mothering while in care; workers' experiences and perspectives regarding young mothers; and young mothers' experiences and perspectives on their lives (see summaries). A four-person panel then shared reflections on these findings and the issues facing young mothers in/from care, and a general discussion followed. In the afternoon, participants divided into small groups to engage in a brainstorming discussion framed around three trigger questions:

- What needs to change for policy and practice?
- What are some first steps?
- What can I do?

Because time did not permit Forum participants to introduce themselves and speak about their aims for the day, participants were invited over the lunch hour to record on "post-it" notes their interests in attending the Forum, and what they hoped to get out of the day. Participants' comments, in summary form, are presented below, as they provide a further context for the project and the Forum, and since they speak to the urgency of the need for action.

¹ The project was funded by SSHRC and carried out under the auspices of the Child, Family and Community Research Unit at the School of Social Work, University of Victoria.

Participants sought the following through the Forum and related follow-up activity:

- Strategies to address the specific needs of Aboriginal women and children, and strategies to support Aboriginal families, drawing on strengths and wisdom of First Nation elders.
- Strategies to address how racist policies and the history of colonization have affected First Nations families and parenting in First Nations communities.
- Strategies to “sway public opinion” about young mothers.
- Strategies and a plan for young mothers to voice their experiences and have their messages, along with those captured through the research, inform practice, policy and program development, and community awareness.
- Solutions for young mothers and their children, including: changes in “rules and restrictions that work against young moms”; and support from social workers and others in the system to see that young mothers are “properly set up”.
- Clarity in terms of MCF policies, practices and rights/entitlements for young mothers in/from care, such as: What is MCF’s role/responsibility as “grandparent”? What is meant by “protection”? And do young mothers have to put their children into care or allow themselves to be labeled a ‘protection risk’ in order to access support and resources for them?

A Brief History of Policies Affecting Young Mothers In/From Care

The development of policies affecting young mothers in/from care, from the time of the first provision of charitable and/or public assistance to single mothers to the present, reveals an ongoing struggle about who is a 'deserving' mother, and thus entitled to government and societal support, and who is an 'undeserving' mother, and thus must either prove herself 'worthy' of assistance or lose her children.

For almost a hundred years, research has demonstrated that there is a strong correlational connection between demographic factors such as a mother's poverty or race and the possibility that her children might be apprehended. This information has been interpreted in two different and opposing views by those who seek to shape public policy: 'bad' parenting is about the failures of individual parents and arises out of their pathologies; and 'bad' parenting is an inevitable consequence of structural inequalities such as racism and poverty, as illustrated by these two contrasting positions from early in the last century:

The children of drunken and immoral parents should have protection by law so as to enable them to grow up to live a useful life and not by force of their surroundings becoming untruthful, unclean and immoral and add to the pauper and criminal class of the community. (Singleton, 1911, cited in Callahan and Wharf, 1982, p.7)

The Canadian 'Social Service Congress' of 1914 linked problems of family and societal dysfunction to poverty, noting that a 1911 review of Ontario children in the care of child welfare authorities found that more than 50% of them had been removed from the homes of sole-support mothers on the ground of poverty.

The view that has held sway contends that poverty and characteristics ascribed more often to certain races are symptoms rather than causes of 'bad' mothering. From this perspective, inadequate mothering is about the moral and psychological failings of individual women, and thus their children should be taken from them in order to 'break the cycle', as illustrated by this excerpt from the BC Mothers Pension Act 1935 policy manual:

Only 'good' mothers should be entitled to aid, and consideration should be given to removing children and providing for their care in other ways unless it can be unquestionably proved that their mother is the best possible person to be entrusted with their care.

Historically, legislation attempted to stop the 'wrong' mothers from having children. The Sexual Sterilisation Act allowed the forced sterilisation of women who might pass on 'mental disease or deficiency'. The Juvenile Delinquents Act made possible the incarceration of young sexually active women. Other acts facilitated the apprehension of children. The Adoption Act allowed child welfare authorities to dispense with parental consent to adoption on many grounds. Federally, the Indian Act facilitated the apprehension and adoption of countless First Nations children. Other policies were designed to make it difficult for 'bad' mothers to keep their children. Mothers' pensions, which later became mothers' allowances, were available only to certain women: British [white], widowed or with disabled husbands, with more than one child. Deserted wives

were not entitled to maintenance for themselves or their children if they had committed adultery.

Current Failures in Policies Affecting Young Mothers In/From Care

While the more draconian of these laws and policies have now been repealed, repeated calls (Royal Commission on the Status of Women 1967; Poverty in Canada 1971; The Real Poverty Report 1971; Berger Royal Commission Report 1973; Liberating our Children, Liberating our Nations, 1992; Making Changes: a Place to Start, 1992) for public policy to address the poverty, racism and other structural inequalities that these reports see as the true cause of 'bad' mothering continue to be ignored. In BC today, as has been true throughout the last century, those who are most likely to lose their children are poor, young, Aboriginal and come from families that have historical involvement with the child welfare system²:

- more than 50% of children in care are the children of single mothers (less than 10% of BC's households are headed by single mothers)
- 35% of children in care, including 52% of children in care by court order, are Aboriginal (Aboriginal people represent 3% of BC's population)
- 52% of children in care come from families where there had been previous admissions to care
- 51% of parents were receiving income assistance at the time of apprehension
- 66% of parents were living in rental housing at the time their children were apprehended

Although no specific statistics are gathered about the situations of young mothers in/from care, this statistical picture suggests that these young women must be particularly vulnerable to having their children apprehended. A review of current BC child welfare legislation and policy reveals both an absence of policies designed to help or support this group of young mothers, and the presence of policies that monitor and assess their mothering without offering supports or resources.

Other current failures in policies affecting young mothers in/from care include:

1. Emphasising 'breaking the cycle' while failing to provide the resources and support necessary that while allow young mothers to do so

- Inadequate housing
- Inadequate income
- Inadequate respite
- Forcing young mothers into low-paying, dead-end jobs with no benefits

2. Failing to separate support and protection functions

- Those who are to provide parenting functions are also expected to assess and report on young mothers
- Primacy of protection in current CFCSA
- Limiting the definition of child welfare to 'child protection'

² Statistics are drawn from Campbell, 1991; 'Untangling the Social Safety Net for Aboriginal Peoples', BC Government, 1995; Ministry for Children and Families Research, Evaluation and Statistics Branch Report, 1996.

3. Failure to conceptualise 'parenting' as a responsibility towards children and youth in care

- Parenting tasks parcelled out among a number of caregivers
- High turnover in caregivers
- Failure to designate an ongoing, consistent and responsible substitute parent: guardianship standards failure to address this overarching issue
- Failure to designate parental responsibilities in Comprehensive Plans of Care [CPOC]
- Failure to designate parental responsibilities in Looking After Children [LAC] assessments
- Lack of compliance (and lack of consequences for compliance) with CPOC and LAC initiatives

Faced with simultaneous demands to complete growing up tasks (i.e., to become 'good' daughters), and to complete grown up tasks (i.e., to become 'good' mothers), without resources, parenting or support, we might well ask two important questions. One is: How it is that some young women successfully negotiate these conflicting demands and policy vacuums to make loving homes for themselves and their children. The other is: Consider what might be accomplished, in the lives of these young women, the lives of their children, and society itself, if these young women were furnished with the relationships and resources that we consider so necessary for all daughters and mothers...

Workers' Experiences and Perspectives

Workers' Values, Beliefs & Attitudes

Workers' values are inextricably part of the lens through which they construct their notion of "deserving" mothers and perceive the adequacy of their clients' parenting. Themes relating to workers' values included:

We have middle class values

We're a middle class organization and we have middle-class values that we're trying to impose on clients who may or may not have middle class values.

The inevitability of the cycle

She wanted to take the example of what's happened to her and break the cycle. ...And then she went and got pregnant. And of course the child was apprehended and now she's pregnant again.

Low expectations for youth in care

How many kids are "with it" enough to know that that's the kind of place that would really give them a good start?

The need for young mothers to acknowledge their parenting limitations

(She was) doing all the right things. ...Being super cooperative (with her child protection worker).

Many workers voiced their belief that although many young mothers from care were determined to be different from their own mothers, the cycle of poor parenting was all but inevitable. Workers' notion of "the cycle" included being: a teenage mother; a welfare mother; a poor mother; and thus an inadequate mother. Workers also wanted young mothers to "cooperate" and be appreciative of existing parenting-related resources. Young mothers' refusal of services often signaled a child protection risk in the minds of workers, and thus sometimes triggered child protection investigation procedures.

Workers' Experience of their Practice with Young Mothers

In describing their dual role as parent/guardian of the young women and agent of the "child protection" ministry, workers used powerful, war-related metaphors (e.g. being in "no man's land") that suggested they felt under siege. Themes relating to their experience of their practice included:

- **Dual roles; conflicted loyalties**
- **Being and feeling scrutinized and under surveillance as a worker**
- **Feeling like an inadequate "parent"**
- **Dealing with young mothers' ambivalence about community resources**
- **Parenting at a distance and across the "revolving door" of multiple placements**
- **Parenting role is to help get youth independent and young mothers "through the whole thing"**
- **Appreciating that young mothers are scrutinized and judged by a different standard**
- **Working with young mothers is challenging and taxing**

And me as their guardian: which am I, we or they?

We have a lot more people looking over our shoulder now than we did before too.

Our job is to see that they don't get pregnant if we can, which is impossible.

I almost feel like we set her up. She did her very, very best and she basically was a good parent within that foster home while someone was...taking care of her, but once she had to stand on her own two feet, umm, it wasn't great. ...I felt I let her down.

We're their guardian or take the role of parent, but we're sitting in an office. We're not out there. We pay someone else to look after them.

Workers' feelings of being under surveillance paralleled those of the young mothers. Workers also were troubled by the amount of time that they needed to spend attending to this scrutiny, as it necessarily usurped time away from relationships with clients. As well, many workers experienced deep feelings of sadness when they were party to the removal of a child of one of "their" young mothers, and they felt especially frustrated when they believed that removal could have been avoided had alternative policies been in place.

Policy (Barriers) for Young Mothers In/From Care

Workers experienced a confluence of several major forces relating to policy, including: *existing policies that do not support young mothers; a vacuum in relation to supportive policies for young mothers; and Ministry leadership priorities that felt out of synch with the lived realities of front line practitioners.* Perhaps most importantly, however, workers maintained that current allocations of government resources were plainly insufficient to address the basic human needs of young mothers in and from care. Themes relating to these policy issues and barriers included:

- **MCF as child protection ministry; we don't fix families, we break them apart**
- **Income support is insufficient: Are they being set up to fail?**
- **Predominance of risk assessment model**
- **MCF cuts off at 19**
- **MCF focus is on short -term interventions**
- **MCF as parent but not grandparent**
- **Policy fragmentation and lack of coordination across ministries**

There are some supports that I feel we should be able to provide to our young moms from our office that are more routinely offered from child protection offices. I would like to be able to have those services amongst the, our toolbox. So that we don't have to refer (to child protection) in order to access that service.

It's just appalling to me that these people who we're supposed to be guardians of we're allowing to live in poverty and deprivation.

So that in the protection and support of a foster family she was able to work on her education but she wasn't yet ready for independence. But when that magic number 19 came she went out on her own, and of course she floundered.

The reality is young moms are having difficulty raising their kids cause we don't fund (and) support them. ... Yet you can create new divisions and appoint new people and spend millions on re-vamping the ministry and appoint new ministers every six weeks.

In sum, workers' dissatisfaction with policy echoed their frustration over the lack of supports and resources available to young mothers. Workers believed that most removals could have been avoided had adequate supports and resources been in place.

Young Mothers' Experiences and Perspectives

In our first papers, we reported the perceptions of young mothers in care, using grounded theory approaches to analyze our data. We determined that the social process of mothering while in/from care could be conceptualized as “**prevailing on the edge on my own**”. This process captured both the accomplishments and actions of young women and the loneliness and precariousness of their existence. However, while we had a rich description of the lives of young women and particularly the process of mothering, we were unable to explain what accounted for the considerable variation among the young mothers, which conveyed differing degrees of success in meeting their objectives, whether in the eyes of the worker, or themselves. A theory, grounded in the experiences of young mothers in care, which would explain the diversity in these experiences.

Looking Promising: Explaining Variations in Experience

We returned to the data from the young women and the social workers to determine what might account for these differences in experiences. We were struck by the importance of what the social worker thought about different young women and how young women positioned themselves with their workers. Some young women looked promising to workers, with the potential to “break the cycle”. They seemed able to raise themselves out of their “working class” background and aspire to middle class values and behaviours. These young women seemed “deserving” of help and able to use what the social worker could offer (assistance with launching tasks, education and child care), support that white middle class girls get, even if they become pregnant. Most critically, deserving meant being able to keep your child, deserving to be a mother. Young women who had absorbed these notions of improvement and conveyed them to their workers looked and often felt like good daughters and mothers.

For young women, looking promising and breaking the cycle consisted of three main processes with sub processes within these:

1. Surviving a truncated and traumatic childhood

Young women were proud of their accomplishments in living through what could hardly be termed a childhood. Many had left home at an early age, sometimes as young as three years, and they had learned to live in the precarious and unloving circumstances of state care. Some had simply left home for the streets and had survived the dangers of drugs, prostitution and homelessness. As children and youth, they had to learn how to deal with social workers, foster parents and other helpers and to be raised “by policy” rather than parents. Amongst the challenges was learning how to develop and then lose relationships that matter. There was a strong message about the importance overall of the relationship with social workers, seen as “stand-in” parents with the power to make significant changes in their lives.

Having a child at an early age was a turning point for most young women. They remarked consistently that pregnancy and birth had saved them or could have saved them from a destructive, even fatal, set of circumstances and made them want to live for someone else's sake. While these young women had few opportunities to experience childhood as it is traditionally conceived, they had to downplay these losses, lest they appear unready for adulthood and mothering.

2. Being a good mother

Many of the processes involved in good mothering may appear to apply to any mothers: providing for my child, keeping to a routine, staying out of the “party” scene and loving my child. However these young women expected themselves and were expected by others to accomplish these tasks with the minimum of financial resources and without the support of an extended and consistent family. Most did not have stable partners to share parenting. They attempted to create or re-create family by connecting with their own parents and siblings and the families of their boy friends and by appealing to social workers and others who could offer resources. However, in order to show themselves as a good mother, they often distanced themselves from others “in the same boat” lest they be tarnished with the stereotypes of “single mothers”. Part of being a good mother was scrounging for resources from many quarters. To do so young women had to gain knowledge of a large number of systems and present oneself appropriately to these resources. Amongst the challenges was learning how to position themselves as “in need” and yet competent enough to continue to care for their children. In B.C. this is particularly challenging. Young mothers can only receive care for their children if the children will be in need of protection if services are not provided.

3. Keeping my children out of care (or getting them back)

Young mothers feared that the eyes of the state and community were on them at all times: while riding the bus, trying to shop, in the housing projects, at family gatherings, when they went to the physician and the welfare office and when their workers came to visit. They knew that there was a file on them from their childhood and that their youthful behaviour was part and parcel of how workers judged them now as mothers. The notion of “risk” and “risk assessment” was evident in the mothers’ talk. Young women felt that their lives and futures were at risk if they didn’t change. Through mothering they may have saved themselves but they risked placing their child in jeopardy through removal and thus risk placing their child in the position of living a life similar to the one that they experienced - in care.

Mothering under surveillance required that one look good to the outside: clean houses and children, well behaved children on routines and so forth. Young women felt that must demonstrate their difference from their own parents. At the same time, they often needed to reconnect with their family to assist with their own parenting tasks. While many young women hope to be different from their parents, these young women expressed this desire most passionately because it meant keeping their own children out of care and free from the traumas of a lost childhood. However, young women’s determination to ensure that their child did not go into foster care illustrated their strong belief that “the cycle” of childhood trauma, abuse and neglect was perpetuated as much by the state’s parenting as by their own familial environment.

Overview of small group discussions

1. What needs to change in policy and practice

- Shift in values and attitudes amongst practitioners and policy makers regarding youth and young mothers (in care) to a more respectful and inclusive stance
- Increased involvement of young mothers, front line workers and other “stakeholders” in policy development, as well as in the hiring and training of workers; involve the people with lived experienced and expertise in order to formulate more relevant and culturally appropriate services
- More financial support provided to young mothers by government
- More continuity in social workers and residential placements
- Increased and more consistent access to Independent Living Services for young mothers
- Clear and consistent information to youth in care regarding rights and entitlements is provided regularly and in a variety of ways (pamphlets, videos, one-to-one)
- Better transition-related services and more accessible post-majority services, especially for education, for youth/young parents (also birth control, parenting information, Nobody’s Perfect, etc.); supportive relationships with workers and other resources should continue to be available beyond age 19
- Real integrated case management: youth have to have a say in what happens to them and what they need; better planning and communication between MCF, community partners and youth
- There needs to be more/better support for high risk and pregnant youth
- Young mothers shouldn’t have to fear that their child might be removed when they ask for help or support
- The state should provide resources and support to a young mother’s child(ren) given its role as “grandparent” and not simply offer resources when/if a child comes into care due to protection concerns.

Other important themes:

- Child welfare shouldn't be tied to politics; community governance for child welfare agencies
- Service providers need to get into the communities – they need to get to know the people (and the history of the people) with whom they are working. This obligation especially applies to those who work with First Nations people.
- There should be more voicing of young women's stories and narratives to increase public awareness, social attitude change and activism
- Government priorities must equally balance the welfare and safety of pregnant and parenting youth with the protection of the young person's child
- Young mothers and their children should have the same social worker
- Revise policies that force young mothers in care to be out of the foster home during specific hours of the day ("B&B" policies)
- Better and more available housing

2. What are some first steps?

- More talking between groups that work with young moms
- Policy analysts out into the field more
- Contract reform:
 - better resource distribution
 - get more effective agencies who meet the needs of young moms
- Respite care (not tied to protection)
- Take youth's needs and rights into account
- More support to youth in care networks

3. What can I do?

- Write letters to policy makers and politicians about our concerns, including funding allocations
- Ensure that what young mothers said in this research project and what Forum participants said is brought to the attention of the MCF Minister
- As a young person in care, ask MCF to show me policies, procedures and standards, so that I can inform myself about entitlements, and what factors social workers take into consideration when deciding whether or not to remove a child
- Become a youth advocate
- Start a support group for young moms
- Facilitate (through Single Parent Resource Centre) a 'survivors' group for mothers whose children have been removed
- Continue to work within the Ministry (MCF) to effect change
- Ensure that young mothers in care are represented on Minister's Youth Action Advisory Committee (MCF)
- Encourage workers to 'help' young moms, not tell them what to do
- Do CPOCs that address young moms' needs related to parenting
- Be better communicators
- Do what we can to assist people

Wrapping up and an invitation to action

One Forum participant summarized the project's findings and messages with great eloquence and passion. In her words:

“What is going to come of this?
As a young pregnant woman in care, what changes will I
see, and when?
Why do my baby and I have different social workers?
Can we change that?

They seem to think and show us
in many different ways that we can't do it.

We have never had proper homes - that makes us young
moms
want to make our home the best we can do for our child.
Instead of putting us down and saying we can't do it,
and making it hard for us to believe we can do it,
it would be better to encourage us
and help us instead of hurting us.

What I feel is just not right is that when young moms
(or not so young moms) try as hard as they can,
they jump through all the hoops and run that extra mile
and they do not say 'good job' or 'nice try'.
We do not get any recognition for what we are doing.
Somehow they still make us feel we are not doing
anything right
And that we are not going to be good moms.
How are we supposed to be doing good when we keep on
being put down,
and they make it seem we cannot do anything right or
good?

I wish the Ministry would work for us instead of against
us.

I feel social workers should be more in your life to
make it easy for you.
They make choices for you when they don't know you from
a hole in the ground.

I would like some comments on how adults can just look
down
on young mothers assuming we will fail.
Also, as a young mother in care,
People think since I wasn't properly parented,

grew up in foster homes, that my child will end up the
same,
and we will end up like our parents.
In some cases that could be true but in other cases, it's
not!!!

Some of us can succeed, and we're not given the chance."

Forum participant

In closing, several suggestions and invitations were offered for ways in which interested participants could continue to work toward policy and practice change regarding mothering while in care. For example, a coalition of community based practitioners has been meeting to strategize around the issue of respite support for young mothers. In addition, the newly formed Minister's Youth Action Committee (MCF) may be a vehicle for voicing young mother's experiences and perspectives, and representation on this Committee by young mothers in/from care is strongly recommended. As well, the project team encourages participants to copy and distribute widely these Forum Proceedings, and, where appropriate, to use this document to advocate for policy and practice change. Finally, the project team is hopeful that a working group will come together to review and revise relevant policy, practice standards and training. If you are interested in being part of this group, please contact the project team at: 472-4133 (phone) or sjstrega@uvic.ca (email).