

# For kids in B.C. care, jail a more likely future than graduation

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Children in government care are more likely to be charged with a crime than they are to finish high school, says troubling new research by B.C.'s representative for children and youth.

Preliminary findings from a study by Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond indicate that 44 per cent of adolescents receiving services from the Ministry of Children and Family Development end up facing criminal charges.

And 36 per cent of kids in care are going to jail, despite the trend of fewer youth being incarcerated each year in B.C.

"What I'm finding is, of the people who are still in [the youth justice system], they are largely these children who experienced abuse and maltreatment, and came into government care," Turpel-Lafond said in an interview Thursday.

Another troubling finding was that foster children were more likely to end up behind bars than finish high school, which just 24 per cent of them did.

"I think that's the most staggering finding because it is not exactly the outcome we want for them," said Turpel-Lafond.

The adolescents in her study -- aged 12 to 17 -- also got into criminal trouble at younger ages and stayed mired in the justice system longer than kids who live with their families and have a better support system at home.

"The average age they would first be charged is closer to 14. Someone not in care, it would be around 15," said Turpel-Lafond, a former Saskatchewan provincial court judge who became B.C.'s first representative for children and youth last year.

"And I'm seeing kids in care over-represented in terms of the population that's going on into the adult [prison] system."

She argued B.C.'s child protection system, which has been criticized by other scathing reports in recent years, is failing adolescents by not offering them more stable environments to keep them in school and out of the corrections system.

"We need to do a better job to get them supported and not be using that criminal justice system as sort of a default foster-care system," Turpel-

Lafond said.

Her study tracked the progress of more than 50,000 children: those who were born in B.C. in 1986 who were still in school here in 1997 (when they were 11 years old).

The evidence suggests foster children got into criminal trouble more frequently due to both the maltreatment they experienced before going into care and also because they were not properly treated while receiving government services. "The system of support we have for adolescents needs to be reconsidered," she said.

Turpel-Lafond's study shows that more than 70 per cent of the children in care ensnared in the justice system have special needs, such as learning disabilities, mental health issues, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

She will provide recommendations in the fall when her report is complete, but said Thursday there are some measures that can be taken to reverse this troubling trend.

They include initiatives to avoid children going into care in the first place, such as more accessible medical support for vulnerable pregnant women, good quality daycares, stable housing for needy families, and better job opportunities for parents.

For adolescents already in care, she recommends:

- More stable placements, so children are not moved between multiple foster homes. (The vast majority of kids in care who did not go to jail were adopted.)
- Putting teens in placements that fit the specific needs of adolescents.
- Reconsider the current system which is providing 583 B.C. teens with cash so they can live on their own. "Are they doing well? Evidence to me is they are not," Turpel-Lafond said.