

DISRUPTING CARCERAL PATHWAYS: EXPERIENCES OF ANTI-YOUTH AGEISM
AND CRIMINALIZATION IN CANADIAN CHILD WELFARE

by

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Dedication Page

I want to dedicate this work to all the HALO youth I have had the pleasure of working with over the years. Thank you for the yelling, the chaos, and all the bluntness. I did not fully grasp it then, but you were trying to convey that I needed to do better. I hope my work reflects that going forward. Thank you for letting me be a part of your journey.

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Abstract

Objective: Presently, youth living in the Canadian child welfare system experience disproportionate rates of criminalization as compared to their non-accessing counterparts. Canadian research on the care-to-prison pipeline is limited, with scholarship primarily focused on gathering quantitative data to help identify risk profiles and broad systemic policies driving criminalization rates. Most research reflects service providers' perspectives and overlooks whether administrative policies and workplace biases in group care facilities may contribute to youth criminalization. This research aims to fill that gap by examining whether former youth in government care may have experienced anti-youth ageism within these facilities and how it may have influenced their involvement with the justice system.

Method: The study uses a phenomenological design and a youth-centred framework to inform it. Arts-informed methods were optional; however, participants declined to use them. Five ($n = 5$) former youth in care from Nova Scotia participated in one semi-structured interview lasting approximately 40 minutes.

Result: Three theme clusters and six themes were found after interpretative phenomenological analysis occurred: Awareness of Labels and Double Standards (Internalizing Stereotypes of Care Status, Not Age; Inconsistent Expectations and Fleeting Feelings of Normalcy), Pathways to Criminalization (Rigid Rules Inciting Retaliation; Self-Management and Isolation), and Moving Toward Equitable Standards of Care (Listening and Connecting; Acknowledging Inherent Goodness).

Conclusion: Overall, participants did not report experiencing anti-youth ageism in group home facilities, nor did they believe it was a factor in criminalization processes. However, it was found that stereotypes surrounding their identity as a youth in care contributed to negative labels and unfair policies. Moreover, participants named punitive policies and staff complacency as underlying pathways to criminalization.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The Canadian child welfare system grapples with a significant issue: a disproportionate number of youths in government care find themselves entangled in the criminal justice system compared to their counterparts in family units (Bala et al., 2015). The term cross-over youth is used to describe young people who, due to growing up or being placed in government care facilities like group homes or foster placements, have entered into the youth criminal justice system (Bala et al., 2015). In Canada, some explanations have been researched to determine why this phenomenon occurs. For instance, it has been proposed that macro-systems of oppression, like neoliberalism and colonialism, that dominate the overall functioning of child welfare as an institution, have driven youth closer to criminal justice involvement (Brownell et al., 2020; Finlay et al., 2019). What remains underreported are the micro-level social relations defined as social norms, everyday practices, and workplace-specific policies within child welfare facilities, namely group and institutional care (Baines, 2017), that may facilitate youth oppression and function as a pathway into the care-to-prison pipeline.

To rectify this gap in the research, this thesis aims to understand the association between child welfare, criminalization, and anti-youth ageism from the perspective of former youth in care. The literature review begins by evaluating the child welfare system and foundational Canadian studies regarding cross-over youth, followed by a theoretical outline of anti-youth ageism, its historical significance, and real-life manifestations. This study introduces the concept of anti-youth ageism as the primary factor facilitating youth oppression and examines adult supremacy as the underlying ideology driving micro-level social relations within group care facilities. Using a qualitative arts-informed phenomenological design and an intersectional feminist theoretical basis, this research will emphasize participants' experiences living in group home facilities and within criminal justice

systems, further exploring whether they experienced anti-youth ageism and its association with criminal justice involvement. By centring the experiences of those directly impacted, this research aims to inform changes to social work practices and attitudes towards young people, ultimately disrupting carceral pathways.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 The Child Welfare System: A Brief Review

The Canadian child welfare system has historically been a contentious program, raising questions about whether it has caused more harm than good. Pollock and colleagues (2024) define child welfare as an institution and a system of services intended to uphold children's dignity, safety, and well-being. Further, all child welfare legislation aims to enact and uphold children's best interests and universal children's rights as outlined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Freeman, 2020; Pollock et al., 2024). Fallon and colleagues (2023) explain that child welfare services operate under a dual mandate to protect children from harm while supporting their overall development and well-being. In Canada, child welfare is overseen by provincial and territorial ministries, yet the mandate and responsibilities regarding children's safety and well-being remain consistent in legislation nationwide (Fallon et al., 2023; Pollock et al., 2024). One caveat to this statement is the 2019 federal mandate that ratified Indigenous sovereignty over child welfare decision-making for Indigenous youth within *An Act Respecting First Nation, Inuit, and Métis Children, Youth, and Families* (Pollock et al., 2024). Indigenous governing bodies are working to develop new legislation and services that align with their ways of knowing and approaches to care, parenting, and community (Pollock et al., 2024).

The criteria for government interventions, such as child apprehension, are similar across jurisdictions. Fallon et al. (2023), Pollock et al. (2024), and Saint-Giron et al. (2020) agree that Canadian youth are typically taken into care when there is a suspicion of abuse or

neglect or when a parent figure is no longer able to care for their children. Not all children involved in child welfare services live outside the parental home. In fact, Pollock and colleagues (2024) estimate that only a small portion resides in out-of-home care, which includes foster care, kinship care, or group and institutional placements. According to data from 2021/2022, an estimated 61,104 youth live in out-of-home care throughout Canada, a national rate of 8.24 kids per 1000 (Pollock et al., 2024). Moreover, only about 12% of youths in care live in group and institutional facilities, while the remainder are in family-based home placements (Pollock et al., 2024). Again, because of the range of legislation regulating child welfare services in Canada, there are no universal criteria for out-of-home placement eligibility; however, based on the mandates discussed above, we assume these requirements are likely to be similar (Pollock et al., 2024).

The contention surrounding child welfare then does not lie in the mandate and overall mission of the child welfare system; I believe that most people in this country want what is best for young people and oppose child maltreatment. Thus, the criticism fundamentally lies in the historical origins of the child welfare institution, the pervasive ideologies that influence and are embedded in organizational provisions and policies, and its impact on social reproduction (Swift & Callahan, 2002; Swift & Parada, 2004), akin to critiques of most welfare services.

The roots of child welfare in Canada are closely tied to the colonial nation-building project that sought to enforce Eurocentric norms regarding family, child-rearing, and state authority, which are imperative for advancing capital accumulation (Swift & Parada, 2004). These implementations disproportionately marginalized Indigenous and Black communities, as assimilation tactics and state control were heavily directed at them in order to conform to the colonial mould of what constituted a proper parent and a good moral person (Choate et al., 2021). The *Indian Act of 1867* and the exile to reservation land marked the plight of

colonization and forced adherence to white settler aid, Eurocentric government order, and Christian standards of morality imposed on Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island (Cullen et al., 2021; Hall, 2021; Hurley, 2009). Assimilation strategies included conversion to Christianity through mandatory enrollment in the residential school program, which tore Indigenous families apart and induced mass cultural genocide and intergenerational trauma for Indigenous people (Cullen et al., 2021; Grammond, 2018). Even after the residential school program was disbanded, the use of birth alerts against Indigenous mothers and other racialized and marginalized communities continued the legacy of colonial assimilation and influenced child welfare approaches (Simpson, 2017; Thobani, 2007). This practice marked a new era of the Sixties Scoop, during which Indigenous and racialized babies were taken from their parents and placed into foster-type placements with white families to uphold and perpetuate Canada's nation-building goals across generations (Simpson, 2017; Thobani, 2007). The impacts of these policies persist today, as evidenced by the marginalization of Indigenous and Black communities and the overrepresentation of their children in the Canadian child welfare system (Choate et al., 2021).

Concerning the evolution of child welfare legislation, Swift and Callahan (2002) explain that early policy evolved in response to a growing population of homeless or neglected youth in the 19th century. Middle-class settlers became increasingly concerned about these youth, fearing the effects on their developing morals and behaviour (Swift & Callahan, 2002). Meanwhile, settlers also worried about the security of their accumulating property (Swift & Callahan, 2002). It must also be noted that youth who suffered abuse were not included in this population, as they were considered the property of their caregivers, and corporal punishment was a normalized practice (Swift & Callahan, 2002). The introduction of the child-saving movement, supported by the paternalistic British common law doctrine of *parens patriae*, allowed state intervention into private family matters in the name of

protecting children from becoming immoral (Swift & Callahan, 2002; Swift & Parada, 2004). It should be noted that paternalistic ideology also fueled white settlers of the colonial projects' views of saving Indigenous and enslaved people from their immoral ways of being (Narayan, 1995; Swift & Parada, 2004). This movement also aligned with the colonial and capitalist regimes, as it safeguarded the trajectory and survival of settler national values and, again, the property and capital of the so-called proper citizens (Swift & Callahan, 2002; Swift & Parada, 2004).

As such, Swift and Parada (2004) argue that welfare institutions, including child protection, played a significant role in reproducing social hierarchies by surveilling and intervening in families whose lives did not align with white, middle-class, nuclear family ideals. Considering the white supremacy and racism that grounded the colonial project, one can imagine that families targeted were typically racialized or the greatly impoverished (Swift & Parada, 2004). So, rather than acting as a purely protective mechanism, early child welfare operated as a covert tool for coercion and social control (Swift & Parada, 2004). An example of this is birth alerts during the aforementioned Sixties Scoop. These practices are not merely relics of the past: present-day interventions often rely on the same logic of risk, moral judgment, and paternalism, disproportionately impacting families who face systemic poverty, racism, and intergenerational trauma (Bezanson, 2018; Swift & Parada, 2004).

Returning to the discussion of contention surrounding modern-day child welfare practices, the institution's current landscape reflects the consequences of colonial legacies and the impacts of neoliberal capitalism on the welfare state (Bezanson, 2018). Despite its protective mandate, child welfare services often function through a lens of surveillance, efficiency, and responsabilization, particularly towards low-income, racialized, and socially marginalized families (Bezanson, 2018; Maki, 2021). This perspective stems from the neoliberal belief that moral worth and responsibility are tied to capital accumulation

(Bezanson, 2018). Moreover, child protection measures tend to be risk-based, reproducing classist and racist assumptions of risk, which leads to high levels of intervention in structurally disadvantaged communities (Bezanson, 2018; Maki, 2021). Maki (2021) further explains that the system prioritizes child safety through removal rather than addressing the root causes of harm, overlooking the dignity and worth of clients and the ethics of youth and family-serving professions. Furthermore, due to the privatization and underfunding of these services, amenities for youth in care facilities are limited, and staff are often burned out from a system working against their values, creating conditions of disconnect, instability, and disempowerment between youth and staff.

Bryan and colleagues (2024) conducted a report detailing social workers' challenges in the Nova Scotia child welfare system. Similar to the sentiment above, moral distress is emphasized as workers struggle to balance the pursuit of socially just and ethical social work practice within the confines of an underfunded, under-resourced system that cannot support the needs of families and youth (Bryan et al., 2024). Social workers reported unmanageably high and complex caseloads and lacked the time to deliver interventions prioritizing client care, worth, and dignity (Bryan et al., 2024). Furthermore, participants in Bryan and colleagues' (2024) project reported that staff were insufficiently trained, and constant turnover alongside understaffing contributed to stress among staff, adjacent professionals, families, and youth. Again, social workers reported feeling defeated, misunderstood, and devalued (Bryan et al., 2024), which begs the question: if this is how people who work for the system feel, how do the children and families feel? Throughout the project, the social workers emphasized that change was necessary and that service users must be given appropriate space for their voices and opinions to be heard (Bryan et al., 2024). Together, these structural and emotional challenges point to a system that fails to support its workers and protect the youth and families it is meant to serve.

Moral distress occurs when institutional constraints force social workers and other human service professionals to perform actions that do not align with their professional and personal values (Jaskela et al., 2018). Scholarly research addressing the issue in child welfare points to neoliberal underfunding as a primary facilitator of moral distress (He et al., 2021; Stahlschmidt et al., 2022), and some identify internal rules within residential services as particularly distressing (Brend, 2020; Jaskela et al., 2018). Brend (2020) and Jaskela and colleagues (2018) discuss facility-specific policies as a source of moral oppression for child welfare workers, especially when these rules perpetuate barriers to relational care due to liability concerns, leading to reprimand or job loss. In 2025, the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers re-released a document outlining how the provincial child welfare system operates on a risk-based model focused on state liability, meaning policies are established to protect the government, not the workers, and certainly not the youth and families it serves.

This faction of moral distress was evident in the Bryan and colleagues (2024) document, where child welfare workers reported contention between managing future risk to children, avoiding liability and professional consequences, and creating a safe, relational connection with clients that reflects social work ethics of care. These findings illustrate a deeply entrenched systemic failure, again most likely derived from neoliberal and colonial origins, where the protection of the state supersedes any genuine commitment to relationality, social justice, or social work ethics (Bryan et al., 2024; Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, 2025). Rather than addressing the needs of staff and clients, the system evokes surveillance and fear as a tactic of coercive control, reinforcing historical patterns of marginalization under the guise of managing risk.

Understanding the historical, ideological, and systemic conditions that shape child welfare practice in Canada is essential for contextualizing the broader consequences of youth involvement in care. Some of the most pressing outcomes of these conditions include youth

homelessness and institutionalization (Bala et al., 2015). This thesis project, however, primarily addresses the rising rate of criminalization among youth who have accessed child welfare services, a phenomenon often referred to as the care-to-prison pipeline. The following section reviews Canadian research and policy documents that examine this pipeline and the overlapping category of cross-over youth, defined as young people who become involved in criminal justice systems due to their status in care.

1.1.2 Foundational Studies

Between 2009 and 2020, five significant projects on cross-over youth in Canada were completed across three provinces: British Columbia (Bala et al., 2015; Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009), Ontario (Corrado et al., 2011; Finlay et al., 2019), and Manitoba (Brownell et al., 2020). All five reports identify similar mitigating and aggravating factors that may contribute to the overrepresentation of youth in care within justice settings and provide policy and procedural recommendations to help remedy the situation (Bala et al., 2015; Brownell et al., 2020; Corrado et al., 2011; Finlay et al., 2019; Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009). However, all five documents gathered data from the perspective of service providers instead of exploring the issue from the standpoint of those most affected: the young people in care (Bala et al., 2015; Brownell et al., 2020; Corrado et al., 2011; Finlay et al., 2019; Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009). The gap in this perspective accentuates a need for closer examination of existing research on crossover youth in Canada, beginning with the work of Corrado and colleagues (2009), one of the earliest Canadian studies examining the relationship between child welfare and youth justice.

Corrado and colleagues (2011) were among the first teams in Canada to investigate the relationship between child welfare and justice involvement among youth. The authors extracted data from a British Columbia-based report conducted in 2009 by Dr. Turpel-Lafond of the Representative for Children and Youth and Dr. Kendall of the Office of the Provincial

Health Officer (Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009). The 2009 report revealed that children living in government care were nearly seven times more likely to be charged with criminal offences, with approximately 41% of children recommended for police charges and 10% sentenced to custody (Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009). Corrado et al. (2011) utilized data from Turpel-Lafond and Kendall's (2009) report to establish specific risk profiles of young people involved in the child welfare and youth justice systems. These risk profiles include increased mental health diagnoses, youth or family history of substance use, educational challenges, exposure to maltreatment, difficulties forming attachments, Indigeneity, and placement type (Corrado et al., 2011). Corrado and colleagues (2011) further analyzed selected theories underlying the connection between these risk profiles, such as systemic policy discrimination, inaccessible or siloed resources, and developmental and attachment theories. Ultimately, the authors recommend that service providers implement sophisticated risk management tools to detect the aforementioned risk factors earlier and apply more comprehensive supervision and support to mitigate initial justice contact for youth in government care (Corrado et al., 2011).

Bala and his colleagues (2015) conducted a similar study in response to Canada's need for policies addressing cross-over youth in Ontario. Their study amalgamates literature reviews on dually involved youth globally and includes 22 qualitative interviews that capture the perspectives of Ontario service providers on the issue (Bala et al., 2015). The document discusses the key issues within Ontario's youth justice and child welfare systems. It highlights that although one ministry assumes responsibility for both systems, they continue to operate separately, resulting in siloed resources and separate court proceedings (Bala et al., 2015). Similar to the report by Turpel-Lafond and Kendall (2009), Bala and his peers (2015) found that among a sample of 93 youth in an Ontario custody facility, 51% had child welfare histories, and 42% had been placed in residential care prior to incarceration. When examining

the profiles of youth in both systems, the authors noted that common risk factors included parental maltreatment, placement stability and type, substance use, mental health concerns, Indigeneity, and harsher sentences (Bala et al., 2015), which aligns with the profiles described in the Corrado and colleagues (2011) study.

Bala and colleagues (2015) suggest that the lack of timely identification, enhanced collaboration between systems, and practical programming available to young people perpetuates the higher-than-normal rates of incarceration among youth in care. As a solution, Bala and colleagues (2015) advocate for early intervention, improved policies and practices within group homes, increased advocacy, integrated services, greater youth involvement, and strengthened communication between systems to ensure a disruption in carceral pipelines moving forward.

Another significant study conducted by Finlay and colleagues (2019) was the *Cross-Over Youth Project: Navigating Quicksand*, which engaged ten interdisciplinary sectors serving young people in the child welfare and justice systems. This four-year pilot project thoroughly explored the complexities of pathways to criminalization for youth in care within Ontario (Finlay et al., 2019). It provided a framework of wrap-around practice solutions to reduce criminal risk and foster lasting partnerships across all sectors (Finlay et al., 2019). This project's results echoed earlier studies' findings regarding movement and trajectories through both systems (Finlay et al., 2019). In particular, the need for youth-centred case planning to support young people before and after criminal justice involvement was highlighted (Finlay et al., 2019). The authors also emphasize that specialized care must be developed for Indigenous, Black, and racialized youth, as these groups are overrepresented in both systems (Finlay et al., 2019). While cross-over youths participated in the study, the primary aim was to enhance service providers' practice models and strengthen a collaborative system among all service sectors that work with criminalized youth in care (Finlay et al.,

2019). However, what remains absent are the experiences and direct voices of cross-over youth.

The report by Brownell and colleagues (2020), produced in collaboration with the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy, explores the intersection of child welfare and youth justice systems in Manitoba. Specifically, it quantifies the number of crossover youth and identifies the characteristics linked to involvement in the youth criminal justice system (Brownell et al., 2020). The authors highlight the over-representation of Indigenous children and youth within both systems, noting that Manitoba has the highest incarceration rate for Indigenous youth (80%) and the highest proportion of Indigenous children in care (90%) in Canada (Brownell et al., 2020). The findings presented by Brownell and his colleagues (2020) were unsurprising yet still shocking; utilizing a birth cohort from 1994 to 1998, the authors discovered that nearly one-third of youth in care had been charged at least once as minors, and by adulthood, almost half had faced charges for a criminal offence (Brownell et al., 2020). Notably, most youth with encounters in the criminal justice system had also been involved with the child welfare system at some point, indicating that child welfare involvement was the most decisive factor associated with being charged with a crime (Brownell et al., 2020).

In terms of Indigeneity, it was found that Indigenous youth are 24 times more likely to be involved in both systems, with the overrepresentation of First Nation youth in child welfare and justice systems rising steadily by 13.2% over just ten years (Brownell et al., 2020). The authors suggest that Indigenous identity is not a risk factor in itself; rather, it is an outcome of Canada's colonial legacy that continues to burden Indigenous communities systemically (Brownell et al., 2020). The report recommends implementing increased prevention strategies starting in the family home, adjusting service delivery, and developing

methods for monitoring and reporting that recognize the unique challenges faced by youth, particularly those from racialized backgrounds (Brownell et al., 2020).

Throughout these foundational studies, several common themes emerged. In terms of risk profiles, Bala et al. (2015) and Corrado et al. (2011) conclude that child welfare youth with a familial or personal history of mental health issues, substance use, and maltreatment strongly predict future involvement with the criminal justice system. Furthermore, all studies noted the overrepresentation of Indigenous and Black youth in both the child welfare and justice systems (Bala et al., 2015; Corrado et al., 2011; Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009), with Finlay et al. (2019) and Brownell et al. (2020) explicitly calling for more specialized and culturally informed care approaches to address the high rates of racialized youth in both systems. A majority of these studies also reference the isolated operations between child welfare and youth justice organizations and departments (Bala et al., 2015; Corrado et al., 2011; Finlay et al., 2019; Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009). To remedy this issue, each report suggested an integrated approach to service delivery and improved intercommunication to minimize occurrences of crossover youth (Bala et al., 2015; Corrado et al., 2011; Finlay et al., 2019; Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009). These scholars also widely agreed that the phenomenon of crossover youth is systemic and a product of neoliberal policies that underfund social programs and the legacy of settler colonialism, which has systematically marginalized racialized and impoverished people, primarily Indigenous and Black communities in Canada (Bala et al., 2015; Brownell et al., 2020; Corrado et al., 2011; Finlay et al., 2019; Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009).

The scholarly work available on cross-over youth has laid a clear foundation regarding the macro systemic causes of youth-in-care criminalization. The last factor prominently discussed was placement type and stability, with group care or residential stays outrightly named as a common factor among criminalized youth (Bala et al., 2015; Brownell

et al., 2020; Corrado et al., 2011; Finlay et al., 2019; Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2009). Bala et al. (2015) and Finlay et al. (2019) explicitly state the need for improved policies and practices within out-of-home residential facilities; group care is typically the last resort for youth with behavioural concerns, leading to close monitoring and punitive rules to control behaviour and an increase of police contact to aid in behavioural management. Both studies recommended integrating youth-centred case management that involved young people in decision-making and providing feedback on policies and procedures in which they are directly affected (Bala et al., 2015; Finlay et al., 2019).

Once again, the issues perpetuating the connection between crossover youth and group homes are primarily systemic, with inadequate staffing, training, and funding as the main contributors (Bala et al., 2015; Finlay et al., 2019), also factors the social workers in the Bryan and colleagues (2024) study recounted. Thus, this issue is well-established. What remains underexplored are the perspectives of young people who have experienced the system and the specific dynamics and micro-level social relations, like social norms, facility policies, and workplace culture (Baines, 2017), within government care programs that contribute to the overrepresentation of child welfare youth in the justice system.

An important theme from Finlay and colleagues (2019) was the overwhelming instances of youth oppression being perpetuated, prompting their project to recommend increased youth-centred approaches in research and practice. The study acknowledges the pervasive cross-sectoral oppression influencing child welfare and youth justice policies and procedures (Finlay et al., 2019). Dupuis and Mann-Feder (2013) state that these systems are bureaucracies that exert power and control over young people, inherently discouraging their voices and participation. Due to this insight, I suggest that anti-youth ageism may be a significant factor influencing the rising rates of crossover youth. Negative stereotypes and widely accepted narratives about youth, particularly those in welfare services, may shape how

youth professionals interact and create policy within these facilities and perpetuate criminalization. Currently, no research has explored the role of anti-youth ageism in government care homes or how it might contribute to the care-to-prison pipeline. This research aims to fill that gap by examining how former youth in government care may have experienced anti-youth ageism within these facilities and how it may have influenced their involvement with the justice system.

1.1.3 Theorizing Anti-Youth Ageism

An often under-researched and overlooked aspect of ageism is the oppression of young people. Ageism, as defined by the World Health Organization (2021), is the practice of marginalizing individuals in harmful, disadvantageous, and unjust ways based on their age. Anti-youth ageism refers directly to the stereotypes (thinking), prejudice (feeling), and discrimination (acting) that young people face based on age, occurring in institutional, interpersonal, and internalized ways (World Health Organization, 2021; Wray-Lake et al., 2025). The phenomenon is synonymous with terms such as adultism, childism, juvenile ageism, reverse ageism, ageism against youth, and anti-youth ageism (Wray-Lake et al., 2025). For this research, I will use the term “anti-youth ageism,” as Wray-Lake and colleagues (2025) indicate that it clearly specifies the target population (youth) against which this oppression operates. Most available ageism research has focused on older populations' experiences; however, young people are equally likely to encounter ageist behaviour. In fact, ageism is thought to be ingrained from childhood, as early socialization shapes how individuals interpret and enact oppression throughout their lives (World Health Organization, 2021). Rollo (2022) corroborates this sentiment by stating that childhood can be considered ground zero for systems of domination, as it establishes a foundation for how one interprets and acts upon stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion.

When conceptualizing anti-youth ageism, it is essential to address adult supremacy and the construction of childhood, as adult power, privilege, and hierarchies protect and perpetuate youth oppression (Rollo, 2022; Wray-Lake et al., 2025). Adult supremacy is defined as a power structure prioritizing adult interests, privileges, and needs over those of children, often leading to the marginalization of minors (Rollo, 2022). The colonial project reinforced adult supremacy and shaped Western notions of childhood as a period characterized by dependency, immaturity, and subordination (Rollo, 2018). Throughout the colonial project, Western powers often justified their control over colonized communities by depicting themselves as a superior culture of benevolent guardians, a concept known as paternalism (Maynard, 2017; Narayan, 1995). This paternalistic mindset extended to many settlers' perceptions of children and youth, who were seen as needing guidance and protection to become civilized according to Western standards (Maynard, 2017; Narayan, 1995), as seen in the historic child savers movement and the common law doctrine of *parens patriae* (Swift & Callahan, 2002; Swift & Parada, 2004). DeJong and Love (2015) explore the parallels between youth-adult relationships and the dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized. They explain that just as colonial subjects were framed as needing their oppressor's guidance to achieve full humanity, youth are similarly socialized to seek validation, legitimacy, and authority through adult-defined structures and expectations (DeJong & Love, 2015). This construction laid the groundwork for a society where adults devalue and subordinate youth to maintain power and control in many situations (DeJong & Love, 2015; Rollo, 2018).

These norms were further reinforced with the establishment of the Canadian nuclear family, which created an adult-centric social order, positioning adults as the sole arbiters of knowledge, morality, and societal norms (Love & Phillips, 2007; Maza, 2020). Tootoosis (2020) writes that for many colonized peoples, the concept of youth and hierarchical systems of the family was not a part of their traditions and was imposed on non-settler communities as

a means of control and assimilation, emphasizing the paternalistic nature of the colonial project. This notion was discussed earlier regarding the historical underpinnings of the child welfare system and the colonial nation-building project that aimed to create a homogenized and obedient culture through enforcing family or national values (Swift & Parada, 2004). The expansion of youth-focused institutions, such as schools, child welfare agencies, and legal systems, solidified childhood as a distinct and subordinated category (Love & Phillips, 2007; Maza, 2020). These institutions reinforced the division between childhood and adulthood and cemented the perception of youth as a source of social disruption to the adult world, justifying strict oversight and control (Love & Phillips, 2007; Swift & Parada, 2004).

Most scholars of youth ageism acknowledge that adult authority over youth is not inherently problematic or oppressive (Bell, 1995; Smith, 2024). In fact, many young individuals actively seek and need guidance and care from adults (Smith, 2024), and institutions like child protection often play a necessary role in safeguarding children from abuse. Connotations of adult supremacy, however, arise when the dichotomy of superiority and inferiority becomes overwhelming, allowing little space for youth autonomy, belonging, and participation to flourish and rightly develop (Smith, 2024). Thus, recognizing adult supremacy is not about rejecting all forms of adult control or seeing young people as miniature adults. It is about ensuring that youth feel safe to exercise their rights and ideas without fear of being dismissed, belittled, or punished (bergman, 2022). Adult supremacy remains entrenched in the present-day reality, where youth continue to face stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination that maintain adult power and control (bergman, 2022).

1.1.4 Manifestations of Anti-Youth Ageism

Returning to the previously mentioned definition, anti-youth ageism is expressed and experienced through thoughts of stereotypes, feelings of prejudice, and acts of discrimination (World Health Organization, 2021). Additionally, these expressions manifest at the

institutional, interpersonal, and internal levels (World Health Organization, 2021). Wray-Lakes and colleagues (2025) define internalized anti-youth ageism as youths' acceptance of stereotypes that marginalize them and lead to diminished power, control, and privilege. It is witnessed, through common media and scholarship, that Western society attaches negative labels to young people, including rebellious, risk-taking, selfish, lazy, irresponsible, and conforming to peers (Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998; Grünh et al., 2011; Qu et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Roche (1999) notes that adult society views young people as lacking wisdom and not yet rational beings, which results in adult spaces silencing and excluding youth from practices and participation despite their role as social actors. This could be an example of interpersonal anti-youth ageism, as it involves direct interactions perpetuating youth marginalization (Wray-Lakes et al., 2025). These stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory practices are often not enacted with overt malicious intent but rather justified through the paternalistic belief that young people must be saved from themselves (Roche, 1999). This mirrors the colonial logic discussed above that frames marginalized groups as incapable of self-governance, thus legitimizing continued adult control over policies that directly affect young people (Roche, 1999; Rollo, 2018). These instances illustrate institutional anti-youth ageism, which pertains to the formal structures and policies that sustain the oppression of youth (Wray-Lakes et al., 2025).

The use of benevolent and paternalistic language that frames this marginalization as care makes such ageist practices more difficult to challenge, as they are embedded in dominant cultural narratives about youth development and safety. As such, ageist assumptions become normalized and codified into systems that render youth exclusion necessary for the betterment of society. These examples demonstrate how anti-youth ageism operates across multiple levels and reinforces a cycle in which youth are systemically marginalized, silenced, and denied agency under the guise of protection and guidance. Again,

as Bell (1995) and Smith (2024) recount, these notions would not be considered oppressive if young people are in danger of themselves or putting others in danger.

1.2 The Current Project

To date, minimal Canadian research has been conducted on the connection between child welfare involvement, anti-youth ageism, and criminalization. Moreover, the available research rarely consults people with lived experiences in child welfare and justice systems. Therefore, the current study aims to fill that knowledge gap by showcasing experiences of ageism and criminalization of former youth in care. Two main research questions guide this thesis study: First, have former youth in care experienced anti-youth ageism while living in government care programs? If so, how did they experience anti-youth ageism? Second, in what ways has anti-youth ageism in government care programs perpetuated criminalization and justice involvement? The ultimate goal of these project findings is to take the insights from participants with lived experience to understand ways youth-serving professionals can work towards disrupting carceral pathways.

1.3 Theoretical Location

This research is primarily grounded in intersectional feminist theory and will guide the construction and analysis of this study. Additionally, I will discuss my social location and the use of a youth-centred approach as a framework for my social work practice. I will also explain how intersectional feminism informs my youth-centred approach to praxis.

Articulating my perspective as a social worker and approach to praxis is significant to the theoretical foundation of this study, as it shapes my ways of being, knowing, and valuing information (LeFrancois et al., 2022).

1.3.1 Intersectional Feminist Theory

Feminism is a theoretical framework and social activist movement that emerged from women's struggles against gendered injustices (Moosa-Mitha, 2022). In both theory and

practice, feminism challenges the status quo that perpetuates discrimination against women and provides alternative ways of understanding inequality based on women's lived experiences (Moosa-Mitha, 2022). As a movement, feminism has contributed to knowledge development from historically unheard and undervalued voices while challenging what constitutes accepted ways of knowing (Moosa-Mitha, 2022). Thus, knowledge of power and oppression depends on the individuals' experiences with inequality and its felt consequences (Moosa-Mitha, 2022). However, many scholars, such as Kerner (2017), have critiqued the initial waves of feminism for excluding Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized voices despite the fact that their lives have been the most impacted by systems of oppression. Ultimately, feminist theory has evolved to consider the lived experiences of all individuals and how their social roles and identities affect them while still focusing on dismantling structures that perpetuate inequality through oppression, power, and privilege (Kerner, 2017).

Miller (2010) explains that social injustices do not remain static or operate in isolation. Instead, systems of oppression exist along a spectrum of identities, including gender, race, sexuality, class, and age (Miller, 2010). Furthermore, inequalities are shaped by and interact with broader power systems, such as neoliberalism, colonial paternalism, and white supremacy (Miller, 2010). Thus, there is a recognition that power structures and social hierarchies shape, produce, and control knowledge, particularly what is deemed normal by broader society (Miller, 2010). As such, Kerner (2017) and Miller (2010) agree that most feminist theorists today believe addressing intersecting differences in relation to power dynamics and inequality is a core task of the feminist movement.

The term intersectionality was introduced by critical legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to examine how the dynamics of various identities affect women's lives, particularly those of Black women in the United States. Intersectionality as a concept is grounded in Black feminist, critical legal, and critical race theories (Cho et al., 2013). Using

these theoretical insights, Crenshaw (1989) challenged the dominant narratives of feminism that centred gender as the sole marker of social difference and disempowerment by arguing that individuals' identities are multiple, and the effects of subordination are shaped by how different systems of oppression intersect with the axes of privilege and oppression in a person's life.

Building on Kerner's (2017) critique that mainstream feminism historically excluded marginalized voices, the development of intersectional analysis within feminist theory created space for feminists from diverse social locations to share their insights into the interlocking nature of oppression and inequality. It also compelled feminists, especially white individuals, to reflect on their privilege and how their advantages interact with systems of inequality, as well as how they experience oppression differently from those who do not share the same privileges (Kerner, 2017). Moosa-Mitha (2022) further explains that intersectional feminism provides a framework for analyzing multiple identities in the context of structural power relationships, recognizing that structural inequalities are discursively produced social constructs. For example, how Indigenous mothers can be mistreated in the child welfare system due to pervasive ideologies like white supremacy and colonialism, painting them as unfit (Sistovaris et al., 2021). In summary, employing an intersectional lens in feminist theory recognizes the complexity of oppression and how these systems socially construct intersecting identities while sustaining systems of power (Moosa-Mitha, 2022).

This thesis study recognizes intersectional feminist theory as both a framework for analyzing how overlapping systems of oppression shape lived experiences and as a political commitment to amplifying marginalized voices (Crenshaw, 1989; Moosa-Mitha, 2022), particularly those of youth in government care. The primary system of oppression examined in this study is anti-youth ageism situated within the structural confines of child welfare systems. As discussed, adult supremacy, stemming from colonial paternalism and neoliberal

capitalism, is the pervasive ideology that reproduces youth oppression on institutional, interpersonal, and internalized levels (bergman, 2021; Wray-Lake, 2025). While all youth may encounter anti-youth ageism, youth living in government care often face compounded forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, and ableism (Brownell et al., 2020).

Furthermore, these youth are also exposed to powerful state institutions like child welfare and justice systems, further shaping their experiences of subordination. Given these layered dynamics, an intersectional feminist analysis is essential to understanding how anti-youth ageism operates in tandem with other systems of power to create the unique inequities experienced by youth in care. Applying an intersectional feminist lens will also bring critical attention to broader ideologies, whether it be neoliberalism, paternalism, or adult supremacy, that have discursively produced a dominant societal understanding of normalcy and deviance assigned to youth in care (Moosa-Mitha, 2022). This lens will guide the interpretation of participants' narratives by exploring how age-based oppression in care settings may produce experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and ultimately criminalization while also acknowledging the impact of their status as a youth in government care.

1.3.2 Social Location and Youth-Centred Approaches as Praxis

As intersectional feminist theory suggests, every individual experiences a unique blend of privilege and oppression that influences their lived experiences and perceptions of the social world, also known as social location (Baines, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989). While I strive to remain unbiased as a researcher, being a social worker is inherently political (Baines, 2017), as are the topics related to this profession and research. Moreover, actively participating in Canadian society means engaging in the everyday macro and micro-social relations that perpetuate ideas and processes that lead to oppression or privilege (Baines, 2017). Therefore, as a critical and anti-oppressive social worker, global citizen, and intersectional feminist, I cannot remain entirely neutral, as all my identities intersect with

various forms of power dynamics that shape my worldview (Baines, 2017; Miller, 2010). For this reason, I must position myself within the research as a mechanism to maintain academic and ethical rigour and offer context for how my lived experiences may impact the analysis and interpretation of the overall findings.

I write from the position of an able-bodied, white woman settler who has access to financial privilege and advanced education, social positions that afford me power and mobility within dominant systems. I was raised in Treaty Six Territory (Edmonton, Alberta), the traditional lands of the Cree, Dene, Blackfoot, Saulteaux, and Nakoda-Sioux people since time immemorial. Currently, I am living in Kjipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki, the unceded and ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq People, completing my master's degree in social work. I am cognizant of the privilege my whiteness brings me as a social worker and as a student on colonized land, and I must remain reflexive of the harm my ancestors have perpetuated, the systems that continue to perpetuate harm, and my place as a white social worker within it. Further, I must also strive to challenge systems of oppression and decentre Eurocentric epistemologies.

Simultaneously, I carry personal experiences that inform my relational sensitivity to care-related systems. I am the child of divorced parents who vehemently dislike each other and have had no contact for over twenty years. Both my parents experienced post-traumatic stress disorder after a mountain biking accident left my dad permanently disabled and reliant on a power wheelchair. Growing up, this created an environment with little supervision and emotional support, making most adult people feel unsafe and untrustworthy. This has shaped my understanding and empathy for systemic forms of disconnection, alienation, and mistrust of adults. That being said, I have never been a youth in the child welfare system, nor have I ever personally accessed welfare services. Not having adult people I could turn to for support or help is a significant factor in my career choice as a social worker. I wanted to ensure young

people had a safe adult they could turn to without worrying about being judged or belittled. I began my social services work in group homes for young people, where I witnessed a system that was not conducive to change, nor considered the perspectives of the youth viable. Since then, I have worked in other youth-serving community organizations like shelters and resource centres where I have witnessed similar practices. This pushed me further to question the legitimacy and underpinnings of child welfare practices and the societal view of young people as an oppressed group.

As a critical and anti-oppressive social worker, my praxis is rooted in youth-centred approaches informed by feminist theories. A youth-centred approach to praxis prioritizes young people's voices, needs, and rights by balancing power and agency in youth-adult partnerships, ensuring active participation in shaping their environments (Government of Nova Scotia, 2009). Similarly, Rammer and colleagues (2023) developed a theoretical basis for youth-centred approaches, citing five key elements: ensuring youth rights are acknowledged, implemented, and encouraged; guaranteeing real and meaningful participation; respecting the knowledge of both youth and staff; acknowledging and analyzing values and attitudes; and co-creating an empowering environment. These aspects were missing from the overall framework of group care facilities and, I believe, contributed to harm and dysfunction within the confines of the space.

A youth-centred approach is particularly relevant to this study because it directly challenges anti-youth ageism and the exclusion of young people from decision-making, key issues explored in this research. Furthermore, intersectional feminist theory informs this praxis by emphasizing the systems of oppression that intersect to shape the lives of young people (Moosa-Mitha, 2022). This lens also encourages a deeper examination of how power operates within youth-caring systems and invites a deliberate focus on emphasizing the voices of young people living within these systems. Intersectional feminism confronts

hierarchical and adult-centred knowledge production by valuing the lived experiences of youth as legitimate ways of knowing, especially those excluded from decision-making processes. In my social work practice, a youth-centred approach informed by intersectional feminism enables me to confront adult supremacy by reflecting on the power and privilege I hold as an adult in youth spaces (bergman, 2022). It also involves holding myself accountable for my actions and the actions of the institutions I belong to that contribute to the oppression of young people and sustain adult power and control (bergman, 2022).

Ultimately, my social position, youth-centred approach to praxis, and intersectional feminist framework shape how I engage with social work and this research. These components reinforce my commitment to amplifying the voices of participants affected by systems of oppression, such as anti-youth ageism, and inform how I critically interrogate the powerful social forces embedded within the child welfare system, including adult supremacy, paternalism, and neoliberalism. Consequently, this thesis serves both as a scholarly inquiry and as an act of resistance against the ongoing marginalization, discrimination, and criminalization of youth within the Canadian child welfare system.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This research study uses a qualitative arts-informed phenomenological design. Qualitative research has long been associated with phenomenological inquiry, as it focuses on the commonalities of individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they derive from them (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2019; Preston & Redgrift, 2017). In this study, the participants are former youth in care who have experienced justice involvement and may have encountered anti-youth ageism. Creswell (2013) clarifies that the primary aim of phenomenology is to create a composite description of a universal essence, which refers to the meaning people assign to their experiences of a phenomenon. Further, this method is based on experiential and discursive methods of inquiry; experiential meaning input is obtained from expert participants to understand the thoughts and feelings of a phenomenon, and discursive refers to how language is used to construct meaning (Smith & Nizza, 2022). As researchers, phenomenological inquiry prompts us to adopt the phenomenological attitude of bracketing, a method used to minimize our preconceived ideas or knowledge of phenomena to reveal the true essence of participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Further, phenomenological design uses interpretative inquiry to better understand participants' perspectives by examining symbolic understandings and patterns between participants on an individual and collective level (Preston & Redgrift, 2017).

Interpretative phenomenological inquiry is most conducive to analyzing the research objectives of understanding the experiences of ageism in youth care facilities and its potential connection to criminalization. In their discussion of social work research, Vicary and Ferguson (2024) argue that interpretative phenomenology is an ideal methodology because it examines individuals' experiences and encourages researchers to set aside their biases and existing knowledge. For this study, which employs intersectional feminist theory to dissect

adult power and privilege, phenomenological inquiry helps to recognize the many intersecting identities that young people in care hold that may contribute to criminalization. Also, it aids in emphasizing the participants' voices and interpretations.

To facilitate the phenomenological design, I conducted five semi-structured interviews and provided space for optional arts-informed methods. Qualitative semi-structured interviews are the standard form of data collection in phenomenology and are used as the primary form of data collection in the project (Creswell, 2013). It has been suggested that arts-informed methods can complement phenomenological inquiry by providing valuable insights into participants' inner worlds and life experiences (Gupta & Zieske, 2024). Art-based methods, such as drawing, sculpture, or poetry/song lyrics, are also offered as an optional method of inquiry and used to stimulate conversation and reflection at the end of the interview (Gupta & Zieske, 2024). I have chosen to utilize arts-informed methods at participants' discretion in the spirit of being youth-centred as providing choice in how one wishes to share their stories is essential for building relationships and encouraging active participation.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

The study's sample comprises five adults ($n = 5$) from the Halifax community formerly involved in the child welfare and justice systems. No demographic information was collected as all participants chose not to disclose this material. Generally, however, participants' ages ranged between 20 and 40 years old, and all participants lived within a supportive living environment. Purposive sampling techniques were applied, which, according to Staller (2021), involve selecting the most information-rich, relevant, and broad-ranging information available to develop fuller descriptions over generalizable claims. This means more participants are not always necessary for qualitative work (Staller, 2021). Furthermore, Creswell (2013) explains that small sample sizes are common in qualitative

phenomenological research as the focus, similar to purposive sampling, is to stray from generalized claims. The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the commonalities between unique individuals' lived experiences, prompting Creswell (2013) to recommend sample sizes of five to fifteen to achieve saturation. This is comparable to other studies' sample sizes using quantitative arts-informed phenomenological methods (Cohen-Miller, 2018; Sadkowska, 2018).

To participate in this study, participants needed to be adults aged 18 years or older who identified as having lived in out-of-home government care and were involved in the youth or adult justice system in Nova Scotia. Speaking with adults who have experienced both systems will provide a retrospective account of their time and offer a more comprehensive narrative (Maxwell, 2013). Out-of-home government care was defined as temporary or permanent placement in group, kinship, or foster care. To qualify, participants must have spent at least 2 years in child welfare custody. On average, young people involved in child welfare services spend about 2 years in care facilities, indicating that a 2-year minimum period will yield findings more representative of the broader population (British Columbia, 2023).

Youth criminal justice involvement was defined as those charged and sentenced to community or custody orders such as probation, restorative justice, community service, conditional sentences, or incarceration in custody facilities while under child welfare custody. Participants will still be considered if they have received conditional or absolute discharges. The Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA), the legislation governing youth criminal rights and decision-making in Canada, mandates that the least restrictive measures be implemented first (Government of Canada, 2021). This means that most youth with criminal offences will typically have been sentenced to community orders such as probation or restorative justice, with only a select few who have committed the most severe offences facing custodial

sentences (Government of Canada, 2021). Including a vast array of justice experiences will yield more inclusive results for the broader population.

2.3 Data Collection

2.3.1 Recruitment

Recruitment consisted of sending invitational emails to most community organizations working with marginalized people in Nova Scotia. The email asked service providers to hang promotional posters in their facilities and inform eligible clients that the study was occurring. It was also made clear that supporting the recruitment process was voluntary. The email included an information and consent form and the promotional poster. Out of 23 organizations emailed, six agreed to promote the study, one declined, and sixteen did not make further contact. Recruitment and data collection occurred simultaneously from January 6th, 2025, to February 21st, 2025. Eligible participants engaged in self-screening before voluntarily expressing interest to me over the phone. During this phone call, I read the eligibility requirements, the purpose of the study, what the study would entail, the approximate time it would take, and what benefits and consequences participants could expect from the research. From there, I asked prospective participants if they were interested in proceeding with the research, and if they were, we decided on a date, time, and location that worked for them.

2.3.2 Procedures

As discussed above, this thesis conducted five semi-structured interviews with an option to engage in arts-informed methods. Unfortunately, none of the participants chose to complete arts-informed inquiries. One interview was conducted online over Teams, and the other four were conducted in various community organizations around Halifax and Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. The in-person interviews were conducted in private rooms to avoid

violating confidentiality. Before the interviews began, the participant and I reviewed the information letter and completed the consent form together.

The interviews took approximately 40 minutes to complete and consisted of open-ended questions. The interview began with mapping out a timeline of the participant's life on a scrap piece of paper, specifically the instances of child welfare and justice involvement. From here, we went through each point on the timeline, and I asked questions from the interview guide. The interview questions were open-ended and divided into six sections revolving around the research question: background information to complete the timeline and get to know the participant; experiences with stereotypes; experiences with autonomy and participation; experiences with surveillance; perpetuation of criminalization; reflections and debriefing. Considering the research questions, which ask if the participants had experiences with anti-youth ageism while living in government care, I wanted to gear questions around ways people may experience anti-youth ageism on an internalized, interpersonal, and institutional level. Further, the last section on the perpetuation of criminalization helped explore the connection between child welfare, anti-youth ageism, and criminalization.

2.4 Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded and automatically transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Within a week of completion, each interview was edited verbatim to match the original recording and ensure no errors from the automatic transcription. Smith and Nizza (2022) recommend a five-step process for interpretative phenomenological analysis. First, each transcript was read thoroughly, and exploratory notes were taken before engaging in a detailed analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). These notes include initial reactions, insights, similarities, differences, and contradictions; these notes can be descriptive, linguistic, or contextual (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Once these notes are complete, the second step is to formulate experiential statements, creating a succinct phrase that identifies the meaning of

each significant answer (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Capous-Desyllas and Bromfield (2018) suggest that to establish experiential statements, textural descriptions (what the participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how the experience occurred) should be produced. For example, one statement reads, “*Rigid rules in care facilities punished the participant for engaging in typical teenage behaviour, making them feel powerless and angry,*” effectively capturing the essence (what and how) of the participant’s experience. I completed both these steps on my Dalhousie OneDrive, where I commented notes and statements on what I deemed important passages.

Step three involved matching similar experiential statements and assigning them to cluster themes (Smith & Nizza, 2022); this is done for each transcript. I completed this step again on my Dalhousie OneDrive by colour-coding-like statements. For example, the above experiential statement was coded into a cluster called *Inconsistent Expectations*. In step four, Smith and Nizza (2022) recommend transferring information from step three into a table. However, I did not make these tables because I was using qualitative data software, Atalas.ti, for step five, cross-case analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Instead, I used Atlas.ti to code each theme cluster created from each transcript. Then, I grouped those into code groups, eventually synthesizing these groups into a table of three theme clusters and six themes (see Table 1). It should be noted that before cross-case analysis, I wrote a quick one-page summary of common aspects I noticed throughout the five interviews. Although this is not part of the scholarly recommendation, I found it helpful in situating themes and narrowing down what was most important.

To establish validity and rigour in this study, participants were offered the opportunity to engage in member checking during informed consent (Preston & Redgrift, 2018). Member checking is a process where participants are allowed to review the analyzed and interpreted findings and provide feedback to ensure their words have been understood correctly (Preston

& Redgrift, 2018). All five participants chose to refrain from the process. Furthermore, as part of the intersectional feminist approach, I positioned myself in the research and engaged in research reflexivity, the process of critically assessing my own bias (Preston & Redgrift, 2018).

2.5 Ethical Considerations, Risks, and Benefits

The Dalhousie Social Science and Humanities Research Ethics Board approved this research (2024-7474) on December 9, 2024. Confidentiality was discussed during the initial phone call with participants and again when reviewing the information sheet before the interview commenced. Participants understood that their involvement in this study was voluntary and that they could withdraw without penalty until April 1, 2025. They were also informed that their transcripts and data would be securely stored in an encrypted, password-protected file on my Dalhousie Microsoft OneDrive for one year, after which it would be deleted (University of Waterloo, 2023). All participants received a \$50.00 gift card of their choosing. The only gift cards I did not offer were those from the provincially owned Nova Scotia Liquor and Marijuana stores and gambling sites, as they were not ethically approved.

This research is particularly attentive to the lived experiences of criminalized individuals and their intersecting identities. Given the scope of the research, it can be assumed that some participants may feel mild discomfort or distress when answering interview questions related to their time in government care. Participants were asked to recall potentially stressful situations which could have triggered uncomfortable memories. To mitigate those emotional risks, participants were informed before their involvement in interviews what content would be discussed, and they always had the option to pause or terminate their involvement at any point. Participation was voluntary, clearly outlined in the information letter and consent form. Before the interview and during informed consent, participants received a list of options for counselling or crisis intervention services. This

included local organizations, call or text lines, and federal initiatives. After the interview, participants were given the opportunity to debrief if anything emotionally distressing came up. Luckily, none of the participants disclosed they felt uncomfortable post-interview, and our debriefing conversations were short.

Participants were made aware of the information they provided, and the ultimate results were for partial credit for my master's thesis in social work. They understood that besides the defence presentation, these results may not be shared with others or published in journals, reports, books, magazines, or websites. As such, the participants recognized that this research may not benefit them directly. However, by centring the voices and bringing awareness to the lived experiences of young people during their time in care, perhaps it can bring change to policy, procedures, and generally, the ways society views and treats youth at large. In terms of criminalization, I believe this research also brings to light why punitive and controlling tactics may enrage or alienate young people. For practitioners who engage in this research, hopefully, it facilitates a paradigm shift towards more relational tactics of care instead of employing punitive control. Finally, engaging with participants through lived experiences is an important step in dismantling pervasive ideologies that negatively impact people accessing welfare services.

Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Essence and Overview

The overall essence of this phenomenon has been identified as *pervasive and infiltrating stereotypes as a catalyst for the care-to-prison pipelines*. The phenomenon's essence is presented through three thematic clusters, from which six themes emerged by analyzing participants' experiences with the child welfare system, particularly regarding anti-youth ageism and criminalization (see Table 1).

To reiterate, this thesis project aimed to determine whether anti-youth ageism is present in child welfare facilities and its connection to the care-to-prison pipeline through the guise of former youth-in-care. The project's objectives were to outline whether young people experience anti-youth ageism in group care facilities, how anti-youth ageism may be displayed, and whether anti-youth ageism perpetuates criminalization. Further, this project used an intersectional feminist theoretical lens to help identify the relationship between youth oppression and power dynamics of both micro and macro systems.

To do this, five individual semi-structured interviews were conducted and then analyzed using a phenomenological research design. In line with phenomenological inquiry, I sought to situate the results as an uninterrupted narrative of stories of the participants' lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This aligns with interpretive phenomenological inquiries' methodological design to understand participants' lived experiences and how they make sense of their social worlds (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Each thematic section will begin with a summary of the results and their relation to the study's aims and objectives, followed by subsections that tell the participants' stories without my interpretations to preserve their lived experiences as they have recounted them.

The first theme discusses participants' experiences with anti-youth ageism in government care. It is divided into internal and interpersonal accounts of oppression, as well

as institutional instances of anti-youth ageism in micro-level policies in group care facilities. The second theme uncovers the participants' personal pathways to criminalization and aims to reveal whether anti-youth ageism is involved. The third theme explores how participants believe the care-to-prison pipeline can be disrupted. Although this theme does not directly answer the guiding research questions, as a social worker who informs their practice by centring youth voices and resisting power dynamics caused by pervasive systems of oppression, I felt it was essential to provide individuals with lived experience a platform to share what they believe youth in the government care system need most.

3.2 Theme One: Awareness of Labels and Double Standards

To identify whether participants experienced age-based oppression, they were asked generally if they had faced any stereotypes at an interpersonal level while living in care. They were then probed to ascertain whether these stereotypes were age-based, reflected in group home policy, and how stereotypes were internalized or affected their experiences. Most participants felt stereotyped, but not specifically due to their age. Instead, they felt their status as youth living in a group home altered the public's perceptions of them. Additionally, many participants believed that facility institutional policies imposed higher standards of conduct on them, which did not align with the treatment of their peers outside the care system.

Ultimately, the answer to the first research question is no; participants did not report experiences of anti-youth ageism as a system of oppression within group care facilities. However, they did report another intersecting identity related to their status in care being a catalyst for discrimination on an internal, interpersonal, and institutional level. These experiences of discrimination were reflected within facilities through policies that inform group care programming and throughout the community by peers and parents. For the most part, these stereotypes were reported to be quite distressing for participants and operated

similarly to anti-youth ageism; their care status label still suppressed their autonomy and decision-making power and was used to belittle and shun them from non-welfare spaces.

3.2.1 Internalizing Stereotypes of Care Status, Not Age

All participants expressed that they had experienced some degree of stereotyping during their time in care. However, many believed it was not due to their age but their child welfare status. Participants also reported that these labels did not come from the youth-serving professionals but from community members of all ages. As Connor recounts, they did not feel stereotyped by the social or youth workers at the group homes but experienced being labelled by people who had limited interaction with the child welfare system. While Lauren realized early on that being a youth in care was perceived negatively, and to feel safe, they hid that part of their life from others.

“The people that I was with, like, I feel like it was more or less like people who are on the outside and didn't understand it. You know what I mean?” -Connor

“Like everybody kind of knew what was going on in my life. And once I realized that... Like I was aware of it, myself like the judgment that can be put on me for it. So I knew it was a possibility to be treated differently. Like automatically it would open things up for people to judge me too. So, for sure, I wouldn't talk to anyone and hid it.” -Lauren

Stereotyping from peer groups arose several times, with participants sharing their experiences of bullying at school due to living in group homes. Connor noted that their friend's parents would not permit them to visit their home, suggesting that adults viewed their care status negatively.

“A lot, it affected me a lot, kind of in a bad way. Yea I felt like I was being judged a lot for living there at the time. Just by my peers.” -Lauren

“Just my peers. The kids were mean in class, they called us the prostitutes. You know because of the way that I dress, and where I lived, they assumed that I was working the streets or something maybe. It made me feel lesser than.” -Celeste

“How life is, I feel like there's always gonna be stereotypes and stuff, but people definitely do like I remember going to school and people like, didn't really like that I was like living in a group home, so I wasn't allowed to hang out with a lot of my like friends at their houses and stuff like that.” -Connor

These assumptions community members made caused participants to feel negatively about themselves, as Lauren and Celeste state in the previous quotes. Riley described how they began to internalize these stereotypes, with Connor going so far as to state that they understood why some people would impose such biases. Connor describes the media as a means of portraying youth in child welfare as deviant. They recognized why individuals outside the system may hold discriminatory views against them if the media is their primary source of information.

“My peers made me feel not valid. It made me feel like, I was ashamed of the way that I looked and felt the way that I felt. You know what I mean? Like what everybody else was seeing is not what was actually in me. And I was actually really sensitive, and it hurt my feelings a lot. Yeah, it really did. Made me feel like a can of meat.” -Riley

“I understood it. It didn't really make me feel any type of way. Like I understood it. Like, not everybody grows up in a way where they like, you know, like people do, like in movies and shit, people portray kids who grow up this way like to be bad kids. Like they like, they go through shit, right. So, you got like if that's the way that, you know like people on TV and shit like that portray us, then obviously people are gonna see us that way.” -Connor

Community and peers were reported as the most significant sources of prejudice. However, law enforcement was mentioned as a source of prejudice and discrimination among professionals. Connor recounts that this label has followed them into adulthood, with police still referring to them as a group home kid.

Well, I guess like I said, like some police officers like still to this day up in Halifax like they know me and they'll still call me a Group Home X kid, even though I haven't lived at Group Home X, in years like I haven't lived there in like 10 years” -Connor

Once more, participants did not think it was because of their age but rather due to the label of residing in a group home.

3.2.2 Inconsistent Expectations and Fleeting Feelings of Normalcy

Although participants did not feel they experienced overt anti-youth ageism from group home staff, all respondents believed they were treated differently compared to those outside the child welfare system. The participants often noted that group home facility policies imposed different expectations and standards on youth compared to non-youth in care. Connor and Leon shared that when they attempted to behave like ordinary teenagers, exploring their autonomy and independence, it led to disproportionate punishments and involvement with the criminal justice system; they recognized that this was not the case in their friends' homes and questioned the apparent double standard.

“We were punished for a lot of things that normal kids would do so eventually like. For me, I didn't understand it because if like if my friends didn't come home, like if they came home late, they weren't getting dragged away in shackles and handcuffs. You know what I mean by sheriffs. They were getting talked you know I thought it was very unfair.” -

Connor

“For people who haven't grown up in care, they'll skip school or won't come home on time sometimes, like normal teenage stuff you know. But if we did that, we'd get written up and sent to jail.” -

Leon

These expectations confused participants because they did not understand why their homes had different standards from those of other kids their age. Lauren and Celeste explained that specific policies and the staff enforcing them made them feel untrustworthy within the community. Lauren particularly felt like staff assumed youth would misbehave, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“It's the way they treat people, like they treat you as a child and treat you like you're gonna mess up. They should treat them like they're gonna do something good. Like even if you know they're not gonna go to school, treat them like they are anyway, man.” -

Lauren

“It didn't make sense why I couldn't stay out with my peers and go to parties or have relationships outside the group home. You know I just wanted to do normal teenager things and they made me feel like I was not trusted. It was humiliating.” -

Celeste

These feelings also led Leon and Connor to believe that the policies in group care were designed to separate kids in child welfare from non-youth in care, potentially reinforcing the accepted negative stereotypes that community members already believe.

“They literally like lock you down to make your brain locked down too. If you're trying to prepare us to be better people in the community, why shut the community out of our lives?” -Leon

“It definitely made me feel like all those rules like they were helping people stereotype us and stuff like that. And I definitely feel like it made people look at us the way people looked at us, for sure.” -Connor

This may suggest that even though youth professionals are not blatantly participating in discriminatory practices, their work environments, policies and procedures are subtly influenced by stereotypes and negative assumptions, teaching young people in care that they are different from their peers.

3.3 Theme Two: Pathways to Criminalization

Eligibility requirements for this project mandated that all participants have experienced some form of justice involvement in care or adulthood. The second research question concerned whether anti-youth ageism in group care helped facilitate criminal justice involvement. This question was debunked after participants did not report anti-youth ageism during the first portion of the interview; instead, we focused on discussing how the micro-social relations within group care (Baines, 2017) forged their specific pathway to criminalization. Two themes emerged: participants who entered the criminal justice system as youth reacted against punitive rules and were punished, while those who entered as adults developed severe mistrust of the system, opting to isolate themselves instead. Both these instances led to eventual criminal justice involvement.

Again, participants did not report anti-youth ageism as a catalyst for criminalization, but they did report obvious power imbalances and social relations that made participants feel

there was a dichotomy of superiority and inferiority (Baines, 2017). Staff were mentioned as passive agents of oppression in that they did not actively discriminate against the participants, but they still upheld institutional policies created on the rhetoric that youth in care were deviant and needed to be controlled for the safety of the community and themselves. Whether staff believed in or understood what these policies underlying mandate produced is undetermined. Participants resisted these systems of oppression by either retaliating or isolating; both allowed youth to regain semblances of control for short periods but eventually experienced forms of criminalization.

3.3.1 Rigid Rules Inciting Retaliation

Participants reported that decision-making, participation, and autonomy were rarely granted during their time in care. The house rules, in particular, were discussed as rigid and unwavering, and staff permission was needed to complete even the most minor tasks. Celeste and Leon explained that their daily schedules were strictly enforced by staff, and they were given no decision-making power when creating them.

“Oh, Lord. They like to tell you what to do. You can’t do this; you can do this. Look at the board, those are your chores. You can’t go out until your chores are done. If you wanna go to your room, you ring the doorbell. We open it and unlock it from the camera. It was not a good place for me.” -Celeste

“Well, yeah, you have to be in rooms at certain times you had to. Had to eat at certain times, shower at certain times. You can’t go to the bathroom when you want, smoke when you want. We’re on their time. We’re not on our time. We’re on their time for sure and they let us know it too.” -Leon

When participants were asked how these procedures made them feel, some exclaimed that it made them feel quite angry, often leading to power struggles with staff or having incident reports written. Celeste and Connor recount that the persistent control drove them to retaliate and disobey facility rules to regain some semblance of power.

“They said no relationships between peers, no relationships with kids in the community. It was embarrassing. It made me mad. It made me want to do it more. You tell me not to turn left, I’ll turn a hard left. It got me in trouble a lot.” -Celeste

“It made me. It made me angry. So, it definitely made me act out more. I like I’d start missing my curfew. I wouldn’t come home for programming. I, you know, like I just. Didn’t really care anymore, I wanted to choose my life. I wouldn’t go to school like I ended up getting expelled from school like it was. Yeah.” -Connor

Participants reported that these retaliations often escalated to physical confrontations, resulting in damage within the facility. Consequently, participants explained that police were typically called to de-escalate and manage the youths’ behaviour during these events. This could be seen as some participants’ initial encounter with the criminal justice system.

To further examine the impact of anti-youth ageism in this context, participants were asked if staff influenced their retaliatory measures against punitive policies. To some extent, staff appeared to occupy neutral ground, with participants acknowledging that it was their role to enforce the policies. Although this frustrated participants and sometimes made them feel uncared for, they did not perceive the enforcement of rules as a personal attack. Connor notes that staff would advocate for youth when issues arose, but it often did not lead to substantial outcomes due to what participants assumed to be staff’s job liability. Leon clarifies that the use of police by staff for behaviour management was sometimes justified; even though more could have been done, staff were following protocol.

“Certain situations like they didn’t want to take any more like, you know, take it farther, because at that point it could have costed them their jobs, or would have made them look a certain type of way, you know, like they were more worried about themselves at the end of the day. Back when I was in care, it used to honestly make me very angry.” -Connor

“I won’t lie, any time the staff called the police, they were definitely needed. I would end up fighting people and stuff. I mean the staff could have tried more, cared more, you know? It wouldn’t have helped you know? Like they have to protect themselves too.” -Leon

This may further indicate that young people living in group care do not experience overt discrimination from the staff. However, micro-policies within group care maintain adult power and appear to perpetuate the oppression of youth decision-making abilities, leading to a struggle for control. Thus, even though staff do not explicitly oppress youth, they are complicit in enforcing the policies that do.

3.3.2 Isolation From Stereotypes

Participants observed that they internalized the stigma of being youth in care, which led some to hide their identities and isolate themselves. Although Riley and Lauren expressed similar negative feelings about punitive policies and a lack of agency, their response did not include physical retaliation. They describe witnessing their peers getting into trouble for breaking the rules; however, as Lauren tells, rather than joining in, it acted as a cautionary tale. Riley explains that she avoided resisting rules because she understood that if she got into trouble with the group home or law enforcement, she would be on her own.

“Uh, not for me I stayed out of that stuff. But when they called the police. I think that it like made me react different like I don't want to react in a way where police are gonna get called on me.” -Lauren

“But I mean, I always knew, like, my dad's dead and my mom was not there. So, like if I got in trouble, there was nobody to bail me out, right?” -Riley

Both participants explained that their fear of losing incentives or having police involvement made them feel unsafe expressing their feelings to the staff and pushed them to self-manage their behaviour. This, in turn, fostered significant distrust toward the system and the people working within it. The pair recounted that, although they did not experience intervention from the criminal justice system as youths, their time in care made them reluctant to seek help or engage with the welfare system in adulthood for fear of being belittled or dismissed. Both participants attribute this reluctance to seek support to their adult experiences with the jail system.

“Like when people believe adults over you and you're like, what are you gonna do? You can't defend yourself. And so, you know, maybe if that anger would have ended, I wouldn't have stayed away. You know what I mean? I could have asked for help earlier and avoided jail.” -Riley

“I just knew that people would judge me so I kept everything to myself. It's kinda sad how they treat some people like criminals and some people they don't. And it helped, it was probably a good decision as a kid. But now I still don't want people to know things about me. Its kind of led me to trouble.” -Lauren

Again, their age was not reported as a factor contributing to their mistrust of the system, nor was it observed that staff held negative biases and attitudes towards clients because of their age. Instead, the staff's complicity in enforcing policies that undermined youths' autonomy and participation created a negative narrative that both participants seemed to internalize. This led to Riley and Lauren avoiding seeking social support throughout their lives.

3.4 Theme Three: Moving Towards Equitable Standards of Care

Reflecting on their time in care, participants discussed how group care and child welfare, in general, could better support young people and reduce criminalization. The importance of listening to and connecting with youth was frequently highlighted, which was unsurprising given the discussion surrounding strict rules and the lack of decision-making power. Uplifting the youth's inherent goodness and helping them feel positive about themselves was also mentioned. Although this theme does not directly answer either research question, it does relate to the ultimate goal of this research, which is to figure out ways social workers can begin to disrupt carceral pathways. It also connects to the fundamental goals of my theoretical lens and approach to practice, which is to centre the voices of youth as experts in their own lives while resisting pervasive and oppressive systems that tend to favour adult opinions. Creating space for participants to define the needs of youth challenges dominant narratives such as adult supremacy and repositions them as active agents of change. This shift

is essential for disrupting anti-youth ageist logics that underpin many of the punitive practices embedded in group care and child welfare environments.

3.4.1 Listening and Connection

Participants frequently observed that their feelings were often ignored in group home settings, and when expressed, staff dismissed them, leading to youth escalation. However, participants did report positive times with staff that involved connecting and acknowledging the youths' ideas and emotions. Lauren noted that her most positive experience living in a group home occurred when social workers set aside time for one-on-one conversations. Connor and Leon recounted moments when social workers positively impacted their lives by listening and collaborating on solutions that suited them rather than imposing blanket policies. During these instances, participants felt they had some control over their lives and experienced a sense of respect that was not always apparent in group home facilities.

"I always enjoy like going to get coffee or when they would take us out and actually talk to us and listen." **-Lauren**

"But she'd listen like she used to go above and beyond for me. 'cause she understood. She seen a difference in me. If that makes sense. So, like she'd always like if I told her that I didn't think this was fair, she'd always listen. And then try to come up with a better solution for me instead of just making me do it. It made me feel like appreciated and heard and stuff." **-Connor**

"Yeah, she usually always took me seriously when I had a problem. It felt good to be taken serious you know." **-Leon**

Participants were asked how they believed intentional listening could reduce criminalization in child welfare. While this was recognized as a significant multilayered question, and most participants were uncertain about the specifics, they strongly felt that being heard and included was essential to decrease criminalization.

"Honestly, I think people just need to start listening to these kids more. Asking, taking like, you know, like it's not that hard to ask someone if they're okay. It's really not. Try to understand these kids. Like, that's what they need to do." **-Connor**

Connor suggests that when youth in care are listened to, valued, and prioritized, they are less likely to be funnelled into the justice system.

3.4.2 Acknowledging Inherent Goodness

Participants agreed that to shift the pervasive negative narratives surrounding youth in care as deviant and difficult, youth-serving professionals must embody that change. Lauren discussed inherent goodness, believing that staff should help the youth feel positive about themselves and demonstrate that they are cared for. They elaborated that if adults in positions of power treat them as criminals, why would a youth think or behave any differently?

“Just like the mentality like of them thinking they're criminal, like, make them believe that they're good enough for you. Like just make them think they're worth it you know, just for a second, because I know fucking how they feel. If they think they're a criminal, why wouldn't they be?” -Lauren

Riley expresses similar sentiments and adds that positive experiences must occur daily to feel good about oneself.

“If they could convince these kids to have more positive things in their life, that would be better. Because if they don't go out and join sports teams, arts clubs, whatever, it won't help. It might sound silly but it really does help normal your life a bit.” -Riley

They suggest that, alongside staff and social workers striving to be a positive source for young people, community involvement fosters stability and cultivates a sense of belonging among peers. In turn, this may facilitate normalcy and positive feelings about oneself.

3.5 Conclusion

To restate, participants did not report anti-youth ageism as a factor of their identity that contributed to their oppression. They also felt it was not a factor in their criminalization story. What participants did experience was stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination due to the label of youth in care and this stigmatization was embedded across many systems and relationships. Further, the events inciting criminalization arose in two ways: retaliation or

isolation. Both tactics grew out of resistance to punitive policies and procedures that undermined participants' dignity, autonomy, and intelligence. Participants did not view staff as inherently spiteful or discriminatory. However, they did view the policies staff enforced as degrading and based on negative biases that plague child welfare accessing youth, meaning workers were perhaps unconsciously upholding cycles of oppression. Lastly, in an attempt to emphasize the needs of youth-in-care from individuals who formerly lived in child welfare facilities, participants were asked what social workers and youth-serving professionals could do to dismantle the care-to-prison pipeline and oppressive systems of carceral care. The answer was simple. Take the time to listen to young people's needs and give them time to build relationships and trust. Further, participants highlighted that changing the negative narratives about youth in care begins with workers creating spaces for young people and the community to see their inherent goodness. It starts with social workers to do better.

Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The original aims of this research question were to determine whether anti-youth ageism occurred in group care facilities, how it manifested in internal, interpersonal, and institutional spaces, and its role in facilitating the care-to-prison pipeline. Using an intersectional feminist lens, this study also aimed to uncover how youth's age identity interacted with other systems of oppression on micro and macro levels.

As previously mentioned, participants did not identify age as an oppressive identity but did identify their child welfare status as a source of stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice. Participants described how their welfare status was overtly stigmatized by community members and covertly by group care policies and youth worker staff. Furthermore, participants reported that their pathways to criminalization either began with retaliation against punitive policies or with self-isolation to avoid punishment. Micro-level social relations influenced both pathways, albeit covertly and involved staff complacency with punitive group care policies. Although anti-youth ageism was not identified as a catalyst for youth oppression in group care facilities, care status and its associated connotations were reported as a more significant identity marker of oppression and eventual criminalization. That being said, anti-youth ageism and adult supremacy can still be identified, especially institutionally.

4.1.1 Oppression Beyond Ageism

The present study aimed to uncover how former youth in care experienced anti-youth ageism while living in group care facilities and whether such instances contributed to their involvement with the justice system. Overwhelmingly, participants did not name anti-youth ageism as a primary oppression they experienced. What was uncovered, however, was the impact of being labelled a youth in care and the influence that stereotypes had on micro-

social relations in group care facilities. Instead of unpacking the effects of anti-youth ageism, we can disseminate how participants' identity as a youth in care perpetuates oppression. According to Crenshaw (1989) and Baines (2017), oppression occurs when a power imbalance in micro- and macro-social relations disproportionately affects a group or identity, resulting in subordination and devaluation of the less powerful group. Again, micro-level social relations refer to day-to-day social norms and workplace practices (Baines, 2017). In contrast, macro-level social relations are the larger social forces and ideologies that inform social norms (Baines, 2017).

Per the study's results, participants experienced oppression in multiple ways due to their identity as youths in care and the connotations that come with that. Participants experienced negative stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination for what they believed was due to their identity as a youth in the child welfare system. The harmful labelling youth in care receive is a well-researched phenomenon consistent with other Canadian reports (Carey, 2023; Turcotte & Lanctôt, 2023). Carey (2023) found that the participants in her study internalized youth in care labels as flawed, troubled, stupid, mentally sick, or even pitiful. Similar sentiments were shared in Turcotte and Lanctôt's (2023) article describing youth in care as being labelled deviant, violent, and disturbed. Participants in this study identified that these labels made them feel ashamed, devalued, belittled, and judged. The understanding that they were not normal compared to other kids their age was also internalized and, at times, rationalized by participants. Like the results from Dansey and colleagues' (2019) study on young people's management of stigmatization, the study participants also revealed that internalizing these negative biases evoked feelings of anger, frustration, and rejection.

Participants in this study vocalized that these negative labels were shaped interpersonally, where community members, primarily peers and their parents, held and enforced oppressive beliefs about them because they lived in group care programs. It was

explained that they were bullied and shamed by peers and, at times, banned from spaces because parents believed the participants were delinquent and did not want their children spending time with them. These experiences resulted in the internalization of this discrimination, which led to participants' acceptance that they were bad kids. Notably, the persistence of these stereotypes into adulthood, as indicated by Connors's account of continued identification as a group home kid by police, further supports the argument that discrimination faced by youth in care is not primarily age-related but due to their care status. This begs the question, what part of the youth in care identity produces negative connotations, and why is it an oppressive point?

Michell (2015) explains that the social stigma surrounding youth in care may derive from youths' experiences prior to entering the child welfare system, such as poverty, ethnicity, abuse, or neglect. These identities are socially stigmatized and accepted by some common folk, especially those lacking knowledge about the child welfare system, thereby perpetuating negative narratives concerning youth in care (Michell, 2015), which may align more closely with other forms of oppression, like classism or racism. Turcotte and Lanctôt (2023) agree with this sentiment that the adverse circumstances that typically necessitate child intervention services are the backbone of negative labels that youth in care face, as poverty is still demonized and feared in contemporary society. Negative stereotypes of the parents of youth in care, such as that they were child abandoners, substance users, or lived in extreme poverty and could not care for their children (Turcotte & Lanctôt, 2023), enmesh together and seem to trickle down to be unfairly placed on the kids.

Furthermore, participants reported that group care policies reflected inconsistent standards of conduct for teenagers. They were often punished for engaging in what they considered normal activities for their age, while peers who did not access services enjoyed greater leniency and forgiveness for pushing boundaries. Striving for normalcy in relation to

peers is a common ideal among youth in care, arising from the internalization of the negative stigma attached to their care status (Dansey et al., 2019). Again, the participants agreed that these policies and double standards were influenced by stereotypes and stigma surrounding their identity in care, not their age.

Using an intersectional feminist lens leads this discussion back to those dominant ideologies regarding morality and obedience to social norms that shaped early policy around child protection (Bezanson, 2018; Maki, 2021; Swift & Callahan, 2002). As discussed in the literature review, these policies disproportionately affected the population with marginalized identities as they did not receive the same opportunity to participate in the national economy due to racist and classist values (Bezanson, 2018; Maki, 2021; Swift & Callahan, 2002). Thus, parents were punished by child intervention policies for being poor, racialized, or deviant from the settler norms, and the children were seen as at risk of essentially catching this immorality and in need of correction to assimilate into the dominant culture (Swift & Callahan, 2002).

Policies promoting inconsistent expectations could also have roots in assimilatory tactics to produce citizens with homogenized values (Swift & Callahan, 2002; Swift & Parada, 2004). Teenagers living in a home setting with parental figures are assumed to be taught the proper way to socialize and are granted more relational, lenient ways to teach social conduct (Swift & Callahan, 2002; Turcotte & Lanctôt, 2023). Policies governing group care facilities then appear unfair and more punitive than what other teenagers experience, which again may be connected to the idea that the state assumes these children are immoral because their parents did not follow the social norms laid out by neoliberal values (Swift & Callahan, 2002; Swift & Parada, 2004; Turcotte & Lanctôt, 2023). Perhaps the child welfare policies that participants experienced aimed to assimilate them to follow social norms that reflect neoliberal or traditional values, blanketly deciding that all youth in care must need this

correction due to their experiences pre-intervention. With this in mind, one may conclude that the “child welfare kid” label stems from long-held and sometimes unconscious prejudices against poverty and race.

4.1.2 Criminalization as a Response to Oppression

The second research question aimed to discover how anti-youth ageism perpetuates criminalization. Participants reported two reactions to punitive policies: resistance and withdrawal. Some responded frustrated and angry, resisting group home policies and the staff who enforced them through physical retaliation. These behaviours increased police involvement and resulted in early entry into the criminal justice system. Crowe (2007) noted that youth who feel powerless or mistreated, particularly by overbearing structures like child welfare, have an increased likelihood of resisting adult control. Furthermore, in Carey’s (2023) article, she observed that some participants, who were former youth in care, resorted to violence to resist powerlessness or to be heard in spaces that demeaned and stigmatized them; this also led to increased interaction with the justice system.

Conversely, other participants in this study withdrew, choosing isolation over punishment. Rogers (2017) observed similar findings where youth who experienced stigmatization and loss of agency while in care became distrustful of both staff and peers. Participants in this study shared comparable sentiments, expressing that mistrust of the system contributed to their reluctance to seek help as adults, increasing their vulnerability to criminalization. Resistance to power structures is a core tenet of intersectional feminist theory, asserting that when power is distributed unevenly, the oppressed group may find ways to resist (Crenshaw, 1989; Kerner, 2017). Retaliation to oppressive policies and efforts to isolate oneself seemed to be an act of resistance by the participants under oppression by the child welfare system and an attempt to regain a sense of control that the system had withheld from them.

Regarding anti-youth ageism and its role in criminalization processes, participants did not believe that staff personally held overtly adverse biases against them based on age or other intersecting identities. Instead, they identified group care policies as the primary source of mistreatment, noting how these policies restricted their autonomy and devalued their capacity for decision-making. Importantly, participants emphasized that these punitive practices stemmed not solely from their chronological age but from their stigmatized youth in care label. While staff were not necessarily oppressive on an interpersonal level, the policies they enforced reflected broader macro-social relations, such as paternalistic protectionism and neoliberal risk-based management (Bezanson, 2018; Maki, 2021). This raises an important question about the complicity of staff in maintaining procedures that denigrate youth agency and incite resistance. Given the power dynamics at play, with micro-level policies reinforcing staff dominance, it is plausible that ideologies like adult supremacy, neoliberalism, and paternalism were unconsciously embedded in everyday practice.

Although participants generally viewed staff conduct through a neutral or even sympathetic lens, they nonetheless acknowledged that frontline workers played a role, albeit sometimes inadvertently, in their pathways to criminalization. Participants often recognized that staff were constrained by the systems and policies they critiqued. They understood that workers had limited influence over policy development, a generous perspective given the policies' role in facilitating their oppression. This aligns with findings from Micetic and colleagues (2024), who observed that frontline group care workers often held positive opinions of young people in care and were themselves critical of deficit-based, non-youth-centred group home policies. Similarly, Bryan and colleagues (2024) reported that social workers often felt their professional ethics conflicted with the mandates of child intervention work, yet compliance was required. Echoing these findings, participants in the current study did not perceive staff as intentionally discriminatory, but instead pointed to the punitive rules

that eroded their agency and dignity, ultimately undermining trust in both the system and its workers.

Centring the conversation on moral distress and liability within a risk-based system (Brend, 2020; Bryan et al., 2024; Jaskela et al., 2018), this study's participants' observations of staff complacency take on new meaning. The frontline child welfare workers described by participants, similar to those discussed by Bryan and colleagues (2024) and the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (2025), are constrained by institutional demands prioritizing liability protection and job security over youths' dignity, autonomy, and care. This ethical tension contradicts the original mandate of child welfare work, which is to protect children from harm and promote their healthy development and well-being according to the best interests of the child (Freeman, 2020; Pollock et al., 2024). Staff in group care facilities face the choice between enforcing punitive, criminalizing policies that conflict with their personal and professional ethics or risking professional chastisement or termination. Thus, liability is produced by the neoliberal risk-based system underpinning child welfare practices, as a tool to evoke fear and almost force staff to be complacent in enforcing carceral, punitive, and discriminatory policies. Here, it becomes clear that truly ethical practice is rendered almost impossible in the system as it is now if liability is used as coercive control on the youth-serving professionals (Brend, 2020; Jaskela et al., 2018).

This leads back to the point that staff who complicitly adhere to punitive policies seem to be the underlying perpetrators of these two pathways to criminalization. However, the true facilitator of the care-to-prison pipeline may genuinely be the neoliberal regime that continues to champion a risk-based, paternalistic, and carceral way of practice. If staff were not shamed into following protocols that do not align with their morality and values out of fear of reprimand, more time may be spent forging meaningful relationships with youth clients and finding creative solutions around punitive policies. One may conclude that child

welfare staff in these residential facilities are also being oppressed by the same system that oppresses the youth and participants in this study.

4.1.3 Ageism in Disguise

Even though participants did not name age as an oppressive identity, age discrimination could still be obscured or interwoven with other forms of marginalization related to their care status, without young people realizing it. Indeed, as intersectional feminists would note (Miller, 2010), youth in care are not a monolith of their age, and they may place a higher value on the stigmatization that comes from being system-involved, as does society at large. However, due to the lack of research regarding anti-youth ageism and adult supremacy, perhaps it has gone unnoticed.

Referring to Wray-Lake's (2025) definition, institutional anti-youth ageism encompasses formal structures and policies that perpetuate youth oppression and reinforce adult power. The results of this study suggest that participants believe negative stereotypes of youth in care are reflected in micro-policies within group homes, holding these youth to different standards than non-youth in care; it remains unclear whether age discrimination catalyzed the development of these procedures. However, considering that the theoretical underpinnings of anti-youth ageism are grounded in paternalist ideals and adult supremacy, there may be a connection (Love & Phillips, 2007; Roche, 1999; Rollo, 2018).

The reinforcement of the adult power component in the definition of anti-youth ageism is particularly interesting, as it seems to serve a primary function in the oppression of youth under child welfare policies. As Love and Philips (2007) state, adult supremacy is closely tied with arbitering morality, the facilitator between right and wrong, which, to some extent, is the overall goal of these policies. If policymakers perceive youth in care through deficit-based labels such as dangerous, vulnerable, and unable to partake in moral decision making, this may justify increased adult control and relinquished youth autonomy under the

guise of protection (Rollo, 2018). This protective notion relates to Swift and Callahan's (2002) description of the common law doctrine of *parens patriae*, which essentially codified the right for state agents to step in as parents if they believed a child needed saving or was not being socialized correctly. This suggests that while the policies may not explicitly target youth due to their age, they reflect broader structures of institutional ageism that are inherent in child welfare as an institution. However, this conclusion remains speculative, as it requires further information from the perspective of the adults crafting those policies. What is clear is that negative stereotypes and systems of oppression have impacted youth on macro and micro levels, even if they do not pertain to age.

While staff may not have personally engaged in interpersonal ageism or other mechanisms of oppression, they still unintentionally facilitate policies that uphold values related to paternalism, neoliberalism, and, in a way, adult supremacy, as there is complete adult control (Swift & Callahan, 2002; Wray-Lakes, 2025). This suggests that anti-youth ageism and other forms of oppression are implicitly maintained by staff, as power dynamics and oppressive ideologies are embedded in policies at both the micro and macro levels. It seems quite clear that people working within the confines of child welfare, whether on the frontline or otherwise, want what is best for the youth. However, they may be unaware of the ideological underpinnings of the policies and procedures they enforce. They could also be experiencing moral distress and unable to make decisions they genuinely believe in out of fear of losing their jobs or being in trouble with management. Perhaps, practitioners and policymakers may benefit from enhanced education on the infiltration of neoliberalism, colonial paternalism, and adult supremacy into policies, as it appears challenging to decipher.

4.2 Practical Implications for Social Work Practice

Due to the study's youth-centred framework, participants were encouraged to reflect on ways they believe the care-to-prison pipeline could be mitigated. Further, intersectional

feminist inquiry emphasizes lived experiences. Their responses were included as themes in the results section, reinforcing the importance of youth voice in shaping solutions (Rammer et al., 2023). Participants urged youth care professionals and the child welfare system to listen to youth voices, build meaningful connections, and actively challenge harmful stereotypes by recognizing young people's inherent worth and potential.

A central finding of this study is that participants felt they were not granted autonomy, trust, or opportunities for meaningful participation while living in care. When they tried to communicate their needs and emotions, they were dismissed, which further contributed to frustration, ostracization, and, in some cases, escalation into criminalization. Khan and Ungar (2025) specifically highlight that child welfare youth in Nova Scotia report a lack of participation and voice in their decision-making practices. Similar to the participants in this study, Khan and Ungar (2025) found that involving youth more would establish a greater sense of trust and well-being between youth and workers. A similar conclusion was reached by Damiani-Taraba and colleagues (2018) in a youth-led project aimed at amplifying and listening to the voices of youth involved in child welfare. Their findings reinforce the need for youth care professionals to “take tolerable risks” by creating fair opportunities for young people to feel safe to express themselves and genuinely be heard (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018, p. 12). From a youth-centred and intersectional feminist lens, this necessitates shifting power dynamics in group care programs, actively listening, incorporating feedback, and co-developing policies and procedures that prioritize youth values and needs while aligning with some staff views (Rammer et al., 2023).

Another critical insight from participants was the lack of recognition of their inherent goodness while in care. Participants emphasized that a paradigm shift is necessary, and people, especially workers, must resist the pervasive negative stereotypes that affect young people in care. This is a crucial contribution to the broader scholarship on crossover youth, as

it highlights how deeply the label “youth in care” impacts participants' lived experiences. Many described how these biases led to mistreatment by the system, ultimately reinforcing pathways to criminalization, an ironic outcome given that it is precisely what the system aims to prevent. Tilton (2013) argues that when young people are repeatedly labelled as delinquent, problematic, or beyond help, their capacity for a positive self-concept and access to meaningful support are severely hindered. This study affirms that resisting this harmful narrative and radically accepting youth as good and worthy is essential for the well-being of youth and disrupting the systems that continue to perpetuate this damaging stereotype.

Some participants in this project identified mistrust as a catalyst for their ascent into criminalization, indicating that future social workers should be mindful to invest time in relationship building and advocacy work. This involves advocating for the youths' voices to be heard and considered and pushing for changes to the system. As discussed, there are clear undertones of neoliberal, paternalistic, and adult supremacist values embedded within child welfare policy at both the provincial level and the frontline (Swift & Callahan, 2002). These ideologies have roots in racist and classist rhetoric, yet they continue to be accepted and enforced. Listening to youth and allowing them to participate will significantly disrupt the internalization of harmful stereotypes. However, if social workers and youth-serving professionals do not challenge these pervasive labels, oppressive policies will continue to perpetuate the cycle of oppression and criminalization for youth in care.

4.3 Conclusion

Overall, this research highlights the connection between social stigma, institutional policies, and the criminalization of youth in care. While the role of ageism was not explicitly identified as a factor in participants' experiences, the rigid power structures that characterized their time in group homes reflect young people in care's multiple identities and the power structures that maintain their oppression. However, without further exploration of the policy-

making process in group care facilities, it remains uncertain whether micro-policies genuinely reflect the dynamics of anti-youth ageism. Still significant is the pervasive stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination that the participants experienced because they were living in group care facilities and being branded as child welfare kids. Moving forward, youth-serving professionals, community members, and policymakers should take the impact of being labelled seriously and begin work on systemic advocacy in order to disrupt youth oppression and criminalization.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

Like all research, particular limitations can be noted. For instance, applying a phenomenological approach to this study, which reports the experiences of former youth in care regarding anti-youth ageism and criminalization, presents certain limitations. For example, the experiences are confined to those individuals who volunteered to participate. Understanding that this project will address group care and justice involvement can evoke strong emotions, attracting individuals with particularly intense feelings towards these systems to participate. As such, those who experienced potentially positive outcomes during their time in care may not find the study worthwhile or applicable.

Due to the niche population, finding participants was challenging, and discussion points could be triggering, contributing to organizations choosing not to assist with recruitment. Additionally, I observed that because I was not familiar with almost all participants, the absence of rapport and trust was evident in some interviews. This makes sense, considering that the experiences participants have had with social workers have not always been positive. In future studies, this could be addressed by conducting research with clients with whom the researcher has established a good rapport and a trusting relationship. Furthermore, it might be easier to recruit participants if the project partnered with a community or government organization that the participants trust, as this could foster a greater sense of comfort, leading to more in-depth responses and a larger sample size.

Another limitation lies within the theory of anti-youth ageism itself and the limited knowledge surrounding it. Anti-youth ageism has not been well researched, particularly at institutional levels, according to the World Health Organization (2021). From this research, one could infer that the principles of institutional anti-youth ageism are embedded in the policies of child welfare and group care organizations, which have been inherently

paternalistic and colonial since their inception and champion complete adult control.

However, the lack of scholarly research makes it difficult to prove the existence of anti-youth ageism and hinders new research on youth oppression. Even so, anti-youth ageism and adult supremacy are incredibly pervasive and accepted on many levels in society. It is true that young people are systematically denied full autonomy and meaningful participation based on their age and are frequently subjected to harmful treatment by adults, treatment that is tolerated and normalized under prevailing social norms. Desmarais (2022) reminds us that young people's behaviour exists within the social constructs that adults have built and is equally controlled, surveilled, and criminalized, as youth autonomy is dangerous to adult power. As a less well-known site of oppression, limited research on anti-youth ageism may also promote the internalization of negative stigma and the acceptance of prejudice and stereotypes among youth and adults. Thus, more research should focus on connecting the theoretical underpinnings of anti-youth ageism to the policies and procedures of child welfare institutions and other youth-focused organizations.

Lastly, a limitation of this study may stem from my status as a novice researcher. After completing the interviews and taking experiential notes on the transcripts, I noticed instances where I could have probed further, asked questions differently, or overlooked elements crucial to answering my points more comprehensively. I can attribute this limitation to the absence of prior studies on anti-youth ageism, resulting in limited research on anti-youth ageism and cross-over youth in general, which made developing a novel interview guide quite challenging. One change to the interview guide may include shifting the point of reference. For example, when discussing whether ageism affected their oppression, participants were comparing themselves to other youth, making their age an obsolete point of oppression. Participants were looking for differences in their oppression and not the similarities; this is further hindered by the fact that anti-youth ageism and adult supremacy

are widely accepted and considered an invisible oppression. Additionally, I have only conducted a few qualitative interviews outside of this research, indicating that my interview skills are still in their early stages and require time and experience to develop fully. To address this limitation, more research on the connection between child welfare, criminalization, and anti-youth ageism should be conducted, and I should continue facilitating research to refine my skills.

5.2 Final Thoughts

The results of this study show that, although age and anti-youth ageism are not associated with participants' experiences in group home policies or their criminalization, stereotyping and the label of being involved with child welfare are. Participants reported experiencing stereotypes from their peers and community members, and, by extension, those biases infiltrated the infrastructure of group care facilities and were complicitly enforced by staff. While this research indicates that anti-youth ageism is not the overt cause of these stereotypes, this system of oppression appears to be linked to child welfare at an institutional level. The data shows that young people in care are marginalized by their care status, which seems to stem from other identities of oppression like poverty, race, and, to some extent, age. This was made apparent when considering the historical and ideological underpinnings of the child welfare system and the part neoliberalism and colonial paternalism play in policy creation and the shaping of social norms.

Although ageism is not named as an oppressive identity by participants, some aspects of policy and complicity in enforcing said policy may show that anti-youth ageism and adult supremacy are occurring on an institutional level. Glimmers of internalized anti-youth ageism and adult supremacy are woven throughout participants' stories as they recount policies and staff severely repressing their autonomy, belonging, and participation. These processes also seem to harm the youth-serving professionals who work within the confines of group care

facilities, as their morals, values, and ethics are consistently called into question. However, further research and analysis are needed to explore the ideological foundations of policy and procedures at both micro and macro levels to confirm if tenets of anti-youth ageism are involved. Although the results suggest that staff complacency in enforcing punitive and discriminatory policies lies at the heart of pathways to criminalization, the true facilitator of the care-to-prison pipeline is the neoliberal system that uses fear as a mode of coercive control over workers, youth, and families.

Additionally, participants suggested that social workers must actively listen to young people's ideas and engage in practices that affirm their inherent goodness to combat stigmatization and increased disengagement. Ultimately, these recommendations indicate that centring young people in social work and youth spaces is an essential first step and should be done immediately. However, this advocacy must extend further by educating ourselves and others about the ideologies and histories that may inform policy. We, as social workers and adjacent professionals, must also be leaders in trusting young people to know what they need and be mindful of the language we use to describe young people as a population; otherwise, we risk spreading pervasive negative stereotypes. If social workers do not advocate for change, we remain complicit in perpetuating pathways to criminalization and the cycle of youth oppression.

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Table 1**Theme Clusters and Themes**

Theme Clusters	Themes
Awareness of Labels and Double Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Internalizing Stereotypes of Care Status, Not Age ○ Inconsistent Expectations and Fleeting Feelings of Normalcy
Pathways to Criminalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Rigid Rules Inciting Retaliation ○ Self-Management and Isolation
Moving Toward Equitable Standards of Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Listening and Connecting ○ Acknowledging Inherent Goodness