[Reflection]

The realities of Black youth navigating life after foster care

> This reflection is part of a series Laidlaw Foundation is publishing for Black History Month. The series will highlight the issues we prioritize (education, child welfare, criminal justice, and environmental justice) while also showcasing the critical discussions, leadership and initiatives of Black communities in Ontario within these contexts.

Picture a Black teenage boy who just aged out of foster care. He is equipped with a binder that symbolizes his preparedness for independence (identification, references, transition plans) and he is sent out into the world. He has done everything that was asked of him. Yet, as he calls landlord after landlord, visiting potential homes, and submits application after application, he is met with the same refrain: "We will call you". The words are courteous, the rejections quiet and with each unanswered call, his hope thins. What was framed as readiness for independence begins to feel like a slow erosion into homelessness. This was the essence of a short film screened at the REST Centres Black Youth Equity Summit in November 2025. Yet the story felt less like fiction and more like a familiar experience for many Black youth exiting Ontario's child welfare system. Black youth exiting foster care are frequently told they are ready, yet the realities of systemic racism, housing instability, and fragmented support reveal how unprepared society truly is.

I have heard countless stories that are similar to that of the Black boy with the binder, repeatedly in my line of work. This troubles me because aging out of care is often framed as a milestone but for many youth, and in particular, for Black youth, it is a transition from one form of systemic vulnerability to another. These young people are already navigating a system that was not designed with their wellbeing in mind, and leaving care often compounds the risks they already face. Exit preparedness rarely focuses on ensuring youth have stable housing and supportive relationships for long term security and sadly, it is systemic forces that shape this reality. Black youth are overrepresented in care due to historic and ongoing anti-Black racism. This shows up in the form of family surveillance, school discipline, and limited access to economic opportunities, which do not happen in isolation. They intersect with biased housing, education, justice, and health systems, creating a network of barriers that make it harder for youth to thrive while in care, and even more so, when they exit.

These barriers stem from policies that were once overtly discriminatory. Practices like redlining denied access to loans, mortgages, and other financial services to neighbourhoods primarily inhabited by Black or other racial minorities. Segregated neighbourhoods, and exclusionary housing frameworks limited opportunities for Black families. These included contracts that prevented homeowners from selling or renting to Black or other racial minority families, as well as housing projects that were designed to concentrate Black families in certain areas and excluded them from others. While these practices are now subtle, their effects still linger. The outcome then, isn't failure on the youth's part but a system that is designed to funnel them into instability, when they age out of care.

Think of a youth who's moved through multiple foster homes without ever having a consistent adult anchor before aging out of care. How can they step into adulthood prepared when they lack the resources and guidance necessary for independent living, and when the systems that are meant to help them are fragmented and stacked against them? Some youth leave care with a minor justice record that closes doors to housing and employment opportunities. How are they expected to secure a home and earn enough money to survive when doors keep closing? Others face mental health challenges that are misdiagnosed or unsupported, destabilizing their ability to live independently once they age out of care. How will they manage their day-to-day lives when the help they need isn't available? These are not random misfortunes but predictable outcomes of fragmented and inequitable systems.

From our grantees at Laidlaw Foundation, I have learned that meaningful exit preparedness should start early and provide housing pathways that last. It should include mentorship, financial stability, employment support, and culturally informed mental health services. Most importantly, it should involve youth as decision-makers and not symbolic participants. Young people need to be architects of the systems that affect them. At REST Centres' Black Youth Equity Summit, one principle that resonated with me and that reflects our values at Laidlaw: *nothing about youth without youth at the table.* If we are serious about addressing Black youth homelessness, we must move beyond symbolic readiness. It is time for systems to align, silos dismantled, and prevention prioritized instead of crisis response. One of the panelists at the summit reminded us that 'justice is how we measure love in public spaces'. Exit preparedness for Black youth then exposes our moral and systemic failure. It shows whether we, as a society, are willing to act with care and fairness. Are we providing housing, resources and opportunities, when Black youth need them the most? Are we preparing young people to thrive, or if we are merely just documenting their transition into life of precarity? Also worthy of reflection, is whether we are willing to name systemic racism in our institutions, or do we let it continue to operate quietly through polite rejection and bureaucratic distance? So, then I am left with one last question. Was it the boy with the binder that was unprepared or was it our systems that were not ready for him?

Haiat Iman
Research, Learning, and Evaluation Lead