

## **How can journalists deepen child-welfare reporting? A collaborative project kick-off**

A healthy child-welfare system is critical for a healthy and productive society. It's also a difficult system for journalists to cover. The Canadian child-welfare system is a complex tangle of [legal processes](#), multiple government jurisdictions, [privacy considerations](#), [racial tensions](#), and questions about how best to reconcile relationships with Indigenous Peoples, which have been strained by decades of destructive colonial policies and practices.

These challenges are perhaps too great for individual journalists or news organizations to address on their own. But what if we put our heads together? Could we more effectively cover and hold accountable this complex system? That's what we'd like to test, and we're inviting you to join us.

On **June 28, 2018**, journalists and child-welfare system stakeholders will come together in Vancouver to **brainstorm ideas for a major collaborative journalism project focused on the child-welfare system** — which the Vancouver Foundation has expressed interest in supporting.

This brief provides context for our June 28 kick-off. It suggests why we need more and better child-welfare reporting, and identifies some common shortcomings and challenges in our collective coverage. It summarizes a pilot collaborative project carried out in 2017 by Vancouver-area journalists and led by The Discourse's [child-welfare reporter](#) Brielle Morgan. It then provides examples of collaborations tried elsewhere in other issue areas and concludes with a few more details about the June 28 event.

We want this brief to help jump-start our conversations, but not to limit them. Please feel free to offer feedback!

### **The need for child-welfare journalism that digs deeper and reaches further**

There's a well-documented and urgent need to reimagine the way we, as a society, [think](#) about child welfare, the way our governments [deliver services](#) and [support families](#), and the way we, as journalists, [report](#) on child welfare — especially if we intend to honour our [national](#), [regional](#) and personal commitments to reconciliation.

In its [94 Calls to Action](#), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's first five recommendations focused on reforming the child-welfare system. Across the country, Indigenous leaders are working with [provincial](#) and federal leaders to [transition control of child-welfare systems](#) back to their communities. This marks a major opportunity for collaborative coverage: how could we collectively illustrate both the challenges and success stories fuelling this transition?

While Indigenous families [aren't the only families](#) being [impacted](#) by [inadequate](#) and ["paternalistic"](#) — if evolving — child-welfare systems, they are grossly over-represented in such systems across Canada: in B.C., for example, Indigenous children make up [63 per cent](#) of kids in government care, while in Manitoba they account for nearly [90 per cent](#).

Canada's minister of Indigenous Services, Jane Philpott, has dubbed this overrepresentation a ["humanitarian crisis."](#) She's also acknowledged significant gaps in our information landscape: "No one actually knows how many Indigenous children are in care across the country," she said at an [emergency meeting](#) on child-welfare in Ottawa in January 2018. "No one has good data about the rates of apprehension, where those children are going and why."

***"No one actually knows how many Indigenous children are in care across the country."***

This gap in data represents another opportunity for journalistic intervention. There are many other stories to potentially explore, from the [overlap in child welfare and refugee systems](#) to [outcomes for youth who have aged out](#) of care to the impacts of [changing divorce laws](#).

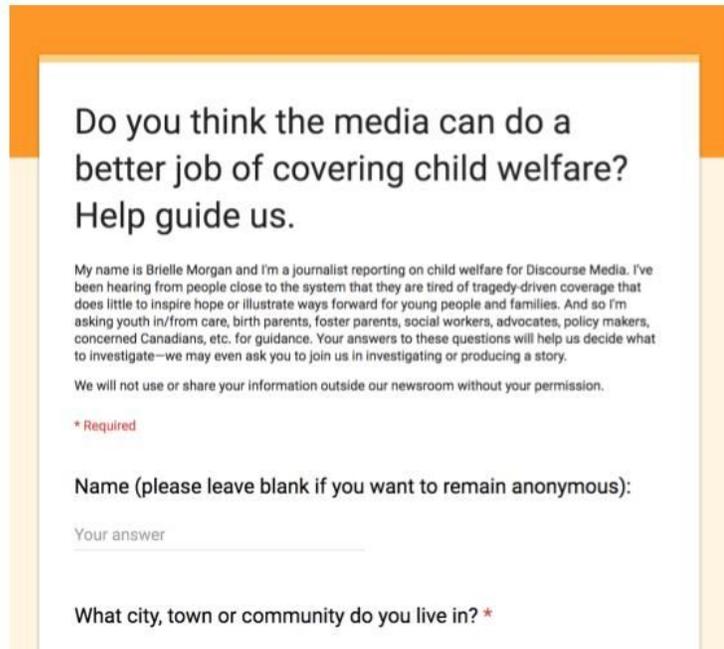
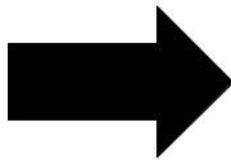
Ultimately, we believe journalists can help deepen public understanding of the system and its impact on families, particularly Indigenous families, by working together to unpack complexity, amplify marginalized perspectives and illustrate ways forward. We also believe there is a genuine public appetite for journalism that brings fresh approaches and new insights to this important issue area. We propose that a well-designed collaboration among journalists working for different news outlets, each with their own strengths and audiences, can help achieve these goals.

### **Problems with status quo reporting — and opportunities**

Many people are calling on journalists to do a better job of covering the child-welfare system. Since 2016, more than 80 people with diverse connections to the system have shared their recommendations for improving coverage with The Discourse's Brielle Morgan. These consultations included a series of workshops and listening events that took place at community organizations in the Vancouver area, as well as ongoing interviews and [surveys](#) of stakeholders.

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We've received  
**75+ responses** to  
this survey.



Do you think the media can do a better job of covering child welfare?  
Help guide us.

My name is Brielle Morgan and I'm a journalist reporting on child welfare for Discourse Media. I've been hearing from people close to the system that they are tired of tragedy-driven coverage that does little to inspire hope or illustrate ways forward for young people and families. And so I'm asking youth in/from care, birth parents, foster parents, social workers, advocates, policy makers, concerned Canadians, etc. for guidance. Your answers to these questions will help us decide what to investigate—we may even ask you to join us in investigating or producing a story.

We will not use or share your information outside our newsroom without your permission.

\* Required

Name (please leave blank if you want to remain anonymous):

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

What city, town or community do you live in? \*

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Participants identified a set of common problems with media coverage: a tendency toward [“foster-care porn;”](#) [disregard for youth in the reporting process](#); too little attention paid to the voices and experiences of [families impacted by the system](#); too little attention paid to the [systemic racism](#) undermining some families in the system; and cyclical, tragedy-driven coverage that does little to inspire hope. In an intensive workshop at the Vancouver Foundation, a diverse group of 25 stakeholders in the child-welfare system and journalists laid the groundwork for [an evolving set of best practices for journalists covering child welfare](#).

In 2017, Morgan began convening meetings with local journalists who were interested in working together to improve coverage of the child-welfare system, including: Katie Hyslop (*The Tyee*); Tracy Sherlock (freelancer and journalism instructor); Gordon Katic (Cited podcast); David Ball (*StarMetro*); Emilee Gilpin (*National Observer*); Dylan Cohen (First Call youth advocate and former youth media fellow at The Discourse); Laurence Gatinel (Co-op Radio); and Dexter McMillan (Master of Journalism candidate, Carleton University).

Many of these journalists participated in a [workshop series](#) organized by Morgan with support from Cohen and Diana Oproescu, Discourse’s 2017 [youth in/from care media fellows](#). This two-day series brought journalists together with youth in/from care, social workers, elders, [B.C.’s Representative for Children and Youth](#), and other key stakeholders.



Journalists and social workers from [Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services](#) discussed the media's impact on the child-welfare system during last year's [workshop series](#) in Victoria. DIANA OPROESCU

After participating in the workshops, Hyslop, who's covered child-welfare for *The Tyee* for years, said, "Every workshop taught me something new, and raised questions [not only] about the ethics of my own reporting but also about how we create news in general." Journalists with less experience covering child welfare said they gained a basic understanding of the system and some ideas and tools to report on it.

Several workshop participants then developed a plan for coordinating media coverage on the child-welfare system, inspired by the [San Francisco Homeless Project](#) (see below for more details about this project). On Nov. 22, 2017, 10 journalists participated in the inaugural [Child Welfare Media Day](#) by publishing child-welfare stories on their own sites, and some also published on a [shared Medium page](#).

This collaborative pilot project brought attention to child-welfare issues in BC, strengthened relationships between journalists and child-welfare system stakeholders, and, most importantly perhaps, it gave journalists an opportunity to reflect critically on our standard practices and consider new approaches. It also sparked ideas for a deeper and potentially more impactful collaborative approach, including:

- Having journalists from different outlets share tips for independent investigations: by dividing up rather than hoarding stories they could cover more ground more quickly.

- Working together on a large, over-arching, shared investigation, rather than simply coordinating individual efforts.
- Bringing in media partners that would reach larger audiences and/or key communities affected by these issues.
- Creating a database usable by all media partners, perhaps one that addresses Minister Philpott’s observation that, “No one actually knows how many Indigenous children are in care across the country.”
- Identifying ways to measure engagement and the impact of the collaboration.

## Examples of successful collaborations

In recent years, some of the most important journalism has been produced by media collaborations. Journalists and media organizations are experimenting with collaborations that [vary widely](#) in their depth and timeframe, and in the roles played by partners. Different approaches could have different payoffs for a project focused on B.C.’s child welfare system.

The most ambitious collaborations are vast in size, such as the [Panama Papers](#) investigation (which in 2016 gave hundreds of journalists from around the world access to a leaked database of over 11.5 million financial and legal documents from the Panama-based firm Mossack Fonseca, which has led to over 4,700 stories), or the cross-country coverage of the 2016 US elections in [Electionland](#), which involved 1,000 journalists and technologists. Large-scale projects like these can have [huge impact](#), but also require a high degree of centralized coordination.

Collaborative projects that are more modest in scale can also be impactful. One approach is to coordinate independent but simultaneous coverage of a specific topic. For instance, the [SF Homeless Project](#) drove attention to the neglected issue of homelessness, when [over 80 media outlets](#) published stories on the topic on the same day in June 2016 (and many wrote [follow-up stories](#) in 2017). According to Audrey Cooper, the *San Francisco Chronicle* editor-in-chief who started the project, following this surge of media attention, new shelters were “rushed into opening,” and philanthropic organizations raised “over \$130 million.”

A second approach is to create a shared database to assist media partners’ investigations. These databases can be used to unearth patterns as well as discrete stories. For the [Price of Oil](#) project, journalists from three outlets ([Global News](#), the [National Observer](#) and the [Toronto Star](#)) and students from four journalism schools examined hundreds of internal government and industry documents. They also interviewed experts and people affected to investigate the effects of the rapidly growing oil industries in Ontario and Saskatchewan. Other current Canadian examples include the [analysis of Facebook ads in the Ontario election](#) by *ProPublica*, the *Globe and Mail*, and CBC; and the work by APTN, The Discourse and *HuffPost* to track the positions of [all Indigenous communities along the Trans Mountain Pipeline](#) route.

Other projects illustrate how media partners can work with non-media partners like arts organizations and universities to deepen investigations and extend their reach. In 2014, journalists with The Center for Investigative Reporting identified [dangerous uses of pesticides in strawberry farming in California](#). By partnering with researchers at the University of Southern California, they discovered that people in affected areas were largely unaware of this problem. To [get the story out to at-risk communities](#), they partnered with local newspapers and radio programs and helped mount theatre productions in English and Spanish. They also partnered with the *Guardian US* to reach a national audience, both to inform strawberry consumers and to put pressure on national and state officials. Their work helped trigger policy changes by government agencies and businesses.

Increasingly, as newsrooms shrink and reporting resources become more scarce across the continent, media organizations are pooling their resources.

“What these collaborations mean for the public — at least in theory — is broader and deeper news coverage, more easily accessed or discovered,” says the Pew Research Center, a U.S. nonpartisan group that tracks issues and attitudes around the world. “What they mean for news organizations is — depending on one’s place at the table — a more diverse mix of content to offer, broader reach and more scalable reporting.”

## **June 28: A collaborative project kick-off**

On June 28, The Discourse will facilitate a one-day workshop (location TBD). The goal will be for participating journalists to **develop a skeleton plan for a collaborative journalism project** that is focused on the child-welfare system and informed by system stakeholders.

At the workshop, participants will:

- Discuss gaps, challenges and opportunities with respect to child-welfare reporting.
- Explore ways to fill gaps through a collaborative journalism project (e.g. create and visualize databases; develop tools to empower people to tell their own stories or research their own solutions; produce live storytelling events; create a website to track whether past policy recommendations for the child-welfare system are being successfully implemented, etc.)
- Outline a project strategy, funding needs, and a framework for working together.
- Clarify capacities and potential roles for different journalists, journalism organizations and stakeholders; identify forms of support they might need.

In recognition of people’s busy schedules, we’re breaking the day into two sessions (although people are welcome to stay for the whole day):

**First half of the day — System stakeholders’ brainstorm:**

System stakeholders such as youth in/from care, parents, grandparents, family support workers, Indigenous elders, social workers, academic researchers, child protection lawyers and key officials from both the Representative of Children and Youth’s Office and the Ministry of Children and Family Development will help identify gaps in coverage and possible topics for investigation.

"There is so much power in the media that could be used to help minorities and oppressed individuals who are stigmatized and misunderstood. I have spent the last few years really involved in the youth in care community and learning what the biggest issues were and advocating for change."

- **Cammy Lawson**,  
2018 Youth in/from  
Care Media Fellow for  
The Discourse



**Second half of the day — Journalists’ brainstorm:**

Journalists from different media outlets who serve different communities will come together to brainstorm a collaborative journalism project, using ideas generated by stakeholders in the morning as a starting point.

**After June 28:**

Coming out of this workshop, a committee of journalists will develop a concrete proposal for a long-term collaborative project — to be considered by The Vancouver Foundation. If the Foundation finds the proposal viable they would be willing to contribute up to \$100,000 toward its implementation — with the understanding that they will have no editorial control. A steering committee made up of journalists from different media outlets would decide how to use these funds.

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