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Young people's transitions from care to adulthood : cross national perspectives

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Project length

Annual seminars between 2003 and 2008

Funder

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Where to find more evidence

Munro, E.R., Stein, M. and Ward, H. (2005) 'Comparing how different social, political and legal frameworks support or inhibit transitions from public care to independence in Europe, Israel, Canada and the United States.' *International Journal of Child Welfare* 4, 191-201

Stein, M. and Munro, E.R. (eds) (2008) *Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood: International Research and Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

This paper was written by Emily R. Munro and Mike Stein



Research undertaken in partnership with Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, UK.

References

Courtney, M.E. (2008) 'Use of secondary data to understand the experiences of care leavers: cross-national comparisons', in M. Stein and E.R. Munro (eds) *Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood: International Research and Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Munro, E. R., Stein, M. and Ward, H. (2005) 'Comparing how different social, political and legal frameworks support or inhibit transitions from public care to independence in Europe, Israel, Canada and the United States.' *International Journal of Child Welfare* 4, 191-201.

Stein, M. (2004) *What Works for Young People Leaving Care?* Barking: Barnardo's.

Thoburn, J. (2007) 'Globalisation and Child Welfare: Some Lessons from a Cross-national Study of Out-of-home Care.' *Social Work Monographs*. Norwich: University of East Anglia. Accessed at <http://www.uea.ac.uk/swk/research/publications/monographs/welcome.htm>.

This CCFR Evidence paper forms part of the **Outcomes for Vulnerable Children** research programme

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Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood

Cross national perspectives

Concerns have increasingly been raised about the difficulties experienced by young people making the transition from care to adulthood in the developed world. Academics from 16 countries attended a series of cross-national seminars to comprehensively describe young people's transitions in different countries; analyse four-cross cutting themes (welfare regimes, legal and policy frameworks, the use of secondary data, and research findings); and to summarise messages for policy and practice.

- Drawing valid comparison between needs, circumstances and outcomes for young people making the transition from care to adulthood is complex. Differences in historical, social, cultural, political and economic context need to be considered.
- Variations in thresholds for entry to care, reasons for entry and profiles of need, types of placement, stability and continuity of placement and carer and the length of time people remain looked after are also likely to have an impact upon how young people fare as they make the transition to independence.
- When undertaking cross-national comparison, consideration needs to be given to differences in language and terminology; legal and policy frameworks; quality and quantity of official data and research evidence.
- Research in Europe, the Middle East, and North America reveals that although some young people are remarkably resilient, as a group, young people making the transition from care to adulthood are at high risk of social exclusion. They are more likely than their peers to have gained poorer educational qualifications, be younger parents, experience homelessness, and have higher levels of mental ill-health.
- Most commonly in Western Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States, young people are negotiating the transition at an earlier age than their peers and are simultaneously having to cope with a number of major changes. In short, their transitions are accelerated and compressed.
- In former communist countries a different pattern of transition emerges: extended and abrupt. Young people may stay in institutional care until their mid-twenties, but feel unprepared for coping with adulthood. Lack of preparation and support means that young adults may feel there is an expectation of 'instant adulthood'.
- The international transitions group adopted the research framework identifying three broad outcome groups of transitions to adulthood; those 'moving on' from care, those 'surviving' and those who are 'struggling'. This framework was seen as a helpful way of connecting international research findings to young people's lives and considering the factors that promote resilience and positive outcomes.

Project aims

The project aims to identify those factors within policy and practice in different societies that promote or inhibit the successful transition from care to adulthood.

Methodology

Work has been undertaken through a series of cross-national seminars, attended by experts from 16 countries. Seminars have focused upon exploration of welfare regimes; legal frameworks and administrative structures; use of secondary data to understand the experience of care leavers; and research evidence.

Definitional issues

A number of conceptual issues needed to be resolved when undertaking comparative research. It cannot be assumed that definitions of key terms and concepts are consistent in different countries. In England the term 'care leaver' is narrowly focused on those making the transition to independence. In a number of other countries the term 'care leaver' is used to describe all young people leaving public care, irrespective of age and/or reason for leaving.

Legal and policy frameworks

In the last twenty years, or so, structural and economic changes have influenced normative transitions to adulthood. For example, the decline in manufacturing and heavy industry has reduced demand for unskilled workers and there has been an increase in the proportion of young people remaining in education beyond the statutory minimum age. Not only are young people staying longer at school, they are also returning to or remaining with their parents after completing their education. Shortages in the availability of low cost housing provide further economic reasons for young people to remain in the parental home (Munro et al. 2005). Normative transitions have become increasingly protracted. Those who are unable to rely on emotional and/or financial support from family are likely to experience additional challenges in the current climate, particularly if compensatory support from the state is lacking.

The nature and type of support provided to young people making the transition from care to adulthood is influenced by how countries see the balance between the individual, the family and the role of the welfare state and the labour market. This, alongside wider social, economic and global influences will lead to variations in a country's policy responses to meet the needs of this group.

For young people leaving care and moving to adulthood, these diverse and complex influences may become embodied in the role of the 'corporate parent'. In practice, the role taken will be influenced by a number of factors, including: 1) The balance between universal services for all young people, or specialist services for young people making the transition from care to independence; 2) Whether legislation is framed in terms of 'duties' or is 'permissive'. Permissive legislation or non-statutory guidelines potentially result in absent or minimal service provision; 3) whether services are offered as a 'right' or 'discretionary'. Discretionary service provision means services may be conditional upon certain activities, for example, seeking employment.

Secondary data to understand the experiences of care leavers

There are wide disparities in both the quantity and quality of data routinely available to facilitate understanding of the experiences of young people leaving care, service responses to meet their needs and outcomes. In part, this reflects variations in attitude concerning the value and purpose of such data. In the United States and United Kingdom data are generated for performance monitoring purposes. In some other countries, for example, Sweden, data are generated more for policy development and planning purposes (Thoburn 2007).

Some national data on care experiences are available from Germany, Israel, Jordan, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, the United Kingdom and the United States. However, far fewer countries use government data for research purposes and/or utilise data from population-based studies to understand the experiences of care leavers. This is regrettable, as 'secondary data can be a powerful torch with which to shed light on the transition to adulthood' (Courtney, 2008, 286) and to understand outcomes for this group, as compared to other vulnerable populations.

Research evidence

Although some young people are resilient, research in Europe, the Middle East and North America identifies that care leavers are vulnerable to social exclusion. As a group, they are more likely than their peers to have poorer educational qualifications, be younger parents, be homeless, and have higher levels of offending behaviour and mental health problems.

Outcomes for care leavers need to be considered in the wider context of their pre-care and in-care experiences. Research undertaken in Australia, France and the United Kingdom suggests that high quality and stable placements support positive outcomes. First, by providing

a warm and redeeming relationship with a carer. Second, stability and continuity are likely to contribute to positive educational outcomes.

Stein's research (2004) suggests that broadly speaking, care leavers fall into three outcome groups, those 'moving on' from care, those 'surviving' and those who are 'struggling'. This framework is a helpful way of connecting international research findings to young people's lives and considering factors that promote resilience and positive outcomes.

Implications for policy, practice and research

Policy and practice recommendations, based on international perspectives of young people's transition from care to independence suggest that the following issues should be prioritised:

- Improving the quality of care to compensate for adverse pre-entry experiences
- Providing opportunities for gradual transitions – more akin to those experienced by the general population
- Longer term support - after care and into adulthood
- More use should be made of secondary data sets
- There is a need for more cohort studies, more evaluative research and more ethnographic research
- Our work is just a beginning, there is considerable potential for local, national and global comparative work