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The transition to adulthood for young people leaving public care: international comparisons and perspectives

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Key words: young people, transitions, comparative research

Background

A growing body of international research findings had revealed the poor outcomes for looked after children, in comparison to children who had not been in care, especially in relation to their education, health and wellbeing. These findings had also shown the high risk of social exclusion of young people making the transition from care to adulthood. They were far more likely than young people who had not been in care to have poorer educational qualifications, be younger parents, be homeless, and have higher levels of unemployment, offending behaviour and mental health problems. In 2003 a seminar held in Brussels brought together, for the first time, researchers from Europe, the Middle East, Canada and the United States, to begin to explore in depth the issues underpinning these research findings.

Purpose

This paper will outline the roots and development of this international research group, with members from 16 countries, from its origins in 2003 to 2008, leading to the publication of *Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood*. This will provide the context for an exploration of key issues arising from the work of the group, drawing on the 16 international chapters, as well as the thematic chapters: comparing welfare regimes; legal and policy frameworks; using secondary data to understand the experiences of young people leaving care. In conclusion the paper will look at messages from research, and their implications for policy and practice

Key findings

- 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, North America reveals that although some young people are remarkably resilient, and there are differences in outcomes (as detailed below), as a group, young people making the transition from care to adulthood are at high risk of social exclusion.
- Most common, in Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States, many 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. 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 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.

Implications for policy, practice and research

Policy, practice and research recommendations arising from the group include:

- 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
- Stronger legislation and 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

Key references

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