

Youth Transitions Out of State Care

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Youth Transitions Out of State Care: Being Recognized as Worthy of Care, Respect, and Support

BY

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Christian (pseudonym), a young man with much promise and ambition who generously shared his life with me throughout the year before his untimely death in 2018.

For Whom the Bell Tolls

*No man is an island, entire of itself.
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.*

*If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
As well as if a promontory were,
As well as if a manor of thy friends
Or of thine own were.*

*Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind.
And, therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.*

— John Donne

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List of Abbreviations

CAO	Central Applications Office
HAP	Housing Assistance Payment
HSE	Health Service Executive
ILP	Independent Living Program
IT(s)	Institute(s) of Technology
NEET	Not in Employment, Education, or Training
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
P1	Phase 1 interview
P2	Phase 2 interview
P3	Phase 3 interview
PLC	Post-Leaving Certificate course
QLR	Qualitative Longitudinal Research
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TSS	Transition Support Services
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

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About the Author

Natalie Glynn is a Lecturer and Research Officer in the Comparative Public Policy Research Group at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Tübingen. She was a Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholar for the Irish Research Council from 2016 to 2019. She has also worked as an Evaluation Fellow at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases. Prior to entering research, she was a sixth-grade science teacher at Todd County Middle School in Mission, South Dakota on the Rosebud Reservation, where she developed a passion for working with young people.

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Chapter One

Introduction

My aunt fostered several older children when I was growing up. Though I did not meet them often, I distinctly remember a young man who came to Thanksgiving when I was 12, John. He was older – 16, almost 17 – and seemed very “cool.” We talked and played games like children do at family gatherings, and then I never saw him again. This kind of momentary connection with the foster children in my aunt’s care became normal over my teenage years, and I soon found myself not thinking much about the children passing through my aunt’s home, though I do remember that they were all older children. Then, about 10 years later, my aunt was talking at one family gathering about some concerns she had for a young man she had fostered. It was John. To my surprise, she had stayed in touch with him over the years after he left her home. Without much thought, I had assumed that she had let him slip as easily from her life as he had from mine. This was my first introduction to the lasting bonds that can be made in the foster care system, but also to the transiency that becomes a norm for so many children and young people who have been placed in alternative care.

In search of a meaningful research project, I decided in 2015 to investigate the transition experiences of young people like John. I wanted to learn more about how they learn to live independently after their time in alternative care, what kinds of decisions they must make as they embark on this journey, and what resources are available to them. I knew from my aunt’s experiences that some keep in touch with former carers for quite some time after they leave their care, but I also knew from research that this is a group of young people who are often disadvantaged in society by virtue of smaller social networks, disrupted educational journeys, and traumatic experiences with which they are coming to terms. This book, a study about young people aging out of state care in Ireland, is a culmination of that work.

Youth Transitions in Transformation

Care leavers are first and foremost youth who are situated in a larger social structure in which all young people experience a variety of transitions on the way to attaining adult status in society. It is, therefore, important to consider how young

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people transition from adolescence to young adulthood in the Western world, a process that has become increasingly convoluted, as Kiernan (1991) explains:

No one single event marks the attainment of adult status, but it usually involves changes from economic dependence upon parents to economic independence and from participation in the family of origin to establishment of one's own family. Becoming an adult usually involves a number of key transitions: finishing full-time education; entry into the labour market; leaving home; establishment of an independent household; and entry into marriage and parenthood. (p. 95)

Over the past three decades, a large body of research has examined diverse aspects of youth transitions, including educational completion, labor force participation, household establishment, marriage, and parenthood (Arnett, 1997, 2000, 2015; T. D. Cook & Furstenberg, 2002; Furstenberg, 2010; Gierveld, Liefbroer, & Beekink, 1991; Goldscheider & Davanzo, 1989; Iacovou, 2002; Kiernan, 1991; Woodman & Bennett, 2015). These are distinct yet interrelated phenomena that are referred to variously as “social,” “demographic,” or “role” transitions (Arnett, 1997). Research has consistently demonstrated that these types of transitions are becoming more circuitous and less connected to one another than in previous generations (Arnett, 2000; T. D. Cook & Furstenberg, 2002; Furstenberg, 2010; Woodman & Bennett, 2015).

At present, prolonged and sporadic dependence on the family home for residence are common after brief periods of independent living. This pattern is in contrast to the post-War period when the age at which young people left home was tightly linked to marriage and first employment (Blatterer, 2007; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). During the 1960s and 1970s, the age of leaving home began to diverge from these normative (expected) social and role transitions (Arnett, 2000; Blatterer, 2007; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Gierveld et al., 1991; Goldscheider & Davanzo, 1989), and, by the 1990s, 70% of young adults in the United States of America (USA) experienced independent living prior to marriage, such as in dormitories or private residences (Goldscheider & Davanzo, 1989). In the European context, by the early 2000s, the age at which 50% of young people were living outside the parental home ranged from 20 years old in Finland to 30 in Italy (Iacovou, 2002), with it being consistently demonstrated that young women leave the family home earlier than young men (Gierveld et al., 1991; Goldscheider & Davanzo, 1989; Iacovou, 2002; Kiernan, 1991).

This change in residential patterns has seen a more recent shift whereby young adults frequently return home after a period of independent living for a variety of reasons, including the end of a romantic partnership and the conclusion of educational studies (Furstenberg, 2010; Gierveld et al., 1991; Goldscheider & Davanzo, 1989; Kiernan, 1991). Thus, currently in the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries, 35% of young people between the ages of 20 and 34 years of age are living with at least one parent (OECD Social Policy Division, 2016). In Ireland, over half (57.25%) of the young

people (aged 20–34 years) not living with a partner continue to reside with at least one of their parents (28.18% of all 20–34-year-olds) (OECD Social Policy Division, 2016).

A shift in family formation patterns also demonstrates a detachment of household establishment from the founding of one's own family. During the 1990s and 2000s, marriage rates in almost all OECD countries declined¹ while the age at first marriage rose (Arnett, 2000; Gierveld et al., 1991; Goldscheider & Davanzo, 1989; OECD Social Policy Division, 2018c). Recent figures indicate that the average age of women's first marriage increased from 24.5 years in 1990 to 30 years in 2016 and that the average age of men's first marriage increased from 27 to 31 years over the same period (OECD Social Policy Division, 2018c). These trends in delayed marriage have been accompanied by declining birth rates and delayed childbirth, that is, the age at which young adults are starting families is also increasing. The OECD average for women giving birth is now 30+ years of age, and the highest average age of first childbirth for women in the OECD is in Ireland² at 32 years of age (OECD Social Policy Division, 2018b).

Additionally, education and employment transitions are changing, with young people either postponing entering the labor market or combining part-time or seasonal work with extended periods of educational participation (Furlong et al., 2018; Gontkovičová, Mihalčová, & Pružinský, 2015). Both secondary completion rates and tertiary education participation rates have increased significantly in recent decades. Generally, young women are progressing to third-level education at higher rates than their male counterparts, but, even for young men, current rates of tertiary education are significantly higher than they were 20–30 years ago. This does, however, vary by socio-economic background, with young people who have at least one tertiary educated parent more likely to attend tertiary education than those with parents who have no higher-level education (OECD Social Policy Division, 2018a). Nonetheless, progressing to tertiary education is *becoming an expectation* for the masses rather than an “elite experience” (Furlong et al., 2018, p. 65). This shift is related to a myriad of social, economic, and political changes that include governments promoting “educational participation on the grounds that a more educated population is believed to enhance economic competitiveness”; meanwhile, young people are aware that “unqualified [school] leavers have poor employment prospects” and are thus taking “shelter in education” (Furlong et al., 2018, p. 65).

Finally, alongside these shifting transition patterns there has been a scaling back of social welfare systems since the 1980s, commonly referred to as “welfare state retrenchment” (Starke, 2006). Happening in a variety of contexts and in diverse ways, retrenchment was spurred by a belief that the welfare state “had

¹Notably, Ireland is one of six countries that has seen an increase in the rate of marriages since 1995, the others being Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Slovak Republic, and Sweden.

²Ireland has the highest average age of childbirth for women. It is closely followed by Italy, Korea, Spain, and Switzerland with averages of nearly 32 years of age.

become a significant *source* of social and economic problems instead of a solution” (Starke, 2006, p. 105, emphasis in original). Thus, there has been substantial “restructuring” of welfare benefits to introduce eligibility criteria, requirements to pursue work, and other measures to encourage self-sufficiency and reduce welfare claimants. In terms of youth social policy, this led to what Furlong et al. (2018, p. 35) refer to as the “punitive turn,” which is characterized by “sanctions in the form of benefit withdrawal” should one refuse to submit to coercive measures such as being required to accept a job placement. Thus, young people increasingly turn to their support systems rather than the state for assistance in times of need. In this way, welfare state retrenchment and a punitive turn in youth social policy has contributed to the externalizing of youth support onto families and personal support systems (Furlong et al., 2018).

In summary, the past 30–40 years have seen numerous discernible shifts related to – and which impact upon – the transition to adulthood in Western countries. Major factors that have contributed to the changing nature of the transition to adulthood in the Western world include the expansion of higher education, growing difficulties in the youth labor market, increased cohabitation, later marriage, and fewer children (T. D. Cook & Furstenberg, 2002; Furlong et al., 2018). Young people now experience protracted and intermittent periods of dependence on their families for housing and financial assistance; educational participation has extended into the third decade of life for many more young people than previously; and young people are regularly deferring both marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2000, 2015; T. D. Cook & Furstenberg, 2002; Furlong et al., 2018; Furstenberg, 2010; Gierveld et al., 1991; Goldscheider & Davanzo, 1989; Iacovou, 2002; Kiernan, 1991; OECD Social Policy Division, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Additionally, families and social networks are increasingly expected to support youth in these changing transitions as the state has reigned in welfare benefits, particularly for those under the age of 25 (Furlong et al., 2018).

How Care Transitions are Different

These changes create social expectations for the transition to adulthood generally and have implications for the policies and expectations placed on young people leaving care, which typically occurs between the ages of 18 and 21³ (Häggman-Laitila, Salohekkilä, & Karki, 2018). While experiences vary according to care placement type – residential, foster, and kinship care – having a history of state care (hereafter referred to as care) is associated with key deviations from the above noted trends and numerous poor outcomes for care leavers. Because

³The age at which young people leave care varies by jurisdiction, with some areas of the UK allowing young people to leave at the age of 16 years (E. R. Munro et al., 2016). Conversely, Scotland recently extended the right to care to the age of 21 years and the right to “advice, guidance and assistance” up to the age of 26 years (Children & Young People’s Commissioner Scotland, 2019). Typically, though, young people are expected to leave care between the ages of 18 and 21 years old (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018).

“[e]xisting literature has primarily focused on documenting and describing the numerous challenges associated with emancipation” (Curry & Abrams, 2015, p. 143), a large body of evidence on outcomes for care leavers highlights the social exclusion that young people leaving care experience. Social exclusion includes both material disadvantage and marginalization in society. Material disadvantage is generally associated with being cash-poor and living in relative poverty while marginalization is a social process of excluding groups based on characteristics an individual possesses such as gender, race, and/or age (Stein, 2006b). The literature reveals that care leavers experience social exclusion in the form of both material deprivation and social marginalization across nearly all areas of life, including education, employment, housing, family formation, healthcare and well-being, and criminal justice (Gypen, Vanderfaellie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017).

Less Education, More Unemployment, and Greater Public Assistance

Several key findings related to education have emerged from the literature, and there is now strong evidence that people with a history of care experience disrupted education in care, have high rates of special education needs, and have low tertiary educational participation (Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011; Cameron et al., 2018; Gypen et al., 2017; Morton, 2017). Importantly, being taken into care has been shown to lead to interrupted educational experiences, which can negatively affect educational attainment. Notably, if a young person does not complete secondary education before leaving care, they are unlikely to complete it afterward (Ferrell, 2004), which has long-term consequences since inadequate primary and secondary education is a primary barrier to participation in third-level education (Cameron, 2007).

Consequently, in contrast to higher education trends, people with care experience are much less likely to continue on to tertiary education. In a recent cross-country comparative study of care leaving in England, Finland, and Germany, Cameron et al. (2018) found that in all participating countries *those who had ever been in care* were “much more likely to have no qualifications and much less likely to have a higher level qualification” than their *peers who had never been in care* (p. 167). This is probably related to their care histories given the likelihood of having disrupted educational histories. For instance, another multi-country study of leaving care and progression to higher education conducted in England, Sweden, Spain, Hungary, and Denmark found that “those in care do much less well than other children, even compared with those from very disadvantaged backgrounds” (Jackson & Cameron, 2012, p. 1110), noting that most care leavers had “severely disrupted” education prior to third-level. It was acknowledged in all five countries by the study’s practitioner participants that a division exists between social services and education that hinders collaboration and service provision (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). In Ireland, aftercare steering committees have been mandated to address such divisions between child welfare and other social services, including housing and education. However, this is a recent development with no research or assessment to-date, though all but one of the 17 management areas for Tusla,

the Child and Family Agency, have established an aftercare steering committee (at the time of writing). It must be noted, though, that the education liaison on these committees is from further education and training, not higher education (Tusla, 2017e), and anecdotal evidence during the community assessment process (see Appendix 3 for more information) of this research indicated that the education liaison for many steering committees was the member most likely to be absent from meetings.

Lower educational attainment has implications for the employment prospects and financial security of care leavers. Limited qualifications and other skills deficits (e.g., in the areas of drafting applications and interviewing) leave young people aging out of care more likely than their non-care peers to be unemployed, in lower wage jobs when they are employed, or in receipt of public assistance (Cameron et al., 2018; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Peters, Sherraden, & Kuchinski, 2016; Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014). Cameron et al. (2018) found that care leavers in their three-country comparative study were “over represented in economically inactive categories” (p. 168), which were defined as unemployment and looking after the home or family. Furthermore, Brännström, Forsman, Vinnerljung, and Almquist’s (2017) analysis of the 1953 Stockholm birth cohort found that, into midlife, people with a history of out-of-home care were twice as likely to experience persistent unemployment. In Ireland, there is very little data or research available on the employment experiences of children in care or care leavers. Notably, though, Arnau-Sabates and Gilligan’s (2015) qualitative investigation of care leavers with “substantial” employment experience since leaving care in Catalonia and Ireland found that care leavers attributed their later employment success to early work experiences while in care, which was bolstered by supportive carers.

Difficulties in securing employment and reliance on low-wage and unskilled work leads to a higher rate of dependence on government assistance (Brännström et al., 2017; Broad, 1999; Mech, 1994; Peters et al., 2016; Wade & Dixon, 2006). Care leavers often rely on a combination of general welfare benefits and specialized leaving care supports to meet basic needs (Peters et al., 2016). Research in England and Finland demonstrates that people with a history of care are far more likely to receive benefits by the age of 30, 65% and 87% in England and Finland, respectively – rates approximately three times higher than the “never-in-care” populations of the study (Cameron et al., 2018). In Ireland, there is no data available to assess social benefits utilization of care-experienced adults compared to non-care peers. However, one recent study of care leavers in north Dublin found that within 16 months 42% of care leavers depended on social welfare for their income⁴ (Daly, 2012b).

⁴In terms of comparison to the general population, though, it should be noted that Ireland has the second highest market income inequality in Europe, which is offset by a heavily redistributive welfare system – claimed to be one of the most progressive in Europe – in which a large share of the population receives some form of social welfare transfer. For example, the bottom 40% of earners in Ireland receive nearly three-quarters of their income from state income transfers (Sweeney & Wilson, 2019).

Housing Vulnerability and Early Family Formation

Given the financial instabilities that many care leavers encounter, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a strong connection between leaving care and homelessness. Youth leaving care experience periods of homelessness at a higher rate than the general population, with samples commonly having at least one-third of individuals experiencing homelessness (Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden, & Rosenau, 2012). In addition to high levels of foster care alumni reporting experiences of homelessness, research also shows that the percentage of care leavers who indicate that they have been homeless increases over time (Pecora et al., 2003). These findings are consistent with the only national study of leaving care in Ireland, which found that six months after leaving care, 33% of young people experienced homelessness, which increased to 68% two years after leaving care (Kelleher, Kelleher, & Corbett, 2000). Simultaneously, studies of youth homelessness in several jurisdictions, including Ireland, have consistently highlighted that a disproportionately high percentage of homeless youth report a history of state care (Cameron et al., 2018; Doyle, Mayock, & Burns, 2012; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Mayock & Carr, 2008; Mayock, Corr, & O'Sullivan, 2008; Mayock, Parker, & Murphy, 2014).

Importantly, housing is a strong predictor of positive outcomes across a number of significant domains, such as employment and mental well-being. Wade and Dixon (2006), for instance, found that housing was “the life area most closely associated with mental well-being, outstripping the contribution made by involvement in education and training” (p. 203), suggesting that the link between purposeful economic activity and mental well-being is mediated by housing. Research has identified a number of key factors – including personal difficulties (e.g., mental health), social networks, and government support – that strongly influence the housing trajectories of care leavers. For example, smaller social networks are associated with having experienced homelessness (Avery, 2010; Reilly, 2003). Tusla, the Child and Family Agency in Ireland, have recently begun publishing data on the housing arrangements of young people in receipt of aftercare services. In December 2018, nearly half (47%) of young people aged 18–22 continued living with their carers; 10% returned to their families of origin; and a quarter (26%) moved into independent living (Tusla, 2019). Tusla data do not (at the time of writing), however, track the numbers of care leavers experiencing homelessness or their use of homelessness services (Tusla, 2019), though Irish studies have indicated a strong relationship between a history of state care and experiencing homelessness (Mayock & Parker, 2017; Mayock, Sheridan, & Parker, 2015).

Finally, care leavers are much more likely to experience early parenthood and establish families at a younger age than their non-care peers. Studies have found that between one-fifth and one-third of care leavers have at least one child by the age of 20 (Cameron et al., 2018; Everson-Hock et al., 2011; Jones, 2014a; Wade, 2008), even as the median age of parenthood continues to rise – now averaging 30 years of age for women in OECD countries (OECD Social Policy Division, 2018b). Comparing care leavers in Britain, Finland, and Germany, Cameron et al. (2018) found that care leavers were more likely to have children than their

non-care peers, especially before the age of 20. Additionally, Chase, Maxwell, Knight, and Aggleton (2006) noted, in an in-depth study of parenthood among care leavers in England, that “there was a high degree of ambivalence towards the prevention of pregnancy” (p. 442). Wade (2008) argues that “a pattern of early family formation, whether planned or unplanned, may be a feature of the accelerated transitions made by young people leaving care” (p. 49). Importantly, early parenthood ought not to be necessarily viewed as a negative outcome since many young people find parenthood to be a positive experience (Cameron et al., 2018; Chase et al., 2006; Stein & Munro, 2008), though unskilled and/or unemployed individuals are more likely to wish they had delayed family formation until they were more stable in terms of housing and income (Chase et al., 2006).

In sum, the literature on outcomes reveals that care-experienced young people’s life circumstances differ, sometimes dramatically, from the general population – and even from other “disadvantaged” populations in some cases. Contrary to international trends in youth transitions, care leavers are less likely to go on to higher education and, subsequently, to maintain employment than their non-care peers. Additionally, unlike the trend in extended dependence on the family home, care leavers are more likely to leave home early and experience homelessness. Finally, in contrast to the trends in delayed parenthood and family formation, young people with a history of care are more likely to experience early parenthood, especially by the age of 20, than their non-care peers. These findings have contributed to the conclusion that care leavers’ transition to adulthood are more “accelerated and compressed” than their non-care peers’ transitions (E. R. Munro, Molholt, & Hollingworth, 2016; Stein, 2014).

The Care-leaving Policy Landscape

Thus, it is recognized that young people who leave out-of-home care at the age of 18 are uniquely disadvantaged compared to their non-care peers, and there is a growing international acceptance of the need for continued support for young people leaving care (van Breda et al., 2020). States have a variety of policies to choose from to support young people aging out of care, one of which is extending the right to remain in care after the age of 18 (Mendes, 2021). Alternatively, and more commonly, the state may choose to extend other supports to young people after they have left the care system, often referred to as aftercare, such as providing a support worker and/or educational, housing, and/or financial assistance (Mendes & Snow, 2016).

Social Investment Versus Social Inclusion

Interventions that have been developed for youth leaving care can be classified into six categories of assistance: housing, employment, education, mentorship, independent living, and health (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Stein & Dixon, 2006; Woodgate, Morakinyo, & Martin, 2017). Based on their assumptions and underlying functions, these interventions can be grouped into two models or approaches to policy: social investment and social inclusion (Mendes,