

GUEST EDITORIAL

Outcomes of children raised in out-of-home care

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Introduction

The overarching objective of this special issue is to examine the outcomes of children who were raised for part of their childhood in out-of-home care, including in foster care and institutions. There is a growing body of literature examining the transition to adulthood for young people leaving care (e.g. Collins, 2001; Courtney et al., 2016; Mendes, Pinkerton & Munro, 2014; Stein & Munro, 2008). While these studies generally show that youths raised in care are at risk of experiencing adverse outcomes in adulthood, the amount of literature is still small.

Research so far has shown that negative outcomes can manifest in multiple life domains, including education, employment, relationship formation, parenting experiences, health, wellbeing and life satisfaction, and contact with the criminal justice system (e.g. Mendes & Snow, 2016; Stein, 2006; Stein, Ward & Courtney, 2011). However, many studies are retrospective, and it is difficult to disentangle the impact of pre-existing vulnerabilities from the impact of the care experience itself. Also, while care arrangements have existed for several centuries in different countries, few studies have attempted to compare outcomes across jurisdictions or historical periods

(but see for example Stein, Ward & Courtney, 2011). Moreover, existing studies often either focus on small samples or follow youths for a relatively short period after they have left care.

This special issue was initiated to bring together studies on the aftercare experiences of women and men, from a variety of disciplines, covering different countries and historical periods. A first aim of the special issue is to build upon the emerging body of work on care leavers, by documenting the outcomes of youths who were followed up after they had left out-of-home care. It contains contributions that look at a variety of life domains, including 'objective' markers of adult life success, such as employment, but also outcomes that are less often considered, such as experienced social support and identity. For example, both the study by Averdijk, Ribeaud and Eisner and the article by Verbruggen, Van der Geest and Bijleveld include outcomes in objective domains, such as education, employment, accommodation, and antisocial and criminal behaviour, as well as subjective measures such as employment quality and self-efficacy. Cox, Shore, Alker, and Godfrey provide a historical analysis of outcomes in objective life domains including criminal behaviour, employment and

family formation. Furthermore, Okpych, Feng, Park, Torres-García, and Courtney examine outcomes in terms of different types and sources of social support, whilst Luyten, Nuytiens, Christiaens and Dumortier focus on self-perception and identity, and Cameron looks at realisation of educational aspirations.

A second aim of this special issue is to further investigate to what factors the generally poorer outcomes of care leavers are attributable. An important question is to what extent placement in care and its consequences contribute to difficulties in adulthood among these youths, over and above their often difficult childhood circumstances, which contributed to placement in care in the first place, but which may also explain long-term negative outcomes. In the special issue, pre-existing vulnerabilities such as childhood victimisation are considered, as well as placement in care itself and the associated stigmatisation. In particular, Averdijk and colleagues use a propensity score matching approach to examine whether childhood risk factors or placement in care contribute to negative outcomes after care. Verbruggen et al. focus on the extent to which patterns in adult criminal behaviour impact outcomes in adult life domains, whilst controlling for childhood risk factors. The theme of stigmatisation due to having spent time in care features in the contribution of Luyten, Nuytiens and colleagues.

Third, the special issue also aims to gain insight into the experiences of care leavers by examining what their life trajectories looked like after leaving care, what obstacles they experienced, and how they made sense of themselves and their time in care. Only considering objective markers of adult life adjustment may result in an incomplete picture of the lives of care leavers. Moreover, especially their subjective experiences during and after their time in care may be key to understanding why some do and others do not experience poor outcomes in adulthood (e.g. Stein, 2005). The three qualitative contributions to this special issue by Luyten, Nuytiens and colleagues, Cameron, and Cox et al. therefore help to provide a more in-depth understanding of the lives of care leavers.

The fourth and final aim of the special issue is to bring together research that examines outcomes of children raised in care from a variety of countries. The six studies included in this special issue were conducted in five different countries: the United

States, England, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Taken together, these studies therefore shed light on outcomes of youths who have spent time in care in a range of countries and care settings.

Short outline of the special issue

This special issue consists of a collection of six contributions, which take different methodological approaches to the analysis of aftercare outcomes. Three papers use a quantitative approach to study outcomes of youths who have spent time in care. In addition to describing the outcomes in a variety of life domains, these studies also examine background (risk) factors that can explain (negative) outcomes after leaving care. These papers are complemented by three qualitative studies that provide an in-depth exploration of young peoples' experiences after leaving care, and paint a richer and more contextualised picture of what the lives of young people look like after leaving care.

To begin with, Okpych, Feng, Park, Torres-García and Courtney focused on the role of social support among youths leaving foster care in the United States. They studied a sample of young people in foster care who were followed up at age 19, and examined to what extent youths were still in some form of extended care at age 19, what type of arrangements they lived in, and what types and sources of social support they had available to them. The study also examined differences in social support between youths who left care by the age of 19, and those who used extended care arrangements.

In general, a substantial proportion of youths reported having inadequate emotional, tangible, or informational support at the follow-up interview. Compared to youths who had left care, youths who used extended care arrangements – offered to help them make the transition out of care and into young adulthood – felt better supported, as they were more likely to receive adequate tangible and informational support, as well as support from professionals.

Averdijk, Ribeaud and Eisner addressed the question of whether potentially negative outcomes after out-of-home placement (i.e. foster family or group home) were due to pre-existing childhood adversities, which are characteristic of youths placed in care, or due to the out-of-home placement itself. The authors used a longitudinal

study of Swiss youths, and adopted a propensity score matching approach. This enabled them to match youths who had been placed in out-of-home care to similar youths who had not experienced out-of-home care. Outcomes in several domains, measured in late adolescence, were considered, including various measures of antisocial behaviour and delinquency, internalising problems, education level and commitment, as well as optimism, trust and self-efficacy.

The study found that youths who were placed in out-of-home care came from backgrounds characterised by substantially higher levels of risk and adversity, compared to those of youths who did not experience out-of-home care, and it appeared that it was these pre-existing differences that explained negative outcomes in late adolescence, rather than out-of-home care itself. However, the authors also recognised that youths who were placed in out-of-home care experienced difficulties in several life domains, and that, although out-of-home placement did not worsen their situation, it also did not improve their outcomes.

The study by Verbruggen, Van der Geest and Bijleveld examined long-term outcomes of a group of previously institutionalised men and women from the Netherlands. Using a longitudinal study of a sample of youths who spent time in a judicial treatment institution during adolescence, the study investigated to what extent background risk factors as well as longitudinal patterns in adult criminal behaviour were associated with (negative) outcomes in different life domains. Outcomes in a variety of life domains, namely accommodation, employment, family formation, (mental) health, and alcohol and drug abuse, were measured when previously institutionalised youths were in their thirties.

The study demonstrated that youths, on average 17 years after leaving a judicial treatment institution, experienced difficulties in a variety of adult life domains. Especially those with chronic involvement in criminal behaviour in adulthood were more likely to experience difficulties in several life domains, including in the areas of accommodation, employment, contact with and financially contributing to their offspring, mental health and drug abuse. Moreover, in this specific high-risk group of previously institutionalised youths, characterised by high rates of childhood disadvantage, it was mainly criminal behaviour in

(young) adulthood that was associated with long-term negative outcomes, whilst most background risk factors were not predictive of adult outcomes. An exception was education, which improved youths' prospects in the labour market and was also associated with a reduced likelihood of contact with mental health services.

These three quantitative articles are followed by three studies using a qualitative approach to gain insight into youths' life trajectories and experiences after leaving care, and outcomes in adult life domains. First, Luyten, Nuytiens, Christiaens and Dumortier provide a subjective view on adult outcomes of care leavers from Belgium by examining how self-perception is shaped by the experience of out-of-home care, and how it develops over time. Life history interviews were conducted with people who had spent time in out-of-home care, mainly institutions but also foster care. Respondents were aged between 21 and 66, and therefore some had left care recently whereas for others their care experience was longer ago.

Three narratives of the self emerged from the life stories of the care leavers, namely, among those who spent time in institutions: a *collective* self, referring to the feeling of losing one's sense of self and individuality due to being treated as a 'number' in the group; a *problematic* self, where respondents developed a negative view of themselves because they felt the focus in care was on their problematic behaviour, whereas no attention was paid to the underlying issues causing their behaviour problems; but also a *resilient* self, meaning respondents engaged in various forms of resistance to preserve a sense of self, including both internalising behaviour such as withdrawing, as well as more visible acts of resistance such as running away. After leaving care, these narratives continued to impact their lives. Many experienced stigmatisation due to their time in care, although this appeared to diminish with age. A substantial portion of respondents were dealing with mental health problems and processing earlier traumatic experiences in adulthood. Over time, respondents' self-perception changed and became more positive. Two turning points stood out: starting to work in youth care themselves and parenthood.

The contribution by Cameron examined educational trajectories of young people with a public care background in England. Using a qualitative longitudinal biographical approach, the

study focused on whether educational aspirations at the initial interview were realised at the follow-up interview, and also shed light on the experiences of young people whilst trying to achieve their goals.

The study found that about one-third of young people had been able to fulfil their aspirations and were in or had just completed higher education. Another third were only able to partially fulfil their goals and faced practical barriers or had to adjust their aspirations. Others had not been able to achieve their goals, for example, due to difficulties in the areas of health and relationships. Although many felt it was their own responsibility to achieve their aspirations, many also pointed to experiencing a lack of adequate support.

Finally, the special issue closes with a paper by Cox, Shore, Alker, and Godfrey, which used a historical life course approach to examine the adult outcomes of youths placed in out-of-home care, and one 'industrial school' in particular, in Britain in the late 19th and early 20th century. Using digitised historical records, they reconstructed youths' outcomes in areas such as criminal behaviour, employment, and family formation. Specific attention was paid to the life courses of females placed in care.

The results suggested that most youths placed in care ended up leading regular working-class lives, and that only a few engaged in adult offending. The analysis pointed to the importance of employment after leaving out-of-home care. Interestingly, at the time, a relatively strong aftercare system was in place, consisting of supervised employment, and this may have helped youths in making a successful transition to adulthood.

Taken together, this special issue builds upon the emerging body of work on outcomes of young people who have spent time in care, by describing outcomes of children raised in out-of-home care, analysing factors associated with poorer outcomes, as well as shedding light on the subjective experiences of young people in the period after leaving care. Even though the articles in this special issue vary in terms of research question,

methodology, country and historical period, the following two conclusions stand out.

First, most articles point to the considerable challenges that youths experience after leaving out-of-home care, both in 'objective' domains such as education and employment, as well as in 'subjective' domains such as identity formation. Thus, these youths form a vulnerable group at risk of long-term adversity and social exclusion (e.g. Stein, 2006). However, it is also important to recognise that there are examples of resilience, and that for some youths their situation and experiences improve with time.

Second, the articles point to the importance of aftercare and support throughout the transition to adulthood. The transition to adulthood for young people leaving out-of-home care is both 'accelerated and compressed' compared to youths who have not been in care (Stein, 2006: 274). Care leavers have to make the transition to adulthood in a short period of time, often with limited support and resources, whereas young people not in care tend to prolong this transition period, and often rely on their families for financial and practical support throughout the period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). In recent years, the increased recognition of the challenges faced by care leavers has in some countries already resulted in some efforts to better support them through the transition to adulthood, although this has not necessarily translated into improved outcomes as of yet, and the long-term outcomes of such efforts are still unclear (e.g. Mendes et al., 2014).

Future research conducted in different countries, in which samples of youths in distinct types of out-of-home care (e.g. foster care, residential care) as well as relevant comparison groups are followed throughout the transition to adulthood using a mixed-methods approach, is needed to understand the causes of poor adult outcomes among care leavers and to determine the most effective approaches to support this vulnerable group in their attempts to make a successful transition into adulthood.

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