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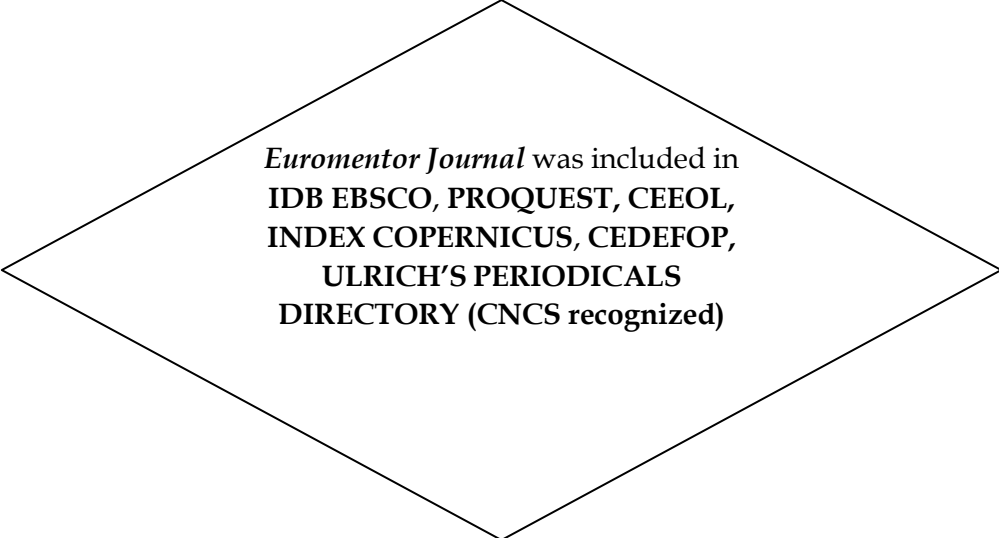
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**EUROMENTOR JOURNAL
STUDIES ABOUT EDUCATION**

Volume XI, No. 3/September 2020

"Euromentor Journal" is published by "Dimitrie Cantemir"
Christian University.

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EUROMENTOR JOURNAL STUDIES ABOUT EDUCATION

Volume XI, No. 3/September 2020



ISSN 2068-780X

Every author is responsible for the originality of the article and that the text was not published previously.

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CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE: HOMELESSNESS, EDUCATION, AND EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract: *Youth out of foster care can face various problems related to finding a housing, unemployment, low educational attainment or lack of interpersonal relationships. The goal of the survey is to study the problems of aging out of foster care. Within the qualitative research semi-structured interviews were conducted. The findings indicated that youth out of foster care felt unprepared for life and face some financial, social and psychological challenges which make transitioning into adulthood even more difficult for them. They have a problem of unstable housing, employment and community integration. The study identified very low involvement of the social worker during preparation to age out of foster care. As youth age out of foster care, social workers are tasked to work collaboratively with them to develop a transition care strategy that meets their needs and helps to promotion them into independent living. It's recommended to expanded foster care services to the age of 21 years with the goals of increasing educational stability, housing stability, and employment services as youth transition to adulthood.*

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Keywords: *Social work, foster care, adolescence, transition-aged foster youth.*

Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a time of adult identity development. During these period many youth rely on their relatives for financial assistance as they pursue opportunities for education and employment. However, this reliance may not be an option for youth aging out of foster care. Foster care is used as a form of alternative care for children who was identified as in need of care and protection. A foster care child is a child who is in foster care if the child has been placed in the care of a person who is not the biological parent of the child. Children usually "age out" of foster care when they turn 18 years old. When children age out of foster care, they become ineligible to receive state assistance with housing, food, and medical care under the foster care system.

Youth out of foster care experience significant problems transitioning into independent living. These individuals are found to have overall poorer outcomes in the domains of housing¹, employment², education³, justice system involvement⁴, mental health, substance abuse⁵, physical health and early parenting^{6,7,8,9} In order to effectively navigate this transition, youth need access to opportunities that can assist them^{10,11,12}.

¹ Fowler, P., Toro, P., & Miles, B., Pathways to and from homelessness and associated psychological outcomes among adolescent leaving the foster care system. *American Journal of Public Health*, 99(8), 2009, 1453–1458.

² Naccarato, T., Brophy, M., & Courtney, M.E., Employment outcomes of foster youth: The results from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Foster Youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(4), 2010, 551–559.

³ Hernandez, L., & Naccarato, T., Scholarships and supports available to foster care alumni: A study of 12 programs across the US. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(5), 2010, 758–766.

⁴ Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M., Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at age 23 and 24. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2010.

⁵ Braciszewski, J.M., & Stout, R.L., Substance use among current and former foster youth: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2012, 34(12): 2337–2344.

⁶ Kushel, M.B., Yen, I.H., Gee, L., Courtney, M.E., Homeless and Health Care Access after Emancipation. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 2007, 161 (10): 986–993.

⁷ Courtney, M.E., Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA. *Child and Family Social Work*, 2006, 11(3): 209–219.

Experts define the following key factors that are necessary for the functioning of young people after leaving the shelter: employment, education, living conditions, supporting networks, health care, safety, legal engagement, and willingness to live in society¹³. After leaving the shelter, 20% of youngsters without family care instantly become homeless¹⁴. It should be noted that, more than 20,000 young people did not return to their families and have no permanent home. According to researches, homelessness increases the risk for several adverse life outcomes of foster care youth, such as increased risk for lack of education, victimization, substance abuse, and incarceration¹⁵.

Poor academic performance and low rates of educational attainment likely result in a low level of employment for youth aging out of foster care. By the age of 24, only half of them are employed^{16,17}. Foster youth have low levels of educational attainment, and continue to face barriers to completing high school and seeking post-secondary education¹⁸. After attaining the full age, only 6% continues to study at a higher level, and

⁸ Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Cusick, G.R., Havlicek, J., Perez, A., Keller, T., Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21. Chicago Chapin Hall, 2007.

⁹ Shaw, M., Steyn, M., Simeon, E., The need for preparing youth ageing out of foster care for independent living in South Africa. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2020, 109,104681.

¹⁰ Richardson, E.W., Futris, T.G., Duncan, J.C., Mallette, J.K., Meeting couple and co-parenting relationship needs of foster caregivers: Perceptions of Georgia Child welfare county directors. *Journal of Extension*, 2018, 56(1):1RIB6.

¹¹ Richmond, A., Borden LM., Motivational interviewing: An approach to support youth aging out of foster care. *Journal of Social Work*, 2020, 20(4):1-16.

¹² Baugh, E.J., A population at risk: Youth "aging out" of the foster care system and implications for extension. *Journal of Extension*, 2008, 46(4): 4IAW3.

¹³ Mech, E.V., Foster youths in transition: Research perspectives on preparation for independent living. *Child Welfare*, 1994, 73(5): 603-623.

¹⁴ Rosenberg, R., Kim, Y., Aging Out of Foster Care: Homelessness, Post-Secondary Education, and Employment. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 12:1, 2018, 99-115.

¹⁵ Dworsky, A., Napolitano, L., & Courtney, M., Homelessness during the transition from foster care to adulthood. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103 (Suppl), 2013, S318-23.

¹⁶ Levin-Epstein, J., Greenberg, M., *Leave no youth behind: Opportunities for Congress to reach disconnected youth*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2003.

¹⁷ Cunningham, M.J.; Diversi, M. (2012). Aging out: Youths' perspectives on foster care and the transition to independence. *Qualitative Social Work*, 12(5): 587 - 602.

¹⁸ Gillum, N., Lindsay, T., Murray, F., & Wells, P., A review of research on college educational outcomes of students who experienced foster care. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 10(3), 2016, 291-309.

from them only 50% receive a diploma for the completion of the education¹⁹.

According to statistical data in Georgia the number of children without care in 2015 was 1643, out of which 1205 children were involved in the fostering program, while 335 children lived in family type children homes²⁰. In 2010 the Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia developed a National Action Plan for Children without Family Care²¹. The main emphasis was made on the closure of large children institutions, the so-called “orphanages” and instead development of the fostering system and small family-type children’s homes²².

The age of deprivation of the state care of persons without family care varies in different countries. USA and some European countries enable youngsters until the age of 21 or 27 to use the government support. Many statutory and private child-serving agencies continue efforts to develop services to meet the needs of this group²³. For instance, in Austria it is possible to continue to provide assistance to youngsters without family care until the age of 21, and this assistance is terminated when they find a job and have the appropriate living conditions²⁴. In Germany, it is possible to continue the care for such children until the age of 27 years. In Norway, the state provides care up to 18 years, after that the individual must make his or her decision to leave the shelter or to remain under the state care. They can extend the period of stay for 12 months or become involved in the next stage of care and stay under the state care up to the age of 23 years. In this case they should plan their life for the next years in a written form. In a case of approval of the plan, they are allowed to implement it and stay under the state care²⁵.

¹⁹ Thompson, S.J., Pollio, D.E., Constantine, J., Reid, D., Nebbitt, V., Short-Term Outcomes for Youth Receiving Runaway and Homeless Shelter Services. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 2002, 12(5): 589 – 603.

²⁰ Social Service Agency of Georgia. Statistic Information. Retrieved from http://ssa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=610

²¹ Georgian Coalition for Children and Youth Welfare (GCCYW). Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Georgia, 2016.

²² Law of Georgia on adoption and foster care. 2017.

²³ Collinsa, M.E., Ward, R.L., Services and outcomes for transition-age foster care youth: Youths' perspectives. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 2011, 6(2): 157-165.

²⁴ Sidery, A., Fostering unaccompanied asylum seeking young people: the views of foster careers on their training and support needs. *Adoption and Fostering*, 2019, 43(1):6-21.

²⁵ Oterholm, I., How do the child welfare services in Norway work with young people leaving care? *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 2009, 4(2): 169-175.

Georgia have high rates of poverty and unemployment^{26,27,28}. Youth aging out of foster care experience even more challenges relating to poverty and unemployment as they are unprepared to deal with vulnerabilities such as securing employment and were not prepared for independent living after foster care. They are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society.

Our survey aims to study the problems of youth aging out of foster care in Georgia.

Method

Within the framework of qualitative research, the in-depth interviews were conducted in the time period of December 2019 in Georgia. In total, 15 youngsters without family care, who have attained 18 years of age and left the shelter, were selected for the survey. Their age did not exceed 25 years. Also, 3 social workers working in governmental and non-governmental sectors were selected.

A nonprobability sampling method and its most convenient type – a snowball sampling was used for the respondent selection. The survey tool is a semi-structured questionnaire, which allows each respondent to change questions as needed. All interviews have been recorded and later transcribed for the data analyses purposes.

Prior to the focus group interviews, each participant was informed about the purpose of the study and written informed consent was obtained. We informed participants that they had the right to refuse participation and could retract their responses at any time during and after participation. Research was carried out in accordance to ethical principles of scientific research, the Declaration of Helsinki and has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Health Policy Institute

Results and discussion

According to the study most of the respondents came to the shelter after the death of their parents. Their lives before the shelter had never been easy, because they lived in poverty.

²⁶ Papava, V., *Economic Reforms in Post-Communist Georgia: Twenty Years After*. Nova Science Pub Inc; UK ed. Edition, 2013.

²⁷ Silagadze, A., Post-Soviet paradoxes of unemployment rate. *Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences*, 2017, 11 (1): 136-141.

²⁸ Asatiani, M., Verulava, T., "Georgian Welfare State: Preliminary Study Based on Esping-Andersen's Typology". *Economics and Sociology*, 2017, 10(4): 21-28.

Respondent 1: *"I was born in Tbilisi; I am ethnic Kurd... I was raised in a traditional Kurdish family... I spoke Kurdish, everything was Kurdish ... Then, at about age 4, I went to shelter for some problems. My mother and I lived in this shelter; while my father lived in Tbilisi and sometimes visited us. Now both of them are dead".*

Respondent 2: *"My father died early. I was eight years old when my mother died. My uncle and my aunt should have grown me up, but since they also had children and lived in extreme poverty at that time, they decided to send me to the 'children's home'. They thought that I would get a better care there. They wanted me to go to a place like a monastery ... they've heard about shelter and so they took me there".*

The respondents stayed at the shelter for early childhood because of their parents' death. However, some respondents lived in the children's home with family members, or with parents and siblings. According to them, they had to go to the children's home due to economic problems. In that time children could live in shelters with their families.

Respondent 4: *"There was a mess in shelter with a little space only; the elders abused youngsters ... Another children's center was a family type, small cottages, 2-3 children and one tutor, all are well disposed".*

We asked the respondents to describe one day or one week of life in the shelter:

Respondent 7: *"One of my usual days was like this: I woke up in the morning at about 8 o'clock. I did not wake up myself, they were awakening me and sending to school. The school was not of the children's center but a public. The village was small, very lovely, and beautiful. We communicated not only with children of the children's center, but also with the village children and not only with Georgians, but with Armenians and Azeri's. It was an international village. I went to school, attended classes and then came back and studied; usually teachers helped me. I normally studied, had normal meals and so on. No difference from a family".*

Respondents say that educational projects (excursions, visits to museums) were frequently implemented, in which they were actively involved.

Respondent 5: *"We were friends with public schools, where I got many friends too. They came to us, sometimes we went to museums and we attended the performances. We went to the excursions very often. I have hiked a whole Georgia; once I flew by a paraglider... So I can say that I've missed nothing in my childhood. Thanks to those people I've really got everything I need".*

Respondent 4: *"There was a project, I do not remember its name, but the purpose was that every week one of the schools visited us and we made some*

educational projects together. I remember from my childhood that foreign guests visited us from France, Holland, they made their own projects and we were actively involved in them. We had joint summer camps with foreign schools...”

Respondent 8: “At least once in two weeks we have excursions, we visited cinemas, museums, factory... concerts. The motion theater was our friend; they invited us often and came here”.

The participants were asked how they felt when the foster care was terminated. Each person perceives their termination differently. Some respondents were aware that they could not stay in the shelter until their end of life, so they were psychologically prepared and had no particular stress. However, there was some fear. The gravest thought was the feeling of uncertainty, they did not know where or how to start work.

Respondent 9: “After foster care you have nothing. I struggled to get a job, and nobody supported me. The social worker just told me I’m no longer in foster care”.

Respondent 11: “I was not prepared for life after foster care”.

However, some have had positive relationships or receiving support from the foster centers after leaving care.

Respondent 3: “The children’s home helps you to find a job. So, they used to help you until you become independent, and many have already found their way and started families and started work and the children’s home has supported us from the beginning to the end... They used to say: “Go, but any time you will need us call, and we will be with you”, and so on. I personally graduated from Ilia State University with the bachelor’s degree and from Tbilisi State University with the master’s degree and during all this period, the shelter paid my rental and tuition fees”.

We asked respondents about how they lived after the shelter, whether they continued contacts with shelter dwellers, what challenges they face. One of the respondents is now renting the apartment and working with cousins, but says that it was not always so.

Respondent 6: “I was preparing for a while and then graduated from the college. Throughout this period, I was financially helped by the children’s home, and then I started to work in the Carrefour bakery and worked for half a year. Now I live with my cousins and I work in the bakery again, but elsewhere”.

Another respondent notes that the staff in the shelter has relations with them as with family members.

Respondent 4: “I cannot call them the staff; because they are my family ... They are all my friends... We still are together... Now I have not been there for a long time but we call each other”.

The participants were asked about challenges after foster care. All of the participants mentioned challenges that they struggled with while aging out of foster care. They have a lack of adequate emotional, social and financial support.

Respondent 2: *"The most challenging aspect for me now is to survive on my own; I don't have a job, family or supports. I don't know where to go."*

Respondent 5: *"One thing I've realized that life without education will be difficult, so I decided to go at the university, but a lot of things are unclear, I need a supporter who will help me. I have no such friend"*.

According to respondents, unemployment is high amongst the youth who have aged out of care. Only four are employed and the rest are still unemployed. Finding jobs has been a struggle for the youth who have aged out of care. As a result, the most challenging thing for them was the financial difficulty that they faced. Unemployment among young people is relatively high in Georgia, which in turn exacerbates challenges amongst the youth who have aged out of care.

The next question was about the help they got from the state after the shelter. Respondents unanimously admitted that they did not even hear about such a state program. According to the respondents, the role of the social worker is important during preparation to age out of care. The involvement of the social worker in this process is very low. Most of the respondents have not seen the social worker after the foster care.

Respondent 9: *"I do not have any idea if the state is doing something; no one has ever contacted me. I do not know about social workers, no one has done anything in my case. I do not know what they are doing and nobody has told me anything"*.

Respondent 13: *"It would be good if youth people have an opportunity to be acquainted with the living outside of the shelter. The youth should know that there is a different reality outside of the shelter, because when you are in the shelter and everyone take care of you, you think that it is life and it will be so in future, but the reality is quite different when you have to go out and see that the life is quite the other world"*.

Respondent 14: *"Social workers should encourage us; they must give us the advice on what we should do about our life"*.

And finally, we talked about future plans. It turned out that their plans are great. One of the respondents is going to connect her future with the shelter because he thinks it is the best and most beneficial thing to do. He thinks that his knowledge and experience can create better and more diverse living conditions to other children.

One of the respondents is going to start the own business, but still with the assistance of the children's home. Others are going to use the money that have been accrued on their accounts by the state to their adulthood and that they have not spent.

We have interviewed three social workers. The main topic of the conversation with them was the problems facing the youngsters without family care after leaving the shelter upon their full age.

Every social worker admits that the lack of housing remains the most important problem for young people who have left the state care system.

Social worker 1: *"The problem of housing is the most acute. After leaving the state care system, some youngsters return to their biological families, from which they have come. Some youngsters have no place to go, nor they have had it or will have it in future. Such children are about 30-40%. We may ask a question whether the state expenditure, which is spent on the children without family care until the age of 18 years is effective, if it is not continued"*.

According to the social workers, the settling of the housing problem together with the central government bodies, as well as involvement of local self-governments can be more effective and efficient.

Social worker 2: *"Each year, about 50 young people leave small family-type homes and fostering families in Georgia. Young people are scattered across Georgia and in each municipality 4-6 young people may be concentrated. It is possible to deduct funds from local self-government budget for the housing, transportation and utility payments of these young people"*.

Social workers consider one of the best ways to solve the problems arising out of leaving the shelter by the youngsters without family care is to develop the skills needed for independent living and to give them adequate professional education. Psychologists' surveillance and work with young people will assist them to make the period of the use of state funds as short as possible and to quickly become independent. In addition, NGOs conduct various professional trainings for them.

Social worker 3: *"By trainings we provide them the necessary skills that will be helpful for them, provide qualified information on various aspects of reproductive health, about the STD protection remedies, human rights, etc. That is, we provide them with what they need."*

According to social workers, despite such activities, vocational trainings are inadequate. The problem is particularly acute in the regions. In regard to this, the state aid in improving the conditions of life of young people is much lower.

Despite the fact that the state fully funds the cost of Bachelor's Degree studies until the age of 21 years, the majority still do not have the desire to pursue studies in higher education institutions.

Social workers believe that youngsters above the age of 18 years who have left the state care system should have been covered with appropriate state programs. It should be taken into consideration that in many European countries, young people are supported by the state until the age of 21-24 years. It is desirable for Georgia to share this model.

Social worker 1: *"The Social Service Agency has signed Memorandums of Cooperation with several organizations that work on issues of children without family care after adulthood. Of course, this is not the way to solve the problem globally, so it is better that the state develops a relevant state program".*

Conclusion

The findings indicated that youth out of foster care felt unprepared for life and face some challenges which make transitioning into adulthood even more difficult for them. They did not experience aging out of foster care positively and identified a lack of financial, social and psychological support. They cannot return to their families and have a problem of unstable housing, employment and community integration.

The study identified very low involvement of the social worker during preparation to age out of foster care. Social workers should work closely with foster youth to provide available incentives and information and promote their educational investment. Social workers are tasked to work collaboratively with them to develop a transition care strategy that meets their needs and helps to promote them into independent living.

Foster youth should be discharged from the care system at age 18 only if they have a place to live and feel stable in that environment. Policy makers should consider expanding foster care services to the age of 21 years with the goals of increasing educational stability, housing stability, and employment services as youth transition to adulthood.

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