

DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION OF YOUTH UNDER INSTITUTIONAL CARE: TRANSITION FROM INSTITUTIONAL CARE TO INDEPENDENT LIFE

Leontina Mihaela DRAGU

Ph.D. Student

Faculty of Social Science,

University of Craiova (Romania)

mihaeladragu983@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The present study analyzes the process of deinstitutionalization, as a transition stage in the life of youngsters who leave care system after turning eighteen. They are a vulnerable population at risk of social and professional exclusion, mainly due to lack of supporting services following their exit. The objective of this study is to introduce a few changes which have taken place within the child protection system, and also a few strategies for guiding and supporting this category, so as to include and integrate them into society and into the labour market. Also, to stress a social worker's role as a community facilitator in increasing the youth chances to adjust to independent life. Thus, after the 1990's, during the political and economic transition stage, significant changes have occurred in the provision of services to children and teenagers placed in state care. Placements have been restructured, more complex services have been added, child care professionals have been trained, social care standards have been redefined, legal frameworks and administrative structures have been properly adjusted.*

Key words: *youth; social worker; intervention; deinstitutionalization; reintegration.*

1. Introduction

Institutionalization has been thusfar the most common strategy for protecting children in need in Romania. Starting with 1997, when the new child protection system was introduced, significant changes have occurred in the provision of services to children and teenagers placed in state care. Placements have been restructured, more complex services have been added, child care professionals have been trained, social care standards have been redefined, legal frameworks and administrative structures have been properly adjusted. Policies and national legislation clearly state a child's right to grow up in a family, favoring biological families and underprivileged children, prioritizing foster care as opposed to residential one and supporting institution reform. Changes in legislation were made at the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Child care is admittedly a priority and efforts are being made towards improving services provided to them in a family-like environment. (Campean, coord., 2010).

There is, however, an age group which is still vulnerable and at risk-adolescents, who leave placements only to face difficult challenges related to health,

lack of jobs and housing, and thus risk addiction and abuse. Therefore, these young people must be properly trained for life outside the care system, in order to acquire useful life skills. Also, after exiting the care system they must be able to rely on the support of integrated services offered by the community in which they live, with uninterrupted access to education and healthcare. All these considerably increase their chances to successfully make the transition from residential care to adult life (Salvați Copiii România, 2006).

When youngsters leave institutional care, the first stage of the transition begins when they exchange rights for responsibilities and most of them cannot cope with the employer who expects a certain conduct, workplace, and workload. Consequently, they end up migrating between different social services givers (hot meals, weekly shower, shelter, clothing, resume writing, job search guidance) and fall into it unwillingly, « the street rule », where they are extremely vulnerable, naive, trusting any promises and easily tempted into crime or improper behaviour. The most frequent problems with integrating youth into the labour market are: lack of qualifications, inability to follow rules or workplace, to respect hierarchy, to commit for a long period of time, lack of self-confidence, or trust in success.

After leaving care institutions and finishing studies, these young people find themselves in a society which is hardly prepared to give them the support they need during this transition stage, which renders most of them at risk of delinquency. Even though conditions in most residential care facilities are better than those in underprivileged families, the absence of parents and their emotional support have long-term effects. Young people who leave care can be easily tempted into delinquency, alcohol consumption, drug abuse, prostitution, organized begging networks.

Institutional policies with regards to social and professional integration of these youngsters are somewhat unclear, as beyond the statistical data offered by the Child Protection Service (Direcția Generală de Asistență Socială și Protecție a Copilului - DGASPC), which shows that there are young people integrated into the labour market, there are no special departments for this within the DGASPC, with trained professionals to follow standard work strategies. In addition, in most cases youth deinstitutionalization is a random outcome, not a planned, organized and guided one and after long-term institutionalization, they are vulnerable and insecure about social integration. the Presidential Commission for Social Demographic Risk Analysis (Administrația Prezidențială, 2009).

2. Transition from institutionalization to independent living / deinstitutionalization

Studies in Romania show that youngsters are generally ill prepared for the transition to independent life, one of the barriers being financial and emotional dependency on family. Young people tend to find socio-professional environment unfriendly, full of obstacles, difficult to cope with and they do not possess the

necessary skills to assess risk and manage crisis situations (Anghel, Dima, 2008). According to recent studies, socio-professional inclusion of youth is mainly affected by integration into the labour market, education background, living situation, health and social involvement (Neagu and Petrescu, 2017).

Each year, some 5000 young people leave institutional care, having to adjust to social and professional life (Muga, 2005). It is a stage difficult enough for every youngster, especially for those who have received state or private institutional care and are being cut off from their support. Many studies have found some irregularities with the child protection system in Romania, such as little or no preparation for independent life, unmatching rights and responsibilities, pressure from trained professionals who expect the young to instantly become adults, little or no professional training of staff to work with these young people, little professional satisfaction compared to workplace conditions and requirements etc. (Campean, 2004).

Children raised in institutional care in Romania, who have suffered severe social and emotional deprivation, have been profoundly affected, according to M. Constantinescu (2008), in their biopsychosocial-cultural development. Similar challenges are stated by Neagu and Petrescu (2017): inconsistent support services for post-institutional care youth and socio-professional integration programs; insufficient case management and skill training staff; segregation/exclusion of young people coming from institutional care in school as well upon employment; insufficient financial and psychological support for foster carers; poor social and professional integration services; poor guidance for independent living; lack of support for the development of social and professional services on the part of NGOs. In addition, youth aging out of the care system are expected to take the typical steps-education, career, housing, family. Once they leave institutional care, they cannot go back to their former residence, while the average young individual can return to parents in case of undesired outcome upon emerging into adulthood. This increases the gap and the number of disadvantages for young adults coming out of the care system (Boldis, 2018).

Absence of proper skills and of experience necessary to independent adult life is a common feature of 'graduates' from residential care. "Lack of experience in accessing different services outside their institution, poorly developed social skills, lack of a real family model, not being able to gradually take on responsibilities, as it usually happens within the average family, lack of social support to ensure basic needs after leaving the centre, are but a few of the most tragic realities that these young people face after leaving institutional care." (Constantinescu, M. 2008: 222)

We will further introduce a few aspects of life in residential care, which contribute to this problem:

- It is rare that these institutions offer the necessary role models. A mostly feminine staff is partly to blame. There are cases when, upon leaving the

institution, young boys and young girls especially have not yet used kitchenware.

- Residential care leads to dislocation from family, also in the case of children who are not orphan or who have not been completely abandoned (poverty being the reason for their placement in the facility).
- Institutionalization induces a state of dependency and a substantial lack of self-motivation. When everything is provided by someone else (food, shelter, personal items but also rules and routine), when even the slightest deviation from the required behaviour is punished, there is no wonder that youngsters face challenges in their adult life, which requires independence and determination. These findings reduce the shock of finding these children in penitentiaries and mental institutions;
- A tendency common to youth in care institutions is that of isolation within the community where they are placed. The situation is that much serious when the facility has its own kindergarten, school, sports centre, limiting contact with people from the outside world. Large facilities have centralized supply service (based on public auction), which does not allow children to go out to stores, the experience of shopping being limited to pocket money products. There are cases when even spending this sum is supervised and limited;
- Many facilities fail in teaching the children gestures, skills, day-to-day abilities necessary within society: talking on the phone, communicating with opposite sex people, preparing for an exam, or a job contest, and so on;
- "Most centres (with some exceptions) do not seem to be interested in teenagers' life after graduation" (Neamțu, 2003: 817)

Sadly, institutions do not follow up on their 'graduates', and their families do not look for them. Now they are truly being abandoned by their second family. Alone and confused, they do not know where to go and what to do. During the political regime prior to 1989, the institutional care system for children, though imperfect, worked - institutionalized children managed to socially integrate to some extent, after leaving the centre. They were found jobs in socialist plants, which usually had dormitories and canteens, thus being able to function according to their previous training and skills acquired during institutionalization, i.e. lack of independent life skills and the ability to independently plan their long-term existence. The need for permanent guidance and protection seems to be a common trait of youngsters raised outside the family.

Thus, according to John Bowlby (1953), in an average family the parents who initially take on all life responsibilities and their children's development, gradually transfer to them a part of these responsibilities and guide them into autonomy and self-awareness. They strive to instill and form the necessary skills to meet own needs with own resources and to plan strategies for this process.

These did not occur in placements where a small teaching and auxiliary staff hardly managed to raise children and meet their basic needs - thus not having the possibility (time, energy, training, or intention) to ensure efficient education and proper training for future life.

Lack of independent living skills often paired with lack of knowledge and acceptance of social norms, with youth in care, due to no contact with the outside world, which contributed to their rejection by and of society and trends today, increased endogrouping, tendency to consider the institution an ideal life model and peers role models difficult to leave. Often, young girls coming from residential care faced sexual activity problems, straying from the ethical norms of the socialist era and unintentionally becoming single mothers of illegitimate children with uncertain paternity or even abandoning unwanted children at the maternity ward.

Certainly, there were solutions to these problems: placing these children into orphanages or wards of children hospitals, with approval from authorities managing these institutions. Thus, the cycle continued, institutional care system being able to self-reproduce. All these prove that until December 1989 the system of institutional care for children, however unsatisfactory and flawed, somehow worked (Alexiu, 2001: 16-18).

Quick measures must be taken so that the cycle is interrupted. For this, sexual education and prevention of unwanted pregnancy is needed among institutionalized young girls. These young girls still suffering from abandonment are not going to be capable of taking care of a baby, being a child looking after another child without having the basic knowledge. This situation too will have the inevitable outcome- another abandonment. This abandonment is partly caused by the relationship and report with the baby's father. If for him this child is not important, it will not matter for her either and she will give him/her up. Child abandonment is also caused by the mother's inability to form emotional ties. She bonds with various people, without forming meaningful ties, as in an attempt to protect herself. She herself has been placed in an institution and she developed. She is expecting the same from this child. In order to stop this phenomenon self-image must be improved in institutionalized children.

3. Implementing strategies for family and social reintegration of youngsters leaving institutional care

One of the most important aspects of the social worker's intervention in preparing teenagers for independent life is the support for designing realistic life projects. Before everything, the youngster must be helped to discover what he/she wants. This role normally falls on family, even if its input is not oftenly direct. With institutionalized children this role is assumed by the social workers and the main positive consequence of their support is defining the adolescent's own identity. An important role assumed by the social worker is that of preparing these young people

for autonomous independent life. The social worker takes part in educating through educational programmes, more or less formal, while the family represents the natural environment of informal education. Education thus becomes a slow incremental process which permanently adjusts itself to each individual's needs and abilities. Achievement rewards is a continuous process offering a more valid mechanism of positive behaviour reinforcement than punishment, oftenly the most common technique in formal education (Pop, 2004: 45-46).

Strategies for integration after leaving institutional care

Two patterns of social relations are formed after leaving the centre.

- 1) Deinstitutionalized individuals with good chances of integration, and these are:
 - a) Young people taken on by Christian organizations which have supported them in finding jobs and helped them to acquire self-care and independent living skills, managed for the most part to internalize socially accepted norms and values and had good chances to optimal integration into society, with positive effects on their life and on society. The factors contributing to this success are: employing skilled staff in order to attain these objectives; offering good role models, to which selection of subjects among institutionalized people, with real chances of success, is added. We also consider that they have real opportunities of developing good social behaviours, with positive consequences on social and private life;
 - b) Young people who remain institutionalized after turning eighteen in order to continue formal education, on condition that they receive real support on the part of society;
- 2) Youngsters who have left the system without receiving any kind of support from society, the ones who do not even have a place to stay, live in the street, in parks, and in the sewers. They have little education and training, different ages, and a slight delay in cognitive development. Their main feature however, is group dependency, with which they do not want to part. Equally low chances have young people living in welfare homes, but do not have a permanent job and show the same group behaviour;
- 3) An intermediary group are young people who are not integrated into their own families and who have different chances of social integration, function of their original families. As most of these families face poverty, there is a great chance of following their pattern. These typical groups suggest different measures so that each of them receive social support according to their needs.

In the spring of 2006 *The National Strategy for Social Inclusion of Youth Leaving the Institutionalized Care System* was implemented. The target group of this strategy is represented by the young people coming from the child protection system

who at the age of eighteen are in juvenile halls or in penitentiaries, and also homeless eighteen-year-olds.

Law 416/2001 regarding minimum wage guarantees decent living conditions. In the National County Strategies on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction, measures are taken to support postinstitutionalized youth. "The programmes for postinstitutionalized youth have two main objectives: providing housing and jobs. With regards to living space, approximately one fifth are shelter-like programmes and fewer are welfare housing. For integration into the labour market, these programmes refer to training on the one hand and support in finding jobs on the other. Counselling and socio professional training programmes are the most frequent. They take place either in social service facilities, either within individual training plans" (HG no. 669/may 24th 2006, chap. II).

With regards to social economy, a priority in Romania is increasing employment for underprivileged people (MEFPS, 2009). Actions promoting the year 2010 as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion emphasize raising public awareness about active inclusion. (*European Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion*, strategic framework document, 2010: 4). Recent evolution of national social policies has led to finding innovative and alternative solutions to meet needs of vulnerable groups, with the purpose to reduce multiple social exclusion. The strategy for promoting social inclusion, in *The National Strategy for Social Protection and Social Inclusion Report* (2008-2010), includes a second main objective : "Increasing employment for underprivileged people, which states that "development of the area with regards to SE can account as a first step [...]". (MMFPS, 2008: 23).

The problem of institutionalized young people and the efforts being made for their integration into family and society emphasize "the need for social intervention, for change of vulnerable people's situation through complete understanding of the needs these people have" (Constantinescu M., 2018: 109).

4. Conclusions

Most young people leaving the child protection system at a certain age do not have a family to go back to or a person to support them. This impairs the process of social integration of these young people, who are rarely supported in finding a job or a place to live. Institutionalization is currently the equivalent of isolation from social life, society abandonment, consequently that of the Government, of the institution, of trained professionals, and of everybody really, adding to parent and family abandonment. Success with their integration depends on the involvement of all the factors influencing their well-being, on support from the family and from the social worker/educator in starting independent life, on acquisition of skills necessary to independent life, on the opportunities offered by our society to find jobs and homes.

Institutionalization has a number of negative effects on social and professional integration. It is well known that during institutionalization children and adolescents are *used* to effortlessly receiving everything (food, shelter, clothing). Most of the times they do not know how to use money, are insecure and end up permanently needing someone (an educator or instructor in the care facility). Rules inside the care facilities do not usually allow involvement in activities for life skills acquisition, so they are not involved in facility chores (such as, for example, setting the table, cleaning it, cooking under adult supervision etc). Overprotectiveness can be a negative element in the development of children in the care system: centralized cooking and service of meals, laundry being done by the staff obstruct development of the child's autonomy and responsibility. Even though in care institutions conditions are, most of the times, better than in their families, deprivation of parents and their emotional support have long-term effects (Buzducea, 2013).

That is why the child/adolescent must be taken out of the family only in obvious cases of abuse or neglect. Their emotional and care needs are difficult to meet by an employee in a residential institution, who is more often than not overwhelmed by all the tasks he/she must carry out. It is not, however, impossible that basic needs be met in care institutions. Employment of trained professionals in such institutions is essential to creating a nice welcoming environment.

In Romania authorities are well motivated to work towards faster and more extensive deinstitutionalization, when it favours children/adolescents. The risks of an institutionalized child developing grave attachment problems are considerable, which is why they should preferably stay with the family or at least stay in contact. Institutionalized children are less adjusted. Because of labeling, their integration into a class is problematic. Sometimes adolescents develop violent behaviour, offensive language and lack motivation to study. The system dependency that-long term institutionalization creates, as well as insufficient awareness of own abilities, wrong self-assessment, mostly affected by low esteem are the factors leading to poor social and professional integration and sometimes total failure.

Young people coming from institutionalized care often live in a state of confusion and uncertainty about their future. Transition from care to adulthood is difficult, teenagers lacking independent life skills, and so the most weak are prone to crime. A part of them do not have families to support them, and most cannot rely on their families because of the long gap in their communication. They thus risk homelessness and street life.

This in turn leads to delinquency and crime, to unsafe public places, increase in sexual abuses, drug abuse and alcohol consumption. Street children/teenagers who steal, beg, or use drugs have become frequent images of big cities. Their presence, more oftenly shocking and offensive, determines people to negatively perceive them and they are sentenced to failure from the beginning (Pop, 2004).

In most cases, young people leaving institutionalized care cannot write a resume or attend a job interview. Job searching is also problematic as they do not

know who to speak to. Lack of counselling careerwise makes some of these youngsters train for jobs which no longer exist on the market, which does not help them find a job. Integration of young people into society and active life as well as reaching their potential represent key elements in reducing the risk of social exclusion. Young people who leave the child protection system represent a challenged social category with specific problems, representing a priority of the social care system during this stage in the development of the Romanian society.

Neglecting problems of the young people from the care system is to:

Encourage the homelessness phenomenon, as the number of youngsters leaving institutionalized care and ending up in the street is large, if we consider reports of many social workers dealing with street children or with youngsters who spent their childhood in a residential institution and ran away only to come back for a certain reason; street life, lack of rules and oftenly aggressive pressure represented a true mirage for many, compared to an emotionally deprived life, characterised by abuse and physical and psychological violence without basic resources.

Institutionalized children have more chances of recuperation compared to street children and not taking advantage of these extra chances leads to development of a parallel world in the dark area of society. Living off the books can become as big of a problem as working off the books. For young people coming from institutionalized care and ending up in the street will eventually start families in the street, giving birth to children with no social identification, biologically inadequate, with total lack of hygiene; in short, they will raise children who will not stand any chance.

Sentencing these young people to basic level of education and unemployment. Worklife, profession, are key elements, especially in the case of these young people who do not have any support from their families or other people once they leave care institutions. Their only resource, providing the chance of a socially integrated life, is education and professional training. Lack of their interest in career orientation, through forming work ethics values, often causes their abandonment in the street, with no chances. Even though these youngsters manage to create some kind of life on their own, the education and professional training handicap is still present, generating unequal chances which only increase the gap between them and more privileged youngsters. In many old government social care facilities still exist staff behaviours which foster lack of interest in their problems and hardships (Stativa, 2002). This phenomenon can be called *negative socializing*. All these aspects previously mentioned - exclusion, social factors, as well as consequences - only help to define a phenomenon in terms of a social problem, to assess its extent and severeness, to identify required actions and their extent, causes and consequences.

That is why it is extremely important, in achieving social and professional integration of youth leaving the child protection system, to consider the following objectives:

- creating a coherent and coordinated system of social inclusion;
- reducing marginalization and social exclusion risk;
- integrating into and actively participating in community life.

References:

1. Anghel, R.; Dima, G. 2008. *Romania*, în Stein, M.; Munro, E. R. eds. 2008. *Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publisher. pp.158-172.
2. Alexiu, T. Mircea. 2001. *Părinți care isi abandonează copiii*, Timișoara: Editura Mitron.
3. Boldiș, I. 2018. *Tranziția tinerilor din sistemul de protecție la viața independentă*. Teză de doctorat, unpublished.
4. Bowlby, John. 1953. *Child care and Growth of Love*. Bucharest: Editura Pelican Original.
5. Buzducea Doru. 2013. *Economia socială a grupurilor vulnerabile*. Iași: Editura Polirom.
6. Câmpean, C. 2004. *Criza dezinstituționalizării tinerilor din centrele de plasament*. *Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială*, 4, 422-446.
7. Câmpean C. coord. 2010, *Resurse și nevoi de suport în integrarea socială a copiilor și tinerilor protejați în servicii rezidențiale de protecție a copilului - Raport de cercetare*, <http://www.crips.ro/doc/rfactin.pdf>, accesat: 12.01.2019.
8. Constantinescu, Maria. 2008. *Dezvoltare umană și asistență socială*. Pitești: Editura Universității din Pitești.
9. Constantinescu, Maria. 2018. *Programe integrate și proactive pentru grupurile vulnerabile*. Bucharest: Editura Pro Universitaria.
10. Muga, M. coord. 2005. *Studiu privind situația tinerilor care părăsesc sistemul de protecție a copilului*. Bucharest: Institutul National de Cercetare Stiințifică în Domeniul Muncii și Protecției Sociale.
11. Neagu, G.; Petrescu, C. 2017. *Methodology for working with young people in rural areas and within the child protection system*, <http://iccv.ro/sites/default/files/Methodology.pdf>, accesat: 12.01.2019.
12. Neamtu, George, 2003. *Tratat de Asistență Socială*. Iași: Editura Polirom.
13. Pop, Luana. 2004. *Rolul asistentului social în sprijinirea tinerilor care părăsesc instituțiile*. Bucharest: Editura Cartea Universitară.
14. Otovescu, Cristina; Otovescu, Adrian. *Moral fundamentals of human life protection and the population's right of health*, in *Revista de Cercetare si Intervenție Sociala*, vol. 57, June 2017, Iasi, pp. 228-242.
15. Stativă, E. 2002, *Abuzul asupra copilului în instituțiile de protecție socială din România*, in *Raportului UNICEF*. Bucharest: ANPCP, IOMC București; Fundația Internațională pentru Copil și Familie.
16. Administrația prezidențială, Comisia Prezidențială Pentru Analiza Riscurilor Sociale și Demografice. 2009. *Riscuri și inechități sociale în România*,

- http://media.hotnews.ro/media_server1/document-2010-04-20-7150607-0-raportul-comisiei-prezidentiale.pdf, accesed: 11.02.2019.
17. HG nr.669 din 24 mai 2006 privind aprobarea Strategiei naționale de incluziune socială a tinerilor care părăsesc sistemul de protecție a copilului.
 18. Hope and Homes for Children Romania Salvați Copiii România (2006). *Manual de proceduri privind inserția socio - profesională a tinerilor care părăsesc sistemul de protecție a copilului*. Baia Mare: Editura Eur Print.
 19. Legea 416/2001 privind venitul minim garantat.
 20. MMFPS. 2008. *Raportul Național Strategic privind Protecția Socială și Incluziunea Socială 2008-2010*.
 21. MEFPS. 2009. *Raportul comun privind protecția socială și incluziunea socială pentru 2009*.