

BECOMING ADULT

Transitions into institutional adulthood

Research Brief 4

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Key findings

- With adequate care and support, migrant young people can make highly successful transitions at 18.
- Many unaccompanied migrant young people face specific difficulties when transitioning to adulthood (compared to non-migrant young people in local authority care).
- The quality of local authority social care support for young people turning 18, and at later transitions, varies widely within and between local authorities.
- Some young people choose to disengage from statutory services at 18 because they fear detention and forced removal.
- For young people who have exhausted their appeal rights, transition to adulthood can mean having to survive by relying on social networks and the informal economy.
- Transition to adulthood for young people who disengage from services is often characterised by homelessness, destitution and poor mental and physical health.

Introduction

Previous research on experiences of the general population of young people leaving care in the UK indicates how this transition to 'adulthood' is often compressed; that outcomes in terms of education, health, employment and training are generally poorer than for those young people living with parents¹; and that they often face complex and multiple emotional and psychological issues². The Care Act (2014) places responsibilities on local authorities to bring about better transitions for looked after children through service integration and personalisation of support according to needs. The new Children and Social Work Act (2017) similarly obligates local authorities to clearly signpost young people to available support services and proposes an extension of the role of personal advisors to all care leavers up to the age of 25 (currently under consultation). For unaccompanied migrant children transitioning from care, difficulties are often exacerbated by their uncertain immigration status combined with a degree of ambiguity in terms of their entitlement to care and support on turning 18. Unaccompanied migrant children who seek asylum in the UK usually enter the care of a local authority under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 until they turn 18 and, provided they were accommodated under Section 20 for at least 13 weeks prior to their 18th birthday, should continue to receive support at least until the age of 21. Difficulties arise if their age is disputed, if they become appeal rights exhausted, if they spend less than 13 weeks in care prior to their 18th birthday, or where there is a protracted delay in assessment and allocation of care when they first arrive. Moreover, the Immigration Act (2016) sought to reduce entitlements to leaving care support for migrant young people who no longer have leave to remain in the UK, although, at the time of writing, these changes have not been implemented. Currently, a young person with no permission to remain in the UK can still receive leaving care support subject to a human rights assessment which concludes that withdrawing such support would be in breach of their human rights³.

Findings

Leaving care: Shifts in social care and living arrangements

Our study found that, for many unaccompanied migrant young people, transitioning from care involved significant challenges. It is important to note that this transition did not always take place at 18 and for some young people, particularly those with indefinite leave to remain, the transition to independence could take

place at 21 years or even later. At whatever stage it happened, the majority of young people we interviewed reported not feeling prepared, and very often not being involved or consulted, in the transition. Young people becoming 'adult' with precarious legal status frequently faced significant shifts in the provision of social care support combined with the risk of destitution and being forced to survive by illegal means if the local authority considered them no longer eligible for support.

Some young people in the study had experience of foster care but in most cases were expected to transition from foster care to semi-independent housing by the age of 18. A few young people described how they requested this shift to independence earlier than advised by a social worker. Where the foster placement had worked well, young people spoke of how they maintained relationships with foster carers after they had moved to other forms of accommodation and spoke of the important role foster carers had in providing continuity of support from a distance. The majority of young people, however, had not experienced foster care since they arrived aged 16–17 years, and were most commonly placed in shared housing and then later moved to independent living arrangements at 18. They spoke of how this transition was often sudden, how they had no choice or control over the process and how it led to high levels of stress, loneliness and social isolation. For many, this relocation happened on the very same day of their birthday.

"When I was 18, believe me, everything got stopped. (...) I did everything by myself and it was hard. Every time you seek help they told you that you are not a teenager anymore. You are adult, you do it yourself, do it yourself! They give you a lot of independence but they never asked whether this person is capable of being independent or not." (Mohammad, Afghanistan)

"My social worker didn't prepare me to move, to independently move. She didn't prepare me at all. She just told me straight away one week before my birthday. For me it was a shock." (Eden, Eritrea)

Another major change described during the transition to adulthood was the shift in personalised support from social care workers. At 18 years, young people usually move from being supported by a social worker to being assisted by a personal advisor. The latter has the role to advise and assist the care leaver until the age of 21, or until 25 if young people are continuing in higher education. Young people sometimes contrasted the personalised and more intensive support provided

by a social worker with the more limited and sporadic support provided by personal advisers whom they might see as infrequently as once a month or less. Some young people experienced this transition as abandonment or a betrayal by social care institutions, especially if a significant and beneficial relationship previously existed with their social worker. This sense of abandonment was accentuated for young people for whom the transition coincided with becoming appeal rights exhausted (ARE):

“It was literally like a stab in the back because even the social workers they supported you in the beginning but as soon as I had the appeal denied, everything just switched for them as well.” (Adnan, Albania)

A further difficulty arose for some young people when they turned 21 at which point they had to negotiate their own housing arrangements (as well as housing benefit) with the local authority, often with very limited support. As Aaron from Eritrea explained,

“I didn’t expect it, they haven’t explained to me that when you turn 21 then you have to find a house by yourself. I thought they were going to find me a house and then move me on from where I am but it’s very difficult, you have to do everything by yourself.” (Aaron, Eritrea)

Discrepancies of practices across local authorities

From interviews with young people and service providers, we found important differences in practices of care provision across local authorities. These practices varied according to different local governments and allocation of resources and, in some cases, according to the country of origin of the young person. Some young people had enjoyed exceptional support from social workers and social services departments through to and beyond the age of 21. Their educational pathways had been encouraged and resourced and they spoke positively of social workers who went out of their way to do everything they could to provide emotional as well as practical support. However, in local authorities with fewer resources and greater budgetary constraints, young people were often only supported until the age of 18 years old. Many young people said that they felt dissatisfaction with social workers and that they felt treated ‘like numbers’ while social workers equally recognised that young people needed more support than was available.

“The main important thing is thinking about creating a bridge for young people so that they can move on to become adults. We need to create that bridge for those

people who don’t have anybody else to show them how to cross the bridge.” (Leslie, social worker)

“There’s bad people and there’s good people, but as far as I’ve seen, they treat you more as a thing, as a number, rather than human being... and that goes for Home Office and Social Services.” (Ilir, Albania)

Disengaging from social care and transitions to ‘illegality’

The possibility of young people securing legal status to remain in the UK by the time they reach adulthood largely depends on their country of origin combined with access to good quality legal advice and support. Albanian young people are most likely to have their applications for asylum refused and to face the likelihood of being forcibly returned to their country of origin. Similarly, a large number of young people from Afghanistan in the study were returned to Afghanistan or ‘disappeared’ from statutory services in order to avoid forced removal⁴. Young people from Eritrea were most likely to have their claims for asylum accepted and in most cases (although not exclusively) secured refugee status.

When they turn 18, young people who become ARE may no longer be supported by local authorities. At this point they are usually expected to comply with immigration control procedures, including regular signing with the Home Office, in order to access continued support (including accommodation). If young people refuse to comply with these rules, the transition to adulthood can mean a transition to living in the UK as an undocumented migrant.

A number of young people described intentionally disengaging from social care when they received or anticipated a negative outcome from their asylum application. This finding suggests that current policy discourses surrounding the underlying reasons for children going ‘missing’ (such as being subjected to trafficking) may be over simplified and indicates that in practice, the situation is likely to be more complicated⁵. The young people we met in this situation typically experienced destitution, homelessness, poor physical and mental health and increased vulnerability to exploitation.

Policy implications

- Care and support practices for unaccompanied migrant young people leaving care should be reviewed in light of the provisions within the Children and Social Work Act 2017
- There is a need for mechanisms to facilitate young people's involvement in decisions during the transition process, in order to better guarantee their best interests
- Monitoring is required of the outcomes following transitions in social care for unaccompanied young adults including the likelihood of homelessness, destitution and poor mental and physical health.

1. See Hiles D, Moss D, Thorne L, et al. (2014) 'So what am I?'—Multiple perspectives on young people's experience of leaving care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 41: 1–15. Hiles D, Moss D, Wright J, et al. (2013) Young people's experience of social support during the process of leaving care: A review of the literature. *Children and Youth Services Review* 35: 2059–2071.
2. McAuley, C. and Davis, T. (2009) Emotional well-being and mental health of looked after children in England. *Child and Family Social Work*, 14,2,147–155.
3. For further information see Coram Children's Legal Centre (2017) Care leavers and the 'local offer'. Available at: <http://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/local-offer-care-leavers/>
4. See Becoming Adult Research Brief No. 7: Forced returns and protracted displacement.
5. See Becoming Adult Research Brief No.6: Understanding causes and consequences of 'going missing'.

The Becoming Adult project

The Becoming Adult project is a three-year ESRC-funded research project exploring the post 18 wellbeing outcomes of young people who migrated on their own to the UK as children from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania. While the main focus of the research has been on young people who arrive in the UK, the policy implications are relevant to Europe and beyond. Furthermore, the grant-linked studentship has enabled a comparative analysis of experiences of unaccompanied young people in the UK and Italy.

Methodology

The study comprises three research components addressing (i) how ideas about migration, futures, 'becoming adult' and wellbeing are conceptualised in different cultural media; (ii) unaccompanied young people's lived experiences of becoming 'adult' after migrating on their own as children; and (iii) policy and practice governing unaccompanied young people.

Young people between the ages of 18–25 took part in research. A narrative enquiry approach was used, combining retrospective narrative interviews and longitudinal research with participants up to a period of 18 months. Questions were asked about: experiences of turning 18 and other key transitions; educational experiences and outcomes; accommodation and living arrangements; factors perceived to promote or undermine their health and wellbeing; migration history, influences and experiences; social ties and networks; experiences of social care and leaving care; family ties; and aspirations for the future. In addition to taking part in interviews, other young people engaged in the research through activities including photography, art, writing, and theatre projects. A core team of young people who had previously migrated to the UK on their own worked as core members of the research team. In total some 100 young people participated in the research in the UK and Italy. Fifty interviews with policy stakeholders and practitioners in four local authorities and a FOI survey of all local authorities in England offered insights into the governance of this population and the encounters between the asylum and child protection regimes and young migrants.

How to cite

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