

## Transition from Out-of-Home Care: a Problem or an Opportunity?

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**Introduction.** There have been child protection policy improvements in Latvia since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including childcare and child development in institutional care (orphanages and crises centers). The system of foster families have been developed and improved over the last decade. However, around 1200 children still live in institutions. Those young people who turn 18 have to leave their institutionalised “homes” and start an independent adult life.

Contrary to children who live at parental homes, to transition from institutional or out-of-home care to independent life is an extremely important issue in lives of young people residing in institutional care. The difference from youth living in parental home is at least two-fold: first, the transition is immediate, prompt; and there is no (or very limited) advice. The transition often falls into “no-man’s land”, when responsibility seems to be attributed to some “other institution or service”. It is not a responsibility of institution, and it is not a responsibility of social services where the young person arrives.

**Aim, Materials and Methods.** The objective of the paper was to research the process of transition from institutional care to independent adult life, and to find out the strategies how the transitional problems are solved.

The methods applied for the conduct of the research include: policy analysis, expert interviews (social services, children institutions), and interviews with young people leaving care.

**Results.** Children enter institutional care due to neglect, physical and / or psychological neglect, physical and psychological abuse. In many cases (up to 50%) children have spent up to 15 or more years in different institutions, in many cases far away from the place of birth. When they turn 18, they have to return back to the municipality where they have been exempted from the families.

The transition period from childhood to adult life is very short, it can be characterised as immediate and instant. According to the expert interviews and youth interviews, the care leavers are not prepared to the independent life when turning 18, and they are not willing to start independent life. Youth living in institutions is at a clear disadvantage and inequality of opportunities compared to the general youth population in rural areas in the educational pathways and outcomes.

Training of practical and social skills is not provided to all adolescents living in institutional care, in many cases such training is fragmentary and not appropriate.

**Conclusions.** The transition from out-of-family care to independent adult life is a rather painful process for majority of care leavers, because of the lack necessary skills.

There should be a governmental programme developed to teach, train and practice everyday practical skills and social skills to children living in out-of-family care.

The system of mentorship for care leavers should be developed in order to decrease risks of failure at the beginning of independent life.