

Challenges of Emerging Adulthood among Youth out of Foster Care

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Youth out of foster care can face various problems related to finding a housing, unemployment, low educational attainment or lack of interpersonal relationships. The aim of the research was to study the problems of youth out of foster care in Georgia. Within the qualitative study semi-structured in-depth 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 the transition to adulthood more problematic. They have a problem of unstable housing, employment and community integration. In this critical period of transition, social workers are responsible for supporting adolescence. The study identified very low involvement of the social worker during preparation to age out of foster care. Social workers must continue to work with young people, help them build relationships and positive support network. It's recommended to expand foster care services to the youth with the aims of growing learning and accommodation stability, and employment services. Policy makers should consider housing opportunities for youth out of foster care. Youngsters out of foster care require protective preparation and planning, which will help adolescents make this transition into adulthood more flexible.

Keywords: social work, foster care, adolescence, transition-aged foster youth, Social support network

Emerging adulthood is a period of adult identity formation (Verulava et al., 2020, Mukeria et al., 2020). During these period many youth depends on their families for financial support as they pursue opportunities for employment and education (Saleem et al., 2019; Zareen et al., 2019; Verulava et al., 2020; Arif et al., 2019). However, this reliance on relatives may not be an option for

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Authors' contributions

1. Tengiz Verulava primarily focused on literature review, theoretical analysis of the data and overall writing of this research paper.
2. Beka Dangadze initiated the research and collected data, including the primary works, and contributed in analysis of data and editing.

youth aging out of foster care. Foster care is a temporary service provided by state for children who cannot live with their families and was identified as in need of care and protection. youth will age out of the foster care when they turn 18 years old.

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 housing (Fowler et al., 2009), employment (Naccarato et al., 2010), education (Hernandez & Naccarato), justice system involvement (Courtney et al., 2010), mental health, substance abuse (Braciszewski & Stout, 2012), physical health and early parenting (Kushel et al., 2007; Courtney, 2006; Courtney et al., 2007; Shaw, Steyn & Simeon, 2020). 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 society (Mech, 1994). Young people after leaving the shelter did not return to their families and instantly become homeless (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Cochrane and Szabo-Kubitz, 2009).

According to researches, homelessness increases the risk for lack of education, employment, discrimination, substance abuse, and imprisonment (Dworsky, Napolitano & Courtney, 2013; Shagufta, 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). According to studies, former foster care youth more likely to leave university before earning a degree (Day et al., 2011; Courtney et al., 2010). Reduced academic performance likely effect in a low level of employment (Levin-Epstein & Greenberg, 2003; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Gillum et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2002). Psychological health and communication difficulties are more common among former foster care youth (Merdinger et al., 2005).

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 homes (Social Service Agency of Georgia, 2020). In 2010 the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of Georgia developed a National Action Plan for Children without Family Care (GCCYW, 2016). 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 homes (Law of Georgia, 2017).

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 group (Collinsa & Ward, 2011). 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 conditions (Sidery, 2019). 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 care (Oterholm, 2009).

Georgia have high rates of poverty and unemployment (Papava, 2013; Silagadze, 2017; Asatiani & Verulava, 2017). Foster youth in the Georgia face significant barriers in a transition to independence. The aim of the research was to study the problems of youth 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.

A nonprobability sampling method and its most convenient type – a snowball sampling was used to identify and recruit the main participants of the study. 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. A gift was given to all the individuals who were recruited in the study. Having communication problems was the only exclusion criteria for the study. Also, 3 social workers working in governmental (1 social worker) and non-governmental (2 social workers) sectors were selected.

The survey tool is a semi-structured questionnaire, which allows each respondent to change questions as needed. The interviews were digitally recorded using voice recorders and later transcribed for the data analyses purposes. Data entry, editing, and analysis were done using NVivo software. To analyse the interviews, a case-centered narrative approach was used. The interviews were transcribed and checked carefully. The next step was to describe interviews thematically, this was, a structural element of narratives identified to get the main points of the stories. The respondents' names and any aspects that might reveal their circumstances were omitted to preserve their confidentiality.

Prior to the 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.

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 youngers ... 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".*

Discussion

Youth out of foster care can face various problems related to finding a housing, unemployment, poverty, low educational attainment, substance abuse, lack of interpersonal relationships, health and mental health problems, and victimization. Stable housing is fundamental for youth out of foster care to ensure health and pursue investment in education and profession.

The study showed higher jobless rates among youth out of foster care compared to young people of a related age. They have restricted work histories or may find only occupations with lesser reimbursing salaries. This result is compatible with other studies (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Tanur, 2012).

The participants did not experience ageing out of foster care positively. The participants specified that they were not prepared for life after foster care and recognized a lack of economic, societal and emotional support after ageing out of foster care. Youths expressed nervousness about their personal experiences, including financial challenges and accommodation uncertainty, loss of social support. Our study results correspond with other studies (Bender et al., 2015; Fowler et al., 2009). In this case, it is important that youth are not only equipped with the essential resources to succeed independently, but also directly involved in the development of their transition strategy (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Social workers must continue to work with young people, help them build relationships and positive support network

The study identified very low involvement of the social worker during preparation to age out of foster care. Most of the participants have not seen the social worker after the placement was finalized. Development of a transition plan can contribute to an adolescence's positive future (Mitchell et al., 2014). Foster youth should be discharged from the care system only if they have stable housing. Policy makers should consider developing alternate housing opportunities for university students. Also, they could be discouraged from university due to financial problems. Social workers should work closely with youth to deliver available information.

Conclusion

The study identified very low involvement of the social worker during preparation to age out of foster care. Social workers must continue to work with young people, help them build relationships and positive support network. It's recommended to expand foster care services to the youth with the aims of growing learning and accommodation stability, and employment services. Policy makers should consider housing opportunities for youth out of foster care. Youngsters out of foster care require protective preparation and planning, which will help adolescents make this transition into adulthood more flexible.

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