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**TRANSITION OUT OF CARE OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE OR HAVE BEEN
IN STATE CARE IN THE LAST 10 YEARS (2010 - 2020)**

**SUMMARY
DOCTORAL THESIS**

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KEYWORDS

Institutionalisation, transitional mechanisms and plans, placement and residential centres, young people under state protection, social exclusion, abandonment, social impact, preparation for transition from the protection system, representation, inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

The PhD thesis, entitled "*The transition out of care of young people who are or have been in state care in the last 10 years*", was developed with the aim of analysing the perspectives of young people who are in the social protection system, as well as those who have left this system, on the process of training in the consolidation of skills necessary for independent living. Through this research, I aimed to understand and highlight the challenges that these young people face in the transition to financial and social independence.

The thesis also investigates new perspectives on the development of independent living skills for young people in social care institutions. By identifying factors influencing this process and proposing effective intervention strategies, my research has the potential to contribute to improving the preparation and integration of these young people into our society. In this context, the research approach focused on the study of young people's views on the transitional mechanisms and plans they have been or are part of during the period of institutionalisation. The data collection tools used in the research were questionnaire, case study and document analysis.

The study also focused on the frequency of respondents' exposure to activities related to sexual health, drug prevention, first aid, money management, job search, and other related activities. All these activities contribute to the development of the skills needed for independent living, as set out in the National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of

Children's Rights¹ . Even though there are well stipulated legislative measures at national level, there are still gaps in the implementation of the objectives set to improve the situation of children in the special protection system and to accelerate the development of community services. These objectives include promoting fair treatment for all children and encouraging them to exercise their rights.

In the present research, we considered a sample of two distinct categories of young people in order to provide relevant information on their readiness to leave care. The first category consisted of 627 young people who were under the special protection measure in placement and residential centres at national level, and the second category comprised 70 young people for whom the special protection measure ended between 2010 and 2020. And the third category was represented by the analysis of documents received from DGASPCs at national level.

The questionnaire was designed to collect detailed information about preparation for permanent exit from the institutional system. It included questions about interpersonal networks, employment prospects, housing, access to psycho-social and education services, and the presence or absence of social and family support. Analysis of the results revealed various issues related to the transition of young people from the welfare system to autonomy and social integration. Consequently, specific conclusions and recommendations were formulated to optimise this process.

According to data obtained from the DGASPCs, there is still no effective and youth-friendly uniform model of working with young people on their transition to independent living. Therefore, it is necessary to understand this process and identify the strengths as well as the vulnerabilities of existing measures and procedures in order to be able to propose effective intervention solutions and programmes that facilitate young people's transition to independent living.

This transition to adulthood is a difficult time in young people's lives, as they have to deal with the many challenges associated with the transition to independent living, such as finding a job, obtaining housing or developing money management and interpersonal skills. In addition, these young people may be at greater risk of poverty, social exclusion and poor

¹ National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights (http://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/Transparenta/2014/2014-02-03_Anexa1_HG_Strategie_protectia_copilului.pdf), [accessed 10.11.2023].

mental health than other young people their age. Accordingly, the PhD thesis focused on analysing young people's perceptions, evaluating existing policies and practices in this area at national level, identifying models of national and international good practice, and identifying opportunities to improve the transition of young people leaving care.

Motivation in choosing the theme

This PhD thesis is based on my personal experience, having as context the institutionalization in a children's home, later becoming a placement centre. As the youngest of 13 siblings, all left in the care of the state, this thesis was chosen out of the conviction that it would be enlightening for the experiences I went through. When I was 19, I found myself alone in Bucharest, lacking the minimum skills, panicking and willing to beg to survive the new lifestyle. I had only 200 lei a month to support myself. I felt acute abandonment for more than a year, being a student without any form of support. Therefore, this introduction aims to explain the motivation behind the choice of the thesis topic, which stemmed from my own experience. At the age of one month and a little I was placed in the dystrophic ward of a maternity ward in Bacau county, followed by a transfer to a nursery in the city of Onești, Bacau county. I stayed until I was 3 years old, when I was transferred to the Preschool Home, and then from 8 years old to the School Children Home. I went through many difficult moments and I was the victim of abuse by those who had to take care of me and my colleagues in the institutions and not a few times I ran away from the centre to escape from violence, but I was always brought back by the police.

The personal story reflects the pain and suffering of more than 100,000 children institutionalised in the more than 700 centres that have remained as a legacy of Romania since the 1989 Revolution. I am one of the "lucky ones" who witnessed the reform of the child protection system, so that at the age of 14 I was placed in foster care. In a rural cottage, run by a "mother" and a "father", where I was a frequent witness and victim of domestic violence. The traumatic experiences in this personal story highlight the alarming reality of the child protection system in Romania and call for in-depth research on the subject. Therefore, this PhD thesis aims to analyse and better understand the transformations and challenges of the child protection system in Romania in the last decades, with a focus on the transition out of care issues of young people who are or have been in state care in the last 10 years (2010-2020).

The research focuses on the phenomenon of care leavers between 2010 and 2020 and aims to document this issue and find solutions. We considered the empirical analysis of the perspective of two parties involved in this phenomenon: young people (with or without special protection measure) and specialists (employed in child protection directorates). Although the research met with some resistance from representatives of the General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC), I sent questions in order to better document the phenomenon and I personally went to placement or residential centres at national level in order to have as comprehensive information as possible.

In order to have a balanced approach, we have also presented the opinions of the DGASPCs' representatives, in addition to the opinions of the young people in and out of care, on the topic under analysis. However, it is important to note that this research does not aim to analyse existing fears, to condemn, accuse or find guilty parties.

Research objectives

1. Identify the perceptions of young people in residential and foster care about the transitional mechanisms and plans needed to exit the care system.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of current transitional mechanisms and plans in the context of care leavers from the perspective of young people who are or have been in care.
3. Formulate recommendations to improve the transition process for young people in care based on their perceptions and experiences.

The data required for this approach were collected, analysed and interpreted according to the principle of methodological triangulation².

The main purpose of this research was to analyse the level of knowledge and understanding of respondents, who are under special protection measure and care leavers between 2010-2020, about the transition mechanisms and plans needed to exit the care system.

Methodologically, I decided to reorganise my research approach by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. I considered the Romanian and international literature

² Linda Heath, "Triangulation: Methodology" International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, 2nd edition, Volume 24 (2015): 639-644.

in order to comparatively analyse the mechanisms and transition plans required for exiting the care system, in order to obtain a detailed perspective on the studied topic. We also used the questionnaire to collect relevant quantitative data. This combined approach we felt was the most appropriate to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of respondents who are in the special care system, as well as those who have left the system, about transition mechanisms and plans.

The use of literature review gave me the opportunity to explore existing knowledge in the field. Through documentation I was able to identify the main theories and concepts that underpinned my research and to examine the arguments and conclusions of other researchers in the field.

The open-ended responses in the questionnaire were a key approach to gaining the individual perspectives of the respondents, this has been covered in Chapter V of the paper. This technique allowed direct interaction with the research subjects and facilitated in-depth exploration of their personal experiences, opinions and thoughts. At the same time, the questionnaire was used as a quantitative research method, allowing data to be obtained from a large number of participants in an efficient way.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

The PhD thesis comprises seven chapters summarised as follows:

The first chapter aims to provide an international retrospective of abandonment, with a focus on the evolution of the child protection system at national level, the regions concerned being Ardeal, Moldova and Wallachia. In the same chapter, we also explore how the child protection system evolved during the communist period and after the fall of the communist regime up to the present. Understanding the historical context is essential to gain a clearer perspective on the issues and needs of young people transitioning out of care.

The analysis reveals how the child protection system in Romania is influenced by the political factor, but also highlights the importance of specialized training of the staff who must provide protection to ensure a good development of those they have to care for.

As in most European countries³, child protection has been a particular concern of the church⁴. For example, Charles the Great⁵ (742 - 814) ordered churches and monasteries to give a tenth of their income to help the poor, while at the same time stipulating that all orphans be registered⁶. The Romanian rulers also set up institutions of a humanitarian nature (for example, the "Cutia Milelor" founded by Alexander Ipsilanti), which were also run by the church.⁷

During the communist period, the child protection system was marked by an aggressively pro-natalist policy, which began in 1966 with Decree 770, which regulated the termination of pregnancies and cancelled Decree 463/1957⁸. The Ceausescu regime laid the foundations, through the Decree, for what was to become "one of the most repressive and

³ John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers - The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Pantheon Books, 1988.

⁴ Charles A. Nelson, Nathan A. Fox, Charles H. Zeanah, *Romania's Abandoned Children: Deprivation, Brain Development, and the Struggle for Recovery*, Harvard University Press, 2014, p. 40.

⁵ King of the Franks from 768 until his death, founder of the Carolingian Empire.

⁶ G. Banu, *Tractatus of Social Medicine*, Volume II, House of Schools, 1944, p. 25.

⁷ Gabriela-Elena Petrescu, *Historical evolution of the institution of child protection in Romania*, Bibliotheca Publishing House, Targoviste, 2014, p. 58.

⁸ Decree No 463/1957 on the granting of terminations of pregnancy, in force from 30 September 1957 to 30 October 1966, repealed and replaced by Decree 770/1966. Published in the Official Gazette No 26 of 30 September 1957. Form applicable on 30 October 1966.

harshesht pronatalist regimes in history"⁹ , which resulted in the birth of a large number of unwanted children and an increase in maternal mortality due to empirical abortions. There was also a national centralisation of orphaned and temporarily or permanently parentless children. This national centralisation of orphaned children led to the establishment of children's homes, known at the time as 'cradles'. The major consequence of this policy was the birth of a large number of unwanted children and a high maternal mortality rate due to unassisted and empirical abortions. During the same period, mammoth centres were built, mainly run by doctors, who did not pay enough attention to the emotional development of children in their care¹⁰ .

In these children's centres, also called "swings", data from the early 1990s show that there were more than 170,000 children¹¹ . The living conditions in those mammoth centres have been making the rounds since 1990, when the first pictures of institutionalised children in Romania appeared: children living bed-bound, dozens of children crammed into one room, children with disabilities, AIDS patients, an acute lack of hygiene, excessive medication, lack of care and attention. Admittedly, these images did not represent a generally valid picture of the living conditions in each centre, as they came from institutions for children considered "untreatable"¹² .

Thus, this chapter concludes with the period 2000 - 2010, in which a decade in Romania's history is presented and is characterized by the assumption of radical reforms in terms of deinstitutionalization and protection of children's rights. The European Union has established a clear agenda of support and measures for the respect of children's rights in Romania, contributing to the acceleration of reforms in the field of child rights protection and adoption. This period has been marked by strong political and financial support from the European Union, reflected in a series of well-defined, well-funded public campaigns that have contributed significantly to the deinstitutionalisation process.

⁹ Final Report, (2006), *The Demographic Policy of the Ceausescu Regime*, Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, Bucharest, p509-521, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org>, [accessed 02.10.2023].

¹⁰ After Elena Zamfir, Cătălin Zamfir, *Social Policies: Romania in the European Context*, Alternative Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995, p. 190-191.

¹¹ After HALF WAY HOME: *Romania's Abandoned Children Ten Years after the Revolution*, 2001, Report by US Ambassador to Romania James C. Rosapepe.

¹² According to G.-E. Petrescu, op. cit, p. 134-135.

The second chapter aims to present some important factors in child development, with a focus on the issue of abandonment. The representation of the child in society, or rather the way the child is seen and known at different stages. The most important changes took place during the 1800s when, as a result of changes in society and in the context of increased interest in human development, various studies were developed on children and their role in society, and on the formation of their personality.

Child abandonment has existed since ancient times, but over time the people or institutions dealing with abandoned children have changed. While during the Roman Empire, abandoned children were 'rescued from the kindness of strangers', with the advent of the first institutions or homes, they ended up behind walls, out of sight¹³.

Abandonment is the greatest trauma a human being can endure in his or her lifetime"¹⁴. Thus, children and young people who enter the child protection system have to face not only a new environment, far from their family, but also a strong sense of abandonment. A child or young person is also put in the position of developing a relationship in which he or she feels protected with a stranger who may not know his or her feelings, personality, gestures or characteristics. Such changes have a particular impact on the child's or young person's emotional development and counselling services should be provided so that the child or young person can understand the mechanisms of approaching other people and the reasons that have led to the situation they find themselves in.

The causes of abandonment in Romania have been the subject of studies such as the one conducted by Manuela Sofia Stănculescu, Vlad Grigoraș, Emil Teșliuc, Voichița Pop¹⁵ for UNICEF (2017) in which the authors showed that one of the causes is represented by "the lack of a family model, given that many mothers who abandon their children come either from institutions or from families with problems". But at the same time, child abandonment should also be considered from the perspective of the large number of teenage mothers¹⁶. It has also been noted since the 1990s that many children are born into the population at risk of

¹³ John Boswell, op. cit. p. 432-433.

¹⁴ Gabriela Marc, *Child abuse. Diagnosis and therapeutic intervention*, SPER publishing house, Doctoralia collection, no. 13, Bucharest, 2015.

¹⁵ Manuela Sofia Stănculescu, Vlad Grigoraș, Emil Teșliuc, Voichița Pop (coord.), *Romania Children in Public Care*, Alpha MDN Printing House, Bucharest, 2017, p. 92.

¹⁶ Rebeca Popescu, Ana Muntean, Femmie Juffer, *Adoption in Romania: Historical Perspectives and Recent Statistics*, 2019, p. 17.

poverty¹⁷. In a 1994 study by Zamfir Cătălin, Marius Augustin Pop, Elena Zamfir observed that after the legalisation of abortions, a contraction in the birth rate was observed, but this "seems to have occurred more in the case of rich families than in the case of poor ones, the conclusion being that proportionally more children are born in conditions of poverty". The same authors also noted that one of the consequences of liberalising abortion should have been a significant reduction in the number of children institutionalised for 1-2 years, but this was "less (...). A plausible explanation is that many families who want children, suddenly and brutally confronted with difficulties in life, resort to placing children in institutions."¹⁸ At the same time it should not be ignored that "a few months after the legalisation of abortion in December 1989, the Ministry of Health continued to receive records of mothers who had died as a result of illegal terminations, either because they were unaware that Decree 770 had been repealed, or because of distrust of the changes that had taken place in December 1989"¹⁹, an element which may also contribute to the number of children still placed in institutions.

Abandonment is a feeling that can be experienced permanently, a feeling that needs to be approached with care. However, when resources are insufficient, this support cannot be given properly. Research by Gabriela Dima and John Pinkerton²⁰ shows that those who live in residential care and are not supported in their transition to adulthood experience this as a "second abandonment", so their lives lack stability and security permanently. At the same time, they note that support can take many forms, so it is not only special protection staff or foster carers who can provide emotional support, but also *peer* support networks, which are important for sharing experiences and learning from others who may have faced the same problems.

Starting from abandonment, in the same chapter, we continued with the analysis of the main explanatory theories relevant to the development of children in care, such as attachment theory, social role theory and resilience theory. Understanding these theories is important for

¹⁷ Zamfir Cătălin, Marius Augustin Pop, Elena Zamfir, *Romania 89-93. Dynamics of Welfare and Social Protection*, Expert Publishing House, 1994, p. 54.

¹⁸ Zamfir Cătălin, Marius Augustin Pop, Elena Zamfir, op. cit, p. 24.

¹⁹ Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania - FINAL REPORT - (coord.) Vladimir Tismaneanu, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2006, p. 510

²⁰ Dima, G., Pinkerton J., *The Role of Informal Leaving Care Peer Support Networks in Romania*, in Mendes, P. & Snow, P.m *Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care*, 2016, p. 409-424, Springer Nature.

the correct perception of the specific needs in these categories of young people and their social behaviour in the transition process from the perspective of theoretical framing.

In chapter three, dedicated to relevant public policies related to the protection of children's rights in Romania, we have considered issues that have influenced legislation in the field, as well as previous research and strategies related to leaving care. At the same time, we analysed the changes in the Children's Law in the period 2010-2020, the quality standards of social protection services, the detailed perspective on child abuse in foster and residential care, the protection of children's rights through the Children's Advocate and the international perspectives on the termination of special protection. This information provides a solid basis for understanding the legal and institutional context in which young people face the difficult transition from state care to independent living.

An important aspect of chapter three is the international perspective after the end of the special protection measure, in the sense that I have chosen to present models of approaching leaving care in Austria, Germany, Croatia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Norway, the UK and Hungary.

Chapter four is devoted to presenting the research methodology of the paper. The research aimed to identify the level of knowledge and understanding of young people under special protection measure about the transition mechanisms and plans needed to exit the care system, through qualitative and quantitative methods.

This chapter presents the sociological survey (based on a questionnaire administered to 627 institutionalised respondents and 70 respondents for whom the special protection measure ended between 2010 and 2020), among which we assessed three major aspects: the level of knowledge and understanding of young people about transitional plans, their perception of these transitional mechanisms and plans, and finally, the opinion of young people who ended their period of special protection about these plans and mechanisms.

The research question from which the research topic "*The transition out of care of young people who are or have been in state care in the last 10 years*" was derived was: How prepared do youth in state care feel for exiting the system and what programs do they have access to or have had access to to facilitate their transition to community living? This question provides a solid foundation for analyzing how young people leaving the child welfare system are supported in their social integration process.

Given that part of the target group was under special protection measure, the identification of possible participants in the study was carried out exclusively by contacting the 47 DGASPCs existing at national level. Specifically, we sent an email to the directorates to obtain the necessary agreement to apply the questionnaire to the young people. We received affirmative answers from 23 DGASPCs at county level and from Sector 4, Bucharest. Thus, the questionnaire was physically applied face-to-face to a total sample of 627 young people in state care, aged between 14 and 26, who were under special protection measures at the time of filling in the questionnaire.

The actual application of questionnaire one started in 2019, 47 placement and residential centres were visited at national level, in 22 counties and in Sector 4 - Bucharest. For the application

Quantitative research is an objective process in which numerical data is used to quantify or measure phenomena and to obtain results (Carr, 1994, p.716). In this study we used two questionnaires as data collection tools.

1. Questionnaire 1, for young people in state care, consisted of 29 questions, of which 19 were pre-defined, 6 open-ended and 4 for demographic information on the group studied (Annex 1).
2. Questionnaire 2, for young care leavers, consisting of 27 questions, of which 19 with pre-defined response options, 7 open-ended, 6 were designed to obtain demographic information about the study group (Annex 2).
3. Administrative questionnaires emailed in three different stages, each containing different sets of questions: 7 questions (Annex 4 - 2019), 5 questions (Annex 5 - 2020) and 11 questions (Annex 6 - 2023). The purpose of these requests was to obtain official data from the DGASPCs in the country on the subject studied. To this end, we requested information on the resources and tools used, as well as concrete data on the number of beneficiaries and their follow-up mechanisms after leaving care in the period 2010 - 2020. Out of 47 DGASPCs at national level, only 37 provided information.

Given that the present analysis is aimed at two distinct samples, two different questionnaires were developed (Annex 1, Annex 2), each of which aimed primarily at collecting information on the stage of transition of young people from an institutional to an independent environment. Considering that legislation and quality standards regarding social

services, as well as those regarding social services for children in the special protection system, are constantly changing, we analysed the extent to which attention is paid to the transition stage out of care (Annex 1).

To conduct the administrative analysis, we sent out three email requests in three different stages, each containing different sets of questions: 7 questions (Annex 4 - 2019), 5 questions (Annex 5 - 2020) and 11 questions (Annex 6 - 2023). The purpose of these requests was to obtain official data from the DGASPCs in the country on the topic under study. To this end, we requested information on the resources and tools used, as well as concrete data on the number of beneficiaries and their follow-up mechanisms after leaving care in the period 2010 - 2020.

The data obtained were analysed in Chapters V and VI. However, given the responses received, it was impossible for me to adequately assess the impact of the actions undertaken by these DGASPCs in terms of the transition of young people to independent living. The lack of concrete data on the monitoring and evaluation of this process was a major obstacle to a rigorous and conclusive analysis.

4.3.2. Case study

The case study²¹ is a research method used in various scientific fields, including sociology, that involves detailed analysis of a specific case to better understand a complex phenomenon or problem. In this research, I chose to use this type of approach to analyse the life experience of 7 subjects who went through the process of institutionalisation and leaving care. Through this case study, I was able to identify and analyse the factors that influenced their decisions and perspectives on the transitional measures they took part in.

Initials	Sex	Age at the time of the interview	Age outside the centre	County
V.I.	M	26	21	Giurgiu
C.B.	M	32	26	Buzău
E.C.	F	22	16	Iasi
N.C.	M	26	21	Bacau
A.T.	M	24	21	Bucharest

²¹ Norman, K. Denzin, Yvonna, S. Lincoln, (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, by SAGE Publication, Inc, pp. 301, 2011.

N.I.	M	27	25	Calarasi
E.A.G.	F	24	23	Ialomita

Short history

Through research on the life experiences of V.I., C.B., E.C., N.C., A.T., N.I. and E.A.G. in foster care, we were able to gain a detailed insight into the environment and conditions in which they grew and developed. Each subject had a unique and moving story, and my interactions with them gave me a clearer understanding of their reality in the centers where they grew up.

Abandoned at the age of one, V.I. was sexually abused and moved to various placement centres in Giurgiu, where he was diagnosed as "moderately retarded". C.B. benefited from the special protection system from birth to the age of 26 and was subjected to violence and sexual abuse. E.C. was abandoned near a dumpster at the age of 2. She was subsequently taken to an emergency reception centre and then placed with a foster carer. As a teenager, at the wish of the foster carer, she was institutionalised in a foster home in Iasi. N.C. was abandoned by his mother at birth and was moved to different foster homes in Bacau. A.T. spent the first 21 years of her life in children's homes in Bucharest. N.I. was abandoned in a hospital home in Bucharest and then transferred to the Children's Home in Calarasi, where he stayed until the age of 26. E.A.G. had to end up in a foster home in Urziceni at the age of 11 because her mother had health problems.

The fifth chapter of the paper focused on the analysis of data from the perspective of young people who are or have been in care, on their transition plans and their preparation for leaving care. The research addressed different aspects, including financial support for young people leaving care, strengthening the independence of system recipients from the perspective of developing independent living skills, and from the perspective of transition to independent living. Given the analysis of the perception of young people who have left the care system, it was important to highlight which factors influence the choice of housing after leaving care or residential care. At the same time, considering that any major change in a person's life can have an impact on his/her psycho-emotional state, we also analysed the psychological support received by young people during the period of institutionalisation and the serious consequences of inappropriate behaviour in institutions. I was interested in the opportunity to objectively examine issues that have not been adequately addressed in

exploring the reality of their sexual orientation. From this perspective, the research explored how sexual orientation is addressed and managed in the child protection system, in the context that several young people I interviewed told me that they had been victims of sexual abuse during their institutionalisation.

In Chapter 6 of the thesis²² we analysed the social impact of care leavers on young people who left the child protection system between 2010 and 2020. The study starts from in-depth research of the transitional measures implemented by the child protection directorates of each county and by the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption, in order to support young care leavers to integrate sustainably into society.

In recent years, Romania has made significant progress in improving the child protection system. However, the problems faced by young people leaving care remain a major concern. Many young people are at risk of becoming marginalised and socially disadvantaged, due to a lack of support and the limited resources available to them to integrate into society. In spite of this, several non-governmental organisations have taken on the responsibility of developing programmes for transition from special care to socio-professional integration, such as Hope and Homes for Children Romania²³, Vocea Copiilor Abandonnés²⁴, Fundația Filantropică Metropolis²⁵, Fundația Viață și Lumină, SOS Satele Copiilor Romania, Fundația FARA, Asociația TIBERIUS and many other organisations for the protection and defence of young people who have left care.

The analysis therefore focused on young people's perceptions of the challenges and barriers they face when leaving care. This highlights the importance of transitional measures to ensure the necessary support for young people to start their independent lives. One of the most important transitional measures is the extension of the period of support offered to young people leaving care. Young people do not receive support once they leave care to consolidate an independent life. An important period for young people to prepare for independent living is the 2 years before leaving the centre, during which time young people

²² Excerpts from this chapter were published in (2020) *Analysis of the social impact of leaving care in the last 10 years in Romania*, author, pp: 56 -75, Human Rights Journal, Romanian Institute for Human Rights.

²³ Transit centres and financial support for up to 6 months to pay the rent;

²⁴ EDFORSO HOUSING Programme - housing for homeless young people, young people who have left care.

²⁵ METROPOLIS Transit Centre for young people leaving care.

would have access to financial support and educational resources to find a job, secure housing or continue their education.

In the same chapter we have made an exposition of a Case Study. A head study on the 7 respondents who have experienced foster care and have been the subject of much debate regarding the child protection system in the country. As there are many issues identified in this area, it is essential to explore the life stories of these young people to better understand the impact the system has had on their lives. This case study focuses on exploratory interviews with young people who have been through different types of foster care, providing a first-hand insight into how they experienced their time in institutional care and how they perceived their time out of care.

To highlight these insights, we conducted a case study focusing on seven in-depth interviews selected from a sample of 70 respondents who initially participated in the quantitative research phase. The interview technique used is the life history interview, which allows for in-depth exploration of young people's experiences and perceptions of the child protection system.

This approach has given me a deeper understanding of the impact of the child protection system on children's lives, allowing me to identify key areas for improvement and propose practical solutions to support their transition to adult life.

Each of the respondents identified different problems within the system. As they reported their own experiences, the observations are subjective, but there are similar elements about how they experienced life in the centres. The people with whom we had the 7 in-depth interviews came from different parts of the country and were also of different ages. The majority of those interviewed had been victims of sexual abuse in various forms. Moreover, the interviewees reported that they had been subjected to violence and abuse. However, there are two successful cases among the young interviewees who focused their presentation only from the positive perspective of their experiences in residential care.

An important chapter of the present research is the one dedicated to the conclusions and the 10 recommendations proposed based on the results observed during the research. In this work, we have analysed the complex and delicate psychosocial problems encountered by young people under special protection measures, which influence and contribute to the transition to the moment of permanent exit from placement or residential centres. The

services provided by child protection in this respect are particularly important in terms of ensuring a future trajectory for these young people, enabling them to integrate into society when they leave care after the age of 18. However, it is important to note that behind the statistics used in monitoring the child protection system, there are real individuals, each with their own personality. It is therefore essential always to bear in mind the principle of human dignity, a universal value that we must all respect. This principle is also associated with the need for everyone to have the opportunity to acquire the life skills necessary to be independent and to integrate successfully into society. Overcoming deficiencies in training and education, as well as active engagement in the decision-making process and in various activities that enable their multilateral development, are essential elements in this process. These services are therefore particularly important in terms of ensuring a strong society and social cohesion.

The child protection system has undergone significant changes in recent years and continues to develop in a direction that allows for the integration of international child rights provisions. However, it must be realised that behind every figure (in September 2022, 12,054 children were in residential services and 31,158 in family services)²⁶ there is a person who can have a greater or lesser impact on the society in which we live and who has a personality and a will of their own. The principle of dignity, the intrinsic value of every human being, must not be missing from all discussions on children under special protection.

Recommendations developed in this chapter include: Implementing a vocational education and training program tailored to the individual needs of institutionalized youth, providing access to counseling and consultation to develop self-care skills and manage independent living, developing personalized transition plans that reflect the needs and aspirations of each youth, providing ongoing multidisciplinary team support to help institutionalized youth manage the changes and challenges of transition, promoting partnerships with community organizations to support socio-vocational integration, Providing legal assistance needed to navigate the processes related to independence, creating support networks, including mentors and positive role models, to guide youth, ensuring a smooth and planned transition to independent living, avoiding abrupt changes, accessing health services, including mental health, tailored to the specific requirements of the transition period,

²⁶ Statistical data on children and adoptions, ANPDCA, <https://copii.gov.ro/1/statistici/>

ensuring financial stability through financial literacy programs and support in obtaining employment.

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