

RESIDENTIAL RESOURCES FOR THE TRANSITION TOWARDS ADULT LIFE FOR FOSTERED YOUTHS IN CATALONIA

LOS RECURSOS RESIDENCIALES PARA LA TRANSICIÓN HACIA LA VIDA
ADULTA DE LOS JÓVENES TUTELADOS EN CATALUÑA

OS RECURSOS RESIDENCIAIS PARA A TRANSIÇÃO PARA A VIDA ADULTA
DOS JOVENS TUTELADOS EM CATALUÑA

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ABSTRACT: In Catalonia, Youths in care and Care leavers can apply for a housing program from 16 up to 21 to support their emancipation process. The aim of this study is to describe the housing program for transitioning to adult life for former foster youths in Catalonia, as well as the profile of young people, their educators and the work carried out in them. To this end, 5 methacategories were established: Identification data of the entity and its housing program, characteristics of the young residents, educational and support aspects to the youth, access and permanence in the housing program and leaving of the housing program. A semi-structured interview was used to interview 26 professionals. Professionals pointed out that the youth who stay longer are the ones who have a clear emancipation project and accept the educative supervision and program rules. The professionals explained that having an educative project and being enrolled in a training process increase the stay, because the financial subsidises they receive don't provide enough financial stability. Professionals pointed out that reasons for leaving the program were the lack of labour opportunities because subsidises they receive don't brings them enough financial stability. The reasons to left the program were the economic and labour stability. Due to the social and economic situation and the lack of job opportunities, most young people leave the program without having had the opportunity to prove themselves.

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<p>PALABRAS CLAVE: jóvenes tutelados extutelados ayuda a la emancipación autonomía transición a la vida adulta</p>	<p>RESUMEN: Los jóvenes tutelados y extutelados en Cataluña pueden acceder al programa de vivienda de apoyo a la emancipación desde los 16 a los 21 años. El objetivo de este estudio es describir los recursos residenciales de transición a la vida adulta para los jóvenes extutelados en Cataluña, así como el perfil de los jóvenes, sus educadores y la labor que en éstos se realiza. Para ello se establecieron 5 metacategorías: Datos identificativos de la entidad y sus recursos, características de los jóvenes residentes, aspectos educativos y de apoyo al joven, acceso y permanencia en el recurso y salida del recurso. Se entrevistó a 26 profesionales de las entidades que gestionan estos recursos residenciales mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas que fueron transcritas y codificadas para realizar posteriormente un análisis centrado en las categorías propuestas en el diseño. Los profesionales apuntaron que los jóvenes que permanecen en el programa son aquellos que tienen un proyecto claro de emancipación y aceptan las orientaciones educativas y las reglas del recurso residencial. También apuntaron a que tener un proyecto educativo y tener un proceso formativo en curso, aumentaba el tiempo de permanencia en el programa y que la falta de oportunidades laborales disuadía a los jóvenes a abandonar el programa, ya que las prestaciones económicas que reciben no les aporta la suficiente estabilidad financiera. En cuanto a las razones para abandonar el programa, mencionaron la estabilidad económica y laboral. Debido a la situación social y económica y la falta de oportunidades de trabajo, la mayoría de los jóvenes abandonan el programa sin haber tenido la oportunidad de demostrar su valía.</p>
<p>PALAVRAS-CHAVE: jovens tutelados extutelados ajuda à emancipação autonomia transição à vida adulta</p>	<p>RESUMO: Os jovens tutelados e extutelados em Catalunya podem aceder ao programa residencial de apoio à emancipação dos os 16 aos 21 anos. O objectivo deste estudo é descrever os recursos residenciais de transição à vida adulta para os jovens extutelados em Catalunya, bem como definir o perfil dos jovens, dos educadores e o trabalho que estes realizam. Para isso estabeleceram-se 5 meta categorias: Dados identificativos da entidade e seus recursos, características dos jovens residentes, aspetos educativos e de apoio ao jovem, acesso e permanência na casa de acolhimento e respetiva saída. Foram entrevistados 26 profissionais das entidades que gerem estes recursos residenciais mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas que foram transcritas e codificadas para realizar posteriormente uma análise centrada nas categorias propostas no desenho. Os profissionais apontaram que os jovens que permanecem no programa são aqueles que têm um projeto claro de emancipação e aceitam as orientações educativas e as regras da casa de acolhimento. Também apontaram que ter um projeto educativo e ter um processo formativo em curso, aumentava o tempo de permanência no programa, e que, a falta de oportunidades de trabalho dissuadia os jovens a abandonarem o programa, já que as prestações económicas que recebem não lhes dariam a estabilidade financeira desejada. Quanto às razões para abandonar o programa, mencionaram a estabilidade económica e o trabalho. Devido à situação social e económica e à falta de oportunidades de trabalho, a maioria dos jovens abandonam o programa sem ter tido a oportunidade de demonstrar sua valia.</p>

1. Introduction

In 2014, 42.867 Spanish children and youths were under the foster care of the public administrations (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2016). This protective measure ends when the youths reach adulthood. Melendro (2010, 2015) points out the concept of “young adults”, which has been used in several studies in this millennium to refer to youths who *have not yet clearly transitioned to independent adult life*, and establishes different factors that affect their independence: work, social, family and economic factors, which are attained in a non-linear fashion and at an increasingly later age. The transition to adult life is particularly difficult for foster youths, but even more so in a country with high levels of youth unemployment and difficulties accessing housing, like Spain. This is why foster youth are dealing with a shorter, more accelerated and compressed transitions towards

adulthood than their parents (Lopez, Santos, Bravo & Fernández del Valle, 2013). This transition must also be made with an impoverished support network (Bravo & Fernández del Valle, 2001; Bravo & Fernández del Valle, 2003; Martín, 2011; Martín, García & Siverio, 2012; Martín, Muñoz, Rodríguez & Pérez, 2008; Sala, Villalba, Jarriot & Arnau, 2012), which is so necessary for the successful transition to adult life (Montserrat, Casas, González, Malo, Araujo & Navarro, 2010). Youths are often oriented towards their family even if the family does not have the ability to provide them the support they need (París, Hernando, & Martínez, 2017).

However, the difficulties are not solely constrained to the hostile socioeconomic context and the early age when youths fostered by the administration must become independent from their “corporate parent” (Courtney, 2009); instead, the vast majority must make this difficult step with low educational levels, low job qualifications and

smaller social support network. In fact, the majority of foster youths suffer from problems of under-employment, job instability and poverty (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney *et al.*, 2005; Courtney *et al.*, 1998, 2001, Jariot, Sala & Arnau, 2015; among others). A meta-analysis of 32 studies found that having a stable home and education are the most determining factors (Gypen, Vanderfaellie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017).

In a country with a high youth unemployment rate, educational level is the first filter used to choose the possible candidates for a job. Numerous international studies have found that foster youths have educational levels that are far beneath their peers (Courtney, 2009; Courtney *et al.*, 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Festinger 1983; Pecora *et al.*, 2006), as well as much lower percentages of graduation from compulsory secondary school compared to the general population (Montserrat, Casas, Malo & Bertran, 2011; Montserrat, Casas & Malo, 2013; Montserrat, Casas & Bertran, 2013; Montserrat, Casas & Baena, 2015; Sala, Villaba, Jariot & Rodríguez, 2009).

There are numerous factors that affect this low graduation rate: a previous history of low education in the birth family, high rates of disability and psychological disorders, low educational support, the emotional upset they experience, constant school changes, and the prioritisation of informal educational pathways due to the low educational expectations held by the professionals that deal with the youths, coupled with the fact that they have to fend for themselves after they turn 18 years old (Casas, Montserrat & Malo, 2010; Courtney, 2009; Fernández del Valle, Sinero & Bravo, 2011; IARS, 2009; Sala, Villalba, Jariot & Arnau, 2012).

In fact, Courtney, Hook and Lee (2010) observed that former foster youths with a higher educational level are more likely to find jobs, have a stable home and avoid problems with the legal system and are less likely to become adolescent parents. Leaving the protective system usually generates lower salaries and higher unemployment levels, and consequently more situations of poverty (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Hook and Courtney (2011) found that staying in the protection system longer can act as a protective factor against these situations. In the same vein, the results of the meta-analysis performed by Heerde, Hemphill and Scholes Balog (2016) underscore the benefits of transitional programmes in housing, jobs and education. This is why, pioneering services to support the transition started to be developed in Catalonia in 1994, and they are currently

under the supervision of the ASJTET (Support Area for Current and Former Foster Youths) and provided for in Law 14/2010 on the Opportunities and Rights of Children. The ASJTET offers different services (social-educational supervision, legal advice, job advice, housing and economic support) geared towards foster and former foster youths aged 16 and older who do not have the possibility of returning to their family and show a high risk of exclusion after turning 18. In 2014, 537 youths benefited from the housing programme (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015). The majority of these homes are small units supervised by a wide web of varied entities (foundations, cooperatives or associations) which have reached agreements with the ASJTET. Many of these entities belong to the Federation of Entities with Assisted Projects and Flats (FEPA), a state-wide organisation. For this reason, the programmes to support the transition to adult life for foster youths in Catalonia are a referent worth considering when implementing these services in other regions in Spain.

The purpose of this study is to describe the residential resources for the transition to adult life for former foster youths in Catalonia, as well as the profile of the youths, their social workers and the job the latter perform. To do so, 5 meta-categories were established: information identifying the entity and its resources, characteristics of the resident youths, educational aspects and support for the youths, access and time spent at the residence, and departure from the residence.

2. Methodology

The study performed is a descriptive study that seeks to gather information that will allow us to identify the characteristics of the housing programme for former foster youths and the profiles of the youths. The methodology is predominantly qualitative, although some quantitative information was also gathered. A descriptive transactional design was used. To gather the information, a semi-structured interview was designed in which the entities were asked about the number of residential resources and places, the profiles of the youths they attend to, the profile of the social workers, the goals and strategies of their interventions, the amount of time the youths stay at the residence and the reasons they leave it. The interview was validated by 4 experts in this field of research. Likewise, we requested the ASJTET's permission to perform the study. The design of the study was approved by the Ethics Committee on Animal and Human Experimentation at the

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (CEEAH) with report number 2272.

Professionals from 25 of the 29 entities that manage 59 residential resources for former foster youths in Catalonia were interviewed. The main criterion was that they have at least one residential resource exclusively for former foster youths, and regarding the criterion for choosing the person to interview, they had to be a manager or a professional with managerial responsibilities within the residential resource so that there could be conceptual representativeness as they responded to the questions. These entities were contacted by phone to request an interview with a professional with responsibilities in the entity, and a day was agreed upon to hold the interview. Before it was held, the interviewee was informed of the content of the interview and the objectives of the study, and they were asked to participate voluntarily. A source from the ASJTET was also interviewed to ascertain the access and case referral criteria. The interviews were recorded so that they could later be transcribed.

The data gathered were analysed through descriptive matrixes. The analysis method was categorical content analysis. The categorisation process was mixed deductive-inductive.

3. Results

3.1. Transitional residential resources, access requirements and length of stays

Two of the main characteristics of the housing programme are fragmentation and small sizes. The 59 residential resources analysed belong to 25 entities, most of which arrange their places with the public administration (89%). Only 6 residential resources have public infrastructures, but their management is delegated to a private entity. Thus, we find entities that manage just a single residential resource (28%), others that manage two or three residential resources (60%) and a few that manage 4 or more residential resources (12%).

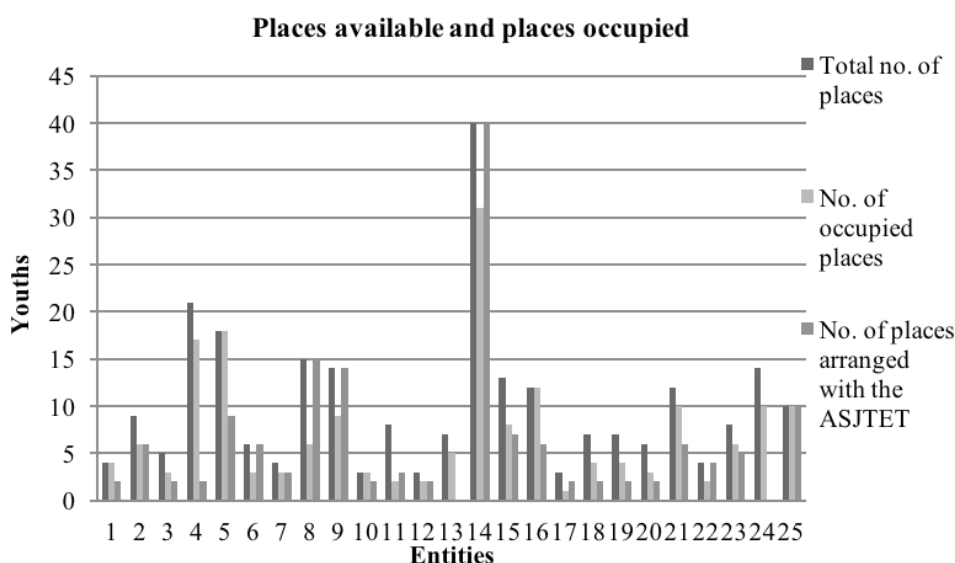


Figure 1. Places available, occupied and agreed upon with the Administration

All told, these entities offer 267 places, 196 of which (73% of those available) were occupied at the time of the interview. The residential resources had between 2 and 7 places, with homes with 4-5 places predominating (49%), followed by homes with 2-3 places (37%). Homes with 6-8 or more than 8 places are somewhat uncommon (7% each). These small formats seek to create environments that are as normal as possible in which the youths must take responsibility for their home and live with other youths:

Here the only thing I have here which is not like a flat is the cleaning responsibilities, so when there are three of them there are three; and when there are two of them they combine it between them. But other than that, everything else works like a normal student flat [...] I also want them to know that they are at home and that I'm in a space that I don't want to bother them (Entity 12).

The social worker's supervision is an intrinsic part of all the residential resources; in most cases

this involves occasional visits to the home but daily telephone availability (88%). Only in a few (12%), those targeted at the less independent youths, offer social worker support 24 hours a day.

Youths who want to access these residences have to apply with ASJTET before they turn 18, and they have to develop an educational plan and demonstrate acquisition of minimum competencies for independence. The ASJTET experts evaluate their candidacy and suggest them to the residential resource. These applications are generally accepted because in their careers the experts have proven their ability to choose the youths, although they can also reject them. Finally, the interested party is proposed the residential resource.

[...] Then there is a pre-selection [...] they are generally offered just to the kids that someone or the social workers from the CRAE [Residential Centre for Educational Action] or the experts of ASJTET think may work out, that is, there aren't [...] places for everyone who leaves the CRAEs. So there is a population that is already sort of pre-chosen or elitist or which is going to have good chances of working out. (Entity 4)

Another requirement which the centres tend to request for immigrant youths is having a residence permit, or having applied for one, since this is a requirement for accessing courses or job offers, and if they do not have one, it hinders the work that the social workers can do with them.

[...] in general, all my kids who enter the flats have residency, and if they don't I try to get it for them because the process takes a very long time. I always tell them that it's better for them to be in the centre, since there is more educational experience, and they can do workshops and stuff. If they don't have a residence permit they can't take any courses and they get bored. Of course, I push for it: "You don't have residence? Well, I want it as soon as you get it". (Entity 8)

Finally, another frequent criterion that the residential resources insist on before they accept a youth is that they cannot show any serious psychiatric or drug consumption problems; this is due to the lack of specialised staff to provide quality social-work assistance.

Once in the resource, the youths are required to commit to and take advantage of it. They must accept the social worker's efforts and fulfil the basic rules needed for peaceful cohabitation. The flexibility of these criteria can be seen in terms of the youths' situation and circumstances, as a form of individualised work.

If we established an overly strict filter, no one is going to live here. Look, a girl disappeared for two weeks in the summer and that was reason enough for her to lose her spot, but I decided that that wasn't the best course and now the girl is studying and working and living alone in a rented flat. You have to know how to provide opportunities. The criteria are flexible and very individual. We don't apply the rules as rules per se; we apply them to the person and I think that this is fundamental. (Entity 16).

3.2. *The professionals*

The entities interviewed had a total of 61 staff workers in social worker jobs, which is equivalent to an average of 1 social worker per residential resource and a mean ratio of one social worker per 4.5 youths. More than half of the educators are in the 30-40-year-old age bracket (50.82%), and only 4.9 are over the age of 50. This reflects the entities' intention to have staff that is young but old enough to distance themselves from the users. Females predominate, with 69%, over males with the remaining 31%. In terms of education, more than half of the professionals (64%) are social workers, one-fourth have other university degrees (28%), and some have done the upper-level vocational training course in social integration or sociocultural organisation (8%).

3.3. *Purposes and intervention strategies of the residential resources*

All the interviewees agree that the purpose of the residential resources is to accompany the youths towards independence; therefore, one of the main spheres of work in all the entities is job insertion. Due to the current economic situation, the entities view job insertion as somewhat unfeasible and focus their efforts on training and on ensuring that the youths have enough resources to deal with their situation when they leave the residential resource, which is considered disproportionate for the age of these youths.

[...] it's not like the youths leave here with jobs and a flat... no, because these objectives cannot be met, they are very difficult. The objectives are for the youths to have the tools they need to live alone, that they are capable of dealing with a job interview, that they can somehow compete for a job and know how to live in a space where there are now social workers and they can live alone. (Entity 9)

Another sphere of assistance is emotional support. The entities provide an adult reference figure who helps them and offers them security in

their doubts and concerns or allows them to share their successes, changes or future plans. The social workers stress a greater need for this assistance among the girls, in order to empower them and minimise their dependence on their partner as they construct their personal future plans.

They should be capable of living alone, of taking charge, of having their network of friends, and this friendship should not necessarily entail a sexual or partner relationship. [...] Creating a network of friends who have been meaningful and who care for her, but without having to depend on anyone, either affectively or economically. In women, I think it's primarily the independence of not having to be with a man or a woman. (Entity 18)

Money management is a specific area on which all the entities work. The youths develop a spending plan along with their guardian, which includes the money needed to pay for food, everyday expenses and co-pays for services not covered by all the expenses of the flat. However, it is also used to teach about money management and to familiarise the youths with the real costs of housing. This co-pay varies among entities (from €45 to €250), as well as according to the youths' whereabouts. Under no circumstances is not earning any income and being unable to pay the co-pay and maintenance a reason for evicting the youths from the residential resource. If they cannot maintain themselves, the entities help them with maintenance and cover their costs.

The objectives of each youth's educational intervention are captured in an individualised working plan, and their progress is reported to the public administration every quarter. The goal is to get the youths involved in this process. This involvement is perceived differently by each centre; some entities insist that the project must arise from the youths and not be imposed, while others expect the youths to follow the professionals' instructions.

The pathway should be marked by the youths, but many times they are lacking the tools. Then the work that can be done in the flats is to help them in this process, but obviously not imposing it; they have to do it themselves and believe in it. As a social worker, you have to be able to give them these tools and instruments so they can decide, too. (Entity 14)

Well, yes, if I tell them to go somewhere they do, and if I say they have to take a Spanish class they take it. But I don't have to keep watch over what time they get up. (Entity 8)

The entities also use external resources to cover the youths' needs, such as immigrant care services, psychological services and municipal job-training services, as well as to cover the needs of the teams, such as advice for social work teams, among others.

3.4. Profile of former foster teens in transitional residential resources to adult life

A total of 196 youths were using the residential resources at the time of the interview; the proportion of boys was higher than girls (58.2% vs. 41.8%). Just a few residential resources are co-ed, partly to prevent youths of different sexes from living together, as this is a stage in which affective relationships impact the development of their personal plans, in a space without the continuous presence of a reference adult.

Of course, in a flat where there isn't a social worker 24 hours a day, with boys and girls aged 18, 19, 20 with their hormones raging... it can be complicated (Entity 7).

However, the entities that do have co-ed flats have had positive experiences with them.

It's much better. And I'll tell you something else: co-ed living works much better in the flat when there are two of each of them than when there are 4 boys [...], I mean it's more natural. (Entity 11)

Most of the youths are between the ages of 18 (39.8%) and 19 (31.9%), although there are also youths aged 20 (18.7%) and 21 (6%) (mean = 18 years 11 months).

Regarding the geographic provenance of the former foster youths, half of them have immigrant backgrounds (54%), which does not match the proportion in the foster population. This can be explained by the fact that most of these youths have no family in Spain to whom to turn.

Ninety percent of the youths who were living in the residential resources at the time had no job, only 8% had a job contract and 2% were working without a contract. As mentioned above, the immigrant youths faced particular difficulties finding work since many of them did not have a work permit and they tended to have little education.

We are talking about the fact that the specific population that we have today is all immigrants, and they do have a residence permit, but it's really hard for them to get a work permit. It's kind of a Catch-22 situation: "we can't give you a work permit until you have a contract", but then the company says: "if you don't

have a work permit...". They are not well-informed about how much this could cost them; they think that they have to pay much more, and the kids aren't well educated so you're not going to say, "Wow! A business owner is going to really stand up for this kid" because their education is extremely basic. [...] So they keep getting training, course after course, but they have hardly any opportunities (Entity 3).

The youths who work primarily do so in government-sponsored entities which aim to provide jobs to groups with difficulties. These entities offer the youths the chance to regularise their work situation, but they offer training contracts that last a limited amount of time and salaries that do not allow them to live independently.

These difficulties, coupled with the lack of job opportunities, explains why most of these youths are engaged in some kind of training.

There has been a major change. The profile 7 or 8 years ago was a youth who was working and everything was most clear. Here there are two factors which compound each other: first, the expansion of training possibilities for youths, such as a benefit or the "La Caixa" scholarships, and secondly the economic crisis. (Entity 14).

Regarding the training, we can see a dichotomy between youths whose prime objective is an education plan and those who prefer to work but who decide to study because of a lack of job opportunities. Thus, on the one hand we find a group which is studying for a Mid-Level or Upper-Level Vocational Training Courses (30% and 3%, respectively) or a university degree (5%), and on the other we find youths who are taking an Initial Professional Qualification Programme (28%), literacy or language classes (15%), occupation training (7%), compulsory secondary school (8%) or Access Courses to Mid-Level Vocational Training Courses (2%).

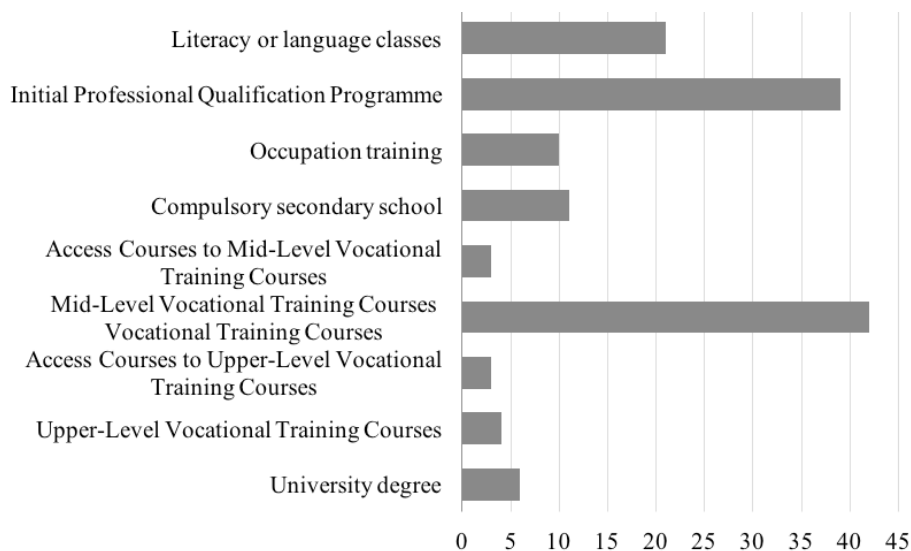


Figure 2. Studies in which the youths are engaged

Number of youths and % by kind of education they are pursuing.

3.5. Length of stay and departure from residential resources

The highest abandonment rate of the residential resources is at the age of 20, and the average stay lasts 1 year and 8 months. The entities concur that 10 years earlier, the youths gained independence earlier and that they have been extending their stays in the residential resources due to their difficulties finding a job.

However, there is a variety of factors that lead a youth to leave the residential resource before the age of 21, and it is not always because they have achieved their independence objectives.

Some youths do not have clear plans and cannot find a reason to keep staying in the residential resource, so they end up leaving it either on their own decision or on the suggestion of the social worker. Others decide to leave the residential resource when they receive a benefit, oftentimes driven by the desire not to have to comply with the rules imposed and be accountable to the social worker. In the case of girls, the social workers note that they primarily leave the project because of partner relationships; although they also have a more decisive, autonomous attitude which allows them to gain independence before the boys.

The issue of a partner heavily influences the girls. Many of them have left to go live with their partner, and you are wringing your hands with a horrible paternalistic feeling because they tell you that they want to be mothers at the age of 19 or 20 and 'I want to marry him' or 'I want to be happy with him'. [...] With partners it's 'well I'm going to live with this one' or 'I'm going to live with that one' or 'I'm going to live with the other guy'. I mean, you get it because it's natural, but of course you say, 'you're leaving an entire process of studying, even though you could get admitted into the university if you wanted, and you're working and all and you have some kind of stability and coherence. Do you want to leave it to go live with this person?' 'Yes'. (Entity 21)

On the other hand, there are youths who have a hard time leaving the centre. Some of the interviewees attribute these cases to the emotional bonds with the social worker or the entity.

However, the girls who extend their stay tend to do so in order to complete their education plans or because they are mothers, since they have greater responsibilities that make them seriously consider taking this leap.

In some cases, the professionals are the ones who decide that the young person should leave the residential resource, in a more or less agreed-upon fashion, either because they believe that the youth has achieved the goals for which they were in the flat or because of an extreme situation which leads them to believe that the youth cannot continue living there. Expulsions are primarily conditioned upon a lack of predisposition and repeated noncompliance with the rules of the residence through mild demerits - bad behaviour, disrupting the peaceful coexistence of the flatmates - or serious demerits, which are regarded as direct expulsions, such as aggression, thefts in the flat or commission of a crime. However, some professionals question the strict application of the rules, stating that they would not be so strict with their own adolescent child.

[...] the third time our attention is drawn because they've found people in the flat, because we've found alcoholic drinks or because they aren't going to school, they are thrown out onto the street. Perhaps we're a bit too strict in this sense, and perhaps that's why we have the flat empty. I'm not sure. But you question it, you know? Because I have kids and I forgive my kids for lots of things in life. That's what I mean. Of course, they're my children and these others aren't, but... you know what I mean, right? (Entity 11)

When the decision to leave the residence is taken by the youth, it is usually motivated by their

lack of agreement with the social workers' control, being fed up with the protection system, because the residence does not meet their expectations or, to a lesser extent, because the possibility arises of returning to their family or going to live with their partner.

The interviewees stated that when the youths leave the centre, the majority of them go to live in shared flats or they rent rooms. Another common reason for departure among local youths is that they return to their families or go to live with their partner or their partner's family, primarily the girls. In the case of the immigrant population, returning to their home country is not an option they consider as they perceive it as a failure in their migratory process.

Most of the entities state that the youths leave without work or at best with occasional jobs or poor working conditions. Most of them leave the residential resources having studied a Mid-Level Vocational Training Courses or Initial Professional Qualification Programme, and earning the non-contributing benefit of the minimum insertion income (RMI) and having earned the assistance offered by the ASJTET, while they lived at the residence. The interviewees also state that these youths' social networks are limited at the time they leave the residence.

Many of the entities offer to keep in touch with the youths when they leave the residence to help them or provide them with advice on occasional problems they may have in securing documentation and other paperwork.

4. Limitations

The design of the study included the participation of all the entities in Catalonia which house foster youths (no.=29); however, because of some entities' availability, we were only able to access 25 of them. In one of the entities, the interviewee did not hold a managerial post, as required, due to last-minute problems in the calendar of the person in charge of the residential resource. This replacement limited the responses to the questions that are the most closely related to management of the flats, which were not taken into consideration in the data analysis.

5. Discussion

The data from the study have allowed us to learn more about the housing programme to support the transitional process to autonomy of former foster youth; the job of the social workers; the profile of the youths and professionals; and the access, length in and departure from this programme.

Without a doubt, these resources fill a very important function which can be crucial in the results of this transition to adulthood. In fact, as noted in the Midwest study (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney *et al.*, 2007), the youths who received this kind of support had more successful transitions. Along the same lines, after analysing the transitional processes of youths attended to by the ASJTET, Montserrat, Casas and Sisteró (2013) concluded that the transitional services brought an improvement in the educational levels comparable to the youths in the general population. The programme provided the stability and guidance needed in a complex period, adolescence, when the youth can take a life course with risks that are difficult to reverse when they lack a support network like the family.

Many of the youths seem to satisfactorily take advantage of the residential resource, although it is surprising that in a place like Spain, with high unemployment rates and serious difficulties finding housing, 70% of the youths leave the residences before the age of 20. The report presented by the ASJTET (2011) noted that 59% of the youths had a departure that their social workers deemed appropriate, but 29% had only partly achieved the objectives and 11% were not following the working plan. In the study presented by Montserrat, Casas and Sisteró (2013), 47.5% of the youths achieved their objectives, 28.4% abandoned the programme on their own will, and 24.2% had largely unfavourable results. The interviewees noted that even though some of the youths left the residence because they achieved the autonomy they needed, a considerable part did so for reasons like failure to comply with the rules, failure to take advantage of the resource and lack of satisfaction with the social workers' supervision, which they perceived as controlling, an aspect which has also been found in other countries (Munson, Stanhope, Small, & Atterbury, 2017). These figures are worrisome, and deserve in-depth analysis, if we also consider the fact that many youths never even enter this kind of resource because they lack the independent-living skills needed, or because they do not have a clear educational plan. On the other hand, the study by Olson, Scherer and Cohen (2017) states that these youths would have fewer decision-making skills than their peers not in foster care.

One of the first questions to emerge in this regard is: why do so many youths fostered in the protection system not reach the age of 18 with the minimum basic skills needed to start a learning phase in a shared flat? In this sense, perhaps the social work programmes for minors focus mainly on covering their basic needs and on access

to education and healthcare services and do not place enough emphasis on developing their basic independent-living competences, which the majority of youths learn at home (cleaning, shopping, cooking, laundry, money management, managing friends' visits and taking responsibility for their behaviour during these visits, etc.). We should also bear in mind that many of these youths who enjoy the housing programme were fostered in their adolescence and enter the programme with entrenched habits and values that are difficult to change in the brief time they spend in the centres. In fact, the majority of participants in the programme are young unaccompanied immigrants, some of whom, prior to their journey to Spain, had lived on the street, in hostile environments, and with the values needed to survive on the street, which could conflict with the rules of the programme.

Another factor worth considering is the high school dropout rate among this population (Montserrat, Casas & Baena, 2015). When the everyday school experience leads to the conviction that "studying isn't worth it" and the students have not had the chance to discover what particular skills they possess, it is difficult to for them visualise an educational pathway in which they could be successful. This aspect requires urgent attention. Many of the foster children had significant educational deficits before being fostered. The centres should not be satisfied just with ensuring that the children attend school every day but should also develop educational plans which are capable of providing individualised support in order to lower the deficits or delays that the children may have and support them in their progress, in addition to helping them discover their own talents and vocations.

Viewing social workers' efforts as "control" is another aspect which is often mentioned as the reason why the youths leave. Even though we have social workers who are better trained in mentoring (Sala, Arnau, Courtney, & Dworsky, 2016), the youths' lack of involvement is a problem which also occurs in other countries. Many of the interviewees expressed their dilemma with regard to the need to ensure that the youths respect the rules and the need for a patient attitude with adolescents. The educational relationship is another aspect that requires more in-depth study. However, this orientation is essential when a high percentage of youths reach adulthood without a clear plan (Lemus, Farruggia, Germa, & Chang, 2017) and when not all the foster youths have similar profiles or the same needs (Miller, Paschall, & Azar, 2017). In fact, Rome and Raskin (2017) found

that the mentorship of an adult is a protective factor in this transition.

On the other hand, one of the reasons cited for abandonment is the difficulty of having to live with youths that they have not chosen, with whom they may feel no affinity. In fact, the analysis of the type of resources in the programme shows that most of the residences are shared flats with discontinuous supervision, which require the youths to have a high degree of autonomy and responsibility, and there are few residences for youths with less autonomy (continuous supervision). One of the resources offered by the ASJTET that is not described in this report because it is not strictly a residential service is the SAEJ (Specialised Mentoring Service of Fostered and Former Foster Youths). This service provides youths living in rental flats and rooms available on the market with intensive social mentoring. This kind of mentoring can be more normalising and does not require the youth to break with their small network of acquaintances, friends or other support people to go live in a residence that has an open spot. Other alternatives for youths who cannot adapt to the available residences could also be considered. In Illinois, in these cases they apply “alternative contracts” with a reference adult that the youth chooses, as long as the public administration deems that it is a safe environment and the adult can provide the supervision needed (Sala, Arnau, Courtney, & Dworsky, 2016).

The difficulties accessing the job market are one of the recurring issues in the interviews. In this sense, the entities resort to external programmes for normalised youths or for populations at the risk of exclusion. The ASJTET has a team of 7 job placers who provide guidance to the social workers and youths who request it, and it arranges these external programmes with some entities, although there are no specific programmes for

foster youths. Some countries have specific job insertion programmes because they believe that the foster youths’ deficit in competencies when accessing the job market are more serious than those of the majority of disadvantaged youths who use these programmes, and that therefore they are unable to take proper advantage of them (Sala, Arnau, Courtney, & Dworsky, 2016).

We should not forget that half of the youths in the housing programme are unaccompanied immigrants with a residence permit but without a job permit, which poses a barrier to their accessing training programmes and the job market. This is one of the aspects on which the interviewees expressed the most concern, which would require the public administration to design some kind of measure.

Finally, the study points to two different kinds of youth profiles: first, those with a clear educational plan, for whom staying in the residence provides security in aspects like money and housing so they can continue their studies and thus extend their stay; and secondly, a group of youths who have a life plan focused on job insertion, who cannot find work or do not have permission to work and take low-level training courses in the hopes of finding internships in companies which can provide them with a job opportunity. In these cases, the disappointment at not meeting expectations may be the reason they break the agreements made with the social worker, as well as the cause of distress and abandonment of the residence. It would be worthwhile to explore the option of creating a network of companies sensitive to these youths which could offer them real job placement possibilities.

More studies are needed that make an in-depth analysis of the educational relationship and satisfaction with the resources from the standpoint of the youths served.

Listado de siglas utilizado

ASJTET: Área de Apoyo a los Jóvenes Tutelados y Extutelados. De sus siglas en catalán de Àrea de Suport als Joves Tutelats i Extutelats.

CAM: Curso de Acceso a Ciclos Formativos de Grado Medio

CAS: Curso de Acceso a Ciclos Formativos de Grado Superior

CFGM: Ciclo Formativo de Grado Medio

CFGS: Ciclo Formativo de Grado Superior

CRAE: Centro Residencial de Acción Educativa

ESO: Educación Secundaria Obligatoria

FEPA: Federación de Entidades con Pisos y Proyectos Asistidos

PCPI: Programa de Cualificación Profesional Inicial

RMI: Renta Mínima de Inserción

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