

# DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY OF COLLECTING DATA ON YOUTH LEAVING INSTITUTIONAL CARE

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## Abstract

There is a lot of children in institutional care in the people after they leave institutional care because data on them are not systematically collected. This paper presents the design and methodology of a primary data collection in a research project on factors influencing care leavers. This paper discusses project methodology, the design of data collection and its limits, the availability of data, how non-response bias will be handled, the burdens of data collection stemming from the GDPR, etc. It also reflects the approaches of preliminary researches. The paper presents the methodology of collecting data; provides guidelines for other researchers, and, in the future, the results of the research might provide basis for those who make decisions regarding the system of institutional care.

**Key words:** institutional care, adaptation, integration, children

**JEL Code:** JEL J13, JEL J15

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## Introduction

Young adults' transition from institutional care to everyday life is closely monitored in all developed countries. Existing research and publications on this topic (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor & Nesmith, 2001; Jones, 2014 and others) show that the transition is very difficult and risky in every country. Despite the support young adults leaving institutional care receive, their subsequent adaptation to everyday life is significantly less successful in comparison with their peers from general public. For example, the risk of LACYP for social exclusion and premature death due to suicide is also several times higher than in their age group in general (Berlin, Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011) and (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). According to Courtney, Hook and Lee (2012), 36% of the researched sample, which is referred to as "accelerated adults", was most likely to succeed in making the key transitions to independent living. They were living independently, beginning to raise their children and completing their secondary education. However, the majority of the sample had some issues in adapting to independent life. Our research attempts to clarify why only some percentage of children raised in institutional care are able to adapt to everyday adult life.

Previously conducted studies have primarily focused on external factors. There is therefore room for researching internal factors, which might also indicate poor adaptation of young adults into society and labor market. Our research will therefore focus on both internal and external factors.

The Czech Technical University in Prague works on this four-year project financially supported by Technical Academy of the Czech Republic, which aims to explore factors that influence successful integration of young people who left institutional care as large percentage of young people fails to integrate into society and adapt to labor market after they leave institutional care.

The purpose of this article is to present methodology of how data will be collected and the limits of this approach, the availability of data, how non-response bias will be handled, the burdens of data collection stemming from GDPR, etc. Nowadays, children leaving institutional care is an issue more explored than years ago and several researches with different designs have been conducted on the subject.

## **1 Child adaptation**

Parents and siblings have an impact on children's emotional development and socialization since they are born. Children are indoctrinated with rules of behavior and respect, communication methods and emotional display since their first steps. Then, when they first begin to socialize within a group in kindergartens, their behavior is shaped by their teachers, but also friends with whom they are playing and acquainting. Furthermore, they gain new experience after they start elementary school, where education and responsibility are key, but also where they learn how to maintain attention during their classes and how to make new relationships, first friendly and later also romantic. After they graduate from secondary school, they should be fully responsible and capable of finding and keeping a job. If they are gifted and want to pursue their education further, they may enroll to a university. Each of these life stages shape how children socialize and adapt (Krejčířová & Langmeier, 2006).

However, not every child is raised by their biological family. The Civil Code defines parental duties, which are derived from parental responsibility and emphasizes their fulfillment. Parental responsibility entails the sum of rights and duties of parents raising an underage child. It includes healthcare, asset representation and management, protection of interests, behavior control and supervision appropriate to their stage of development. Parents are entitled to use educational means proportionate to the circumstances if they do not

compromise children's health, development or human dignity (Civil Code 89/2012 Coll.) *"If a parent does not exercise his parental responsibility properly and if required by the interests of the child, a court shall limit his parental responsibility or its exercise, while determining the scope of this limitation"* (Civil Code, 89/2012 Coll, §870). *"If a parent abuses or seriously neglects his parental responsibility or its exercise, a court shall relieve him of his parental responsibility"* (Civil Code, 89/2012 Coll., § 871, para. 1). In such cases, children are then placed into institutional care. When parents are deprived of parental responsibility, the court can deprive them of all or of only some rights and duties related to their child, which normally expire when the child comes of age. (Civil Code 89/2012 Coll.) Parents with reduced parental responsibility still have the right to be legal representatives of their child, can make decisions for them, can maintain contact with them and can have custody at weekends. However, Little, Kohm and Thompson (2005) wrote: *"Evidence on the impact of parental contact during separation is mixed. Children frequently report that contact with families is beneficial and such findings have resulted in recommendations for an individualised approach to planning and managing family contact. However, frequency of contact with families alone does not appear to improve child development."*

## **2 Institutional Care for Children and Adolescents**

Children can be placed in institutional care right after birth, but also later before coming of age. According to the 2017 analysis by the Czech Statistical Office, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic, and websites of children's homes, there are over 27 thousand children dependent on institutional care in the Czech Republic, out of which 5 thousand are placed in children's homes. There are 142 children's homes in total and their capacity is nearly full. In children's homes, there are three times more children than "aunties", who are trying to teach the children rules of behavior and work habits, and thus preparing them for the life "out there", but they unfortunately cannot fully pay attention to each child separately. The other 22 thousand are living in foster families or other institutions.

Children can stay in children's homes until they come of age or until they are 26 if they are studying. After that, children's homes lose track of and responsibility for the children, who should report to the Labour Office and Probation Office to get help with finding a job and for registration. In children's homes, children are taught practical things such as washing clothes, cooking or cleaning. Today, the educators are also trying to teach them the basics of financial literacy, so they know how to manage money after they leave. Children's

homes are obliged to provide counseling and a “severance” for two years after a child leaves. This severance is monetary and according to Government Decree no. 460/2013 Coll., it has only upper limit of 25 thousand CZK. It can be replaced by or also a part of practical package of material or intangible objects. Some children of age also receive their orphan pensions, which was kept in the children’s home during their stay.

Children’s homes are not obliged to provide leaving children with jobs or housing, it is purely voluntary. Young adults can stay at a halfway house with 24-hour supervision by social workers and code of conduct, which the young adults must follow. These young adults do not feel free and independent in these halfway houses, and they see them as another children’s homes. As a result, they prefer social housing under occasional supervision. However, they cannot live in adjacent flats with a single entrance to prevent ghettoization and poor integration into society. Major disadvantage of this type of housing is that they can rent it for two years at most and that there is not enough of it.

### **3 Foreign Research**

Three major obstacles to successful adult life adaptation young adults with no families or relatives face after they leave children’s homes have already been mentioned – money management, finding housing and keeping a job. This has been confirmed by Mendes, Johnson and Moslehuddin: *“Most young people acquire these skills gradually over time, with the support of their parents and extended family. In contrast, many young people leaving state out-of-home care experience rapid, uneven and compressed transitions to adulthood whereby they have to attain independent housing; leave school; move into further education, training or employment; and in some cases become a parent—all at the same time, and at a much younger age than their peers“* (Mendes, Johnson & Moslehuddin, 2011). Preparing young adults for adulthood after they leave children’s homes differs in each children’s home, but also in each state legislation. *“All countries provide some training in independent living skills, but access to these programs and their quality seems to vary greatly“* (Lerch & Stein, 2010). According to Mendes, Johnson and Moslehuddin (2011), Poland has a two-month period dedicated to preparation for adulthood before a child leaves institutional care, whereas Estonia does not have any laws that would require institutional care facilities to prepare or support children after they leave. Preparation for adulthood should be holistic, long-term and focused on practical knowledge and emotional and interpersonal skills. Basic hygiene and nutrition,

money management, cooking, education, self-realization and family building should be included in this preparatory period.

Multiple studies using questionnaires and depth interviews in England and Scotland have shown that young adults with support from foster parents, family relative, partner and/or partner's parents socialize better than those with no support (Stein, 2006). Furthermore, American adolescents from the Casey program are socializing faster and better. The Casey program has helped them graduate from secondary schools, enroll to universities or practical education for life skills, and become members of organizations and clubs, all of which contributed in forming their identity, thus limiting the threat of dissimilation or homelessness. The program has also provided children with financial, practical and emotional skills, but mainly with stability and support (Pecora, et al. 2006). French researchers have found adolescents with sense of stability and support were better prepared for integration into society (Dumaret, Coppel-Batsch & Courand, 1997).

#### **4 Czech Research**

The four-year PERSIST project aims to statistically analyze potential external factors in successful adaptation to society and labor market in the Czech Republic with young adults leaving children's homes. The project was launched in November 2018. We are currently designing methodology and data collection methods and the research will begin in July 2019, which is why we cannot present any results yet. Special attention will be paid to how the different form of assistance (formal, informal, or none) influenced the ability of people from institutional care to integrate into the labor market. The aim of this article is informing about data collection methods and their limitations.

#### **5 Data Collection Methods**

The research design is done in several successive and complementary steps. The main steps of the research are as follows:

1. Desk researching scientific literature and previously conducted research
2. Qualitatively researching graduates, who have successfully integrated into society
3. Giving questionnaires to young adults, who have left children's home in the past three years
4. Surveying children, who will leave institutional care within three years

## **5.1 Desk Research**

The first step is desk researching the current state of knowledge on integration of young adults into society after leaving institutional care. This desk research has two primary objectives. The first objective is to compare our methodology with previously conducted studies. This has shown that our methodology corresponds with research conducted in other countries. It can be therefore assumed that the results will be comparable as well. The comparison has also shown that our methodology is somewhat ambitious in terms of sample size and research depth.

The second objective is to identify key factors in integration of young adults who have left institutional care into society, as proven by previous research. These factors will be further complemented and specified, based on qualitative research of graduates, who have successfully integrated into society.

## **5.2 Qualitative Research**

People who left institutional care more than 10 years ago will be interviewed about factors that influenced their integration. The project team expects that this group is able to reflect their experience and help identify the factors that have been key for their successful transition from foster care. A sample of 10 to 15 respondents will be interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire.

Due to data protection regulations, obtaining contacts directly from children's homes is not possible, so other means of contact will have to be used. First, the researchers will attend regular school reunions, where potential respondents will be contacted. Another means of contacting respondents is sending a request for cooperation by children's homes. This way, interested respondents will contact the researchers themselves.

Stepanova and Hackett (2014) used a similar approach when they studied Russian care leavers. 45 care leavers who have been living independently for at least a year were surveyed using a questionnaire. Collected data from the questionnaires was used for depth interviews and focus groups. The qualitative research will focus on graduates, who have successfully integrated into society, meaning they have managed to find and keep a job. This group of respondents will therefore not require to deal with non-response bias.

## **5.3 Questionnaire**

Further research will focus on young care-leavers who have left foster care in past 3 years. Factors that seem to lead to the successful integration of people after leaving

institutional care into labour market and the combinations of those factors will be observed on a sample of approx. 500 people. Such observations require long-term contact with the respondents and repeated interviews. Reading scientific articles and literature from Mendes, Johnson and Moslehuddin (2011), Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan (2015) and Stepanova and Hackett (2014), for example, has revealed some factors are similar and other different across different situations and different countries.

According to Mendes, Johnson and Moslehuddin (2011), the biggest factor is how long and wholesome is the preparation for leaving institutional care, which is connected to how long a child stays in the children's home and to the regulations of the given country. Stepanova and Hackett (2014) have compiled six areas of Russian institutional care, which are critical for children's welfare: *"1. the physical characteristics of institutions, including how isolated the institution was; 2. educational provision; 3. stigmatising attitudes towards care leavers in society; 4. relationships and communication with their "houseparents"; 5. living in a group; 6. friendships in care."*

Respondents will be handed questionnaires for assessing their current situation and listing the type of support they received when they were leaving children's home, whether from the children's home itself or non-profit organizations. The research will also investigate factors identified during the desk research and in previously conducted qualitative research.

Results of this research may be skewed to a certain degree, depending on who will cooperate who will not. We presume that those, who have left institutional care and managed to integrate into society will cooperate more. Non-response bias will therefore be dealt with by tracing people who have not successfully integrated into society and giving them the questionnaire. These people will be traced through personal relationships with other respondents, through social media (Facebook, Instagram etc.) and also through the Cabinet Office, which has agreed to provide contacts for non-profit organizations and institutions working with homeless people.

In their research article from Ireland and Catalonia What helps young care leavers enter the world of work, Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan asked 22 care leavers three basic questions: 1. What was the work situation of the participants at time of interview and how did they feel about work currently. 2. How did participants get their first job in labour market? 3. What experience have influenced the participants' entry into, and progress in, the full-time world of work? The authors found that on average, the adolescents have found a job at 16 years of age. The majority of these adolescents have received support from children's homes to find a job. They have received support in and encouragement for work attitude.

Some adolescents were very persistent and they wanted to find a job on their own. “Their motives included earning money for their own benefit or to assist with wider need in their biological family, gaining some independence and, for some, to begin to broaden their identity beyond being a „young person in care“ (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015).

#### **5.4 Depth Interviews**

The last part of the research deals with young adults who are currently leaving children’s home and children who are about to leave institutional care within three years. The researchers will therefore be able to contact respondents while they still are in institutional care. This enables the research to include main personality traits of participants and not only the external factors from the previous parts of the research.

The researchers will attempt to maintain contact with these young adults after they leave institutional care. The research includes interviews with children but also with educators in children’s home, and a questionnaire. We assume keeping contact with the participants will enable us to monitor their situation even after they leave institutional care. This way, non-response bias is not a problem and will not skew the results. Overall, we estimate working with a participant sample of approx. 200 children.

### **Conclusion**

In 2017, there were over 27 thousand children living without their biological families in the Czech Republic. These children are placed into institutional care, foster care or children’s homes, where they can spend several years. There are multiple factors and their combinations influencing care leavers’ integration into society and adaptation to labor market. During a four-year research, the research team will study them in detail. Currently, the research is in development and focuses on methodology and data collection methods design and their limitations.

The methodology is designed in several successive and complementary steps. Below, we list the main steps of the research:

1. Desk researching scientific literature and previously conducted research
2. Qualitatively researching graduates, who have successfully integrated into society
3. Giving questionnaires to young adults, who have left children’s home in the past three years



4. Surveying children, who will leave institutional care within three years

Desk research has confirmed that our methodology corresponds with those from previous foreign research and the researchers assume that the identified external factors will be the same for young adults in the Czech Republic. These negative factors influencing the integration of young adults need to be eliminated through reforms and educational programs. Preparatory training for leaving children's home should focus on basic budgetary and financial skills, finding housing, building relationships, identifying cultural values, learning individual and collective roles, and work habits. By not preparing children for life after they leave institutional care, they encounter problems they do not know how to handle, because they were not taught to be independent.

Intensive three-year data collection will start in July 2019 with help from coordinators, psychologists, students and other interested parties. The research is set to end in November 2022, when our findings will be summarized and presented. Our findings will be used for improving working with young adults and obtaining long-term support for activities and communication with the public with regards to institutional care.

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