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Supporting Youth Transitioning from State Care into Adulthood in Illinois and Catalonia: Lessons from a Cross-National Comparison

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1. Introduction: The Global Context of the Transition to Adulthood from State Care

The transition to adulthood in post-industrial societies has become increasingly complex in recent decades, with young adults facing challenges associated with globalization, rapid technological change, and changes in social norms, and generally continuing to rely on their families well into their 20s and 30s (IOM & NRC, 2014; Jeffrey & McDowell, 2004; Moreno, 2012; Settersten, Furstenberg & Rumbaut, 2005; Vogel, 2002). But if the transition to adulthood can be challenging for youth who have the ongoing support of their families, it might reasonably be expected to be even more difficult for youth who have been separated from their families through placement in the child welfare system (Muir & Hand, 2018). Indeed, research has shown that youth who age out of child welfare systems (hereafter referred to as *care leavers*) fare relatively poorly on average compared to their peers not in the child welfare system's care (Gypen, et al, 2017), though many achieve the milestones associated with adulthood (e.g., postsecondary education, having children, and achieving economic security (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2012). Moreover, when youth leave care, the services upon which they have come to rely often end abruptly (Courtney, 2009; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Stein & Munro, 2008).

In response to the growing recognition of the difficulties encountered by young people who age out of state-sponsored care, governments have enacted policies intended to increase support for these youth as they make the transition to adulthood (Stein & Munro, 2008). Moreover, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has established criteria for supporting care leavers to which national governments are held accountable (Munro et al., 2011). While researchers have studied country-specific policy and services contexts for care leavers, few studies have compared the policy and services context of different countries (see Mendez & Snow, 2016, for several examples). This study provides an in-depth comparative analysis of government efforts to improve the prospects of care leavers. Specifically, it compares the policies and services that target care leavers in two post-industrial democracies, the United States and Spain. Because policy and service contexts also vary not only between but also within countries, we focus on the U.S. state of Illinois (where Chicago is located) and the Spanish state of Catalonia (where Barcelona is

located). Our comparison is based on an analysis of national and state government policies for care leavers and on data collected through interviews with key stakeholders.

Cross national comparative studies have a long tradition. These studies can develop theoretical knowledge and facilitate the transfer of practices from one country to another (Masser 1984). However, they do present some challenges because policies and services that target care leavers reflect the economic, political, and sociocultural realities of national and state contexts in which they are designed. Nevertheless, adolescence and young adulthood are developmental stages experienced by youth around the world, and studies of care leavers around the world have found that they face similar difficulties (Stein & Munro, 2008). Moreover, the child welfare systems in Illinois and Catalonia have pioneered policies and services aimed at supporting care leavers since the 1990s, making them excellent case studies.

We begin with a brief overview of relevant aspects of the national (U.S. and Spain) contexts. Next, we describe our study methods, present our results, and summarize major themes that characterize what we believe to be the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches to serving care leavers. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our results for policy and practice and for future research on this population.

2. National Contexts for Care Leavers

United States

The federal government in the United States has established a broad policy framework for child welfare services, including foster care,[1] and federal funding creates fiscal incentives for states to comply with federal policy. However, service provision is decentralized, with the federal government delegating nearly all service provision to state and local governments. States can administer services directly or supervise the provision of services by county governments. Juvenile courts oversee the provision of out-of-home care by public child welfare agencies. Those agencies, which are ultimately responsible for the care and supervision of children placed in out-of-home care by court order, often contract with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to provide a wide range of child welfare services including services for children in out-of-home care.

Consistent with federal law, every youth in out-of-home care has a caseworker who is expected to visit the youth at least once per month and provide progress reports to the juvenile court. As of September 30, 2018, 437,283 children and youth were in out-of-home care in the United States. Most were living in family foster homes with nonrelatives (46%) or relatives (32%) or in group homes and institutions (10%), (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

Over the past three decades, research has consistently shown that young people aging out of foster care in the US face a wide range of challenges and fare relatively poorly during the transition to adulthood compared to their peers in the general population. For example, studies have found that young people aging out of foster care have lower rates of secondary and postsecondary educational attainment (Okpych & Courtney, 2019), higher rates of housing instability and homelessness (Curry & Abrams, 2015), and lower rates of employment and lower average income (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). They are also more

[1] The term foster care is used in the United States to describe all forms of out-of-home care placement for children removed from their homes because of abuse, neglect, or dependency, including nonrelative family foster homes, kinship foster homes, and congregate care.

likely to need treatment for mental health and substance use disorders (Brown, Courtney, & McMillen, 2015).

Over the past three and a half decades, federal child welfare policy has significantly increased the availability of funding to support young people aging out of foster care. In 1999, the Foster Care Independence Act amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to create the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (the Chafee Program), the primary source of federal funding for services to support young people in foster care during their transition to adulthood. Grants are offered to states and federally-recognized tribes for services that include, but are not limited to, help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support and connections to caring adults. The Family First Prevention Services Act renamed the program in 2018; it is now the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 gives states the option to extend federally subsidized foster care from 18 to 21 years old, and 27 of the 50 states have thus far exercised this option. It also requires child welfare agencies to support youth in the development of a plan for their transition to adulthood, but states still struggle to effectively implement that provision of the law (Park et al., 2020). More recently, the Family First Prevention Services Act allows states that have extended federal foster care to provide a more limited set of services to young people up to age 23 using their Chafee Program funds.

As of September 30, 2018, 12,450 young people ages 18-20 years old were in out-of-home care in the U.S. Most of these young adults live in supervised independent living settings, but some live in the homes of relative and nonrelative foster parents. Research has documented the benefits of remaining in care past age 18 not only for the young people who remain in care but also for the government (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney, Okpych, & Park, 2018; Peters et al., 2009).

The Foster Care Independence Act requires that promising programs for young people aging out of foster care be rigorously evaluated, but only a handful of rigorous evaluations have thus far taken place so the evidence base for these programs remains very limited (Courtney, Pergamit, Woolverton, & McDaniel, 2014; Donkoh, Underhill & Montgomery, 2006). However, the federal government is currently supporting efforts to identify promising programs and prepare them for rigorous evaluation (Courtney et al., 2017; Courtney et al., 2014).

Spain

Spain is a country of autonomous regions that carry out many governmental functions in a decentralized manner within their geographic boundaries. Consequently, despite the existence of national laws that provide a general policy framework for child protection, responsibility for providing out-of-home care rests with the regional governments and juvenile courts do not play a key role when regional governments assume guardianship of children.

On December 31, 2017, Spain had 36,531 children in out-of-home care. Thirty-five percent of these children resided in family foster homes with relatives, 17 percent resided in family foster homes with non-relatives, and 48 percent resided in group homes (Observatorio de la infancia, 2018). A substantial portion of these children are unaccompanied minors.

For most adolescents in out-of-home care, guardianship ends at age 18. Extended care beyond age 18 is only an option for adolescents with certified disabilities. According to Spanish law 26/2015, public child welfare agencies must prepare adolescents for independent living and provide supports to care leavers who need them. However, the law doesn't authorize any funding for these services and programs for care leavers vary widely across the autonomous communities due in part to differences in local priorities.

Data on the number of care leavers in Spain who have received transition services are non-existent and few studies have specifically examined the transition to adulthood from care (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Fernández del Valle, Álvarez, & Fernánz, 1999; Sala-Roca et al., 2009; Sala-Roca et al., 2012). Moreover, the effectiveness of transition services for care leavers has not been studied in depth, although one study found that half the young people who had received transition services achieved their goals (Montserrat, Casas, and Sisteró, 2015). The level of public and private investment in research in Spain is well below the United States, and the outcomes of care leavers in Spain have not been systematically studied and the effectiveness of existing services has generally not been rigorously evaluated.

3. Methods

This study compares the policies and services that target care leavers in Illinois and Catalonia to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each system and provide guidance to practitioners, researchers and policymakers. The primary methodology was semi-structured interviews with key service providers and administrators in both states.

Sampling

Study participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method (Patton, 2015). We identified individuals who had knowledge about and experience with the services and supports for care leavers in their respective contexts. They included 20 child welfare professionals (nine in Illinois and 11 in Catalonia) from NGOs that provide assistance in areas such as housing, employment, education, and financial literacy to transition-age youth currently or formerly in care. Some of the NGOs provide these services and support to specific populations of youth in care including pregnant and parenting youth, youth with mental health problems, and youth with a history of delinquency. We also identified seven child welfare administrators: four from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), one from the Office of the Cook County Public Guardian (Illinois), and two from the Catalan Children Welfare Department (Direcció General d'Atenció a la Infància i Adolescència - DGAIA) in Barcelona. All of the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and they agreed to take part in an interview.

Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with 27 child welfare professionals in 2015 .The aim of the interviews was to better understand transition services and supports from the perspective of professionals involved in their provision. The interview guides were the same in both contexts and covered the following topics: type and aims of transition programs; youth characteristics and eligibility criteria; staff roles and qualifications; data on youth outcomes and program effectiveness; and program strengths and challenges.

Procedures

The interviews were conducted in the native language of the participant, audio-recorded with their consent, and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed using the procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for qualitative thematic analysis. Two researchers coded the interviews separately and then generated an agreed upon a set of codes to identify key themes. Some of the coding categories emerged from the data and while others were pre-established. The semi-structured interviews were supplemented by a review of documents and other written materials (e.g., statutes, regulations and procedures, research and evaluation reports, and websites).

This study is not without its limitations. First, social, cultural, and historical factors that our analysis does not take into account have shaped the child welfare systems in Illinois and Catalonia. Second, because we interviewed a relatively small sample of key informants we may have missed some services and supports available to youth transitioning from state care in these two contexts. And third, we did not interview youth about their perceptions of the services and supports available to care leavers in their respective states. Future cross-nationals studies should incorporate youth voice.

4. Results

The findings presented are based on our analysis of the laws and regulations in both jurisdictions at the time of the study and the content of the interviews we did with key informants in both sites.

4.1. Extended care

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is the governmental entity responsible for providing or contracting for child welfare services in Illinois. Despite the fact that Illinois operates a state-administered child welfare system, every county has its own juvenile court. As of July 31, 2020, 18,320 Illinois children were under the care and supervision of DCFS.

Illinois is one of 28 states with Title IV-E extended foster care. That means youth in Illinois can remain in care until their 21st birthday and the state receives federal funds to help offset the cost if the youth are enrolled in an educational program, employed, engaged in activities to remove barriers to employment or have a medical condition that precludes any of the above. Youth who do not meet one of these conditions can still remain in care until age 21 as long as the relevant county juvenile court deems the extension of care to be in the best interests of the youth, and the state assumes the entire cost.

The state's juvenile courts have played a central role in keeping youth in care until age 21 (Peters, et al., 2008). However, not all of them are as inclined as the juvenile court in Cook County to allow youth to remain in care past their 18th birthday.

> We highly discouraged [youth] to leave the system at 18 (...) 90% of kids stay in care after 19 in Cook County. Downstate is a bit different. Most people know that those kids are not prepared to be self-sufficient because of their history of trauma (…), they don't have the financial resources, they don't have the educational resources (…) they are not ready (…). (DCFS employee)

Consequently, the percentage of youth who remained in care after their 18th birthday is much higher in Cook County than in the rest of the state (Peters et al., 2008). As of July 31,

2020, 899 18 to 20-year-olds were in DCFS care. Of those youth, 448 were in Cook County, where Chicago is located, and 451 were in the state's 101 other counties (Illinois Department of Child and Family Services, 2020).

Catalonia is an autonomous region with its own child welfare laws and procedures for taking custody of children deemed in need of protection. The Direcció General d'Atenció a la Infància (DGAIA), the Catalan agency in charge of child protection, can initiate procedures to take custody of a child, but must inform the family and district court, and the family can appeal the decision. The government becomes the guardian of the minor children in out of home care and DGAIA usually contracts with NGOs to provide them with services .

On December 31, 2017, 7,499 children in Catalonia were in out-of-home care. It is estimated that the number of the children in care in Catalonia has increased by as much as 30% over the past two years due to an 131% increase in the number of unaccompanied minors (DGAIA, 2019). Indeed, immigrants and unaccompanied asylum seekers have accounted for about half of Catalonia's out-of-home care population in recent years (ASJTET, 2011). For most young people in Catalonia, extended care beyond age 18 is not an option. Guardianship ends at age 18 except for youth with certified disabilities

4.2. Transition Services and Supports

In Illinois, transition services and supports supplement the basic case management provided to all youth in extended care by DCFS or by private agencies with which DCFS contracts. DCFS or private agency caseworkers refer youth on their caseload to these transition services or supports. However, some of our key informants believe that the majority of eligible youth do not participate in the programs due to a lack of trust in the service providers and their desire for more autonomy.

> Older youth who grow up in foster care trust no one, trust is a big issue and if you want to help them, you have to gain their trust (...) they have different counselors, different case workers, they feel that the system has failed them, not only their family. (DCFS employee)

Of all Spain's autonomous regions, Catalonia has developed the most services and supports for care leavers ages 18 to 21. However, it was not until 2010, when the Law of the Rights and Opportunities of Children and Adolescents (LDOIA, 14/2010) was passed that a wide range of services and supports to help prepare foster youths for independent living were created. Care leavers who are not reunified with family and do not have the means to support themselves have access to a range of support services provided by the DGAIA through contracts with NGOs. Different programs have different eligibility criteria, but most require youth to be working or enrolled in an educational program.

In 2019, 2,742 18 to 21-year-olds participated in at least one programs for care leavers. This includes some youth who accessed supervised flats at age 16. Forty-nine percent of these youth received economic support (i.e., an emancipation subsidy) and 38% participated in a housing program (DGAIA, 2019). Importantly, in recent years, about half of the youth participating in these programs are immigrants or unaccompanied asylum seekers who entered care during adolescence (DGAIA, 2017; 2019).

In both jurisdictions, the focus of most transition programs is on housing, income and money management, education or training and attending to specific needs. The goals of

these programs are similar, but there are important differences that reflect differences in cultural factors and underlying conceptions of extended care.

4.2.1 *Housing*

DCFS provides a range of housing options for older youth in care in Illinois. The two options that are only available to older youth in care are Transitional Living Programs (TLPs) and Independent Living (IL). Transitional living programs are operated by NGOs and provide continuous (24/7) on-site staff supervision to youth age 17.5 or older who live in one or two-bedroom apartments in the same building. TLPs are an option for youth who need more support than a foster home can provide or who cannot be placed in a foster home. Independent living programs allow youth to live in their own apartment in the community with supervision that is not on-site. To be eligible, youth must be at least 19 years old, have a high school diploma or the equivalent, and demonstrate basic life skills. However, Independent Living programs are not a realistic option for many youth.

> I have never lived on my own. It's not affordable in Chicago. In college I had roommates, I've lived with my family, I got married (…) saying to young people "you need to be ready to live in your own apartment," it's not affordable. We forget that peers are very important in adolescence to develop skills. (Director of a NGO).

Other housing options for older youth in care include non-relative or relative foster homes, residential care, college dormitories, and "placement alternative contracts" (PACs). PACs are an option for youth who are unable to accept a traditional placement but can find an adult who is willing to provide supervision, guidance and a safe place to live. Youth sign a contract, agreeing to complete tasks to prepare for emancipation, and the contract is reviewed with the possibility for renewal every 90 days.

It can be difficult to identify an appropriate adequate housing option for some older youth in care, and sometimes youth are placed in a shelter while awaiting a new placement.

> There is a long waiting list. Most places will have 6, 10, 20 kids waiting for one bed. Agencies have more kids than beds. You cannot always find another place and get one kid from one TLP to another TLP. There will be wait times or shelter if you have to move. (Professional from the Public Guardian's Office in Chicago)

In Catalonia, youth who turn 18 while living in group or residential placements and need housing support can apply for housing. Their main option is to share a 3- or 4- bedroom apartment in buildings where the other tenants are not youth who recently left care. Youth must pay for the portion of their rent that is not subsidized, buy their own food, clothing, and other sundries, and perform household chores. The apartments are usually supervised intermittently by a social educator who visits during the week. A few residences with 24/7 on-site supervision exist for youth needing more support.

This housing option is also available to youth who turn 18 while living in a relative or non-relative family home, but they usually prefer to stay where they are living, a reflection of Spanish family cultural traditions. One study of youth in Spain found that 65% of youth in non-relative homes and 93% of youth in relative homes remained in those homes after reaching adulthood (Del Valle, López, Montserrat & Bravo, 2009).

Another housing option for youth in Spain is the Educative Accompaniment Service (Servei d'Acompanyament Educatiu or SAEJ). Unaccompanied youth ages 16 to 21 are eligible for this program if they are able to function independently in the community but do not have the economic means to do so and could benefit from guidance. Program participants receive assistance finding a safe room to rent and are required to visit a social educator regularly for supervision in SAEJ head offices. Rent is paid directly to the owner by the SAEJ.

In Catalonia, NGOs that provide housing services require youth to sign a six-month contract that can renewed and youth can be evicted if they do not comply with program rules.

> When a youth accesses a placement, both youth and agency sign a contract about different things such as that they will clean common spaces, they will respect roommates and educators … normal things… and that if they don't fulfill them, the contract will be revoked. (Professional from a housing program).

One study found more than half of the youth in one Catalonian housing program violated their living arrangement contract (Montserrat, Casas, & Sisteró, 2015). In fact, youth usually leave housing programs after a year or two because they prefer to live with their friends or partner rather than share an apartment with someone they did not chosen to live with or because they have been evicted for not following the rules. The average stay in a housing program in 2018 was 13.6 months (ASJTET, 2018).

Consequently, some professionals report that there are not enough appropriate housing options for care leavers in Catalonia even though program slots are available.

> The main criterion for a youth to be eligible is by having a plan and a strong commitment to reach their goals. Autonomous apartments are only for youth that the caseworkers or professionals of ASJTET (DGAIA) think can work (…) In fact there aren't enough placements for all the aging out youth." (Professional from one Catalan agency).

4.2.2 Income and Money Management

Youth in Illinois who age out of care may be eligible for a one-time payment of $1,200 as part of the Countdown to 21 program. The program is designed to support the successful transition of older youth to independence. To receive the payment, youth must be in a DCFS-approved placement, attend two Countdown to 21 meetings (one around the time of their 19th birthday and another 90 days prior to their 21st birthday), complete a financial literacy course, identify a supportive resource person, and develop a transition plan and budget for how the emancipation funds will be used.

Although the housing costs of youth in care are paid for directly by DCFS, youth in IL programs are expected to contribute progressively more to their monthly living costs. TLP and IL providers also help youth learn how to manage money and design a weekly financial plan for their living expenses.

Catalonia used to offer care leavers a one-time emancipation payment, but the government converted this to a monthly allowance which youth receive along with an educative plan and supervision because most youth were perceived to have wasted the money. Youth who have been in care for three or more years, cannot reunify with their

family of origin, and do not have the means to support themselves are eligible for this monthly emancipation allowance when they reach age 18. Youth can receive the allowance for a maximum of 3 years or until their 24th birthday if they are pursuing higher education. Youth who have been in care for less than 3 years are also eligible for this allowance, but only for six months. The allowance is even available to youth who decide to continue living with their foster family. They are generally expected to use the allowance to help pay for household living costs. Additionally, youth who do not have enough income to sustain themselves at age 23 can apply for a public subsidy.

Youth receiving transition services must pay for their housing, food, education and other expenses with their emancipation allowance. Their social educator helps them develop money management skills and a financial plan and reviews their expenses and savings to ascertain that they are managing their finances.

4.2.3 Education

Youth in Illinois may be eligible for the federally funded Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program which provides up to $5,000 per year for postsecondary education-related expenses. Youth are eligible for up to five years of assistance until age 26.[2] Youth may also be eligible for state funded assistance including a $511 monthly Youth in College/Vocational Training grant until age 25, the Community College Payment Program, which pays for tuition and other costs not covered by financial aid while youth are in care, a $511 monthly merit-based Youth in Scholarship grant, or a tuition and fee waiver, which is available to youth enrolled in a community college or four-year public college or university in Illinois.

Postsecondary public education is more affordable in Catalonia than in the U.S.. Consequently, care leavers can pay for their studies with their monthly allowance and apply for general scholarships that are available to low-income students. In addition, a private bank has created a program that provides monthly grants to help 18 to 24-year-olds who are no longer eligible for an emancipation allowance not receiving any economic support continue their studies.

4.2.4 Employment

Illinois

In Illinois, youth in care can enroll in employment programs for the general youth or young adult population. Although most of these programs are targeted toward "at risk" youth, they sometimes aren't a good fit for youth in care. Due to the perceived limitations of these mainstream employment programs, NGOs have created employment programs specifically for youth in care. A representative from one of these NGOs told us:

> I'm a big believer than those specific work programs don't cure everything but do a lot for those kids, to have a job, feel that they succeed… increase their self-esteem. They feel good to contribute; to get paid (….) this is a big resource for them. (NGO employee)

[2] In states that have not extended federally funded foster care to age 21, eligibility ends at age 23.

However, these programs tend to be concentrated in the Chicago area. DCFS does have an Employment Incentive Program that provides youth who are employed or in a job training program with a $150 monthly payment.

Catalonia

In contrast, Catalonia has no employment programs targeting care leavers. Catalan professionals argue that youth must become familiar with community-based programs because these will be available after extended care. Nevertheless, six job-sourcing specialists from the DGAIA to assess care leavers and whether the community-based programs available for youths at risk are adequate to cover their specific needs. Youth can also receive help with employment from their social educators.

Specific needs

Some youth transitioning out of care to adulthood have specific needs that may not be met by more general services.

Illinois

In Illinois, for example, DCFS provides or contracts with NGOs to provide enhanced transitional support programs for youth who identify as LGBTQ, youth who are pregnant or parenting, youth with a serious mental illness or other disabilities, youth with criminal records, youth who need to learn to manage aggressive behavior, and sexual offenders.

Catalonia

Enhanced supports are not available to youth in care with special needs in Catalonia. Instead, most youth with special needs are referred to general, community-based services. One DGAIA professional noted that "*our major concern is not having specialized programs to meet specific needs of some youth: mental illness, teen motherhood, etc*." The only specialized program provides legal advice to help immigrant and asylum-seeking adolescents in transition programs obtain passports, visas, and other documents needed for employment.

Social support

Human society is interdependent, and addressing most needs that youths face when leaving care requires the support of relatives, friends or acquaintances, so informal social support should be included in their work plan.

Illinois

Most of the professionals interviewed in Illinois expressed concern about the adequacy of the connections the youths had with supportive adults once they left care. For this reason, DCFS and its NGO partners created specific programs to help youths to develop connections with relatives and other supportive adults.

Catalonia

Such programs do not exist in Catalonia. Most youth in care who enter Catalan transition programs when they age out do so because they do not have supportive relatives. For this reason, professionals do not consider it a main objective of their work to help youth

with their family relationships, even if doing so would help youth deal with their family better.

Workforce

One difference between the two jurisdictions is the composition of their child welfare workforce. While the professionals who supervise the families have similar training in both countries (social workers in Illinois, and social workers and educators in Catalonia), the professionals who are in daily contact with young people in residential settings are different.

Illinois

The child welfare workforce in Illinois includes professionals from multiple disciplines and specialties along with nonprofessional staff. All the DCFS or NGO caseworkers who supervise the provision of services to all youth in care are college graduates. Caseworkers have a bachelor's degree, generally in social work, while upper-level case managers and supervisors usually have a master's degree. However, on-site TLP support staff are only required to have a high school diploma. The low education levels and correspondingly low salaries of on-site staff contribute to a high rate of staff turnover that is perceived to undermine trusting relationships between staff and youth.

> We have horrible turnover. Our caseworkers leave all the time and it's hard for kids to establish relationship. It's a big problem in our system (…) The older kids don't trust us because they say: I have to explain my story over and over again. (Chicago case manager)

Catalonia

In Catalonia, all professionals who care for youth must have a college degree in Social Education. These social educators design individual case plans in collaboration with youth, help youth develop life skills, including the ability to find the community resources they require, and provide youth with emotional support. Filling these multiple roles presents social educators with an opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with the youth whose case plans they supervise.

Youth participation

Another key difference between the two jurisdictions is the level of youth engagement.

Illinois

In Illinois, youth in care can participate in regional and state advisory boards that meet periodically with the DCFS director and other agency leaders to discuss their needs and provide suggestions for improving services and programs. NGO professionals provide board members with training and support (Havlicek & Samuels, 2018). Nevertheless, not all the youth participate in these boards, or just participate in one or two meetings. However, all youths in care know about these boards, and have the opportunity to be involved and participate whenever they want. Federal law also requires that youths be given the opportunity to participate in the development of activities supported by the Chafee Act that are intended to develop youths' independent living skills and the Fostering Connections Act

requires that youths be involved in developing a transition plan 90 days prior to a youth's 18th birthday (or the age required by the State for aging out of care). For example, in Illinois youth participate in Countdown to 21, a program designed to support the successful transition of older youth to Independence by involving them in long term planning activities regarding their final living arrangement prior to leaving care, connections with family and community supports, and educational and vocational goals.

Catalonia

Similar opportunities are not available to youth in Catalonia. Youth in group homes can participate in placement assemblies but are not engaged in leadership development activities with youth in other placements and do not have contact with agency leadership.

Research, policy and service quality

Illinois and Catalonia also differ in their level of investment in research and evaluation.

Illinois

For many years, the DCFS in Illinois has contracted with universities and research centers to evaluate its policies and programs. Illinois was one of three states that participated in the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study), which helped provide evidence of the benefits of extended foster care (Courtney et al., 2007a). Illinois also developed performance metrics for its TLP and ILO service providers and implemented performance-based contracting (Kearney, McEwen, Bloom-Ellis, & Jordan, 2010).

Catalonia

In Catalonia and Spain, there is still a lack of research culture and tradition. No long term follow up study has been done and the evaluation of promising programs is still very scarce, as well as the use of evidence-based practices as a foundation of the intervention. There is a lack of objective indicators not only to evaluate the impact of the child protection measures and the effectiveness of the public investment in the child protection system, but also the impact of transition programs and services.

5. Discussion

Transition programs are both perceived by professionals in both Illinois and Catalonia to play a crucial role in helping youth in care during their transition into adulthood. This analysis provides an opportunity to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of these programs, with potential lessons for child welfare professionals, policy-makers, and researchers.

Privilege vs protection

One of the main takeaways from our study is that the obligations of the state to youth aging out of care are conceptualize differently in Catalonia and Illinois. In Catalonia, transition services for youth in care who have reached the age of 18 are considered an earned privilege, not a right. In Spanish Law, when the youth ages out, they acquire full decision-making capacity and this also carries full responsibility. From this time, these youths are considered young adults who must act responsibly and may be denied services (e.g., evicted from a housing placement). In contrast, in Illinois, largely due to the historic

role of the juvenile court in enforcing rights of youth to services, protection prevails. Young adults in care are not expected to assume full responsibility for looking after themselves. This is consistent with normative expectations of young adults in the United States, many of whom continue to rely on their families for support well into adulthood. This gives young adults the latitude to try new things along the way (e.g., career paths, living arrangements, relationships), not all of which will end well, knowing that such experimentation is part of growing up. The protective approach in Illinois is also an acknowledgment of the trauma that many youth have experienced prior to, and all too often during, their time in care. Consequently, youth generally do not lose access to services simply because they do not follow the rules or adhere to their case plan.

Corporate parenting of young adults challenges care systems to develop policies, programs, and practices that balance protection with the need for youth to accept increasing responsibility for their own care (Courtney, 2009). On the one hand, demanding too high a level of responsibility could lead some youth to fall through the cracks, thereby contributing to the poor average outcomes experienced by care leavers. In Catalonia, the most high-functioning youth are perceived to take advantage of the resources that programs offer, but many youth appear to unable or unwilling to meet program expectations. Even if youth are allowed to re-enter programs before they turn 21, leaving care in a vulnerable situation can lead youth down a risky path without the capacity to return.

On the other hand, being too protective may result in some youth not planning for their transition from care. Indeed, the Midwest Study found that 44 percent of Illinois study participants, who had the benefits of extended care, reported not receiving training or assistance that would have helped them learn to live on their own, and 28 percent reported that they were either "not at all" (17.5%) or "not very" (10.5%) prepared for self-sufficiency when they left care (Courtney et al, 2007b).

Youth engagement and empowerment

One way child welfare systems can encourage youth to take on increasing responsibility for their own well-being is to actively engage them in the development of their transition plans. Youth participation in Countdown to 21 is an example of this in Illinois. In Catalonia, youth are also involved in making decisions about their emancipation plans. When they reach the age of 16, they start preparing and discussing their emancipation plan with their social educator.

Child welfare systems can also empower youth by providing them with opportunities to develop leadership skills through participation in youth advisory boards that examine policies and practices that affect youth in care and advocate for services that better meet their needs (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004; Forenza & Happonen, 2015; Havlicek, 2015; Havlicek & Samuels, 2018). In Illinois, youth between the ages of 14 and 21 who are currently or formerly in care participate in one of four regional youth advisory boards or a statewide youth advisory board. Advisory board members discuss ways to improve DCFS policies and practices for all youth in care, advise the DCFS director and educating their peers. Similar youth advisory do not currently exist in Catalonia.

Finally, care leavers in Illinois can continue to make their voices heard and connect to one another through the Illinois Chapter of Foster Care Alumni of America, which was founded in 2011. An association of young people formerly in care (Unió d'Extutelats de

Catalunya) was created in Catalonia in 2018. These associations provide opportunities for care leavers to advocate for child welfare system reform.

Workforce Characteristics and Relationships with Youth

Trust is one of the cornerstones of helping relationships, particularly with youth in care who often have trouble building relationships with potentially-helpful adults (Samuels, 2008). In fact, youth in care may demand more from their relationships with the professionals with whom they become involved than from other adults (Soldevila, Peregrino, Oriol & Filella, 2013).

In Illinois, all young adults in care meet at least monthly with their caseworker. All DCFS and private agency caseworkers are professionals with undergraduate or graduate degrees. However, on-site TLP staff are only required to have a high school diploma and their wages tend to be low. This contributes to high staff turnover rates, making it difficult for youth to develop trusting relationships with staff.

In Catalonia, all professionals who work with young adults in residential settings must have a university degree in Social Education. The mainly immigrant youth and unaccompanied asylum seekers who are placed in those settings have frequent contact with these professionals, and this frequent contact is believed to contribute to strong relationships with the youth. However, youth transitioning from residential care settings who fail to maintain eligibility for the transitional housing programs operated by NGOs often receive no professional post-discharge support. Moreover, professional support for youth who remain with their foster parents or relatives is generally limited to bimonthly caseworker supervision.

Specialized or community services

Some professionals in Illinois argued that because of the trauma they have experienced, youth in care have difficulty adapting to programs available to the general population even if those programs target marginalized youth. For this reason, and because programs for the general population often end up excluding youth in care, DCFS and its NGO partners have developed specialized programs exclusively for youth in care. By contrast, Catalan professionals argue that youth in care must become familiar with and be able to access programs for the general population that will be available to them when they leave care. However, programs for the general population will not be useful to care leavers who cannot maintain their eligibility.

7. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

The transition to adulthood is difficult for many young people, but especially for young people leaving state care. This comparison between the services and supports available to care leavers in two jurisdictions (Illinois and Catalonia) offers a number of valuable lessons for practitioners and policy makers.

First, child welfare systems must strike the right balance between providing too much and not enough support to young people during their transition to adulthood. Young people need to be able to make decisions, learn from their mistakes, and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. However, they also need opportunities, guidance and resources. Additionally, both the type and duration of support young people need will vary so a “one-size-fits-all” strategy is less likely to be successful than a more tailored approach.

Second, many young people leaving care are able to access and benefit from community-based services available to the general population. Community-based services can help young people build social connections outside the child welfare system, and young people can continue to use them after they leave care. However, providers of community-based services are not always willing or able to address the unique needs of young people leaving care. Hence, it is important for child welfare system to offer services specifically designed with the needs of care leavers in mind. Moreover, the professionals who provide these services must have the knowledge and skills needed to work with young people who have experienced multiple traumas.

Third, young people need opportunities to influence the decisions that are made about their lives. At its most basic, this includes involving youth as co-equal partners in the development of their own transition plans. However, it also means listening to what young people have to say about practices and policies that affect care leavers and other youth in care.

Finally, the effectiveness of transition services and supports will not improve without investments in evaluation. Policymakers and program administrators in both the U.S. and Spain must promote research on the impact of those services and supports on the well-being of care leavers.

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