



# Readiness for independent living of adolescents in youth villages in Israel

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## ABSTRACT

Most Israeli children who spend their youth away from their birth parents live in youth villages. The majority of these children come from either the geographical or social periphery of Israel. Since the 1990s the youth villages have specialized in absorbing immigrants mainly from the former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia. The paper reports on a survey conducted among the professional staff in the youth villages. This study explores their perceptions of the readiness for independent living of adolescents on the verge of leaving youth villages and examines how readiness is associated with individual and familial characteristics. A structured questionnaire was mailed to youth villages asking professionals to anonymously complete the survey. The total sample include reports on 1256 adolescents who spent in the current setting on average 3.3 (SD = 1.8) years. For many of them this was the first out-of-home placement. Generally, workers have a favorable assessment of the youths' readiness for independent living. Still, they report that many of the youths do not have any of the necessary skills for independent living. Additionally, there are sub-groups that are more disadvantaged and at greater risk because they lack skills for a successful transition from care. The findings indicate that youth of Ethiopian origin are more disadvantaged with regard to skills related to school, the job market, finances, interpersonal relationships and normative behaviors, whereas youths from FSU present fewer skills pertaining to military service. The findings emphasize the important role Israeli youth villages have in supporting underprivileged adolescents in acquiring basic skills for adult life and suggest guidelines as to which sub-groups and in which area programs should be developed.

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## 1. Introduction

Many young adults in today's industrialized countries rely on their families to support them in their transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2007). This period in their life is characterized by an extended moratorium and they enjoy the freedom to try and experience their capacities and preferences until their late 20s. Thus, it is during this period that young people are getting ready to become productive adults. In contrast, youth who were placed out of home in many cases lack familial support. As a result, they are required to make the transition to independent living on their own (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007; Stein, 2006). The transition period for care leavers is thus often very short and challenging (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006). Almost from 1 day to the next they need to find a place to live, to be financially independent and to make critical life decisions. The purpose of this study is to explore readiness for independent living of adolescents upon aging-out of care and to examine the association between their readiness and individual and family characteristics.

### 1.1. Readiness to leave care

Readiness to leave care pertains to the adolescent's ability to provide independently for basic needs, as well as to feel comfortable with her/himself and to have satisfying relationships with significant others in the family, community and the society at large (Maluccio, Krieger, & Pine, 1990). This and other similar definitions have served care providers in developing interventions aimed at increasing life skills and abilities required for effective social roles (Whittaker, Schinke, & Gilchrist, 1986).

Yet, many care leavers face difficulties at the start of their adult independent life (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2005). Adjustment to independent living by care leavers is marked by several interrelated factors. Keller et al. (2007) argue that reasons which first brought these young people into the care system (e.g., negative life experiences such as neglect, poor living conditions and separation from family), coupled with lack of familial support, limit their access to basic resources and opportunities (e.g., education and housing). Indeed, previous research has shown that a significant proportion of young people leaving care do not possess the life skills or resources necessary to make successfully the transition from care to independent living (English, Kouidou-Giles, & Plocke, 1994; Mech, Ludy-Dobson, & Hulseman, 1994; Sinclair, 2005). These findings are consistent over time and across countries. In fact, a recent review of reports on care leavers in 16 countries demonstrates that they face similar challenges (Stein & Munro, 2008). For example, they are not prepared for higher education, they lack vocational capacities,

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and they are not familiar with procedures necessary for independent dwelling (Bueheler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Courtney & Dworsky, 2001; McMillen & Tucker, 1999).

Many studies make a distinction between two types of skills that are necessary to assess in order to obtain a comprehensive view of readiness for independent living (Nollan, Horn, Downs, Pecora, & Bressani, 2001; Nollan et al., 2000). One type is tangible or concrete skills (e.g., budget management, job search) and the other is intangible or soft skills (e.g., problem solving, social and intimate relationships). Such skills are required of all adolescents in order to make a successful transition to adulthood. However, the assumption is that birth families naturally prepare children for adulthood, while children who grow up in care, and especially in residential facilities, need additional preparation for these tasks. Moreover, supporting care leavers in acquiring such skills enhances and provides them with the resources needed to meet upcoming challenges (Keller et al., 2007).

The importance of exploring readiness to leave care stems from its impact on both the individual and on the care system. At the individual level, an assessment of readiness in multiple areas of life is needed to tailor preparation efforts to the specific needs of each adolescent. At the system level, a comprehensive needs assessment of adolescents who approach independent living could serve as much needed evidence to inform policy decisions and resource allocation aimed at preparing youth for life in the community after leaving care. Such descriptive information is even more essential in light of the lack of randomized controlled trials that will determine the effectiveness of independent living programs (Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006).

Finally, readiness for independent living can be viewed from two different perspectives. One is the subjective perspective of the adolescent and the other is of the professional worker. Each perspective has its own unique contribution to unraveling the complexity of the phenomenon (De Poy & Gilson, 2003). This study is based on the perspective of the professional staff on the readiness of adolescents who are about to emancipate from youth villages. Social workers and social pedagogues in youth villages in Israel have close contact with the adolescents in their care and are therefore familiar with and sensitive to their abilities and needs. Careful examination of their perceptions of readiness is an important contribution to the development of adequate preparation programs for young people towards their emancipation from youth villages.

## 1.2. The Israeli context

Out-of-home placement in Israel differs somewhat from that in other Western countries (Zeira, 2004, 2009). There are basically two types of residential/institutional placements. One type, supervised by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services, is based on professional and/or court decision and considered more 'treatment'-oriented. Of the 9000 children removed by the welfare system about 80% are placed in residential settings and only about 20% are placed with foster families (Dolev, Ben Rabi, & Zemach-Marom, 2009). According to the intensity of care needed, residential settings comprise remedial, rehabilitation or post-hospitalization institutional settings. The other type of placement, overseen by the Ministry of Education, is to educational residential settings (i.e., youth villages) that host about 25,000 children annually (National Council for the Child, 2009). A few of the educational facilities are mixed and host youth coming in through both the educational and the welfare placement systems (Dolev et al., 2009). In this study we focus on adolescents leaving the educational care system.

### 1.2.1. Youth villages: Past and present

The emergence of youth villages as an educational alternative to high schools is the result of historical and social developments in the first half of the Twentieth Century that characterized the Zionist settlement in

Israel (Zeira, 2004). Since its establishment in 1948, Israel had become the national home to many Jews from all over the world and, as a result, a country of immigrants of all ages. Adjusting to a new country is a major challenge, especially for adolescents who are confronted with developmental processes in a new environment. One response to this challenge was the emergence of youth villages (Kashti, Shlasky, & Arieli, 2000; Zeira, 2009) whose aim was to support and enhance assimilation of mostly adolescent immigrants into the Israeli society. Youth villages play a dual role in this process. They are a socialization and assimilation agent for young immigrants and simultaneously serve as a preparatory mechanism for the transition to adulthood in the Israeli society (Kashti, 1986).

A massive immigration wave in the 1990s from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) alongside smaller in magnitude but significant immigration from Ethiopia had invigorated the youth villages' role as an absorption agent in Israeli society. The youth villages have specialized in caring for these two different cultural groups. Today, in addition to immigrants, these facilities are receiving voluntary placements of adolescents who come from underprivileged families, mostly from the geographical or the social periphery of Israel (Mash, 2001). These include families in deep distress mostly because of poverty, who find it difficult to provide for the educational needs of their children within their low-resource neighborhoods. Consequently, the family background of adolescents in youth villages is very heterogeneous. Whereas some come from families that are highly functional and saw the placement in a youth village as an effective pathway to integration and upward mobility in the Israeli society, other families are struggling with major challenges that limit the support and resources that they could provide their adolescents while in care and after.

### 1.2.2. Cultural differences

As mentioned, Israel absorbs immigrants from all over the world. While immigration had always been considered a boost to the Israeli economy, it also created social and educational challenges (Ben-Porath, 1985). Moreover, certain immigrant groups are prone to greater difficulties than others because they differ culturally from the elite or dominant social groups. For example, in the 1950s Jews from North African countries comprised the largest immigration group while the dominant culture at that time was of the Eastern European leadership. In order to integrate, the immigrants were required to adjust to the new culture and in fact give up many of their traditions and customs, and many of their values (Ben-Rafael, 1982).

Immigrants from Ethiopia are currently the most disadvantaged immigration group in Israel (Ringel, Ronell, & Getahun, 2005). Most of them are living in segregated communities in the geographical periphery of Israel. Sever (2007) describes significantly higher unemployment rates among these immigrants with many holding non-professional and temporary jobs. In addition, compared with about 5% in the general Israeli population, about half of the 120,000 members of the Ethiopian community in Israel have eight or fewer years of school. Furthermore, their dark skin color makes them stand out, and would probably interfere with their integration into the main stream of society for years to come. In contrast, immigrants from the FSU, with the exception of those from some of the Asian Republics (e.g., Cuacas), are typically equipped with higher levels of literacy and professionalization that are not very different from the current Israeli culture. Additionally, they are characterized with strong motivation to assimilate and succeed in the new country (Hacohen, 2001).

In sum, youth villages serve as *melting pots* for adolescents. Only very few of the villages are occupied solely by adolescents from one cultural group, whereas most settings offer opportunities for integration and assimilation between groups. Youth villages are providing young people with a nourishing and supporting environment and are helping them maximize their academic abilities and personal

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