



# Transition to adulthood from foster care in Spain: A biographical approach

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of the article is to analyze the characteristics and experiences of youths when they leave care and their first years in transition from foster care to adulthood. The study design was based in in-depth face-to-face interviews in two sessions to collect life stories and content analysis. Participants were thirty-two young people who left care in 4 Autonomous Communities in Spain (Balearic Islands, Catalonia, Madrid and Galicia).

The results highlight that socio-biographic profile of the young people shows formative and life pathways marked by instability, situations of abuse and neglect within the family and later entering foster care. The second block of results refers to their life history within foster care, where their relationship with their family of origin is a key influencing factor and peer groups are highlighted as a protective factor and contributor to building resilience. The severity of rules often appears as highly criticized and, social labeling is interpreted as greatly hindering their social, formative and work integration.

The third set of results, centered on the socio-educational intervention of the social educators in foster care centers, stands as a key aspect for overcoming victimization and for strengthening empowerment.

The final block of results refers to the process of transition to adulthood from foster care, which will depend both on the work done before the age of 18 in foster care centers and on the resources that support them after.

## 1. Introduction

This article is the result of broader research carried out with the support of funds from the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism (EEAGRANTS 2009-2014)<sup>1</sup>. One of the principle objectives of the research is to know what the processes of transition to adulthood are for youth transitioning out of foster care and to analyze if there are specific characteristic and pathways. In order to do this, we designed an investigation that integrates a qualitative and quantitative perspective with various sources and techniques of information retrieval: discussion groups, interviews, and analyses of files from foster care services (Ballester, Caride, Melendro, & Montserrat, 2016).

The specific aim of this article is to provide an analysis based on life stories which allow us to know what former foster care youth of different ages, origins, and transition to adulthood from foster care situations think about their personal life trajectory (Ballester, Nadal, & Amer, 2017). As a result of this analysis, we have come to know the discourse of these young people and we have investigate how they see themselves, how they understand their processes of foster care (residential or family), and what are the most relevant issues that they face

during the processes of transition to adulthood from foster care.

Often, among different research studies, there is a lack of participation on the part of the youth when interpreting their process of foster care and transition, depriving them of constructing and expressing their own interpretations (Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2015; Vis, Holtan, & Thomas, 2012). One of the possible causes of this silence lies in the naturalization of differences. Professionals and researchers do not hesitate to notice important differences in the pathways and discussions of former foster care youth in relation to those coming from more common familial situations. However, in spite of the evidence of these differences, the differences are not usually made an issue nor are the young people listened to with the attention that they require, thus contributing to the lack of visibility of former foster care youth (Ballester, 2006).

It seems clear that there is a different construction of meaning about the processes lived in institutions of the child protection system, from the professionals, the institutions and administrations and from the side of the involved young people. Paying attention to the opinion of the involved young people can help to understand their circumstances and perspectives, which are often ignored. This article is the result of the

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analysis of the discussions contributed by a sampling of former foster care youth from four communities in Spain. In this article we intend to restore their ability of expression by enabling them to share their unique perspective on their own process in child protection systems and transition to adulthood.

The child protection system in Spain is regulated by a norm that was revised in 2015 (Law 26/2015), improving the opportunities of support for transition to adulthood of young people under protective systems. However, the limitations identified in this research are still current (López & Valle, 2016). Child protection system covers the basic necessities for minors up to 18 years of age. Upon reaching legal age, these young people acquire, in almost every Autonomous Community of Spain, full legal status and all protective public administrations cease, to a great extent, their monitoring, responsibility, and contribution of resources. Therefore, beginning at that moment, these people are considered to be in a position to develop an independent life with full personal autonomy. At the same time it is surmised by the protective public administrations that they have the necessary skills and resources to earn a living and create a separate living unit. However, reality diverges from this supposition, since many of these young people who have been in foster care for a long period of their lives do not have sufficient family, educational, or economic resources. They come across serious difficulties that complicate their integration into the job market and their effective integration into society. This stage of transition is especially complicated in the case of young people who, once they have reached legal age, must leave the residential foster care network and do not have a plan in place that allows them to integrate into the nucleus of their family of origin, or in the case that this is an impossibility a plan to form their own autonomous live. As explained in Ballester et al. (2016) in each of the Autonomous Communities there are different resources available, but the help that is received is limited in scope and is of a temporary nature.

The average age of those in the general population of Spain who leave home and become independent is around 30, making the moment of leaving the family home one of the oldest in Europe given that one in every three of the 6,353,800 people between the ages of 24 and 34 in Spain still is not living on his/her own. More commonly people between 24 and 34 live with both or one of their parents (32.8%), live as a couple with children (28.2%), or live as a couple without children (19.2%). Independence is, furthermore, found at a lower rate among those who are younger. According to data from the National Statistics Institute (INE) for, 2014, one in every two young people between the ages of 25 and 29 is living with his/her parents (48.5%).

However, for children in residential or family foster care the age of independence in almost all of Spain is set at 18.

Furthermore, for the general youth we cannot speak about one-directional and definitive transitions, but must rather speak of fragmented and reversible transitions; in other words, the so-called “boomerang effect” (Mitchell, 2006) of those young people who return to the family home in times of necessity. In most cases, the family represents the basic pillar of transition, providing young people long-term economic, practical, and emotional support, as well as guaranteeing the return when conditions of independent living become more difficult.

However, it is necessary to consider that youth leaving the foster care often lack an effective family support system, given that family relationships may have disappeared, deteriorated, or been converted into a source of problems during foster care (instability, drug addiction, mental health problems, etc.). Therefore, in many cases, the transition to adulthood from foster care involves a definitive and irreversible step in their life stories (Dixon & Stein, 2005). These irreversibility increases the risk of academic failure, job uncertainty and chronic unemployment, premature parenthood, addictive behavior, health problems, indigence, and social isolation (Valle, Álvarez-Baz, & Bravo, 2003; García Barriocanal, De la Herrán, & Imaña, 2007).

When young people under protective services start their emancipation, it is the beginning of a forced and accelerated process of

independence. These difficulties are multiplied for those who leave the child foster care system on their 18th birthday. In contrast, for the majority of young people, the transition to adult life is delayed to around 30 in a majority of cases. Thus, those leaving foster care face a shorter, faster, and much more risky transition. This transition is complex enough for young people in general. It is an exceptionally critical process for young people who have been protected by child foster care services. Studies in different countries indicate that young people who have gone through foster care services are presented with many more difficulties when beginning an independent life, and also have a much greater risk of social exclusion than other young adults (Stein, 2006).

Compared to other young people, generally speaking those who have been under the guardianship of the Administration have poorer academic results, a lower rate of post-compulsory education, and higher levels of unemployment (Montserrat, Casas, & Baena, 2015). They also have a significantly higher risk of suffering from mental problems, adopting criminal behavior, or homelessness. Also, from a psycho-affective point of view, these young people frequently exhibit a lack of affection, limited social competence, and professionals often have low expectations of them. All in all, we are not suggesting that these young people are going to experience these difficulties, but they are more vulnerable to experiencing them.

The autonomous administrations that are in charge in these matters are not unaware of this risk. In order to adequately meet the needs of these young people during the transition to adulthood from foster care, resources and programs have been developed in recent years to prepare them for adult life in various autonomous communities. However, only in Catalonia and the Basque Country have those services been promoted by the public administration. In general, these programs promote the development of independent living skills that allow them a certain guaranteed level of autonomy in daily life and provide support through education and socio-labor resources, transitional housing or economic aid. The beneficiaries of this aid, are young people between the ages of 16 and 21, although once they have reached the age of majority at 18 it is often the case that foster care services are reduced. There are support programs for those young people who do not have sufficient resources for starting an independent life or who need some support and a more exhaustive follow-up to consolidate their independent life. Specifically, in anticipation of these circumstances, plans, programs, and regulations on to establish their right to support have also been implemented in recent years, specifically targeting former foster care youth between the ages of 18 and 21–25 (depending on the Autonomous Community, the minimum, 18, in Madrid, and the maximum, 25, in Balearic Islands).

In the international arena, the United Kingdom and Canada stand out as two of the principle models, not only because of the important economic and social services that they are carrying out in this field, but also for the large volume of scientific contributions to academia of diverse types (congresses, monographs, articles and research). For many years now these countries have been developing specific measures and programs for young people who transition out of foster care, as well as systems to monitor and evaluate the pathways of these young people. The evaluations carried out in the United Kingdom highlight the valuable contribution of transition to adulthood services to the betterment of the living conditions of these young people and, more particularly, to the achievement of higher levels of education (Jackson & Cameron, 2014), the maintenance of stable housing, the development of social skills for daily living, and the extension of informal social support networks (Stein & Munro, 2008).

Despite the achievements of these young people, experts point out the need to ensure that young people who remain in foster care services have more stability, more educational and training support, and provide more stable and permanent resources to those who transition out of the foster care services system. In short, it is a question of facilitating gradual and similar transition processes to those experienced by all other young people when transitioning into adult life (Chase, Simon, &

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