

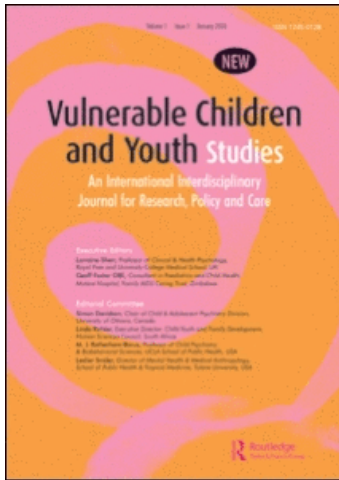
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How do the child welfare services in Norway work with young people leaving care?

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Young people leaving care are vulnerable youths in need of assistance. During recent years there has been a debate in Norway questioning if the support given is random and insufficient. This paper explores how the child welfare services in Norway assist young people leaving care in the transition to adulthood. The discussion is based upon a survey sent to all child welfare services in Norway. Even though most of the services report having a systematic practice, only a few have written guidelines. They also report difficulties motivating young people to receive further support, having too little time and starting the work too late. This could be due to the fact that providing assistance after 18 years is not mandatory, creating a situation of negotiation where both organizational and relational issues become important.

Keywords: child welfare; leaving care; transition to adulthood

Background

In Norway there are approximately 450 local councils and most of them have their own child welfare service. There is, however, great variation among the services with regard to organization, number of clients, employees, etc. During 2006, 7000 children and youths were in care, most of them in foster care. The number of youths provided with assistance from child welfare services is reduced by 50% every year after the youths become 17 years old (Clausen & Kristofersen, 2008; Kristofersen, Sverdrup, Haaland, & Wang Andresen, 2006). This implies that many young care leavers are not given support after becoming 18 years old. Regarding the great need of young people leaving care (e.g. Clausen, & Kristofersen, 2008; Stein, 2004; Vinnerljung, 2006), and the fact that many young people living with their birth parents are given help long after turning 18 years (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007; Hellevik, 2005), it is questionable whether a number of youths are provided with the assistance needed. The most common assistance given to youths between 18 and 23 years comprises financial support, continuing foster care and housing.

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The legal situation in Norway for young people leaving care

The act relating to Child Welfare Services in Norway states that assistance implemented before the child has reached the age of 18 years may be maintained or replaced by other types of support until the child has reached the age of 23, provided that the child consents thereto. This implies that it is not mandatory, but possible, to be given assistance after turning 18 years. Before the youth reaches 18, the child welfare service is obliged to inform them about the opportunity of continued support. Furthermore, the child welfare service needs to consider whether the placement should continue or whether the youth is in need of other kinds of help. To determine the need for assistance the child welfare service should, together with the youth, consider their wishes and needs and complete an overall assessment (Child Welfare Act, 1992; Ministry of Children and Equality, 2006).

Method

The aim of the survey was to understand how the child welfare services carried out their work towards young people leaving care in the transition to independent living. The survey was an assignment from the Norwegian Foster Care Organization with funding from Helse and Rehabilitating (Oterholm, 2008). There has been only one previous study in Norway on this subject (Storø, 2004).

A questionnaire was sent to all child welfare services in Norway ($n = 413$). The questionnaire included questions with structured response categories and open-ended questions, with the majority in the former category. The services were asked about the following topics: routines concerning aftercare services, collaboration with other services and reasons for giving and not giving assistance. The data were coded using the statistical program SPSS.

A total of 68% of the services replied to the questionnaire. The results presented include answers from child welfare services with youths between 18 and 23 years receiving assistance by 31 December 2006 ($n = 213$) (the child welfare services with no young people with assistance were not included because many of them said they had little experience, and did not complete the questionnaire). The child welfare services included appear to represent the variation of child welfare services in Norway, including small and large services, services in cities and small municipalities, as well as services in various parts of the country. Every county was represented, with about two-thirds of the services in the county. The distribution between agency sizes is given in Table 1.

The data also include 30 written guidelines, which represented approximately half the services who claimed to have guidelines in writing. These guidelines were analysed using a matrix to establish different categories.

Table 1. Distribution of answers from child welfare services related to agency size, percent (N), $N = 213$.

	Very small agencies from 0,20 position up to 3 employees	Small agencies from 3 up to 5 employees	Middle-sized agencies from 5 up to 10 employees	Large agencies 10 or more employees	Number of employees not given	Total
Answers	19 (41)	30 (64)	25 (53)	25 (53)	1 (2)	100 (213)

Results

Form of the organization

The size of the child welfare services varied from a 0.20% position to 100 employees. Most of the child welfare services were organized within a generic model (57%). This is a broad model where the workers have all types of cases, 20% had a combination of generic and specialist models, 15% operated with a specialist model while 8% had other types of models or did not reply. The number of young people over 18 years provided with assistance varied from one to 123 at the various services involved. Eight per cent had a specialized youth social worker within their child welfare service.

Routines

One-third of the services reported having written guidelines and all but one of these services considered their practice to be systematic. Overall, about two-thirds of the services regarded their practice concerning care leavers to be systematic. The written guidelines varied from a quarter-page to several pages containing different documents such as procedures, templates for letters, forms of consent, contracts, checklists, etc.

A total of 76% followed a guide from the Ministry of Children and Equality. The guide contains recommendations regarding casework in different areas of child welfare, including some guidelines for aftercare service. The section concerning aftercare contains information about child welfare services' obligations towards young people leaving care, a checklist of what to do and an example of an agreement of consent.

There were differences between smaller and larger services. The services with most employees more often had a systematic practice and guidelines in writing, compared with the smaller services. A relatively higher number of the smaller services used the guide from the Ministry. The smaller services also emphasized the advantage of being small, giving room for flexibility.

Giving information and conducting assessments

All child welfare services reported that they informed the youths about the possibility of continued assistance after turning 18 years of age; 95% said they assessed the young person's needs and wishes in the transition to independent living. There were no questions in the survey about how the assessments were conducted. The only requirement legal is that the child welfare service shall cooperate with the youth. However, when asked about strengths and weaknesses, several of the child welfare services wrote that it was difficult to motivate young people into accepting continued assistance. Some also mentioned that they did not have enough time to talk with the youths and that they started the planning of aftercare service too late: 48% said they started when the youths were aged about 17 years and 24% when the youths were 17.5 years; 86% provided information to the young people regarding the possibility of changing their mind and returning after declining the offer of continuing assistance.

Foster parents and residential care workers are common collaborators; however, fewer than 50% of the child welfare services said they provided information to the foster parents about what the child welfare services could offer to youths who turn 18. Only 22% gave such information to the care workers.

Reasons for giving and not giving assistance

When providing continued assistance after turning 18 years is not obligatory, the reasons why some are given assistance and some are not become significant. The services were asked to give the most common reasons why some young people were given assistance while others were not after turning 18 years. They were allowed to give several answers to the question. The two reasons reported most often for gaining assistance were that the youths needed it and that they wanted it. Both were reported by approximately 90% of the services.

Because being in need was the most common reason for having assistance, one would expect that not being in need would be the most frequent reason for not having further support. This was, however, not the case. Not being in need of support was reported by only a quarter of the child welfare services as a common reason for not having further assistance. The reason reported most often for not giving assistance was that the youths did not want help (91%). About 75% of the services also reported the following reasons: youths believed that they did not need help; other types of services could give more relevant support; and the services and youth disagreed on the kind of support needed.

Only 3% of the services reported lack of financial resources as a reason for not giving further assistance. However, some answers indicated that the financial situation might still have an influence: one in five reported that the reason why young people are not provided with assistance was that child welfare did not have the support needed, while one in 10 reported as a reason that the repayment from the state to the municipality ceased when the youth passed 20. In other studies, lack of funding has been considered to be a relevant reason for insufficient aftercare services (Munkeby, 2005; Oslo Kommune, Kommunerevisjonen, 2006). Why this is not mentioned as an important reason in this study could be due to the fact that it is not a legitimate reason in any particular case.

Discussion

This study has questioned how child welfare services assist young people leaving care in the transition to independent living. The results raise questions related to organization and policy as well as relational issues, which will be discussed separately, although the issues often are intermingled.

Issues of organization and policy

Most services consider themselves to have a systematic practice. Nevertheless, only a few have written guidelines and there is great variation in the content of the written guidelines. Routines play an important role in an organization. They help to coordinate and control the work being conducted, to provide stability, to economize on cognitive resources and to reduce uncertainty and store knowledge (Becker, 2004). It is therefore of great concern that only a few of the services have written guidelines. The lack of written guidelines is an indication that care leavers have not been prioritized. As some of the services mentioned, younger kids are given priority. As many of the services are fairly small, there are only a few young people turning 18 every year, and in some years there are none. Lacking written guidelines and experience it may be difficult to know what is important for young people leaving care. There appears to be a need for more substantial guidelines from the government. Nevertheless, small agencies emphasized the advantages of being small: They know the young people and they consider themselves to be flexible.

The many small agencies could be the reason why only a few of the services had a specialized organization. With only a few employees it is impossible to appoint a specialist youth case worker. Studies conducted in England show that leaving care services are popular with young people. The leaving care staff are described as always available, efficient, friendly and welcoming (Harris & Broad, 2005). Support provided by specialist leaving care-workers is considered by the young people as more helpful than support provided by non-specialist social workers (Dixon & Stein, 2005). However, research concerning specialist schemes found that they were more likely to work with young people with a more disadvantageous starting-point, with limited impact upon other important outcomes (Biehal et al., 1995 in Stein, 2005). Stein argues (2005, p. 25) that it is the carer 'who can provide the stability and continuity young people need during their journey to adulthood. The role of specialist schemes should not be to take over, but to assist in preparing and supporting young people during their transition'. The question of a specialist aftercare service needs to be explored further.

When is the right time to begin the decision-making process concerning youths in care turning 18? Most of the services said they started the assessment and discussion of continued assistance when the youths were aged 17 or 17.5 years. This was considered by several services to be too late, which appears to be in accordance with evidence recommending that preparation should begin early (Dixon, Wade, Byford, Weatherly, & Lee May, 2006, p. 232).

Summarizing this section, several issues should be followed up. This includes providing written guidelines, starting the assessment earlier and exploring the need for specialist aftercare service.

Relational issues

The most common reason why young people are not provided with support after turning 18 is said to be their rejection of further assistance. This could be due to several issues. The importance of the relationship between the young person and their carer, as well as the case worker is emphasised in self-report studies (Bratterud et al., 2006; Storø, 2005; Tabuka, 2003; Thrana, 2006). The relationship between young people and their social workers is said to be of great importance in determining whether they want continued assistance after turning 18 years (Binde, 2008; Bratterud, & Storhaug, 2008). Because of past difficulties it can be hard for young care leavers to accept help or commit themselves to close relationships (Downes, 1992 in Stein, 2006).

Because the young person needs to consent to assistance after turning 18, it is important and necessary to take their opinion into account. At the same time it may be difficult for the youths to understand the conditions for further assistance, especially if their placement has been compulsory. It may also be difficult for young people to understand their own needs, as youths are often not mature enough to understand the necessity of further support (Ot. prp nr 61, 1997–98; Storø, 2005). This could be one reason why it is difficult to motivate young people for further support. Time is often required to deal with the situation. However, several services pointed out that lack of time was a challenge in aftercare work. In line with this, the trade union argues that there has been an decrease in cases not being followed-up by a corresponding increase of the staff (Fellesorganisasjonen, 2007).

In this respect, a question can also be raised as to whether or not young people themselves are given too much responsibility with regard to deciding upon continuing assistance. However, being given assistance is not an obligation, but an opportunity depending upon agreement. As one youth put it: 'In a common home there are few 18 year olds who

have to argue with their parents about the need to still live at home or still needing their parents' (Janka, aged 24, in Follesø, 2006, p. 65). Compared to other youths it seems unreasonable to have to consider whether they need support from their parents in the middle of high school. An example from the state of Illinois, USA, illustrates a way of taking the responsibility from the young person. The court decides whether a case shall be closed or remain open. In one county a judge will not close the case of a youth desiring release from foster care at 18 until the youth can provide a realistic plan for the immediate future (Peters, Claussen Bell, Zinn, Goerge, & Courtney, 2008). This, of course, raises questions about the possibility of giving aid without the youth's consent as well as ethical questions related to coercion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, several issues need to be followed up. This includes the need for written guidelines, recognition of the importance of the relationship between the youth and the caseworker in the negotiation process, and starting early in order to have sufficient time for dialogue and planning. The question of specialized aftercare services should be explored further, along with the possibility of making aftercare service mandatory for the young people in line with our understanding of what corporate parenting entails.

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