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Right to Housing in the Transition of Young Adults from Foster Care into Independent Living

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Young adults leaving foster care are at high risk of homelessness. In fact, this experience has also been reflected in ETHOS typology of homelessness and housing exclusion, which recognises people due to be released from institutions, and in particular children's homes, as at risk of becoming part of the homelessness population when there is no housing available prior to their release. In Slovakia, this issue seems especially urgent when considering the fact that even in total population, the vast majority, 92.6% of young people aged 18-25, and more than a half, 55% aged 25-34, were still living with their parents, which is more than in any other EU Member State apart from Croatia (Eurostat, 2020a).

In this context, the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights prepared a report on the implementation of the right to housing for young adults leaving foster care in Slovakia. In its five chapters, various barriers, as well as supportive tools, in ensuring access to housing, based on the administrative data analysis, as well as a qualitative survey with social workers at children's homes, are discussed. Within the survey, 14 interviews were conducted in November – December 2020 – the authors of the report consider it rather a small sample, also due to the coronavirus pandemic – therefore the findings should be approached with some caution.

When and How Many Young People Leave Foster Care?

Based on the administrative data analysis, the report summarises that in December 2020, there were 68 public and 35 non-public children's homes (set up by NGOs, or church-based organisations). In these, substitute care was provided for 4922 children – 3528 in institutional settings and 1394 in foster families.

Concerning the release from foster care, it can take place in three different age categories:

1. Below the age of legal adulthood (in Slovakia 18 years) – if children are reunified with their families or relatives or go into adoptive families;

2. At the age of legal adulthood – this is usually happening when young people themselves want to leave foster care, e.g., because they find living in institutional care traumatising;
3. After legal adulthood, usually no later than 25 or maximum 27 years of age – this is only possible provided that a person has been studying, no matter whether at secondary or higher education.

The most at risk of housing exclusion are those leaving foster care at the age of legal adulthood. During 2019, provision of foster care was terminated for 1377 children in all three age categories. The most frequent reason (32%) for termination was reunification with family or other relatives. The releases due to legal adulthood represented 24% of all terminations, i.e., 330 young adults were released from foster care because they reached 18 years of age.

Available Housing Options for Young Adults Leaving Foster Care

It is determined by law that no person leaving foster care may leave without a place to stay. In fact, within six months before release, the children's home, together with a young adult and a local municipality, prepare an independent living plan. Apart from other issues, this plan states what would be the first place of residence after the release of that person. Still, options for secure and stable housing are very limited, especially due to low availability of rental housing in the country. In fact, in 2019, 91% of the population in Slovakia lived in a household they owned, while only about 1.6% lived in reduced-rent accommodation (Eurostat, 2020b).

Given these circumstances, young people leaving foster care, especially those at the age of legal adulthood, may then wish to return to their families (often living in inadequate housing), rent an apartment together with their friends, or stay at a worker's hostel. All these options seem rather insecure, as they include sharing a place with other persons due to a lack of affordable housing.

There are also two crisis options to prevent their homelessness. One is the so called 'half-way home', a social service including accommodation, although mostly again in congregate rather than scattered housing. In 2019, there were 26 half-way homes with a capacity of 278 people, which is less than the annual number of young people leaving foster care at the age of 18. Another option since April 2018, is that a young person can come back to the children's home within two years of their release and live there until being independent (until a maximum of 25 years of age), i.e., having a place to stay at and having an income.

There are no exact estimations in what types of housing young people leaving foster care at the age of 18 end up in and how many of them experience homelessness. Provided that young adults (no matter whether they leave at the age of 18 or later) give consent to children's homes to stay in contact with them, children's homes follow their pathways for four years after their release. Out of 770 young adults with whom children's homes were in contact in December 2019, 34 (4.4%) were roofless. The prevalence of other forms of housing exclusion, e.g., living with family or friends, is currently not known since the administrative records do not distinguish various housing arrangements in detail. However, one of the findings of the National Centre for Human Rights is that crisis intervention measures, such as temporary accommodation in half-way homes, which should be the last resort to prevent homelessness of these young people, often become common if not the only housing option for them. Even if they manage to transition from a children's home into some secure accommodation (tenancy), many of them are at risk of falling into housing exclusion in the few months following their release.

Success Factors in Housing Retention

Finally, the report summarises several factors having impact on the ability of young people leaving foster care to retain their housing from a viewpoint of social workers in children's homes.

In particular, they highlighted the importance of relationships with family, not only due to a potential place to stay, but also as a support network in overcoming various emotional or other difficulties after the release which might lead to crisis situations. Therefore lots of effort is made to strengthen family relationships before the release, whenever possible. Another key element for successful housing retention, in their view, is good preparation before the release. Currently, such preparation is mandatory and includes topics such as financial skills, but still, there is a space for improvements. Finally, having a stable job was identified as another success factor for young people to be able to retain housing.

Conclusion

Obviously, there are significant gaps between the needs of young adults leaving foster care in Slovakia, especially when they are released at the age of legal adulthood, and the available measures to support their successful transition into independent living. The report of the National Centre concludes that so far, the right of these people to housing has not been sufficiently reflected in local or national policies. As a result, many of them experience homelessness and housing exclusion.

Further steps are needed to achieve progress in this area. In doing this, it will also be important to improve data collection to gain better insight into housing trajectories of young adults after their release.

➤ References

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