

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Experiences of Young People Leaving Children's Homes as a Form of Institutional Care: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

In Türkiye, there are very few studies examining the outcomes of children's homes, which are institutional care services where children/young people in need of protection are cared for, in terms of independent living. This study was designed in line with the question of how young people who have left these homes experience independent living and based on data obtained through in-depth interviews with a total of 20 young people, 10 men and 10 women, aged between 18 and 24. The young people had experienced children's homes for at least 3 years and had left the children's homes at least 1 year ago. The findings of this research are presented through three main themes: 'leaving care', 'receiving social support' and 'receiving public support: employment'. As a result of the research, it was revealed that care leavers may face some problems in aftercare in terms of their age and experiences and may need social support mechanisms and healthy socialization experiences.

1 | Introduction

Care leavers experience many changes in housing, environment, lifestyle, behaviour, relationships and especially identity (Anghel and Beckett 2007; Sulimani-Aidan 2015) and may face loneliness, exclusion and stigmatization, along with a sense of independence and decision-making about their own lives (Frimpong Manso 2012; Höjer and Sjöblom 2014). In this situation, they often do not find parents or other social support mechanisms with whom they can benefit from their experiences, and they cannot return to institutional care (Mendes, Johnson, and Moslehuddin 2011). In this respect, unlike their peers who are not in institutional care and generally continue to receive parental support, they may have to fend for themselves and make an 'accelerated and compressed' transition to adulthood (Stein 2008a). This implies that young care leavers are forced to rapidly become self-sufficient in a short period when they are not adequately prepared for life aftercare. The difficulties experienced in this

process can lead care leavers to face the risk of experiencing negativities in many dimensions such as homelessness, substance abuse, unemployment and involvement in crime (Akister, Owens, and Goodyer 2010; Dickens 2018; Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney 2013; Hollingworth and Jackson 2016; Murray et al. 2020; Sims-Schouten and Hayden 2017).

Developed countries aim to facilitate the transition process of young people to adulthood with care leaving policies such as counselling services, financial support, housing support, higher education or vocational training support (Hiles et al. 2014; van Breda et al. 2020). The conditions for benefiting from these supports in the aftercare vary according to economic, cultural, social and political conditions. However, what is common in all cases is the age limit. For example, in the United States of America, state support is provided until the age of 21 (Courtney 2019), in the United Kingdom until the age of 21 or until the age of 25 if they are in higher education

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(Holmes, Berridge, and Thoburn 2023), in Germany until the age of 21 but in exceptional cases until the age of 27 (Köngeter, Schröer, and Zeller 2016) and in Norway until the age of 23 (Bakketeig and Backe-Hansen 2018).

Some studies on the effectiveness of services provided to care leavers show that aftercare programmes have positive results in terms of improving the living conditions of young people (Courtney and Hook 2017; Mendes, Bollinger, and Flynn 2023). However, some studies have also shown that these programmes are not working in practice. For example, Strahl et al. (2021) found that of the 36 countries with legislation on care leavers, only nine of those with legislation enabling young people to remain in care until the age of 21 had implemented it.

Informal supportive factors that can help care leavers to cope with difficulties are of great importance. Indeed, research highlights the importance of support from biological family (Refaeli 2020) and mentors (Collins, Spencer, and Ward 2010; Salazar et al. 2016), as well as the presence of professionals who show a genuine interest in their personal journey (Adley and Jupp Kina 2017; Amaral 2011), for care leavers' ability to cope with difficulties and move on with their lives in harmony. Positive emotions and psychosocial well-being experienced through informal support networks can help to build a positive identity (Dutta 2017), develop consistent and positive relationships with others, continue education or encourage academic success (Flynn and Tessier 2011; Pinkney and Walker 2020; Rios and Rocco 2014) and participate in employment (Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan 2020; Johansson et al. 2024), to have appropriate housing (Stein 2012).

Given these data, it is possible to classify care leavers into three groups: young people 'moving on', survivors and strugglers, as Stein (2008b) does. Stein (2008b) defines the 'strugglers' group as those who experience a lack of social support and are exposed to many difficulties; the 'survivors' group as those who experience significant instability but are able to have positive experiences thanks to the support of their environment; and the 'moving on' group as those who cope with the difficulties of transition and continue with higher education or a job. In fact, in order for countries to achieve strong and lasting economic and social welfare, or at least to have strong human and social capital, it is of great importance that individuals who have gone through institutional care are not included in the 'strugglers' class. In this respect, childcare systems are dynamic processes that are constantly looking for the better.

1.1 | Türkiye Context

1.1.1 | Child Welfare System

Following its ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, Türkiye established various intervention principles and procedures to ensure the protection of children through the Child Protection Law No. 5395 in 2005. In cases where it is not possible to support the child with his/her biological family as stipulated in the aforementioned law, alternative

models are adoption or placement in a foster family. The last resort is institutional care (Karatay 2017; Yıldırım 2017).

In 2012, 51% of children/young people placed in care outside their biological family were placed in institutional care, 43% in adoption and 6% in foster care, and by 2023, 44% in adoption, 33% in institutional care and 27% in foster care (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Family and Social Services 2024). Despite the number of children/young people receiving foster care increasing, the need for institutional care remains significant.

1.1.2 | Institutional Care Services

Institutional care in many countries today encompasses deinstitutionalization efforts in line with general global trends, or group home and community-based or independent living arrangements, which are small units that bear little resemblance to large institutions (James 2023). UNICEF and the European Union have also encouraged governments to reduce group sizes of those in institutional care (Ainsworth and Thoburn 2014). The results of studies in other countries also support this trend and efforts to create a home-like environment (Groark and McCall 2011; Riemersma et al. 2024; Thoburn 2016).

In parallel, Türkiye has radically changed its institutional care system since 2009 (Yazıcı 2012). Today, children and young people in Türkiye are cared for in smaller units in three different types of institutional care: children's homes, children's building complexes and child support centres. According to the 2023 year-end data of the Ministry of Family and Social Services, these institutions provide services for 14435 children/young people, with 5553 staying in children's homes. The total number of children's homes in Türkiye is now 1185 (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Family and Social Services 2024).

The children's homes in which this research was conducted are different from children's building complexes and child support centres in that they are apartment-type housing units with a maximum of seven children/young people living together. In Türkiye, children's building complexes and child support centres refer to social service institutions that have more than one unit within a campus and provide services with more capacity. The main distinguishing feature of a children's home is that it provides the opportunity to have a family-like living space within a residential and social environment (Yıldırım and Işıktan 2018). It is also possible for siblings of the same gender to stay in the same house. The maximum age difference between children/young people living in the same household is 3 years, but this difference is not required for siblings as an exception. Children/young people are placed in different homes between the ages of 0 and 6, 7 and 12, and 13 and 18. Young people leave institutional care (children's homes/children's building complexes) when they turn 18.

In addition, the state aims to support young people from the age of 16 onwards through various trainings that include preparing young people for independent living while in care (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Family and Social Services 2024). However, despite the aim to prepare young people with aftercare plans at

the legislative level, concerns about the implementation of this service remain (Erbay, Altındağ, and Çelik 2018).

1.1.3 | Aftercare Services

In Türkiye, the country of our study, those attending secondary education have the right to benefit from state services such as housing, health and financial support until the age of 20 and those attending higher education until the age of 25. In addition, in Türkiye, young people who have benefited from institutional care (children's homes/children's building complexes) or foster care for at least 2 years within the framework of the Social Services Law No. 2828 are entitled to be employed as civil servants or workers in public institutions and organizations.¹ However, another condition for this right is that they must have reached the age of 18 in institutional care (children's homes/children's building complexes) or foster care. Accordingly, a certain number of positions are allocated in public institutions and organizations. In this framework, 2390 young people were placed in public institutions and organizations in Türkiye in 2023 (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Family and Social Services 2024).

However, despite an opportunity such as employment, psychosocial support for care leavers in Türkiye is not at the desired level (Erbay, Altındağ, and Çelik 2018). At this point, our study aims to identify the needs and expectations of young care leavers in the context of Türkiye, focusing on their aftercare. In doing so, this study aims to shed light on the challenges and struggles faced aftercare. Little is known in the literature about the experiences of young care leavers in Türkiye. Unlike studies examining independent living in Türkiye (Kaya Kiliç and Uğur 2022; Turgut and Özkan 2019; Uğur and Kaya Kiliç 2022), this study gains importance in terms of contributing to the field by providing new and up-to-date data and focusing on the current care system and young people leaving this system.

2 | Method

This study was qualitatively designed and used a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of young people leaving children's homes, their aftercare experiences and how they made sense of and interpreted those experiences. Phenomenological research aims to discover the shared meanings of lived experiences of a phenomenon or concept (Creswell and Poth 2016). Researchers collect data from people who have experienced with the phenomenon and create a holistic description that describes the essence of all individuals' experiences (Patton 2015). In the process of describing the essence of an individual's experience through shared meanings, qualitative research, which recognizes that each individual has their own reality, offers a framework that reflects individual differences as well as shared meanings to capture the complexity of human experience (Tutty et al. 1996).

Phenomenology brackets the external world and personal biases of the researcher and avoids making assumptions about the participants' experiences in order to reveal the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas 1994). Based on this, in our study, bracketing involved the participants' acceptance that their experiences constituted their subjective reality. As a result, we

elaborately focused on participants' experiences and avoided making judgements or adding subjective interpretations to the information provided by the participants.

2.1 | Participants

The participants of the study were young people who had experienced children's homes in their past lives and had left care. Participants were reached by using criterion sampling and snowball sampling from purposive sampling methods.

Participants were included in the study if they met the criteria of having stayed at the children's home for at least 3 years, being over 18 years of age and having left the children's home for at least 1 year. Participants were initially contacted through people they trusted, including the children's home supervisor, care staff and social workers. We also contacted an association that provides support to care leavers, and it was easier to reach participants as the person in charge of the association's activities was also a care leaver. Because the participants generally concealed their backgrounds and the fact that they were staying in a children's home, which is a type of institutional care, it was only possible to reach them through contacts they trusted.

Considering that data saturation was reached as a result of the interviews conducted in this research, it was preferred to elaborate on the data rather than diversify it. As a result, a total of 20 participants, 10 men and 10 women, were included in the study. The inclusion of both men and women in the study is based on the findings that, according to the literature, male and female care leavers have different experiences during the integration phase (Diraditsile and Nyadza 2018).

2.2 | Data Collection Process

The data for the study were collected using an in-depth interview technique, through a semi-structured interview form. While preparing the semi-structured interview questions, support was taken from the literature. In addition, the feedback of a social worker and an academic working in the field was taken into consideration in the preparation of the questions. To evaluate the comprehensibility and functionality of the questions, a pilot interview was conducted with three people, and the questions were finalized after the interview.

The interview questions were open-ended, covering the children's home process, the separation process and the process of independent living aftercare. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) also mention that open-ended questions open the door for the participants to interpret their constructed world in their own words. Additionally, follow-up questions were asked during the interview, depending on the participants' responses, due to the nature of the semi-structured interview. For example, questions focusing on experience and meaning similar to 'Can you tell us about your working life experiences?' and 'What would you like to change about your working life?' were asked.

Interviews were conducted in different cities where the participants resided, depending on the participants' university and work

life and the location of the biological or foster family. Interviews were conducted in cafes, university meeting halls and other appropriate locations, with respect to privacy. The interviews lasted between 21 and 97 min. The average duration of interviews is 47 min.

2.3 | Data Analysis

In this study, the data recorded with a voice recorder were transcribed through a transcription program. As a result of all interviews, 946 min and 30s of audio recording and 293 pages² of text were obtained. MAXQDA 2024 software package was used to analyse the data. In order to focus on the participants' experiences (van Manen 1997), an inductive thematic analytic approach with phenomenological foundations was used. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences by focusing on the meaning in a data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). The entire analysis implemented in this research was completed in six steps, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

First, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to get a general idea of the participants' experiences. In the second step, codes were generated throughout the data set. In the third step, the codes were first thematized, and subthemes were created. In the fourth step, the conformity of the themes with the quotations and then the conformity of the quotations with the themes were checked. In the fifth step, the themes were defined and named to finalize them. At this step, the MAXQDA codebook was reviewed by an independent researcher, as it was considered important for data reconciliation that the existing themes and codes were coded by a third party. As a result, the naming of some themes was changed and finalized. Finally, the themes were interpreted with their common and different aspects in the light of the findings and the narrative was supported with quotations.

2.4 | Ethical Issues

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Istanbul University-Cerrahpaşa Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Number: E-74555795-050.01.04-271 224). Additionally, the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical procedures established by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018). Participants voluntarily participated in the study, and informed consent was obtained. During the interviews, the participants were informed that they could leave the interview at any time. The audio recordings were stored in a computer and were not disclosed to any third parties. Participants were informed that the audio recordings would be irreversibly destroyed within 2 years following the completion of the study. To protect their confidentiality, 'M' is used for male, 'F' is used for female participants with numbers as code names.

3 | Results

The age of the participants ranged between 19 and 24, with an average age of 21. Only one of the participants (F-9) was married and had one child. The majority of participants experienced

more than one placement during care. In the study, change of placement only included household mobility after moving to a children's home. This change of placement was more common in girls' homes (see Table 1). Sixty per cent ($n=12$) of the participants left care when they turned 18. 15% ($n=3$) of the participants left the children's homes before they turned 18. These three participants were not entitled to employment, as they were not in children's homes when they turned 18. However, because they met the condition of staying in the children's homes for at least 2 years, they filed a lawsuit and became civil servants as a result of the lawsuit. In conclusion, 65% of the participants ($n=13$) are working as civil servants in public institutions and organizations, approximately 77% ($n=10$) of which are office staff, 15% ($n=2$) are machine technicians and 8% ($n=1$) are cleaning staff. The income level of the working participants is medium. Demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

3.1 | Leaving Care

3.1.1 | Moving Into the Unknown

According to the age criterion, most of the participants left the children's home when they turned 18. However, despite knowing that the place they lived was a service provided to them under certain conditions and for a certain period, most reported that they experienced the uncertainty of leaving care and did not plan for aftercare. F-8 expresses this state as follows:

One day, after my birthday they told me that I would be released when I was old enough. I had nowhere to stay, nowhere, no job. I was not yet eligible for civil service. I do not know where to go.

(F-8)

Being unprepared and not having a plan can cause some adaptation problems in the aftercare. The following participants expressed this notion:

I did not feel prepared, I mean, it was so sudden. Then I became a civil servant. I had to quickly rent a place and did not think what I was doing. I was in a rush.

(M-4)

Before the age of 18, I had never lived or seen anything. I have not experienced anything about life.

(M-8)

All these considerations point to the need for more careful planning of the care leaving process and a preparation programme for independent living.

3.1.2 | Starting Over

Completely abandoning memories and habits is one of the most challenging situations for care leavers. Most participants stated that they felt lonely and empty after leaving the children's home

TABLE 1 | Sociodemographic details.

Participant	Age	Educational status	Profession	Age entering care	Age of admission to Children's home	Number of placement moves	Age when leaving care	Living person/ place
F-1	20	Ongoing bachelor's degree	Student	14	15	6	18	Dormitory
F-2	22	High school graduate	Civil servant	7	11	6	18	Alone
F-3	20	High school graduate	Civil servant	0	15	3	18	Alone
F-4	21	Ongoing associate's degree	Student	12	12	2	19	Dormitory
F-5	19	Ongoing bachelor's degree	Student	7	9	5	18	Sibling
F-6	21	Ongoing bachelor's degree	Student	10	10	8	20	Dormitory
F-7	19	High school graduate	Civil servant	12	12	2	18	Alone
F-8	19	High school graduate	Civil servant	14	14	4	18	Alone
F-9	21	High school graduate	Civil servant	9	12	3	18	Spouse
F-10	22	High school graduate	Civil servant	13	14	2	18	Foster Family
M-1	22	Middle school graduate	Civil servant	9	12	3	17	Biological family
M-2	24	High school graduate	Civil servant	0	15	2	19	Sibling
M-3	22	High school graduate	Civil servant	10	11	3	16	Friend
M-4	21	High school graduate	Civil servant	6	12	2	18	Friend
M-5	20	Ongoing bachelor's degree	Student	9	11	2	18	Sibling
M-6	23	Associate's degree graduate	Civil servant	9	10	2	18	Alone
M-7	24	Ongoing associate's degree	Civil servant	9	13	1	19	Friend
M-8	22	Ongoing bachelor's degree	Student	6	10	2	18	Friend

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Participant	Age	Educational status	Profession	Age entering care	Age of admission to Children's home	Number of placement moves	Age when leaving care	Living person/ place
M-9	20	Ongoing bachelor's degree	Student	2	12	1	19	Dormitory
M-10	19	High school graduate	Civil servant	12	12	4	17	Biological family

because the life they were used to at home with their peers and care staff was replaced by loneliness.

I cried for days after I left because I was so used to it. The girls have no voice, they aren't there. You are on your own now, it was very difficult.

(F-8)

However, leaving also represents a liberation from the excessive prescriptivism of the inflexible institutional structure. Despite the feeling of loneliness, most participants defined leaving care as 'freedom' and adopted a new lifestyle where they could make their own decisions and realize their own abilities:

You know, there are no rules anymore and I am in a place where I can live my own individual freedom, where I can make my own rules.

(F-4)

Well, I think I became more self-confident. In a way, you become more capable. Doing things on your own. Going to the hospital. I learned these things.

(F-5)

3.1.3 | Living in the Shadow of a History of Care

The care history of individuals leaving the children's home may make young people more vulnerable and distant from other people in the aftercare. For some of the participants, this situation may turn into reasons that increase their vulnerability in social participation, establishing new relationships and socialization processes. For example, some participants emphasized that the constant change of home during care can disrupt socialization processes. When young people change their homes, it means a new social environment, new friendships and new care staff. In this case, participants may think that the friendships they have established will be temporary:

I do not want to make too many friends from the new environment because I do not want to tell about myself. You know, meeting someone new was tiring. Because your friends are constantly changing and you have to explain the same things to others.

(F-2)

I mean, no one has a permanent place in my life. This is why you do not need to tell anyone about anything. I mean, G. [housemate] is the same way. She is in my life today, but tomorrow is unknown.

(F-6)

Care staff constitute an important part of the institutional functioning. In this sense, care staff play a critical role in the care process. The information shared by the participants is that some care staff do not exhibit an attitude that understands and allows the child/young person to share their feelings and thoughts

during the care period. This situation is undoubtedly reflected in aftercare in various ways. For example, F-10 described the communication problem she experienced in her friendship relationships due to her upbringing in care with the following statements:

My friends say to me, you do not show yourself, you do not show your feelings to people. We have difficulty understanding you. I was usually the one who preferred to keep it to myself because there was always a psychology of punishment when we expressed it there (in the children's home), so we were living all the emotions inside ourselves.

(F-10)

Another area where socialization processes are disrupted and communication problems are experienced is male–female relations. In children's homes, girls and boys live in separate homes. It is seen that this situation leads to some difficulties in communicating with nonbinary peers. Especially, male participants emphasized this process. The statements of M-5, who explains this situation most clearly, are as follows:

I mean, it also happens because you are always in a male environment, you know, when you suddenly enter a mixed environment of boys and girls, you do not know what to do. Because you stay in a children's home and there are five boys there.

(M-5)

3.2 | Receiving Social Support

3.2.1 | Biological Families

Most participants stated that their relations with their biological family were also weak aftercare and one of the reasons is that their parents also behave distantly:

My mother and I have not had a mother–daughter relationship since I was little. Neither she could show me that love. I tried a lot but it did not work. We are far away from each other. We are like two strangers, we talk. She is my mother after all.

(F-8)

I ask my mom if we can be a family again. She says that's over.

(M-9)

However, most participants are also distant about returning to their families and having close relations with them:

Well, let me put it this way, I mean, I erased that place a lot, to be honest. I do not know, I mean, they want to meet a lot, but I do not prefer to meet a lot.

(M-6)

Similarly, some participants sought alternative ways instead of returning to their biological family:

I mean, I was in contact with my parents after I was 18, but I did not call them and say I'm coming to you. I have stood on my own until now.

(M-3)

There was a possibility that I could go back to my mother. I did not want that either. I was 22, 23 years old. I was looking for an alternative. My friend said, you know, come and stay with us. I said yes.

(M-7)

However, the distant relationship with the parent may differ in the relationship with the sibling. For some of the participants, siblings can be an important source of social support. Especially aftercare, communication and solidarity with siblings increase even more:

If it wasn't for my sister, I'm sure I would not have been ready. Because renting a place and stuff like that is always laborious. I mean, it would have been difficult for me. I worked part-time for minimum wage. During that time, I was contributing to the house to live with my sister. That's how it was.

(M-2)

My sister was living in Van and I went to live with her.

(M-4)

3.2.2 | Care Staff

The relationships young people have with care staff can also affect the aftercare. Although the qualifications and behavioural styles of the care staff vary, participants stated that they were not satisfied with their quality and behavioural styles and the way they established relationships. Participants were mainly dissatisfied with the quality of the care staff, their behaviour and the way they built individual relationships. In this case, some participants preferred not to continue the relationship after leaving the children's home. F-1 expresses this situation as follows:

For example, I do not see the employees in my old house. I blocked them, I do not see them in any way. If I see them, I pretend I do not recognize them.

(F-1)

F-2 stated that she would not receive support from care staff under any circumstances:

The last people I would really say help me if I were to die there, not spiritually but physically. So if there was a death or a spiritual collapse, I would not want to reach out to anyone.

(F-2)

As a result of establishing a healthy relationship with care staff during the care process, some individuals can access an important source of social support by continuing their relationships aftercare. For example, F-8 stated during the interview that she could not establish a mother–daughter relationship with her biological mother; however, in aftercare, she received significant support from a care staff who she described as being ‘no different from my own mother’:

For example, there was a mother [care staff]. She is one of the women who shaped my life the most. We still keep in touch. She is no different from my own mother. In fact, she is more of a mother to me than my own mother.

(F-8)

F-9, who is married, stated that she received support from care staff for the care of her baby and that their relationship continues:

When I had a baby, when my baby did something, I also met with them, I went to them.

(F-9)

3.2.3 | Friends

Although the extent of relationships with biological family and care staff varied, there was a consensus among participants that after the end of care, they were more likely to communicate and receive support from friends with similar backgrounds:

If something happens to me, I call those friends before my family. They call me in the same way. You know, in terms of supporting each other.

(M-3)

M-6 stated that his friends who had been in the institution for many years could naturally understand him better and he felt like he was in a ‘family’ with them:

I mean, imagine you have been with someone for ten years. You know everything about them. This actually goes beyond brotherhood. I mean, it’s more than friendship outside. You feel like family with him.

(M-6)

3.3 | Receiving Public Support: Employment

3.3.1 | Opportunity or Barrier

One of the most important milestones of life participation is the individual’s ability to obtain a stable job and career. This can be seen as a unique characteristic of the care service structure in Türkiye, which provides employment for care leavers in public institutions and organizations.

We start life with a zero, but then it becomes our profession, we acquire something. It contributes a lot to us. We score something like a victory goal, we are actually equalized against life.

(F-8)

However, during the interviews, participants, especially those studying at university, had some reservations about the exercise of the right to employment in terms of discouraging them to continue their education and be competitive in the aftercare:

They know that they will become a civil servant. The children are aware of this, so they do not go to school. They do not study. They drop out at elementary school.

(M-1)

M-2 supported this idea by stating that his only goal for the future was to utilize his right to employment:

That was my thing for the future, after that I already knew that I was going to be a civil servant. By dedicating my life to being a civil servant.

(M-2)

Another important reservation in this case is that all care residents are considered in the same pot:

Even the mentally unhealthy people coming out of high school start working as public servants of the state, regardless of whether they finish high school or not. What is the efficiency that person can give.

(F-6)

3.3.2 | Being Employed

Some participants in employment reported being labelled as ‘orphanage child³’ due to their care history. In principle, the information on one’s children’s home history is confidential, and it is up to him/her to disclose it. However, it may become an issue in some cases when this has become known by other people as for F-9 who explains her situation as follows:

When I first started working, they asked me how did you come? I told them that I came after I left the children’s home, so their attitude towards me was a bit different. That’s why I did not get along with those people there. Because I felt that they oppressed me.

(F-9)

Similarly, F-10 stated that they were categorized as ‘orphanage children’ and were not trusted with the work to be done:

We are grouped under something like this, 'orphanage children'. For example, they do not look at what we do, they look at us as orphanage children. This is going to be a tie on our feet.

(F-10)

One of the problems experienced in employment life is lack of self-confidence and a sense of inadequacy. This can lead to anxiety and hesitation for the participants in working environments. F-2 explained her lack of self-confidence and its reflection on her working life with the following statements:

You know, I did not trust myself at first. Can I do this job? Can I handle it? What would the people there think if I could not do this job?

(F-2)

Therefore, when all these factors are combined, the majority of participants prefer to conceal the fact that they have been in care in the past:

I mean I prefer not to share [care history], I mean no one needs to know where I stay.

(F-7)

4 | Discussion

The majority of the participants had to leave the children's home when they turned 18, despite not feeling ready. For young people who have spent a significant part of their lives in care institutions, leaving care and stepping into an uncertain future is worrisome (Bengtsson, Sjöblom, and Öberg 2018). They may be left with feelings such as anxiety about how they will manage on their own and fear of loneliness (Duncalf 2010; Dutta 2017). On the other hand, as seen in our study, the collective lifestyle during the children's home process, the prescriptive attitude exhibited by the care staff and the management can be replaced by independence after the children's home. Even if leaving the care institution is initially seen as a crisis, Bengtsson, Sjöblom, and Öberg (2018) suggest that the independent 'adult' role prevails. The results of this research also support this finding and that of a study by Goodkind, Schelbe, and Shook (2011), which concluded that a sense of independence was evident among care leavers because institutional life had not allowed them to previously exercise self-determination.

Another important factor in the aftercare is relationships established with care staff, friends and biological families. Similar to the findings of other studies (Acar, Semerci, and Yaman 2021; Frimpong-Manso 2020; Refaeli 2020; Schofield, Larsson, and Ward 2017), it was found that some of the participants in our research were able to establish good relations with care staff, embraced them as their surrogate 'mother' or 'older sister' and maintained these relationships at the same level after leaving care. Van Breda and Hlungwani (2019) have stressed that individuals in care institutions often wish to establish strong relationships with others to compensate for the lack of family support.

However, some participants did not develop positive relationships with the care staff aftercare. Andersson (2005) also found the level of aftercare support from care staff to be drastically low. In our study, this situation was linked to the inability of the staff to respond to the individual needs of the young people during care and the inability to create an environment for individuals to express themselves. However, it is among the findings that this situation is not only related to the individual attitude of the staff but also that the institutional failures experienced are an obstacle to the establishment of this relationship. As in the findings of other studies (Johnson et al. 2010; Muhamedrahimov et al. 2004), some of the participants experienced repeated separations with the staff due to frequent changes in children's homes. These repeated separations are seen as one of the key factors underlying trust and attachment problems. Bowlby (1988) argued that healthy attachment relationships with primary caregivers form the basis of children's developing relational patterns. Similar to other research findings (Connolly 2014; Mann-Feder 2018; Manso et al. 2011), trust and attachment problems, weakness in friendship relationships and problems in communicating emerged in this study as a reflection of the relationships that could not be established with an adult during care. Some women stated that they had trust problems with the opposite sex, and men stated that they were timid and shy. These findings are consistent with Manso et al. (2011). However, even ongoing relationships with at least one consistent person play a significant role in the adaptation of care leavers to society in the long term (McLean 2015).

In parallel with the literature, in our study, it was found that the friendships and supportive relationships of care leavers in the aftercare consisted largely of people who shared the same background with them (Cudjoe, Uggerhøj, and Abdullah 2020; Sulimani-Aidan 2020). In line with the findings of Frimpong Manso (2018), the participants in our study also received support from young people with a care background, particularly for shelter needs, and either resided or currently reside with them. In our research, the main reasons for this are thought to be the common past, trust and the feeling of being like a family member. Accordingly, care leavers describe their relationships with friends with whom they share the same background as 'sibling' relationships and may establish family-like relationships with them (Irvine and Emond 2023; Pryce et al. 2016). Therefore, as found in other studies (Atwool 2020; Hiles et al. 2013; Höjer and Sjöblom 2014), friendships based on common sharing gain importance.

Support from family members, as well as support from care staff and friends, can have positive outcomes in the transition to independent living. The vulnerability of these young people makes the need for social support that families can provide particularly strong (Dutta 2017). However, the results of our research suggest that the majority of young people have distant biological family relationships. This is because it can often be quite difficult to return to parents and rebuild relationships (Bengtsson, Sjöblom, and Öberg 2018). On the other hand, as stated in Sulimani-Aidan's (2018) study, although the majority of the distant relationship is caused by young people, it is seen that in some cases, parents are not willing to establish a relationship. On the other hand, in this study, some of the care leavers had strong ties with their siblings who, like them, had institutionalized backgrounds.

In the study conducted by Cederbaum et al. (2023), it was found that the bond with siblings provides an important emotional support. It is thought that the reason the bond with siblings stands out as strong in the findings of our study is the similar past experience. Because almost all of the participants' siblings were also taken into institutional care (children's homes/children's building complexes). In this case, even though they do not share the same house, they have a similar past and sharing a similar past contributes to the development of the relationship.

In addition to support networks, having a job and participating in social life is another important factor for young people's well-being (Höjer and Sjöblom 2014). Nevertheless, the employment participation of care leavers represents a significant challenge in many countries (Furey and Harris-Evans 2021; Hollingworth and Jackson 2016). Unlike other countries, Türkiye has overcome this problem by providing employment rights to care leavers. In this context, another significant contribution of our study to the literature focusing on the employment challenges of young people transitioning out of care (Liu et al. 2022) and the advantages of stable income (Pasli and Aslantürk 2024) has been the insights it provides regarding the needs and expectations of young people with employment guarantees.

However, although some participants interpreted the right to employment as equalization with young people who are not in care, other participants expressed concern that the right to employment poses a risk of not continuing high school or higher education. Indeed, it is seen that more than half of the participants in our study do not pursue higher education. Studies in other countries in the literature have found that the likelihood of continuing further and/or higher education after completing compulsory education is lower than that of their peers (Gilligan and Brady 2023; Harrison 2020). The data in our research, as highlighted in the study by Tapan (2022), indicate that the majority of care leavers do not pursue higher education considering the guarantee of employment (Erbay, Altındağ, and Çelik 2018). Therefore, they may face sense of professional inadequacy while working (Sadak and Yıldırım 2020; Erbay, Altındağ, and Çelik 2018).

It is therefore clear that although the employment solution offered in Türkiye does provides support for young care leavers (Elmacı 2015), it can also create problems, such as the ones mentioned above. Conversely, it does not consistently yield the anticipated gain in the aftercare. In our research, employed young people reported that they were exposed to stigmatization and social exclusion. Although being in employment is considered as a way of social cohesion and acceptance (Atwool 2020; Furey and Harris-Evans 2021), the situation is different for young care leavers in Türkiye. For example, the findings of Kaya Kiliç and Uğur (2022) and Yanardağ (2019) show that the right to be 'placed in a public institutions and organizations' is a source of prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes towards those who grew up in institutional care. Unlike their peers, young people with a care background are employed not because of their vocational/educational qualifications but because of the support of the state. This situation, as in our study, results in them not being trusted in their work and being subjected to various labelling. Many previous studies have also shown that individuals with a history of institutional care are labelled in social spaces,

although the reasons are different (Ibrahim and Howe 2011; Keshri 2021; Turgut and Özkan 2019).

4.1 | Limitations

The study results have some limitations. The research sample is limited to 20 participants and cannot be generalized to all groups. The experiences of participants who left the children's home and did not reside in cities may differ. We experienced data insufficiency during the field study due to the children's home system not being old enough to make definitive judgements on its efficiency. More specifically, we could not collect data from participants who had experienced a longer aftercare. The study was conducted on a specific date and specific place.

5 | Conclusion

This study presents an outlook on the experiences of care leavers and how they interpret these experiences in the context of Türkiye. The results of our study show that care leavers face a number of problems in the aftercare in terms of the process of leaving care, their age and their experiences. Although aftercare employment in Türkiye is an opportunity for young people not to worry about unemployment, the insufficiency of aftercare supportive resources can make it difficult for young people to adapt to social life. At this point, it is understood that young people need psycho-social support in all areas.

5.1 | Implications for the Social Work Profession

In the children's homes where this research was conducted, social workers are not directly involved in care settings. However, social workers are professionals who have an important place in the care process, including the prevention and recovery stages.

Social workers should facilitate the adaptation of individuals to social life in aftercare by helping to identify individual, group and community-oriented needs with a multidisciplinary approach in guidance and monitoring studies. When necessary, they should serve as a resource for the provision of support services to meet these needs and create programmes to empower individuals and increase their capacity to do.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to offer structured support services both during and after care to adequately prepare these young people for the transition to independent living. Currently, legislation includes provisions for preparing youth in care for independent living through education and counselling starting at the age of 16. However, the implementation of these provisions remains insufficient. Therefore, it is recommended that relevant implementation processes be monitored more rigorously and that regulatory and preventive measures be strengthened to ensure their effective functioning.

After leaving care, career counselling and mentoring services can play a pivotal role in supporting the personal and professional development of young people. Within the scope of these services, young people can be made aware that guaranteed

employment is not the only and most important opportunity in their education and professional life by ensuring that their talents and competencies are recognized early and effectively.

Furthermore, encouraging policies can be created by local governments, central governments and international organizations to establish networks (associations, foundations, etc.) where young people can receive social support and socialize healthily.

5.2 | Recommendations for Future Research

This research suggests that future research on life after children's homes should be conducted with different generations and care leavers and use a larger sample size. In addition to this, the data can be elaborated and can pave the way for future studies. For example, different factors such as the length of stay in the children's home and the gender of the care staff can be evaluated separately and the results can be measured. In addition, a comparative analysis of care leavers who are in working life and have different levels of education can be made, and education and working life can be a focal point for future researchers.

Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa Social and Human Sciences Ethic Committee's Meeting (No. E-74555795-050.01.04-271 224).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹Public institutions and organizations refer to government offices administrated by the state such as ministerial offices and state universities.

²Times New Roman, 12 font size, 1.5 line spacing.

³The term is used for young people who have lived in institutional care by general public.

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