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# Examining narratives of Swedish care-leaving bureaucracy from a lived citizenship perspective: framing the problem in political terms

## Berättelser om svensk leaving-care byråkrati ur ett levtt medborgarskapsperspektiv: en analys av problemet i politiska termer

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### ABSTRACT

The transition to young adulthood is a complex process for all young people, but especially those leaving care who are at high risk of social exclusion. The adverse living conditions of young care leavers have been well documented in recent decades and constitute an established point of departure in the political discourse on care leavers, as well as within the international field of leaving care research. This article builds on twelve in-depth interviews with young people aged 17–24 from a Swedish research project on youth transitioning from out-of-home care and their paths to housing, work and education. From the perspectives of care leavers, the processes governing transitions are characterised by rigid managerialism and social administration that fails to address the extensive needs regarding housing, income, education and health as experienced by this group. The article explores leaving care from a lived citizenship perspective, arguing that the lack of responsiveness from the social services, as well as the lack of meaningful long-term interventions capable of addressing the material, psychological, emotional, relational and educational needs of young people leaving care, places this group on the margins of citizenship, unsupported and insufficiently prepared to enter the many trials of emerging adulthood.

### ABSTRAKT


Det gradvisa inträdet till vuxenlivet är en komplex process för alla ungdomar, men i synnerhet för ungdomar som lämnar samhällsvård som ofta saknar ekonomiska resurser och stödjande sociala nätverk under denna krävande livsperiod, och som därmed löper en påtaglig risk för social marginalisering. De ogynnsamma livsvillkoren som karaktäriserar denna sårbara och underprivilegierade grupp är väldokumenterade i både svensk och internationell forskning. Artikeln bygger på tolv djupintervjuer med unga i åldern 17–24 från ett svenskt forskningsprojekt om unga som lämnar samhällsvård och deras väg till bostad, försörjning och utbildning. De intervjuade ungdomarna berättar om övergångsprocessen främst i termer av erfarenheter av att bli

### KEYWORDS

Lived citizenship; young people's experiences; leaving care

### NYCKELORD

levtt medborgarskap; ungas erfarenheter; leaving care

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administrerade ut ur systemet och lämnade utan ett långsiktigt och kvalitativt stöd; en brist på information och delaktighet i planeringsprocessen vid avslut; en kamp för att ordna med en fungerande och trygg boendesituation; och en kamp för att ordna med stabil ekonomi. Dessa överlappande och sammanflätade erfarenheter och processer försätter ungdomarna i en mångsidig otrygghet som de till stor del behöver hantera på egen hand. Avsaknaden av ett kvalificerat, relationellt och långsiktigt socialt arbete med denna målgrupp leder till en fortsatt hög risk för social och ekonomisk marginalisering.

## Introduction

The transition to young adulthood is a complex process for all young people, but especially those leaving care who are at high risk of social exclusion. The adverse living conditions of young care leavers have been well documented in recent decades and constitute an established point of departure in the political discourse on care leavers, as well as within the international field of leaving care research (Driscoll, 2018; Keller et al., 2023; Mann-Feder & Goyette, 2019; Mendes & Snow, 2016; OECD, 2022; Stein & Munro, 2008). Young adulthood is a critical phase of life, during which the rights and responsibilities of citizenship are gradually acquired. However, it can also be characterised by the entrenchment of social divisions, depending on living conditions, experiences of placement in out-of-home care, changes in the labour market and future educational opportunities. Given that the interventions and services provided by child and youth care systems around the world are usually unable to compensate for the multiple and accumulated disadvantages of these childhoods, this underprivileged group of young citizens is often left with limited support from the state to cope with the upcoming trials of young adulthood. As Gypen et al. (2017, p. 74) conclude in a comprehensive research review regarding outcomes for care leavers, ‘children who leave care continue to struggle [in] all areas (education, employment, income, housing, health, substance abuse and criminal involvement) compared to their peers from the general population’. This is the case regardless of whether the welfare arrangements of the particular country are oriented towards child protection or family support.

In the Swedish context, the problems highlighted by research have focused on physical and mental health (Brännström et al., 2015; Egelund & Lausten, 2009), education (Johansson et al., 2011), and housing and self-sufficiency (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2011, 2014). A series of cohort studies have shown that young people leaving care are more likely to be affected by mental illness (Sallnäs & Vinnerljung, 2009), suicidal tendencies and premature death (Björkenstam, Björkenstam, Ljung, & Vinnerljung, 2013), teenage parenthood (Brännström et al., 2015) and self-sufficiency problems (Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011) compared to their peers. Qualitative studies have problematised the transition from care, showing that young people need support regarding housing, work, social networks and personal finance (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2009, 2011, 2014). The aggregated consequences of the Swedish out-of-home care system are that young people leave care without sufficient support or resources to assert themselves as participating citizens. On 1 January 2020, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was officially incorporated into Swedish law, seemingly confirming the international perception of Sweden as a model country with regard to children’s rights. Despite the importance ascribed to the children’s rights discourse across different domains of child and family social work, Sweden still lacks specific legislation and systematic strategies to regulate and govern transitions from out-of-home care, leaving one of the most vulnerable groups of citizens to navigate the transition to independence on their own. A placement is formally ended when a young person turns 18. In some cases, placements can be extended until graduation from upper secondary school. After that, neither the state nor municipalities offer any specific aftercare programmes intended to provide

structured support to this group of young people. From an international perspective, the Swedish leaving care system is no exception to the bleak picture for aftercare support and long-term outcomes for young care leavers.

This article takes as a starting point the evident deficiencies in the current Swedish child and youth care system, with a specific focus on transitional and aftercare procedures as experienced by young people leaving care. From the perspectives and experiences of care leavers, which are explored in this article, the processes governing the transition to independence are characterised by rigid managerialism, arbitrariness and social administration that fails to address the extensive needs regarding education, housing, health and income experienced by this group. These experiences need to be contextualised in relation to the global, ongoing processes of neoliberalisation and technocratisation of social work that have shifted Scandinavian welfare regimes away from post-war universalism and in line with the central tenets of neoliberal governance (Ferguson et al., 2018; Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). Over the past three decades, the restructuring of general welfare provision towards greater individualisation, marketisation and managerialism has gradually eroded social workers' mandate to provide human-centred, trust-based and relational social work grounded in social justice as one of the core principles of the profession (Bečević & Herz, 2023). In the context of child and youth care, the direct implication of these developments is that young people in out-of-home care are primarily regarded as an administrative problem to be managed according to the bureaucratic procedures of statutory social work, rather than as citizens in the making whose profound needs ought to be addressed from both a short- and a long-term perspective with the aim of inclusion and participation. The needs of children and young people are generally subject to a technical rewriting operation in which complex life experiences are translated into administrable and economically measurable social interventions. This creates a problematic gap between young people's de facto needs (in terms of stability and continuity, supporting social relations, finances, health and future planning) and what social services (due to their organisational rationality) are able to provide. These young people and social services thus act according to different, often incompatible, modes of practice: young people struggle to manage the multifarious challenges of young adulthood while the primary task of social services is to *administrate* these challenges and struggles through a system characterised by a heavy workload and high staff turnover, which makes relationship-based child and family social work difficult (Munro, 2011; Grefve, 2017; Tham, 2018; SOU, 2023, p. 66).

This article explores leaving care from a lived citizenship perspective, arguing that the lack of systematised support programmes for care leavers acts as a barrier to citizenship and participation. The focus of the article is further specified through the following research questions: How do young people experience the transition from care to independence, and what are the main characteristics of the support provided? The dominant focus on social administration when dealing with care leavers' complex life situations and transitions is clearly visible in the narratives that are explored in the article. The lack of responsiveness from social services, as well as the lack of meaningful long-term interventions capable of addressing the psychological, emotional, relational and educational needs of young people leaving care, places this group on the margins of citizenship, unsupported, struggling and not 'sufficiently empowered or enabled to exercise their rights' (Munro, 2019, p. 69).

In the next section, an overview of the Swedish out-of-home care system is presented, followed by details of the study and empirical material that underpin the article, and finally a theoretical framework based on the concept of lived citizenship. The citizenship framework is used in the analysis and discussion of young people's experiences of the transition to independence. Based on their narratives, the article argues for a shift from the bureaucratic mode of governing leaving care to politics of inclusion and social justice.

### **Context: out-of-home care (OHC) legislation in Sweden**

Between 25,000 and 30,000 children and young people are placed in OHC in Sweden every year. About 70 per cent are placed in foster care and 30 per cent in residential care or in supported/secure accommodation. In Sweden, there is no specific 'Children's Act' as in many other countries. Child welfare services administered on a voluntary basis are regulated by the Social Services Act (SSA; Socialtjänstlagen, SoL), a 'frame law' that regulates different areas within social services in the Swedish municipalities. Coercive measures, those administered without the consent of the parent, child or young person, are regulated by the Care of Young People Act (CYPA; Lagen med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga, LVU, SFS, 1990, p. 52). Young offenders are included under Swedish child welfare, and young people who exhibit criminal behaviour and/or severe drug abuse can be placed in special residential care units called homes for special supervision.

If a child/young person is placed in out-of-home care, whether voluntary or mandatory, the placement should formally end at the age of 18. In the case of a mandatory care order (CYPA), the placement can last until the age of 21. Even though the law stipulates an age limit of 18 (or 21), young people often stay in care until they have completed their upper secondary school education, usually when they are about 19 years old. Sweden does not have any laws that specifically regulate the process of leaving care for young people aged 18–21. The Social Services Act (Chapter 5 §1) and the Care of Young People Act (§21) state that social services *should* recognise specific needs for support and help that may be required after a placement in care has ended, but there is no specific advice on the scope of this support. The National Board of Welfare issues guidance to municipalities, further to the actual text in the law, stating that Social Services *should* support young people leaving placements in care with housing, employment and financial help (HSLF-FS 2019.25). The lack of aftercare programmes in the Swedish context can be understood in relation to the commonly held assumption that the special needs of care leavers are covered by the universal welfare system, which is accessible to all adult citizens on equal terms (Backe-Hansen et al., 2013; Storö et al., 2019).

### **Description of the study**

This article builds on qualitative interview data from a study on existing structures of support for young people leaving placements in out-of-home care. The overall aim of the research project was to explore the characteristics of the support provided by participating municipalities, as well as young people's experiences of the transition process from care to independent living. The study participants, both young people and professionals working with young people in care, were recruited from two municipalities in west Sweden. Three focus group interviews were conducted with social workers and twelve individual, in-depth interviews with young people. This article draws exclusively on the results from the individual interviews with the young people.

### **The participants**

The analysis is based on twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with young people aged 17–24. Six participants were recruited through social services and the other six through contacts with a youth organisation working with young people with experience of out-of-home care. Five interviews were conducted face to face, individually, in a private home environment of the individual who facilitated the contact with the young person. Due to geographical distance (young people are often placed in foster and residential care units outside of their home municipality) and specific requests from the interviewees themselves, seven of the interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom. It is the authors' impression that both interview methods allowed the interviewees to share their experiences and provide comprehensive narratives of their time in care as well as their experiences of the transition process.

The participants come from heterogenous backgrounds regarding the conditions they experienced growing up, migration experiences and specific family circumstances that led to their placement in care. In the recruitment process, we aimed for an equal number of males and females. However, the young people that chose to participate in the study were predominantly girls, which resulted in a sample of nine females and three males. Our main intention with the sample was to include participants who at the time of the interview had either transitioned, or were about to transition from care and who had valuable experiences of relevance for the study. We made initial contact with the participants by e-mail and telephone, providing them with information about the aim and structure of the research project, ethical considerations pertaining to informed consent, confidentiality and data management. All the participants gave their written consent to participate in the study.

### *The interviews*

A semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit experiences and rich narrative accounts of young people's time in out-of-home care and the process of leaving care (Gubrium et al., 2012). The interview guide covered a broad range of topics such as early childhood experiences, schooling, contact with social services and relationships with parents, siblings and significant others, as well as their current situation with regard to housing, work and education and their outlook for the near future. The interviews followed an experience-centred approach aimed at facilitating the collection of rich and varied data and establishing a solid empirical base for analysis and knowledge production (Andrews et al., 2012). The interview guide, which was constructed around key themes in relation to the aims of the research project, was used to ensure consistency and to provide space for participants to freely reflect on and discuss the topics most important to them. The interviews were between one and two hours long.

Interviewing young people who have spent several years in out-of-home care and are about to become independent requires ethical sensitivity. The interview situations were intended to be as favourable as possible to the participating young people. The overall aim was for the participants to feel that the interviews were taking place on their terms and that they had control and influence over the form and content. The research project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority prior to the start of the study. The project ran between January 2022 and February 2023.

### *Analysis*

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis is set within a qualitative, interpretivist and thematically oriented framework characterised by a sensitivity towards empirical complexity and an inductive effort to avoid reduction of multifaceted data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Seale, Giampietro, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2007). The transcripts were processed in the software program NVivo. Given that personal narratives carry multiple meanings and can be interpreted in different ways, the first step of the analysis consisted of reading and re-reading the interviews and generating initial codes that capture important characteristics about the data in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 82–89). The inductive, open coding of the interview material led to the collation of codes into broader themes in the next step. On a general level, the creation of themes was informed by one of the main research questions guiding the project: How do young people experience the transition from care to independence? This question led the thematisation process in NVivo. The analytic focus was on *what* the young people conveyed about their experiences of the transition process, resulting in four dominant themes, which are presented and discussed in the findings section. With respect to validity, the preliminary interpretations have been regularly presented and discussed at working seminars as well as international conferences and network meetings on leaving care research. In the final step, the analysis of data became increasingly connected to and driven by the conceptual framework of lived citizenship, connecting the narratives of leaving care to an experienced *lack* of support and inclusion. The framework

of lived citizenship was used to further deepen the understanding of the thematic patterns and refine and clarify ‘the overall story the analysis tells’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

### **Conceptual framework: leaving care from a lived citizenship perspective**

Liberal and social liberal notions of citizenship, often inspired by T.H. Marshall’s (1992) historic analysis of the gradual evolution of civil, political and social rights, conceptualise citizenship as a status bestowed on full members of a community codified through a set of rights and duties. This mainstream understanding of citizenship, primarily as a formal relation between the individual and the state, has historically meant disregarding social hierarchies, power relations and inequalities, which in practice condition citizens’ interactions and experiences in everyday life. Feminist and post-colonial scholars have convincingly shown how this abstract conception of the citizen is built around a ‘false universalism where the norm for a ‘citizen’ is a white, heterosexual, non-disabled adult male – a norm that cannot address different needs and contributions’ (Warming & Fahnøe, 2017, p. 5). Scholars have shown how the contractual character of rights has in fact always been based on the exclusion of women, racialised minorities and children from the domains of participatory citizenship (Invernizzi & Williams, 2007; Lister, 1997, 1998, 2007; Mills, 1997; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Pateman, 1989). This discrepancy between, on the one hand, being granted the legal status and formal rights of citizenship and, on the other, having *substantial* access and real-life opportunities to exert those rights, means that the institution of citizenship entails racial, ethnic, class, gender and age-based divisions and hierarchies, which result in different modes of participation and belonging for different categories of people.

Against this false universalism, there has been a growing emphasis on the need for an analytic shift from the formal towards the *lived* dimensions of citizenship (Kallio et al., 2020; Lister, 2007; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). Emerging as a key concept in the field of citizenship studies in the last two decades, lived citizenship denotes ‘a generative approach to recognize the embodied, relational and lived experiences of *being* a citizen in everyday life’ (Kallio et al., 2020, p. 713). The emphasis on citizenship as agency instead of status puts empirical focus on the multitude of ways in which citizenship is negotiated and experienced and ‘the meaning that citizenship actually has in people’s lives and the ways in which people’s social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens’ (Hall & Williamson, 1999, p. 2; in Kallio et al., 2020, p. 713). From this perspective, citizenship is inherently a political concept with inclusionary potential (Isin, 2002). It evolves ‘from below’ and puts focus on the processes of subjective meaning-making in everyday practice and across different contexts and is essentially ‘about how individuals understand and negotiate the three key elements of citizenship: rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation’ (Lister et al., 2007, p. 168).

The living conditions of care leavers have been investigated in a vast number of previous studies but seldom explored and discussed in terms of citizenship and social justice, meaning that ‘much of the academic and political discourse surrounding care leaving has been underpinned by a discussion of the needs and vulnerability of youth leaving out-of-home care rather than explicitly acknowledging their rights’ (Munro, 2019, p. 69). Given the general absence of political dimensions in the field of leaving care, a lived citizenship approach offers a way of shifting the focus on leaving care from being ‘solely a technical problem for social administration’ towards becoming ‘the political cause of championing the right of [the] young people to be included within every aspect of what it means to be a full citizen’ (Mendes et al., 2014). In this way, young people’s transitions out of care are framed not primarily as a technical problem for social administration but as a matter of voice, inclusion and social justice. A lived citizenship framework foregrounds young people as *political* beings and citizenship as a mode of *politically* embedded acting and becoming in a world that is conditioned by social work practices, programmes and policies with real-life effects on young people’s participation. Care leavers’ perspectives are also largely absent from contemporary debates about citizenship, given that the very language of citizenship tends to exclude those on the margins (children and

young people, the poor, migrants and racialised minorities, people with mental health problems). Understanding and analysing care leaving within a citizenship framework does not mean reconceptualising care leaver's vulnerability to social exclusion, instead it means shedding light on new dimensions of their experiences and acknowledging their voices, rights, participation and claims for recognition and material support. It offers a way of critically examining the role of social policy and social work practice in promoting or hindering citizenship participation for this group, calling for a profession based on the principles of social justice and human rights that works and advocates for their long-term inclusion. By putting the empirical focus on young people's experiences of transitions from care, we apply the concept of lived citizenship to examine the characteristics of transition processes and experiences of interactions with social services and analyse the role of social work practice in promoting inclusion or perpetuating exclusion for young care leavers (Kallio et al., 2020, p. 716; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017, p. 6). This micro-sociological and experience-oriented turn in the study of citizenship challenges established public-private dichotomies as well as practices governing young people's transitions towards independence.

### **Findings: leaving care and the constitution of multidimensional precarity**

The participants in this study talk about the transition process predominantly in terms of four dominant themes: (a) experiences of being administered out of the system and left without any further support, (b) a struggle to secure stable accommodation, (c) lack of information and involvement in the planning process and (d) a struggle to secure a stable financial situation. These intersecting experiences put young people in a situation of multidimensional precarity, which they are left to manage mostly on their own. Personal know-how, diligence and circumstantial opportunities, which may present themselves at a given moment, shape their first steps towards adulthood and independence. The transition from care is thus characterised by a high degree of variation and arbitrariness depending on the procedures of social services in a given municipality, the quality of relationships young people have with individual social workers and access to formal and informal networks that can provide support regarding housing, work, finances, leisure and education.

Here is an excerpt from the interview with Danny, 22, who describes the process of transitioning out of care as follows:

- Interviewer:** What was this meeting like, the last, closing meeting?  
**Danny:** It was ... just me and the social worker and my contact person who was helping me with housing issues. It was just the three of us. It was a couple of years ago, but it was like "now we are finished. You can look after yourself, and we have nothing more to offer."  
**Interviewer:** Did they ask if you needed any support with anything, what your plans were when it came to education, work, housing ... ?  
**Danny:** Absolutely nothing.  
**Interviewer:** Was there a template that you went through?  
**Danny:** Well, she ... had my ... care plan ... where it said that he should be able to take a shower and stuff like that ... basic things, and she sat and ticked the boxes, "you can do this", and when

**Table 1.** Interviewed young people.

Age at interview	Number of interviewees	Age when placed in care	Age upon leaving care	Type of placement in out-of-home care
17–18	3	5–10 <i>n</i> = 1	Still in care (supported housing included) <i>n</i> = 3	Only foster care <i>n</i> = 6
19–20-	3	11–13 <i>n</i> = 3	16–17 <i>n</i> = 2	Only residential care <i>n</i> = 2
21–22	4	14–16 <i>n</i> = 7	18–19 <i>n</i> = 6	Foster care/residential care <i>n</i> = 4
23–24	2	17–18 <i>n</i> = 1	20 <i>n</i> = 1	



every box was filled she closed the cover and said “we’re done now. You don’t need to deal with us anymore”. After that, not much happened.

After he turned 18, Danny’s placement in care was ended, leaving him on his own and without any further support. In his narrative, the experience of the transition from care is described as a single, formalised meeting situation between himself, his assigned contact person, who at the time was helping him with housing issues, and his case manager. Absent from the description of the transition process is any kind of reference to substantial dialogue, deliberation, short- and long-term planning and support. Instead, the ‘transition’ is described in strictly administrative, non-relational terms. A care plan and a checklist pertaining to his abilities to handle practical matters served as a basis for the meeting, and after ‘every box was filled’ the meeting was ended. Danny’s assessment of the situation, ‘you can look after yourself, and we have nothing more to offer’, is symptomatic of the way that young people often feel *administered* out of the care system without any further support.

Anna’s experience of the transition process resembles Danny’s:

- Interviewer:** What happened in the transition phase?  
**Anna:** I wasn’t prepared at all, it just happened overnight. I moved in with my friend who had a flat. I told my foster parents and they said they would notify social services.  
**Interviewer:** You had just turned 18?  
**Anna:** Yeah. [...] It was like, “you have found a flat so take advantage of that opportunity”. It was like ... “if you get a flat, take care of that because you won’t get anything better”.  
**Interviewer:** You moved out and didn’t get any further information about things you needed to know about, regarding finances, further studies ... work, did you get any kind of support from the foster family or social services?  
**Anna:** They helped me move, I guess that was it.  
**Interviewer:** And what about having talks, now you are 18. You will be moving from the foster family to your friend, it’s a sort of independence. Nothing like that, preparatory before moving out?  
**Anna:** Now I can say no because I don’t remember, but I don’t think so. [...] I think we had a closing meeting, but it was only ... how does it feel, does it feel okay? But it wasn’t like we prepared anything. Later on maybe ... we wrote a list of what I needed to buy. It was just that.

Neither Danny nor Anna describes the experience of leaving care in terms of a ‘process’, rather as something that happened suddenly and abruptly, which, as Anna puts it, ‘happened overnight’. Just like in Danny’s narrative, the experience of leaving care for Anna had nothing to do with being offered any kind of support or preparation for independence from social services. Instead, a ‘list’ of what she ‘needed to buy’ (signalling the emphasis on practical and material necessities) was prepared and no substantial aftercare was received.

Being administered out of the system without further support can have disastrous consequences for young struggling citizens with a history of accumulated disadvantages. Like Billy, 22, who after his placement with a foster family ended after he turned 18, had to move back in with his biological family.

- Interviewer:** When you leave [city], are social services somehow ... you sort out accommodation yourself with your family, but are social services somehow involved in any planning?  
**Billy:** Nah.  
**Interviewer:** ... nothing, you just take the trip, no one drives you from [city]?  
**Billy:** Well yeah, I got a ride from my social worker who I had since I lived here.  
**Interviewer:** ... came to pick you up ... and drove you to ...  
**Billy:** Yeah, that’s all. Then they terminated the contact.  
**Interviewer:** Did you guys talk about ... anything to do with plans, housing considering you turned 18, education or employment ... finances?  
**Billy:** Nah, nothing like that.  
**Interviewer:** It was a ride to your mother and your brother and then it sounds like social services disappear from the picture. / ... / Then you get kicked out, you’re 20 and you move in with your dad ... pretty much immediately, the same day ...  
**Billy:**

The same day. It went as it went, he drank a lot and there was a lot of mental abuse, yelling, throwing things, trying to scare me ... it was a lot like that. Then I finally ... I broke down, was hospitalised ... and then I went to emergency psychiatry because I felt that I couldn't take it anymore, I had suicidal thoughts ... I had also self-harmed. But I was only admitted because they understood it as me having a depressive attack due to drugs, so I didn't get any real help there either, it was more ... here is your room. Besides getting in touch with the social services, it was more that I expressed that I couldn't go back to my father, it hadn't worked. / ... /

**Interviewer:** How long did you live with your father?

**Billy:** It was only a few months ... four, five.

**Interviewer:** You moved in with him because you had nowhere else ...

**Billy:** Exactly.

Despite a documented history of maltreatment and abuse in Billy's childhood, without any other options available, he returned to the family context from which he was removed as a 16-year-old. His contact with social services was, as he says, 'terminated', with no further planning initiated. When he turned 20, his brother kicked him out of the flat because of 'continuous fighting'. Facing homelessness, Billy moved in with his violent father, whom he blames for turning to drugs as a way of 'coping' with the physical and mental abuse he experienced during childhood. This move proved to be disastrous for Billy, who described the experience of living with his father as a form of 'mental abuse', which eventually led him to a breakdown and hospitalisation.

In addition to abrupt, bureaucratic termination of care and being left to find housing alone, another aspect of the precarity young care leavers face relates to a lack of information and involvement in the planning process, which puts them in a position of uncertainty, pressure and worry in relation to their future. The following is an extract from an interview with Jonna, 18:

**Interviewer:** You're now 18 and you are in the year two, will you stay in foster care until you have finished year three?

**Jonna:** I have to check with my social worker because I was thinking about it last week. When exactly should I have moved out, when exactly should I have packed my things? Is it the same day, the day I graduate from upper secondary? Is it after the summer holidays, is it before the summer holidays? It's very unclear, I don't know ... they give information two weeks before. I got a ... I'm going to get a checklist now, a year before I'm going to move and check if I know how to pay bills, if I know how to ... wash clothes, and I think that sucks because why don't you get a checklist when you move in? Why didn't I get it straight away, so I get to come into the new context with that checklist and check things off from the day I move in, not two days before I am moving out. Year three in upper secondary is when you should be thinking about studies. I intend to do dishes and wash clothes at the same time as writing a forty-thousand-word essay. It doesn't work, what were they thinking?

Jonna talks about the pressure she experiences due to the lack of planning and communication from social services. She must manage demanding schoolwork as part of her plans to enter further education at the same time as managing uncertainties regarding after-care housing and financial support. Like Danny and Anna in the previous excerpts, she makes reference to a 'checklist', which she agonises over during a stressful period in her life. Financial uncertainty in particular is a source of constant stress that characterises the transition phase.

**Interviewer:** How is the situation with your finances?

**Jonna:** I think that social services are very bad at preparing you for moving out and living on your own and taking care of finances. Terrible. No. You don't get any support, if you don't get it from the family home, there's nothing from social services. / ... / When I think about how social services prepares us for moving, I think it's poorly planned. To me it just feels stupid. I have to work to prepare and get a driver's licence and to have money for rent when I move and have to work constantly, it's not possible otherwise while others ... if I look at my classmates, they don't work because they have the support ... they have the opportunity to focus fully on their studies, while I have to divide myself in two different directions ... then I always become ... I can't focus completely on my studies and then I perform worse than I could have and I think it's so horrible.

**Interviewer:** Was that why you took this job as a waitress because you felt I had to save money, I have to sort it out by myself to be able to plan for a good move later?

**Jonna:** That was why.

For Jonna and the other participants in this study, the lack of long-term financial security is a source of constant pressure and worry. To save money and ease the transition she manages a job as a waitress while at the same time struggling to achieve good marks in a demanding school environment. 'You don't get any support', she says, 'if you don't get it from the family home, there's nothing from social services'. She feels she must 'work constantly' to save money for rent and a driver's licence, describing the phase ahead of leaving care as a struggle for basic financial security.

Another example of the financial precarity during the transition process is shared by Iris, 19, who managed her transition without any substantial support from social services. For two years, during upper secondary school, she was placed in student housing. Social services paid her rent but otherwise left her to manage on her own, not providing any further contact, support or preparatory planning. Shortly after she turned 18, she received a notice saying that her placement was to be terminated, so she had to move and start looking for a job.

**Iris:** In the autumn I get an email from social services saying that now I've turned 18, they can't send money anymore, so then I have to apply for subsistence allowance myself and that is a process in itself because I'm not looking for work. I'm in upper secondary school and that makes it very complicated and I had to do it all alone. I didn't get any help from social services to apply for it.

**Interviewer:** No one supported and helped you with that?

**Iris:** Nah, they stopped sending money and that whole process took a long time. For two months I had to pay the rent myself ...

**Interviewer:** ... how did they think about that, do you think? Did they ever explain?

**Iris:** No idea, luckily I had money saved up so I could get by for two months, but it was tough. Then I finally got in touch with the financial department at social services. They thought it was very strange that I had to go without any income for two months.

**Interviewer:** So you got help there, did you get any retroactive compensation so you could ...

**Iris:** Nah, nothing.

**Interviewer:** There went your savings.

**Iris:** Yes.

During her transition from care, Iris received no support regarding housing, finances, employment or education. As she says later in the interview,

when they decided they were going to stop sending me money when I turned 18, the only preparation I got was the social worker writing to me saying you should start looking for a job ... you need to get a job. That was the preparation I got.

Iris, like most of the young people interviewed in this study, had to rely on her own motivation, persistence and knowledge to secure housing and employment upon leaving care.

## Discussion

Analysing experiences of leaving care from a lived citizenship perspective sheds light on the considerable *gap* between citizenship as status and citizenship as a practice with regard to the participants in this study (Lister, 1997). To *be* a citizen puts emphasis on the juridical and sociological dimensions of belonging and the formal citizenship rights necessary for social and political participation. To *act* as a citizen, on the other hand, means having substantial resources and opportunities to realise the potential and rights implied by the status. Individuals who do not have those resources and opportunities do not cease to be citizens, as Lister (1997, p. 10) points out. While their formal status may be that of citizens, their lived experiences and practices unfold *on the edge* of citizenship.

The interviews in this study suggest that social services do not provide sufficient preparation and support for young people's transition from care – they are most often left to manage the complex and protracted struggles of young adulthood on their own. What their experiences of transitioning

from care reveal does not constitute support or care – if ‘care’ is defined as the provision of what is necessary for the welfare, protection and progress of these young people towards substantial citizenship. Instead, they encounter rigid bureaucracy and social work practice which leaves them without qualified support. None of the interviewees talked about being enrolled in specific programmes or interventions provided to help them transition towards independent and secure living, therapeutic interventions directed at their psychological well-being, mentoring for higher education or mentoring with regard to the volatile job market to help them avoid financial precarity. What they did reference was the strong focus on bureaucracy and administration. The consequence of the administrative paradigm is that young people experience the help they are provided as being of limited value. An overt focus on administration means that not enough substantial and *relational* help is provided to prepare them for participation in the different arenas of society. Instead of promoting citizenship and empowering young people to take confident first steps towards adulthood, the process alienates them and fills them with uncertainty. The transition processes are described as *not* being built around the active involvement of young people and the inclusion of their perspectives and ambitions. Instead, young people generally feel as though they are abruptly administered out of the care system and left without support, which results in them struggling in the domains of housing and personal finance.

Understanding the system of leaving care from a lived citizenship perspective ‘entails paying attention to the ways in which social work and social policy may promote either inclusion or exclusion, not only on a factual level, but also in terms of how they are experienced’ (Warming & Fahnøe, 2017, p. 6). Lived citizenship thus puts focus on the inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics of social work practice and the extent to which it enhances or diminishes the scope of citizenship for people in precarious life situations (Warming & Fahnøe, 2017, p. 249). As shown in this article, social work in the domain of leaving care places young people in a position of multidimensional precarity. The findings show that social work practices underpinned by current social policy fail to provide young people with the conditions and support needed to enhance and promote qualified citizenship. In other words, by not providing adequate programmes, resources and long-term strategies, social work for care leavers is not designed to address the discrepancy between the formal status and substantial practice of citizenship. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and with scarce economic resources are generally one of the groups least able to exercise their rights as they gradually transition to adulthood (Bečević & Dahlstedt, 2022). Left without adequate support, citizenship for young care leavers is often a partial, unfulfilled status characterised by clear limitations. The main argument of this article is that the lack of legally recognised and systematised support programmes for care leavers in Sweden acts as a barrier to qualified citizenship for this group.

Understanding care leaving through the lens of lived citizenship also enables a conceptualisation of care leaving in terms of radical democracy and inclusion. Citizenship is a concept without definite closure, always in flux and at the centre of struggles over rights, participation and belonging (Isin, 2002). As such, the concept of citizenship

offers social work a framework which embraces anti-poverty work, principles of partnership and an anti-discriminatory or oppressive practice, and an inclusionary stance. As a process, it informs relations between social workers and users; as an outcome it represents a strengthening of rights to which social workers can contribute. Working together with those living on the margins, social workers can thus help to enhance the inclusionary side of citizenship as both a status and a practice. (Lister, 1997, p. 17)

Understanding care leavers as citizens of society means lifting this category of young people out of the domain of particular welfare arrangements and addressing their extensive needs and claims in more general terms. In this respect, the state has a responsibility towards its young citizens to ensure and provide the necessary conditions for a prosperous future by investing in them before they reach adulthood. Social work informed by a citizenship framework is better equipped to work towards the

continuous recognition of young care leavers, foregrounding the inclusionary potential of its own practice.

## Concluding remarks

The formal rights of children and young people have been strengthened over the last couple of decades. In comparison to their peers from the general population, young care leavers still continue to experience a tangible deficit when it comes to substantial opportunities to realise their potential as citizens. Material conditions and supportive relationships during the transition process shape early adulthood and set the framework for future aspirations. A system of care leaving that predominantly administrates the multidimensional precarity faced by care leavers instead of acknowledging them as struggling young citizens with accumulated disadvantages, undermines relational and human-centred social work practice oriented towards social justice and inclusion. The fact that many young people who have been in care develop resilience and competence but struggle to establish themselves in the educational and working domains of emerging adulthood suggests that the state, municipalities and professionals are not doing enough in their work with this group. A lived citizenship framework holds unexplored potential for social work to frame the problem of leaving care in political terms and advocate for the rights of care leavers to be included within every aspect of citizenship.

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