Nordisk Välfärdsforskning
Nordic Welfare Research

GUEST EDITORIAL

Scandinavian University Press

Volume 10, no. 3-2025, pp. 1–5
ISSN online: 2464-4161
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18261/nwr.10.3.1

Leaving Care in the Nordic Countries – Young People's Experiences During Transitions to Adulthood

Anne-Kirstine Mølholt
Senior Researcher, Department of Education, Children and Youth, VIVE The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Denmark
akim@vive.dk
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5978-7325

Stian H. Thoresen
Research Professor, Department of Diversity and Inclusion, NTNU Social Research, Norway
stian.thoresen@samforsk.no
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8603-7426

Zulmir Bečević
Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
zulmir.becevic@socwork.gu.se
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1379-2636

States have a responsibility to care for children when their parents are unable, unwilling, or unsuited to do so. Removing a child from his or her family is often viewed as the "last option", and in the Nordic countries, states have a range of support measures they may try to implement prior to removing the child and placing him or her in out-of-home care. In the Nordic countries, foster care is the most common out-of-home care arrangement, but group homes and other residential care arrangements are also used. The transition from out-of-home care, when the young person either "ages out of care" or is reunited with his or her family, represents a critical period in the lives of care-experienced young people. In recognition of the potential vulnerability during this transitional phase, governments are increasingly providing aftercare in the transition from out-of-home care to independence as a support measure for young people. This special issue explores this transition in the context of Nordic welfare states, bringing together recent empirical studies and policy analyses that provide novel insights into barriers, facilitators, outcomes, and the role of welfare services during this pivotal life phase.

There is growing international emphasis on leaving care research, evident through the substantial growth in international research in this area. This special issue was initiated

Copyright © 2025 Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

by members of the Nordic Research Network on Care Leavers' Transition to Adulthood (NRT). The NRT network is part of the International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care (INTRAC), which is a community of researchers that work together to promote national and international research on the transition from care to adulthood.

Historically, the leaving-care research field has focused on identifying deficits and vulnerabilities among care-experienced youth. Indeed, international and Nordic studies have highlighted a range of challenges that disproportionately affect this group: low educational attainment, poor physical and mental health, unemployment, social isolation, and homelessness (Bengtsson et al., 2022; Olsen & de Montgomery, 2018; Paulsen et al., 2023; Storø et al., 2019). However, recent studies increasingly call for a more nuanced approach that also recognises the strengths and resilience of these young people (Bakketeig et al., 2020; Crous et al., 2021; Mølholt et al., 2024; Stein, 2019). Care-experienced people are heterogeneous, and outcomes vary greatly depending on individual, relational, institutional, welfare, and policy-related factors and contexts.

This dual recognition of vulnerability and resilience aligns with a growing emphasis on the rights of children and young people in welfare policy. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has played an important role in shaping national laws and practices to prioritise children's rights to participation, protection, and provision. The Nordic countries are characterised by a social democratic welfare model and universal service provision where reforms increasingly have centred on the importance of listening to young people and incorporating their voices into decision-making processes. However, recent changes also centre on individualisation, decentralisation, and marketisation of services (Kvist & Greve, 2011; Storø, 2021).

Changes in legal frameworks reflect the contextual and sometimes contradictory nature of aftercare policies. In Norway, for example, the upper age limit for receiving aftercare was extended from 23 to 25 in 2021, while Finland reduced the age limit from 25 to 23 in 2024. These changes demonstrate the influence of broader welfare policy dynamics, including fiscal pressures and political priorities. They also reveal that the age at which society defines adulthood – and by extension, independence – remains contested and varies. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, rights-based approaches must be supported by meaningful implementation strategies and adequate resources if they are to have a tangible impact.

Framing the Transition: A Life Course and Contextual Perspective

A central thread that runs through the contributions in this special issue is the importance of adopting a *life course perspective* (Dokkedal et al., 2025; Freysteinsdóttir et al., 2025). Leaving care is not a single event but a gradual, relational, and often fragmented process that unfolds over time. A life course approach highlights how early care experiences, the nature of support received during placements, and the structure of aftercare services jointly shape young people's opportunities and well-being in adulthood. This framework also invites attention to the longitudinal impacts of care, making it clear that the consequences of inadequate support may only manifest years after a formal transition has taken place.

One of the pressing and tangible risks when leaving care in a life course perspective is the danger of becoming homeless. Stable housing is not only a basic need but also a critical foundation for participation in education, employment, and social life. Dokkedal et al. (2025) provide a timely and much-needed literature review of the relationship between

care leaving and homelessness across the Nordic countries. Their findings reveal a growing awareness of the issue, but also a fragmentation of attention and policy between the child welfare and homelessness sectors. The authors argue for a more integrated approach that connects these policy domains and treats housing insecurity as a structural and relational issue rather than an individual failure.

Fragmentation and silos in welfare services and support when it comes to young people leaving care are not limited to housing. As Mordal et al. (2025) illustrate through interviews with care-experienced youth in Norway, formal and informal support systems often function in silos, leaving young people to navigate complex bureaucracies and uncertain relationships on their own. Many of the young people reported that they themselves had to take the initiative to maintain contact with social workers, foster carers, or other support persons – placing an additional emotional and cognitive burden on young people at a vulnerable time in their lives. These findings underscore the relational and emotional dimensions of the transition and call for a re-evaluation of how support is structured, sustained, and personalised.

Moreover, the transition from care cannot be fully understood in isolation from broader contextual factors. Hornset and Halvorsen (2025) make a compelling case for considering *spatial inequality* as a significant determinant of care-experienced' outcomes. Their analysis of Norwegian register data reveals that access to aftercare services varies within national boundaries, depending on the socioeconomic characteristics of local municipalities. Their findings emphasise that inequality is not merely a matter of individual background but is also structurally embedded in geography and local governance. This spatial lens raises critical questions about fairness, accessibility, and consistency in service provision.

Transitioning Out of Care as a Relational and Collective Process

A key theme across the contributions to this special issue is the importance of *experiences* – both of those receiving care and those providing it. These experiences extend beyond the formal care period and shape life outcomes well into adulthood. While the voices of the care-experienced are essential, the experiences of those who support them – such as practitioners and foster carers – also provide crucial and necessary insights into the transition out of care in all its complexities. Hedman and Korkiamäki (2025) investigate the perspectives of Finnish practitioners who work in aftercare. Their analysis identifies three interrelated orientations in practice: *relationality*, *advocacy*, and *equality*. These practitioners often find themselves caught between the desire to form meaningful relationships with young people and the limitations imposed by administrative systems. Many feel the need to advocate for the rights and needs of young people leaving care within bureaucratic structures that are not always responsive or flexible, thus fighting for a right to equality.

Oterholm and Höjer (2025) centre the voices of foster carers in their study on the aftercare period. Their findings point to the importance of supporting foster carers as they continue to provide emotional and practical support to young people after the formal placements end. When carers are adequately supported by child welfare services, they are better equipped to help young people understand their own needs and navigate aftercare options. The article makes a strong case for more collaborative and informed approaches that include carers as key actors in aftercare planning.

A consistent finding across the studies in this special issue is that transitions from care are shaped by more than just individual agency. While it is important to recognise the capacity and aspirations of care-experienced young people, an overemphasis on personal responsibility risks obscuring the structural constraints and systemic shortcomings they face. The transitions from care must be understood as both a personal and collective process, shaped by relationships, institutional arrangements, geographical contexts, and social expectations viewed in a life course perspective.

As the Nordic countries face growing demands for workforce stability (Olsen, 2023), the need to retain skilled professionals and build sustainable support structures becomes more urgent. Without adequate support for professionals and carers, even the best-intentioned policies may fail to deliver meaningful outcomes for young people leaving care.

Conclusion: Listening to Experiences, Challenging Systems

The contributions to this special issue reflect the richness and complexity of transitioning from out-of-home care in the Nordic context. Drawing on diverse methodologies and perspectives – quantitative and qualitative, youth-led and practitioner-informed – they collectively provide a nuanced picture of what it means to leave care in a welfare society. By highlighting not only individual trajectories but also institutional logics and contextual specificities, this special issue contributes to a deeper understanding of both the potential and the pitfalls of current systems.

We, as guest editors of this special issue, hope that these studies will inform policy and practice while also sparking further scholarly engagement with the transition from out-of-home care. Most importantly, we hope they contribute to a continued commitment to listening to the voices of young people, acknowledging the perspectives of those who support them, and critically reflecting on the systems designed to accompany them into adulthood.

References

Bakketeig, E., Boddy, J., Gundersen, T., Østergaard, J., & Hanrahan, F. (2020). Deconstructing doing well: What can we learn from care experienced young people in England, Denmark and Norway? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *118*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105333

Bengtsson, T.T., Olsen, R.F., & Lausten, M. (2022). The role of mental health problems in out-of-home care youths' educational pathways: Quantitative and qualitative analysis of Danish longitudinal data. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *131*, 105782. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105782

Crous, G., Montserrat, C., Gallart-Mir, J., & Matás, M. (2021). 'In the end you're no longer the kid from the children's home, you 're just yourself': Resilience in care leavers over 25. *European Journal of Social Work*, *24*(5), 896–909. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.1918063

Dokkedal, A.A., Niemi, V., Freysteinsdóttir, F.J., Mølholt, A.-K., Bengtsson, M., Paulsen, V., & Sigurdardóttir, E. (2025). The intersection of leaving care and homelessness – A literature overview in a Nordic welfare state context. *Nordisk välfärdsforskning | Nordic Welfare Research*, *10*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.18261/nwr.10.3.2

Freysteinsdóttir, F.J., Sævarsdóttir, H., & Laxdal, B.R. (2025). *The lived experience of former foster care children in Iceland. Nordisk välfärdsforskning | Nordic Welfare Research*, *10*(3), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.18261/nwr.10.3.4

Hedman, J., & Korkiamäki, R. (2025). Aftercare practitioners facilitating the recognition of care-experienced youth in Finland. *Nordisk välfärdsforskning | Nordic Welfare Research*, *10*(3), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.18261/nwr.10.3.6

Hornset, N., & Halvorsen, T. (2025). Distribution of Aftercare Services for Young People in Norway: Social and Geographical Perspectives. *Nordisk välfärdsforskning | Nordic Welfare Research*, *10*(3), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.18261/nwr.10.3.3

Kvist, J., & Greve, B. (2011). Has the Nordic welfare model been transformed? *Social Policy & Administration*, *45*(2), 146–160. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2010.00761.x

Mordal, S., Thoresen, S.H., Ringdal, R., & Paulsen, V. (2025). Experiences of subjective wellbeing among young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Norway. *Nordisk välfärdsforskning | Nordic Welfare Research*, *10*(3), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.18261/nwr.10.3.5

Mølholt, A.-K., Bengtsson, T.T., & Frederiksen, M. (2024). Navigating educational success: Modes of expectation among care-experienced young people. *British Educational Research Journal*, *50*(2), 513–528. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3908

Olsen, T. (2023). Fornyet oppmerksomhet om utvikling i velferdstjenestene. *Nordisk Välfärdsforskning | Nordic Welfare Research*, *8*(1), 4–6. https://doi.org/10.18261/nwr.8.1.1

Olsen, R.F., & de Montgomery, C.J. (2018). Revisiting out-of-home placed children's poor educational outcomes—Is school change part of the explanation? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *88*, 103–113. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.03.005

Oterholm, I., & Höjer, I. (2025). Foster carers and aftercare – collaboration and negotiation with Child Welfare Services. *Nordisk välfärdsforskning | Nordic Welfare Research*, *10*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.18261/nwr.10.3.7

Paulsen, V., Thoresen, S.H., & Wendelborg, C. (2023). Outcomes in adulthood among former child welfare services recipients: Findings from a Norwegian registry study covering two decades. *European Journal of Social Work*, *26*(3), 411–427. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.2016646

Stein, M. (2019). Supporting young people from care to adulthood: International practice. *Child & Family Social Work*, *24*(3), 400–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12473

Storø, J. (2021). Leaving care in Norway in a historic and current perspective: As a function of the Nordic welfare model. *Child & Family Social Work*, *26*(2), 240–247. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12805

Storø, J., Sjöblom, Y., & Höjer, I. (2019). A comparison of state support for young people leaving care in Norway and Sweden: Differences within comparable welfare systems. *Child & Family Social Work*, *24*(3), 393–399. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12471