

SOCIAL INCLUSION AND LIFE SATISFACTION OF CARE LEAVERS

INCLUSIÓN SOCIAL Y SATISFACCIÓN VITAL DE LOS JÓVENES EXTUTELADOS INCLUSÃO SOCIAL E SATISFAÇÃO COM A VIDA DOS JOVENS EX-ACOLHIDOS

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Received date: 02.I.2019

Reviewed date: 09.I.2019

Accepted date: 02.X.2019

KEY WORDS: residential care care leavers transition into adulthood social inclusion life satisfaction	ABSTRACT: The need to accord attention to care leavers has gained recognition in legislative terms, given that research has proven that this group faces a high risk of social exclusion. The aim of this article is to deepen knowledge of social inclusion and life satisfaction of youngsters who abandoned residential care resources and reached the age of majority. For that purpose, phone interviews were conducted to 117 youngsters who had formerly been provided with residential care and were between 18 and 26 years old at the time of the survey. The outcome showed that the majority returns to their families, which are their main source of support. On the other side, it has been proved that this group of people present low qualifications, employability and incomes. Moreover, their life satisfaction is also very low. The results are discussed with regards to previous research and legislative initiatives which are implemented in order to cater for this group.
PALABRAS CLAVE: acogimiento residencial extutelados transición a la vida adulta inclusión social satisfacción vital	RESUMEN: La necesidad de prestar atención a los jóvenes extutelados ha recibido reconocimiento a nivel legislativo, debido a que la investigación ha demostrado que se trata de un colectivo con un alto riesgo de exclusión social. El objetivo de este trabajo es profundizar en el conocimiento de la inclusión social y de la satisfacción vital de los jóvenes que han abandonado los recursos de acogimiento residencial, y que han alcanzado la mayoría de edad. Para ello se realizó una entrevista telefónica a 117 jóvenes que habían estado en acogimiento residencial y que en el momento de realizar el estudio tenían entre 18 y 26 años. Los resultados indican que la mayoría vuelve con la familia de la que fue separado, siendo ésta su principal fuente de

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FUNDING

This paper has been conducted thanks to a R&D contract funded by Dirección General de Protección a la Infancia y la Familia of the Canary Islands Government, and co-funded by European Social Fund (85%).

	<p>apoyo. Por otro lado, se comprueba que se trata de un colectivo con una baja cualificación, con una pobre inserción laboral y suelen tener ingresos muy bajos. Además, tienen un bajo nivel de satisfacción vital. Estos resultados se discuten en relación a la investigación previa, y a las iniciativas legislativas que se implementan para atender a este colectivo.</p>
<p>PALAVRAS-CHAVE: acolhimento residencial exprotegidos passagem para a vida adulta inclusão social satisfação com a vida</p>	<p>RESUMO: A necessidade de prestar atenção aos jovens ex-acolhidos recebeu reconhecimento no nível legislativo, dado que a evidência empírica veio mostrar que se trata de um grupo com alto risco de exclusão social. O objetivo deste trabalho é aprofundar o conhecimento sobre inclusão social e satisfação com a vida de jovens que abandonaram os recursos de acolhimento residenciais e atingiram a maioridade. Para tal, foram conduzidas entrevistas telefônicas com 117 jovens em atendimento residencial e que na época do estudo tinham entre 18 e 26 anos de idade. Os resultados indicam que a maioria deles retorna com a família da qual foram separados, sendo esta a principal fonte de apoio. Por outro lado, verifica-se que é um grupo com baixa qualificação, com baixa inserção laboral e, geralmente, com rendimentos muito baixos. Além disso, eles têm um baixo nível de satisfação com a vida. Esses resultados são discutidos em relação com investigações anteriores assim como com as iniciativas legislativas que se implementaram no que diz respeito ao atendimento deste coletivo.</p>

1. Introduction

In Spain, according to official statistics referring to 2017 (Childhood Observatory, 2018), 17527 children and adolescents were living in residential care facilities given that they had been declared in great difficulty and lacked of an alternative family (extended family or family foster care), even noting a slight increase of the figure in recent years. Residential care (RC from now on) in Spain has historically held a significant role regarding the child protection system. Del Valle and Bravo (2013) examined the importance of RC in different countries when assisting children who had been separated from their primary families and observed that Spain presented the highest percentage of young people in RC, 43,9%, when United Kingdom, Ireland or Australia ranged between 5 and 11%, given that family placement is more common in these countries. Analyzing the profile of cases in RC, we note that approximately 70% of individuals are adolescents and half of them over 15 years old (Childhood Observatory, 2017). It is also important to highlight that the people entering RC come generally from a complex social and family situation, displaying a higher predominance of emotional and behavior problems compared to adolescents who are cared for in foster families, and consequently they require more specialized attention (Dregan & Gulliford, 2012; Leloux-Opmeyer, Kuiper, Swaab & Scholte, 2016; Portwood et al., 2018). A recent study focused on Spanish population, González-García et al. (2017) used a screening test (CBCL) with a sample of 1216 individuals between 6 and 18 years old living in residential care centers and found that 61% were in clinical range and therefore were susceptible of receiving some kind of therapeutic care. These data are similar to others obtained in researches carried out in other countries (Jozefiak et al., 2016). Moreover, this group presents academic problems such

as school failure, lag, dropout, isolation and stigmatization (Jariot, Sala & Arnau, 2015; Montserrat, Casas & Malo, 2013; Martín, Muñoz de Bustillo, Rodríguez & Pérez, 2008). If we add to this the fact that a high percentage of young people in RC is forced to leave child protection system when they reach the age of majority, it is not surprising that the transition of former foster adolescents into adulthood is one the growing interests and concerns among professionals and researchers (Bello, Santana & Feliciano, 2018; Dixon, 2016; Dumart, Donati & Crosto, 2011; Goig & Martínez, 2019; Jariot et al., 2015; López, Santos, Bravo & Del Valle, 2013; Sulimani-Aidan, 2014).

Care leavers are understood as those who lived under the tutelage of public administration during a specific life period that has already ended because they have returned to their families or have reached the age of majority. This group of people must accomplish the transition into adulthood more rapidly than the rest of population, burdened by problems that make the process even more difficult. On the one hand, the cases of individuals with the most serious emotional and behavior problems, which already hinder their social and labor inclusion, are led to the absence of attention when they left the child protection system, worsening the situation (Butterworth et al., 2017). On the other hand, their low academic qualification results in difficulties having access to the labor market (Arnau & Gilligan, 2015; Dixon, 2016; Dumart et al., 2011; Jariot et al., 2015; Montserrat et al., 2013). As if the above were not enough, these adolescents receive deficient social support, both qualitatively and quantitatively (Cuenca, Campos & Goig, 2018; López et al., 2013; Martín & Dávila, 2008; Melkman, 2017).

Even when there is no reliable data on the specific number of adolescents leaving RC after reaching the age of majority, given that national statistics classify more than half of the leaves

under the term “other causes”, which can include a wide variety of cases, the fact that almost the half of the cases are over 15 years old (Childhood Observatory, 2017) gives us reason to believe that the number of adolescents leaving RC after reaching the age of majority is truly considerable.

For all these reasons, there is broad agreement in recognizing that former foster young people leaving RC after reaching the age of majority need the interventions focused on them to be continued after they have turned 18. This need has been stipulated in EQUAR, the quality standards for residential care published by the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality (Del Valle, Bravo, Martínez & Santos, 2012). At the level of legislation, although diverse initiatives were implemented in some regions (Comasòlivas, Sala & Marzo, 2018; Melendro, 2011), it is not until the adoption of Act 26/2015 of 28th July, on Modifications of Childhood and Adolescence Protection System, when autonomic public administrations are requested to perform programs of transition into adulthood on every adolescent over 16 without prospects of family reunification, as well as to attend the individuals who leave the childhood protection system when they reach the age of majority without a family support that can enable their transition into adulthood with minimal guarantees of success. Furthermore, the Act also defines the contents of the programs to develop on this group, which must include aspects as educational monitoring, housing, social and labor inclusion, psychological support and financial aids. Understanding the actual situation of the group of care leavers becomes a previous step that can ease the design of initiatives for public administration to implement. In this respect, our attention is drawn to the fact that since the research by Del Valle, Bravo, Álvarez & Fernanz (2008) there have not been studies analyzing, with larger samples, the situation of the former foster young people. Two aspects of the results obtained in this study are particularly relevant for our goals. First, it was found that the higher the age of the individuals, the easier their social inclusion was, which evidences the greater difficulty that this group of population finds in the transition into adulthood

at such a young age. A second remarkable result is that the variables negatively related to social adjustment in the monitoring refer to adjustment problems during the care placement. This way, variables as behavior problems, escapes, violent conduct and drug consumption foretell scant social adjustment after leaving foster care (Del Valle et al., 2008). If we assess the situation recently found in the population hosted in RC by González-García et al. (2017), which noted a high prevalence of this kind of problems since over half of the study population were in clinical range in the scale of external problems, we hypothesized that the difficulties to achieve social inclusion nowadays have not decreased.

2. Motivation and objectives

Up until now, the aim of this article is to deepen on the actual situation of youngsters who abandoned residential care resources and reached the age of majority, a decade after the research by Del Valle et al. (2008). Specifically, we set two objectives. First, understanding the current social and economic situation of care leavers regarding cohabitation situation, sources of social support, academic qualifications and economic and employment status. Secondly, analyzing their current levels of life satisfaction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The sample consists of 117 care leavers: 62 girls (53%) and 55 boys (47%). During their care placement, they were on average in 2.4 centers (DT= 1.2). Regarding age, the average is 19.5 (DT= 1.4) years old at the time of the survey (February 2017). Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample according to the current age of the individuals, the entry age into the childhood protection system and the exit age. As shown, almost 80% of respondents ranges between 18-20 years old, and over 85% left the protection system in an age of range between 16 and 18.

Table 1: Distribution of the sample according current age, entry age in the protection system and exit age

Current Age	N	%
18 - 20	93	79.5
21 - 23	22	18.8
24 - 26	2	1.8
Entry age		
0-6	8	6.8
7-10	10	8.5
11-14	52	44.4
15-18	47	40.2
Exit age		
< 12	3	2.6
13-15	15	12.8
16-18	99	84.6

3.2. Instrument

In the framework of this study, we conduct a semi-structured interview based on the dimensions commonly assessed in outstanding international studies on this subject, such as the research developed in Chapin Hall Center at the University of Chicago (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Raap, 2010) and adapting them to our targets. Particularly, the dimensions assessed in the interview were:

1. Demographic characteristics: data on gender, age or place of residence.
2. Vulnerability record: this dimension gathers information on the entry age into the system, exit, length of the stay and numbers of centers where they were inscribed.
3. Current network of social support: we included a question referred to the functional dimension of assistance, in order to get to know who they turn to when they need help. Particularly, the question asked whether they had somebody to turn to if they were to find themselves in trouble, and if the answer was yes, they were subsequently asked who such people were.
4. Academic status: questions on the academic status were included, asking them if they were undertaking some type of study at the

time of the survey, and which was the academic level achieved.

5. Employment situation: information on their current work situation was gathered.
6. Economic situation: we included data on monthly income, the amount and the autonomy and financial independence of the adolescents.
7. Life satisfaction: apart from the previous dimensions, an extra question on life satisfaction was included, which was implemented using the single item of Overall Life Satisfaction (OLS) by Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976), which aims to measure the extent to which these adolescents were satisfied with their lives at large. This item is still frequently used today in order to study wellbeing of youth, in both the general population and RC (Casas et al., 2013; Llosada-Gistau, Montserrat & Casas, 2015), and it was chosen in this research given that the interviews were performed via telephone.

3.3. Procedure

The Autonomous Administration provided contact information of former foster young people who had left the protection system and were between 18 and 26 years old at the time of the survey. Foreign unaccompanied minors were not considered for having remarkably different characteristics and personal and family circumstances from the rest of foster adolescents. The population reached 1357 individuals, avoiding those cases that displayed family placement as their only source of assistance and those which lacked a phone number. Adolescents were contacted via their educators or, in their absence, via the contact person listed in the form (parents). The interview was finally performed on 117 adolescents. The rest of interviews were unable to be performed due to many reasons, such as rings with no answer, wrong numbers, or cases of adolescents who presented disabilities, legal detention, had gone abroad or simply refused to participate. Before conducting every interview, the purpose of the call and the target of the survey were explicitly stated, requesting voluntary participation and ensuring the confidentiality of personal data provided. The interviews were conducted via telephone while the interviewer brought the responses together. The average length of the interviews were 15-20 minutes.

3.4. Data analysis

With the aim of understanding social inclusion of care leavers we used descriptive statistical analyses; to get to know the variables involved in life satisfaction we used Student t-test and one-way analysis of variance; post-hoc analyses were made using DMS.

4. Results

The first objective proposed in this paper was the comprehension of the social and economic situation of care leavers. Table 2 shows the outcome obtained. We can check that almost half of the individuals in the sample returned to their families, while over 30% lives alone or with a partner and 15% shares an apartment. The cases living with extended families or others do not reach 9%.

Regarding social support, almost 14% claim to have no one to turn to. The most common source of social support is the birth family (over 60%); extended families and others (friends, teachers, etc.) are the source of social support for slightly more of 20% of the sample. Only 5% state to turn to their former caregivers back in the system.

When asked about their academic situation, it was found that approximately one in five participants in the survey studying, but 64.1% had not yet completed compulsory secondary education at the time of the survey.

In relation to employment situation, one in four reported to be working, but only one in five declared to be economically independent. The answer on incomes showed that almost half of care leavers has no income or the amount is lower than EUR 400 per month. Less than 8% earns more than EUR 1000 per month.

Table 2: Current situation of care leavers

Who do they live with today	%
Nuclear family	47
Extended family	5.1
Other family	3.4
Alone	12.8
With a couple	16.2
Sharing an apartment	15.4
Social support: functional dimension of assistance	
Has somebody to turn to when they find themselves in trouble	86.3
Turns to nuclear family	60.7
Turns to extended family	23.9
Turns to educators	5.1
Turns to others (friends, teachers, etc.)	23.9
Academic situation	
Currently studying	22.2
Completed compulsory secondary education	35.9
Economic situation	
Claims to be economically independent	22.2
Currently working	25.6
Monthly income of those who work	
< 400	46.3
400-800	36.6
800-1000	9.8
>1000	7.3
Note: in the responses related to sources of social support, percentages can add up to more than 100, since they can point out more than one person.	

The second target of the raised objectives in this study was the analysis of the levels of life satisfaction that care leavers in the survey have today. The outcome indicate an average score of 6,6 (DT = 2,03) in a scale of response from 0 to 10- when examining the relation between life satisfaction and age (table 3), it was revealed that no significant differences were found in the scores of this variable regarding their current age [$F = 0,814$

(13), $p > .05$]; however, contrasts can be found regarding the entry age [$F = 3.1$ (13), $p < .05$] and the age of exit [$F = 3.2$ (13), $p < .05$]. Post hoc contrasts conducted with DMS showed that scores in life satisfaction of the group of care leavers who entered the system between 0 and 6 years old are substantially lower than the people in the group who joined RC between 11 and 14 years old. Regarding the exit age, contrasts a posteriori indicated that the average of the group that left the protection system after turning 16 is significantly lower than the average from the group of adolescents who left between 13 and 15 years old.

Table 3: Differences in the scores of life satisfaction according to variables current age, entry age and exit age

	Media	DT	F	p	Contrasts Post hoc
Current age					
18 - 20 years old	6.6	2	.22	.8	
21 - 23 years old	6.8	2.2			
24 years old or above	6	0			
Entry age					
0 - 6 years old (a)	5.1	1.5	3.1	.031*	c > a
7 - 10 years old (b)	5.8	2			
11 - 14 years old (c)	7	1.8			
15 - 18 years old (d)	6.5	2.3			
Exit age					
9 - 12 years old (a)	7.5	1.3	3.2	.045*	b > c
13 - 15 years old (b)	7.7	1.8			
16 - 18 years old (c)	6.4	2			

Note: * $p < .05$

We did not note a significant difference while examining the possible relation between life satisfaction and the existence of providers of social support, even when the average scores of care leavers who turned to different providers are, in almost every case, higher than of those who

do not (figure 1): - has somebody to turn to [$t = 0.471$ (114), $p > .05$]; - turns to nuclear family [$t = -0.699$ (114), $p > .05$]; - turns to extended family [$t = -1.219$ (114), $p > .05$]; - turns to educators [$t = -0.564$ (114), $p > .05$]; - turns to other people [$t = -0.646$ (114), $p > .05$].

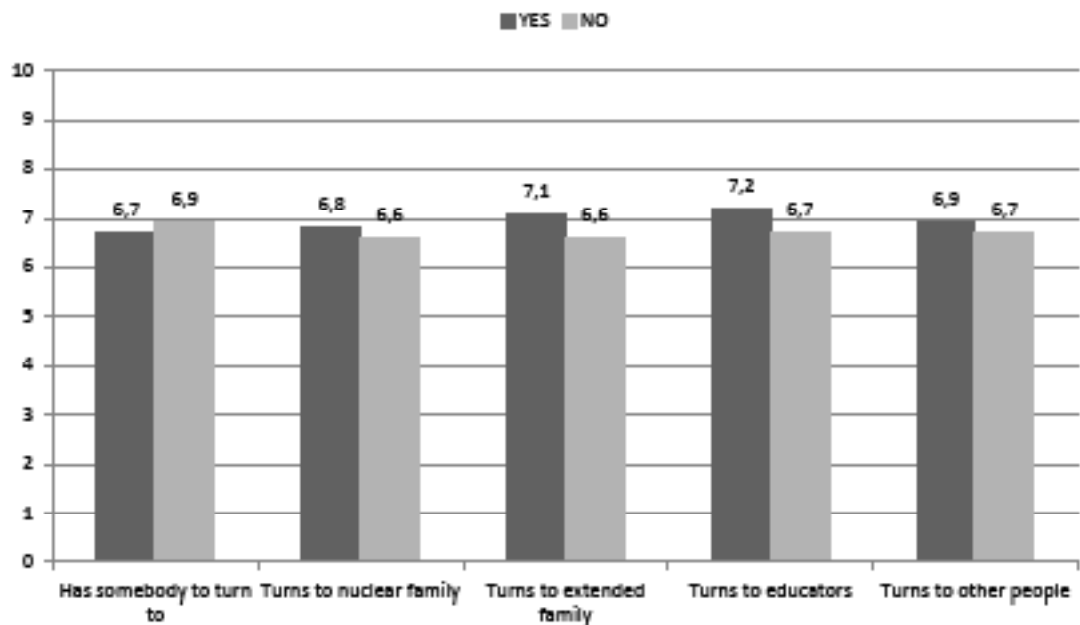


Figure 1. Average scores in life satisfaction according to whom they turn to for help.

In the analysis of the relationship between educational level and life satisfaction, we found that the average score in life satisfaction of care leavers who completed compulsory secondary school ($M = 7.1$, $DT = 2.2$) are significantly higher than the

score of those who did not ($M = 6.3$, $DT = 1.9$) [$t = -2.04$ (114), $p < .05$].

Lastly, it was found that there are significant differences in the scores on life satisfaction depending on whether the individual has a job ($M =$

7.5, $DT= 2.1$) or not ($M = 6.3$, $DT = 1.9$) [$t = -2.7$ (114), $p < .01$]. It also transpired that the average score in life satisfaction of that group who claimed to have incomes is significantly higher ($M = 7.4$, $DT= 1.9$) than those who do not ($M = 6$, $DT = 1.9$) [$t = -3.8$ (114), $p < .001$].

5. Discussion and conclusions

The first target of this article was the analysis of the social and economic situation of care leavers. The data collected provide some interesting facts. First, half of the participants in the survey return to the families that they were separated from when they were sent to the system in order to be protected. These families appear now as their main source of social support, circumstance that is not necessarily positive. According to the results by Cuenca et al. (2018), adolescents raise positive expectations regarding the role of their families in the process of transition into adulthood before leaving RC, and these expectations often collide with reality when they turn back and found themselves again immerse in their family issues (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Cooperation of professionals along with families of adolescents in RC becomes a key issue (Martín, Torbay & Rodríguez, 2008), not only for the plans on family reunification but also for the plans on emancipation, because data tell us that many individuals go back to their families. In this respect, the adoption of a collaborative approach regarding the work with families (Balsells, Pastor, Matos, Vaquero y Urrea, 2015; Martín y Suárez, 2018) can help to generate positive alliances that will stand once the kid has left the protection system.

Apart from the prominent role of the birth family, two other aspects stood out when asking about the sources of social support. Firstly, the low percentage of participants who point their educators in RC as their source of support. These answers could be explained by two reasons: either adolescents leaving care centers want to conclude that stage of their lives breaking every bond that ties them to RC, educators included, or educators are not actually considered as a source of social support for them. This idea is supported by some researches developed in our country. Bravo and Del Valle (2003) found that educators were marked as adolescents in RC as providers of help in the dimension "help", but not in "trust and affection". Martín and Dávila (2008) found for their part that when educators were considered as providers of trust and affection only had a positive impact in school adaptation, but their support was not connected to personal or social adjustment. In any case, it seems logical that the

figure of the educator tends to grow apart from minors once they have left the center (López et al., 2013). The last result that we want to highlight regarding social support is that approximately one third of care leavers claim to turn to people outside their family or residential contexts. Regarding the results of those researches that recommend promoting networks of social support during the care placement (Martín & Dávila, 2008; Melkman, 2017) we can state that further work is needed in this sense so that a higher percentage of care leavers can have these reference figures in contexts outside the protection system.

Regarding academic qualification, the findings are worrying, given that slightly more than a third finished Compulsory Secondary Education and only one in five continued studying, situation that will certainly handicap a proper social and labor inclusion. The academic problems of the group of foster adolescents placed in homes and residences is a well-known matter (Dixon, 2016; Dumart et al., 2011; Jariot et al., 2015; Melendro, 2011; Montserrat et al., 2013) so it is a key issue if we want to better the process of transition into adulthood. In view of the above, the poor economic situation of care leavers should not surprise us, since approximately one in five claims to be economically independent, one in four claims to have a job, and almost the half present incomes under EUR 400 per month. This situation widely justifies the initiatives undertaken in order to improve the process of emancipation of foster youth.

Even when the current economic reality may entail the very same situation for adolescents of the same age living with their families, the fact is that in the case of care leavers it is even more appalling, given that their families are not, in most of the cases, an adequate source of support.

The second target of this paper was to analyze life satisfaction of adolescents who leave residential resources and reach the age of majority. The average score of the responses to the single item of Overall Life Satisfaction is 6,6, below the mean score of adolescents remaining in residences, which is in turn below the normative population, which were respectively 7.1 and 9.1 in the research by Llosada-Gistau et al., (2015). It does seem clear that living in RC (along with the problems caused by family separation) has a negative impact in the welfare of adolescents, but leaving the protection systems causes a higher reduction of life satisfaction of care leavers, possibly due to the loss of the support that the centers bring. However, life satisfaction is conditioned by some variables. This way, concluding compulsory secondary education, relying on incomes and having a job improves satisfaction of this group. The entry age and exit age

from RC also influences life satisfaction. Thus, adolescents who entered the system at less than 6 years old have a lower life satisfaction than those who entered when they were between 11 and 14. The former had longer stays so, joined to the attachment issues derived from family separation at an early age, it occurs that stays of up to three years may produce an involution in some of the dimensions related to social inclusion (Martín, Rodríguez & Torbay, 2007). Regarding the exit age, the fact that those who leave the centers at an age close to majority have a lower life satisfaction than those who leave between 13 and 15 may be due to the fact that the latter may leave RC because their problems which triggered separation have been solved. Meanwhile, the adolescents leaving RC between 16 and 18 years old might be immersed in their transition into adulthood, and lack an adequate family support. This result highlights the importance of the work with families in the programs of transition into adulthood, even after the age of majority has been reached (Balsells et al., 2015; Cuenca et al., 2018; Martín et al., 2008).

It should be pointed out that we did not find significant differences in life satisfaction between those who have someone to turn to in case of need and those who do not. A possible explanation might be the methodological limitations that phone interviews present, since we cannot ask about every factor of social support, and consequently only enabled us to ask about structure and functional dimension of help, avoiding questions on the size of the network, dimensions of trust and affection and quality of the support, which is possibly the dimension in direct relation with life satisfaction (Melkman, 2017).

The main conclusions emerging from this article are three. Firstly, efforts should be increased in order to work in the transition into adulthood of foster youth involving families, given that most of adolescents return to them, even when they are not able to become the best support. Secondly, and from a quantitative approach, the indicators related to training, labor integration and economic incomes confirm that this group of people is at risk of social exclusion and needs help even after reaching the age of majority. Thirdly, and on a subjective basis, care leavers are a group with low levels of life satisfaction, even lower than when they were in RC. The population in RC displays a high prevalence of emotional and behavior problems (González-García et al., 2017), and when they fail to receive therapeutic care after reaching the age of majority, the risk of social exclusion increases (Butterworth et al., 2017; Dumart et al., 2011). Psychological care must play an essential role in the programs implemented by public administration to this group.

We do not wish to end without commenting the major obstacle in this paper, which refers to the challenges involved in the researches on the situation of care leavers. Even when the population under study were care leavers between 18 and 26 years old, 80% of the participants in the survey were between 18 and 20, being the number of participants over 24 very low. It would be advisable to use updated datasets with contact details, which could ease the tracking of former foster adolescents and implement a system of assessment of results permanently reliable.

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HOW TO CITE THE ARTICLE

Martín, E., González P., Chirino E., & Castro J.J. (2020). Inclusión social y satisfacción vital de los jóvenes extutelados. *Pedagogía Social. Revista Interuniversitaria*, 35 97-107. DOI:10.7179/PSRI_2019.35.08

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