

Aftercare – a good transition to adulthood?

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Summary:

The topic of this report is aftercare in the child welfare system. Aftercare is the support of young people who have been in the child welfare service from age of majority (18) until the maximum age of 23. This includes the process of preparing the young people for aftercare and the transition to adulthood. The purpose of the project was to study how the current aftercare system works, and to assess the quality of aftercare services in assisting young people with child welfare experiences in their transition to adulthood. The report also addresses the collaboration between aftercare, which is the responsibility of child welfare, and other welfare services supporting young adults (in particular NAV, the Employment and Welfare Administration). The main research question is: does the current aftercare system contribute to a good transition to adulthood for youth in child welfare? This report consists of 10 chapters addressing: the organization of aftercare (chapter 2), to what extent youth with child welfare experiences receive aftercare and the criteria for providing aftercare (chapter 3), what kind of aftercare measures that are used (chapter 4), the needs of young people in transition to adulthood (chapter 5) and the specific needs of unaccompanied minors (chapter 6), to what extent current aftercare practices are in keeping with national legislation and guidelines (chapter 7), outcomes in adulthood (chapter 8) and cooperation between the child welfare services and NAV (chapter 9). In the last chapter (chapter 10), we summarize and discuss the main findings and make recommendations for future development of aftercare.

Methodological approach

To illuminate the research questions, we used a combination of research methods and approaches. We conducted a quantitative analysis of national register data and two qualitative studies in which we i) conducted interviews in a selection of municipalities (the municipal study) and ii) reviewed and analysed of a selection of child welfare records (the document study).

The primary data source of the registry study is the child welfare register of Statistics Norway (SSB), which has individual data entries each year the person receives child welfare measures. This comprises data back to 1993 (n = 171 746). The child welfare register has person-identifiable records that are encrypted and permit the linking of persons/data across registers, such as; 1) the historical event database, FD-Trygd, which comprises Social Security data, data on employment and employment supports for the Norwegian population. 2) The National Education Database, which provides information on the highest completed education, as well as the parents' educational level. 3) The population register, which includes information on

the municipality of residence when the person was 16 years of age, country of birth, and immigration category, as well as information on the reason for immigration for each individual. We have identified status as unaccompanied minor refugee by adding data from the Directorate of Immigration (UDI). The analyses of the registry data are both descriptive and multivariate. A primary purpose of the analyses was to look at the prevalence of aftercare and characteristics of recipients. Another main purpose was to explore how the youth receiving aftercare was doing with regard to the following outcome indicators; Education, Work, Health-related benefits (disability pension, work assessment benefit (AAP)), and Social Assistance (a cash benefit). In these analyses, we compare three groups: 1) young people who have received child welfare services but *not* aftercare, 2) youth who have received child welfare services *and* aftercare, and 3) same-aged youth who have not received child welfare services (control group).

In the municipal study, we conducted qualitative interviews with 73 employees and 70 young people with child welfare experiences. The young people are aged 16-25 – 30 girls and 40 boys. Thirty-eight had minority background, of whom 29 were unaccompanied minors. Among the employees, 57 worked in child welfare services. The data of document study are the records of 40 child welfare cases from three municipalities. We conducted a qualitative content analysis with a particular focus on whether the practice was in keeping with legislation and guidelines. In the analysis of the records, we studied three phases of the work: 1) preparation for aftercare, 2) the period of action and 3) the termination of measures and possible collaboration with other (adult) services.

Main findings

The study shows that there has been a gradual increase in the number of young people receiving child welfare measures. The proportion receiving aftercare has been relatively stable over the years - about 20% of those who have been in child welfare receive aftercare at any point in time from age 19-23 years. Thus, a relatively low proportion of those who could potentially receive aftercare, actually receive aftercare. Employees, on the other hand, find that more young people want aftercare and the youth themselves often ask for longer follow-up and are concerned about what will happen when aftercare is terminated. There may be various reasons why relatively few receive aftercare, but the analysis suggests that many aftercare measures are terminated without a thorough assessment of needs and the child's best interests.

There is wide variation in how the different child welfare agencies work with aftercare, both in terms of how they organize the work, which available measures are used, and how many young people each employee has responsibility for. Some child welfare services have teams or employees designated to work with youth and aftercare, while other child welfare services are organized according to a generalist model where everyone works with all kinds of cases. One of the major challenges in the aftercare work appears to be low priority. The study shows that employees in child welfare services have difficulties finding time for all tasks, and that aftercare is an area that tend to be less prioritized. It is consistently claimed that young children, case investigation and compliance with deadlines have to be prioritized, which

implies that work with youth and aftercare is less prioritized. It appears like designated teams or employees ensure higher priority to youth/aftercare. With designated employees / teams, employees also have the opportunity to specialize, that is, they can familiarise themselves with the schemes/programmes that exist for young people in the target group. Designated teams also appear to work more efficient and have better insight into the opportunities in universal programmes. In addition, designated and specialized employees / teams give the employees the opportunity to provide closer follow-up and adapt the approach to the needs of the youth, including the need for user participation, flexibility and accessibility.

The most commonly used aftercare measures are supported housing and financial support, and this has been the case for many years. The support provided when the young people receive aftercare is largely in keeping with the young people's needs when it comes to the practical support – if they receive aftercare. However, it is a challenge to ensure the emotional follow-up and care. The young people that have close follow-up from a social worker that they know well, or from a foster home/institution, that follows them through the transition to adulthood, experience that they get the needed support. However, these measures are relatively seldom used - and they are typically terminated when the youths are around 20 years of age. There is reason for concern about the support for youth with substantial follow-up needs, especially after 20 years of age. Here, both staff and young people report that the service is not good enough, neither in the child welfare service nor in other services.

The young people's need for follow-up in transition to adulthood varies, but most describe the need for continued support from child welfare after the age of both 18 and 20 years. The support that is needed includes both practical help, emotional support and care, and advice and guidance in various areas of life. They need someone to be there when needed, who sees them and takes them seriously, and who helps them in the challenges and opportunities they face on the way to adulthood. The support that adolescents describe that they need in the transition to adulthood is similar to the support parents usually provide for adolescents in transition to adulthood. Such needs do not vaporize at age-specific times, such as when adolescents are 18, 20 or 23 years old, but is often extended further into young adulthood. What support each person will need from the child welfare service and/or other public services, is contingent upon the support the young person has access to in the private network. When young people have a limited informal network to rely on (which is the case for many of those interviewed), they experience an abrupt transition to adulthood when support from child welfare services are terminated. This also applies to unaccompanied minors, who have often had a limited time to establish relationships and settle in Norwegian society before the transition to adulthood. They describe the challenges of learning a new language, making Norwegian friends and succeeding in school. In addition, many are struggling emotionally. The experiences of war and fleeing have left mental or physical scars, and for many this creates major additional challenges. Many of the unaccompanied minors experience an almost automatic termination of measures at the age of 20, although many need support for much longer.

The study shows that it varies to what extent the professional practice is in keeping with current legislation and guidelines when it comes to documentation and support after the age of 18 years. In general, we find that there are major deficiencies in the documentation. However, in services where there are employees who have aftercare as their primary task, documentation seems to be better taken care of. We find particularly significant shortcomings when it comes to decisions about termination of measures. Firstly, there are many records where there is no decision or letter of termination, and secondly, the reasons for the decision are rarely based on an assessment of the best interests of the child. A change in the legislation in 2009 was intended to impose a duty to justify terminations in the best interests of the child (Ministry of Children, Equality and Inclusion, 2011). Based on the case records, the impression is that the obligation to explicate reasons for termination is only partially implemented. In addition, we find little evidence that the child welfare service contacts young people after measures have been terminated.

As for how young people are doing in adulthood, measured by traditional transition markers such as education, employment, and financial independence, we find that young people with child welfare experience are at a significantly higher risk of marginalization compared to those who have not been in the child welfare system. Analysis of registry data shows that 80.6 percent of the control group has completed upper secondary education, while the corresponding figures for the aftercare and child welfare (without aftercare) populations are 32.2 and 30.2 percent respectively (applies to those who had child welfare measures when they were 16 and/or 17 years old). For unaccompanied minor refugees, the number is 38 percent. Thus, there is a significantly lower proportion of youth in child welfare who complete upper secondary education. Furthermore, there are two percentage points more in the aftercare group that have completed upper secondary education compared to the group with child welfare measures but not aftercare. This is a small difference, but at the same time; since other results suggests that young adults who receive aftercare tend to be more vulnerable, have a history of more and/or longer out-of-home placements and are more complex cases measured by the number of recorded reasons for child welfare interventions. It is thus likely that aftercare measures have a greater impact than suggested by the two percent difference on whether or not they complete upper secondary education.

When it comes to work, we find that 51 percent of the aftercare group is in work in 2014, and 54 percent of child welfare group (that did not receive aftercare). Slightly more than 65 percent of the control group had some kind of employment in 2014, while this goes for 73.4 percent of the unaccompanied minor refugees. Furthermore, in 2014, we find that a larger proportion of the aftercare and child welfare population receive health-related benefits (work assessment benefit (AAP) or the disability benefit) than the control group. In the aftercare group, 28.5 per cent receive health-related benefits. Of these, around 30 per cent receive disability benefits, that is, around 8 per cent of everyone in the aftercare group. In the child welfare group, 23.8 per cent receive either the disability benefit or AAP, and even in this group do almost 30 per cent receive disability benefit. That is, around 6 percent of everyone in the child welfare group.

What stands out as important factors explaining the increased risk of marginalisation, are vulnerability factors such as receiving long-term measures from the child welfare service (indicating long-term/substantial needs), active measures at the age of 17 years (indicating need for supports in the transition to adulthood) and that the reasons for child welfare measures are related to the young persons` behaviour/challenges (indicating that the youth him-/herself has challenges). The aftercare group has these vulnerabilities to a greater extent than the child welfare group that do not receive aftercare, which illustrates that the group of young people receiving aftercare is a selected population and a group that have more challenges than those who do not receive aftercare.

Our data cannot be used to conclude safely about the effects of aftercare. Since young people who receive aftercare is not a randomly selected group and that we cannot control other conditions that may have an impact on outcomes in early adulthood, it is difficult to conclude whether and to what extent aftercare have effects. At the same time, we find that aftercare can reduce the risk of marginalization in the long run. Aftercare appears to have a long-term positive effect on the completion of upper secondary school, and it reduces the likelihood of receiving a disability pension. Indirectly, it also affects the receipt of the work assessment benefit (AAP) and financial social assistance, as completion of secondary education reduces the likelihood of receiving this type of support. At the same time, we must again emphasize that it is no randomly selected group that receives aftercare, and that it is often young people with more vulnerability factors who receive aftercare. Registry data thus indicates that aftercare works, and together with the qualitative data, this gives us a better understanding of factors that influence the transition to adulthood and the role of aftercare in this.

We also find that a large proportion of the young people have measures both from the child welfare service and NAV (adult employment and welfare services) simultaneously. This is likely to be related to the fact that several municipalities have a division of responsibility in early adulthood, where NAV provides the financial support and the child welfare provides practical and emotional support. NAV and the child welfare service have different social missions and tasks, which is evident in differences in assessments of the needs of the young people and consequently what support they need. The differences in priorities can lead to disagreement and frustration in the collaboration between NAV and child welfare services. One major issue seems to be that they try to push the responsibility for action on to the other party, and that there are often discussions about who should fund the services and support, rather than about the young peoples` needs. The issue of financial responsibility is potentially a weakness when measures and services for the same group are the responsibility of different service sectors. In this case, it leads to unclear liability. There are situations where both bodies are awaiting action from the other and none of the services takes the overall responsibility. The consequence is that young people with substantial needs for support will be left without sufficient help, often for a longer period of time.

In the study, we find several examples of individual cases where the young people receive very good support and where child welfare services or teams are doing a good job with aftercare. However, the overall picture is that today's aftercare services are not good enough

to help young people with child welfare experience in the transition to adulthood. This is evident when you see the number that are marginalized in several important societal arenas. We also see this in the adolescents' own descriptions of the challenges they face in early adulthood. Although many of the young people who have been in child welfare are doing well, many find the transition to adulthood challenging, even when they have had good aftercare with supportive adults. Many of the young people feel that they are not well enough prepared for the demands and expectations that meets them in adulthood, and they experience an abrupt transition to adulthood. This is partly because the preparations for adulthood start too late, and they feel that they do not have the necessary skills to meet adulthood, for example regarding personal economy, educations and housing. In addition, many young people feel that there is little room for flexibility and that supportive relationships are terminated at a vulnerable time in life - without being replaced by other supportive relationships. Overall, this leaves many young people entering adulthood unprepared and without the necessary safety nets and networks that can provide the support they need in transition to adulthood.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study clearly show that there is a need to strengthen the aftercare and support services for young people with child welfare experience in the transition to adulthood. The challenges pointed out in this study have been similar for years, both in terms of the challenges the young people face, the gaps in service provision, the need for changes in the follow-up service, challenges in collaboration between agencies, and the low priority of aftercare. Based on the findings, we have identified several areas in need for improvement and we have made specific proposals for developments. We recommend a national plan for the child welfare aftercare to be drafted, in order to ensure an equal, comprehensive and good follow-up service for youth with child welfare experiences.