

Pathways of out-of-home care in the Netherlands

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Extended abstract

Introduction

In the past decades, many studies attempted to classify children in out-of-home care and tried to explain how they fare as minors^{1,5,8,9,10}. However, the large majority of existing studies used isolated features to describe out-of-home care experiences (e.g. number of placements, duration of placement). Although insightful, the use of such detached characteristics does not properly capture the complexity of youth experiences for these disadvantaged children. Let's think of an example of two children who stayed in out-of-home care for 10 years. Can we regard them as being similar if one stayed for 10 years with grandparents and the other switched between different care arrangements (started to live with grandparents but moved into a residential facility, later on he returned to his mother but as this did not work out he moved back to a different residential facility)? Can we envisage a reality in which we place an equal sign between stability and instability in care? Most developmental psychologists and child welfare experts would not agree to that. Several authors have argued that the complexity of out-of-home care pathways may be best captured if we implement a holistic approach in classifying these children^{4,6}.

In my study I address the large diversity in out-of-home care histories by implementing a life-course approach. Specifically, the life-course perspective^{3,7} argues that events can be defined by their type, duration, number, timing and ordering, and a classification of developmental pathways should integrate these different elements. In my study I will distinguish between different types of care (parental, residential, grandparental, with uncles/aunts and non-kin foster care), will consider the timing of entering and exiting each form of out-of-home care, the duration of stay for each separate placement, the number of placements as well as the order in which placements occur. Based on the scarce research classifying youth using some forms of placement histories^{4,6}, I expect to find at least four different pathways: I. *short-term* single-type stay, adolescence limited, mostly in residential care; II. *medium-term* stay throughout childhood and

adolescence, experiencing about two different placement arrangements; III. *long-term stable* stay, mostly in kinship foster care, entering out-of-home care in toddlerhood or childhood; IV. *long-term turbulent* stay, experiencing multiple placement changes over the entire youth period, possibly leaving care from a residential facility.

Method

This project uses individual-level information on all children born in the Netherlands between 1991 and 1995 ($N \approx 70.000$ children) and experiencing out-of-home care between ages 0 and 18. Population register data from Statistics Netherlands has been used to construct dynamics in the living arrangements of these children every three months by matching the residential addresses and household information of children and their biological parents for the entire youth span (72 measurement points over 18 years). Additional information on household composition and parental structure allowed a fine-grained distinction between types of out-of-home care in which these children lived. Residential stay has been established based on registrations in a residential household. To construct the history of kinship foster care (with grandparents or uncles/aunts), address and household information of children have been matched with address and household information of their relatives for the established timepoints.

Sequence analysis is used to provide a comprehensive classification of pathways of care throughout youth. The advantage of this method in providing a comprehensive classification of various individual trajectories is that it makes no assumptions on the manner in which the data is distributed and groups similar trajectories through cluster analysis. This is a valuable tool allowing the identification of patterns in complex data.

Innovations of the study

My study advances existing knowledge on two major aspects. First, it is substantively innovative as it moves beyond simple classifications of children in out-of-home care based on separate characteristics such as duration of stay or number of placements, and provides an integrated multi-faceted typology accounting for the constellation of care experiences throughout youth. Second, the methodology I propose is cutting-edge as I was able to construct a unique

dataset combining large-scale population-based register data from various micro-data sources from Statistics Netherlands. This allows me to study a large and non-selective sample and follow respondents throughout their entire youth.

Current status and future research developments

The study is in the final stage of constructing the youth histories. Matches between all children and parents, grandparents and uncles/aunts have been made. Episodes of residential care, emigration or leaving the parental home as transition into the adult life have been established. Once some final puzzles regarding missing data in registrations will be solved, I will proceed to the analysis of individual sequences.

This study is a fundamental part in broader research project aiming to understand who among out-of-home care youth succeed and who fail in making successful transitions into adulthood. Specifically, this research will explain the consequences of out-of-home care histories for adult functioning in three key adult domains: family formation, employment and crime. Moreover, it will reveal under which economic, emotional and social circumstances adult adversity may be exacerbated.

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