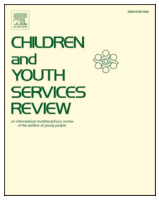
Children and Youth Services Review 178 (2025) 108542

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth



Life beyond the care center: the lived experience of care leavers in Vietnam

Robbie Gilligan [a,*], Hoa Thi Nguyen [b], Nga Hanh Do [c]

[a] School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland
[b] Unitec Institute of Technology, Te Pūkenga, Auckland, New Zealand
[c] Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Viet Nam

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Care leavers
Vietnam
Lived experiences
Agency
Support
Precarity

ABSTRACT

There is strong evidence across many countries that young people transitioning out of alternative care at the relevant local legal care leaving age face considerable challenges as they adapt to life beyond their previous care settings. While there is a growing body of work examining their experiences in countries in the Global North, there are fewer studies reporting on care leaver experiences in the Global South. This study is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with 25 care leavers in Vietnam. It explores their experience of adapting to life beyond their care center. While many of the participants report varying degrees of positive progress, the study also reveals the considerable challenges they may encounter in relation to accommodation, work and education. There was also evidence of the emotional pressures of negotiating these issues, the concerns that might arise in relation to their social and family relations, and the stigma felt to be associated with their ex-care status. While some proved adept at finding their way and identifying sources of support (sometimes linked to connections though the care centre), for others the precarity of their daily circumstances was an ongoing pressure. Analysis revealed how agentic the young people were, but also how important support was to sustain such agency. Access to work was an especially critical issue.

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a gradual increase in academic and policy research internationally investigating the experience of care leavers who have grown up in care settings (and/or in foster families) (see for example Mendes and Snow, 2016). The overall message is that the transition from life in the care setting to life in wider society (typically at age 18) may bring many challenges. Unlike young people living in their own families, care leavers are facing these challenges earlier and generally without the family support usually available to other young people (Stein, 2008). There are, however, two limitations when this body of research on care leavers is considered in global terms. Firstly, it has taken time for scholars to focus properly on the *lived experience of care leavers* themselves as a key aspect of the necessary knowledge base. Secondly, there remains a major shortfall of studies of care leaver issues in the Global South, despite some recent progress in this regard (for example, studies from China (Yin, 2024, 2025); India (Keshri, 2021); Indonesia (Radityaputra, Mendes & Baidawi, 2024); Jordan (Ibrahim and Howe, 2011) and South Africa (van Breda and Hlungwani, 2019).

In many respects, therefore, research on care leaver issues tends to be a project of the Global North. This paper provides a lived experience perspective on care leaver issues in Vietnam – and to our knowledge, the study on which it is based is one of the first of its kind in Vietnam, and still one of only a relatively small number of such studies from Asia. We have been drawn to this project by the importance of a better understanding of the *range* of care leaver experiences across different national contexts, as advocated by van Breda and Pinkerton (2020). We offer our study firstly as a contribution to policy development in the given country context of Vietnam. Collins and Tuyền (2016) have identified a lack of evidence on the experience of care leavers in Vietnam, and in this paper we seek to make a preliminary contribution to addressing this critical gap, and thereby hopefully stimulating further efforts in that regard. Secondly, we also hope to help fill out the global picture regarding how care leaving issues and trends converge and diverge across different cultural and policy contexts. Policy variations at country level include differences in patterns of care provision (the balance between residential and foster family places), in age limits for the legal ending of formal care, and in subsequent after care support and the extent of welfare state like provision (income support etc) for young people at risk of marginalisation such as care leavers. In the following introductory sections, we

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: rgillign@tcd.ie (R. Gilligan).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108542
Received 24 May 2023; Received in revised form 14 August 2025; Accepted 18 August 2025
Available online 21 August 2025

provide a background to this study, drawing on evidence from the international research and policy literature relating to care leaver experiences and provision, firstly looking at recent international evidence, then some consideration of the picture in Asia, and finally focusing specifically on the Vietnamese context and some of its particularities.

1.1. Care leaver experiences internationally

The research literature on care leaver experiences and outcomes is heavily dominated by research conducted in the Global North. Research to date from the Global South (majority world) is restricted due to resource and other factors, although as already noted some studies are beginning to emerge. While a labour of love to seek to identify relevant studies of care leavers' lived experience across different countries, we should declare that our coverage here is illustrative rather than definitive, and relies heavily on review papers, and preliminary searches in the case of country studies in Asia.

A relatively recent systematic review of 21 studies of care leavers' experiences of their transition from care included five studies from the Global South: from Ghana (2), India, South Africa and Zimbabwe (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä & Karki, 2018). Six major themes were identified as concerns for care leavers in daily living across the 21 studies. These were 'academic qualifications, housing problems, employment and financial instability, building relationships and assimilating to cultural norms, and access to health care.' (p. 142). In their conclusion, the research team acknowledged the strengths and resilience of the care leavers and also highlighted further recurring themes in the data such as loneliness among care leavers, their 'minimal' level of survival skills, a lack of support from those in their networks, and poor consideration of their needs in the process of transition from the care setting.

Turning to the Global South specifically, a more recent qualitative study with 29 care leavers aged 17–24 from four African countries (Ghana, Uganda, South African and Zimbabwe) (Kelly et al., 2024) highlights the importance of relationships, but also the relevance of the young adult's own personal agency – in helping care leavers negotiate their adult life (p. 13). Using a life course lens, the researchers flag a range of other topics relating to care leavers' experience including interdependence and cultural connection, stigma relating to care status, and youth precarity which they suggest may have relevance for wider understanding of care leaver experience in other contexts beyond Africa (p. 15). The themes of relationships (or absence of same), precarity and cultural issues are themes that also resonate with the findings from the review by Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä & Karki, (2018).

While the literature emphasises the adversities encountered by care leavers, there is also evidence of the relevance of *resilience* as a concept in achieving a full picture of the care leaver experience (Bengtsson, Sjöblom, & Öberg, 2018; Ibrahim & Howe, 2011; Shpiegel, Simmel, Sapiro, & Ramirez Quiroz, 2022). Despite the many difficulties care leavers may face, some manage to do better than might be expected. This is an important point since there may be lessons to be learned if the underlying reasons for this difference can be better understood. Factors that seem to be associated with better outcomes include positive progress in education, entry into the world of work, the young person's exercise of their own agency, and availability (and activation) of different forms of support (Gilligan, 2019). A Swedish research team has highlighted the significance of care leavers being given time and support to develop their agentic capacity to navigate towards supportive resources (Bengtsson, Sjöblom & Öberg, 2018). Thus, the response to the needs and realities of care leavers may require to be conceptualised and delivered at different levels, and over different time periods.

1.2. Provision for care leavers – global perspectives

The UN General Assembly (2010) resolution on 'Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children' represented a significant and symbolic recognition of the field by the global community. It included six paragraphs (131 – 136) on after care (out of a total of 167 paragraphs) (United Nations General, 2010). These paragraphs on after care declared that relevant organisations should make early preparations for after care support and involve the young person in planning for same. Specifically, organisations should 'systematically aim at preparing children to assume self-reliance and to integrate fully in the community, notably through the acquisition of social and life skills'(Para. 131). While this formulation retains relevance, it arguably has an increasingly dated tone with the passage of time. The recent Comment of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on after care reflects a broader and more evolved view of the needs of the care leaver:

> States should develop and implement policies to ensure comprehensive, planned, ongoing and individualized financial, emotional and practical support to care leavers and their networks (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022, p.34).

(Harder, et al., 2020) provide a further glimpse into a more elaborated version of current thinking as they present evidence-based principles derived from discussion with fifteen experts in the field from fourteen countries, with each principle also rigorously 'verified' by supporting evidence from the research literature. The ten principles (which resonate well with points from work already reviewed above) relate to the following steps in supporting care leavers: listening to young people and facilitating their participation in relevant processes:

i) supporting their autonomy;
ii) ensuring their 'access to education'
iii) 'honouring diversity, including cultural identity'
iv) supporting contact and connections with birth family
v) supporting the development of supportive long term relationships and safety nets
vi) support for working through trauma
vii) preparation for leaving care
viii) ensuring legal frameworks to provide for the rights and needs of care leavers
ix) ensuring access to relevant services

Findings from a recent scoping review on transitional support interventions for care leavers align with this multi-layered approach (Feather et al., 2024). Based on 36 relevant articles, the review identified the importance of both 'robust social policy', and of 'promoting social, emotional and material support', and also the significance of encouraging supportive relationships with relevant positive actors in the lives of care leavers living through the phase of transition from care. This envisages a response to care leavers that ranges from pro-active policy measures to support actions, including relational support from key figures in the life of the care leaver.

Achieving policy reforms that bring clear, consistent and enduring benefits to service users generally requires legal underpinning. Strahl, van Breda, Mann-Feder and Schröer (2021) undertook a study by online survey on the extent and quality of legislation on care systems and after care globally. In the component of the study on after care there were expert responses for a sample of 28 countries. These included six returns from the Global South. Based on analysis of the responses, India was classified as having 'well developed' legislation on after care, South Africa and 'West Africa' (sic) were classified as having 'rudimentary' legislation in this area, and Brazil, Kenya and Nigeria were classified as having 'no legislation'.

Where countries have limited formal support provision for care leavers, informal support becomes very important, and possibly 'the richest resource available to those who have left care and those who work with them.' (Dima and Pinkerton, 2016, p. 424). A scoping review of 58 studies on informal support for care leavers internationally identified personal family history and out of home care placement as key

issues in the lives of the care leavers studied (Stubbs, Baidawi and Mendes, 2023). Nine of these studies were from the Global South: from Ethiopia, Ghana (2), India, Nigeria, South Africa (3) and Zimbabwe. In addition to the range and potential value of informal support, this scoping review flags the importance of care leavers' capacity to benefit from such support. This was found to depend on a number of issues: their regaining trust in people despite earlier experiences of trauma, staying connected to family and former carers even where there were difficulties, having the skills to build supportive and romantic relationships, and taking part with others in sport and leisure (p. 38).

1.3. The picture in Asia

Overall, there is heavy reliance across Asia on institutional /residential settings rather than family-based placement for children needing alternative care. As in the wider Global South and much of the Global North, there is a scarcity in Asia of research studies based on the child and youth experience in and beyond the care setting. Those studies that exist often report in positive terms the importance of peer and/or family and other relations during time in the care setting and afterwards, as in for example studies from Cambodia (Emond, 2010), China (Yin, 2025) India (Mishra and Sondhi, 2021), [whose paper also notes the potential for a dark side to peer relations]; Keshri, 2021), and Philippines (Roche, Flynn and Mendes, 2021).

For care leavers from residential care settings, the sociability and support of the peer group may be hard to replace after the transition from the 'living in a crowd' atmosphere of the care setting to potentially feeling alone in the new life in wider society – a finding from Uptin and Hartung (2022) in their study in Thailand. In her study of 100 female care leavers in India, Dutta (2017) reports that 70 % of her sample said that 'they had no one with whom they could share their problems'. In a small qualitative study in Korea, care experienced adults had done well despite many challenges due, broadly, to their own determination mixed with relevant informal and formal support (Nho, Park & McCarthy, 2017). But overall, the transition presents practical as well as relational challenges for care leavers, not least finding a stable income and accommodation. They must seek work as a source of income in the absence, typically, of welfare state provision in many Asian countries.

In general, most countries in Asia do not have measures addressing the needs and experiences of care leavers specifically and separately. In the case of China, there have been some recent developments, especially in the areas of employment and housing, with most progress reported in some of the bigger cities (Yin, 2024; Shang and Fisher, 2017). A significant development is the provision for transferring *hukou* status (local registration vital for recognition / entitlement for many services) from a care leaver's home community to the community where they have now settled after leaving the care seting (Yin, 2024). In Japan, a recent study highlights the risk care leavers face in terms of social exclusion and poor progress in education compared to non-care leaver peers. Specific provision for care leavers generally does not exist, although some measures are emerging in the capital city, Tokyo (Cleminson, Naoshima & Kumagai, 2017).

1.4. Care leaving and its context in Vietnam

As already noted above, Collins and Tuyên (2016) have found in their useful introduction to the care leaving 'landscape' in Vietnam that little is known about how care leavers fare after leaving their care setting. While young people leaving care, generally, have specific experiences relating to their care and related history, they also have much in common with other young people who are likely to face at least some comparable social and economic challenges in their lives – for example, in relation to one or more of income, accommodation, work and education. Since there may also be useful insights to be gained from research on challenges facing the wider body of youth at risk of marginalisation generally in Vietnam, of which care leavers are part, we review briefly some of that work in the following paragraphs in order to sketch out some of the likely realities facing care leavers.

Young people may face challenges in securing a proper foothold in the formal workforce in Vietnam. Tran et al. (2018) make some key points about the picture of youth (un)employment in Vietnam: those aged 15–24 make up half of all unemployed people, and face a risk of unemployment rate of 7 % (2017) – more than three times the overall rate, and when they are working a majority of youth (76 %) do so under the more precarious conditions of the informal sector of the economy (working on own account, or with an oral rather than written contract, or working for family). Of note also is the counter-intuitive evidence that more educated youth may be at higher risk of unemployment (due to a range of factors including poor alignment between economic needs and educational provision) (Tran et al., 2018). There is evidence that 10 % of young people generally in Vietnam are not in education, employment or training (having what is often known as NEET [not in education, employment or training] status)(Espinoza, Benny, Duc, & Hang, 2018).

Given the disadvantages reported to be facing minority youth in Vietnam (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2018), and similar evidence from other countries, it is reasonable to speculate that care-experienced adults are also among those disadvantaged minority youth groupings. They are thus likely to face a higher risk of NEET status based on this indirect evidence from within Vietnam and on the likely relevance of the international trend for higher rates of NEET among care leavers found, for example, in studies in the Nordic countries (Berlin, Kääriälä, Lausten, Andersson & Brännström, 2021) and South Africa (Dickens and Marx, 2020),

The international literature emphasises how educational attainment may generally be linked to better work and other outcomes for care leavers – and comparable populations. Drawing on evidence from a four-country longitudinal study of young adults since childhood (in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam), (Ilie et al., 2021) point to barriers blocking the transition of academically capable but poorer students to higher education. They note the relevance of financial difficulties but also of psychological (or other) issues such as low expectations, or a low belief in the relevance of education for them.

Unemployment overall is low in Vietnam, yet this must also be seen against the fact that there is no social security for those who are unemployed pending employment (Tran, 2018). This means that youth with less educational and other assets (and who therefore are less competitive in the labour market) may have to rely on more precarious work options such as self-employment, family work, or informal work for an employer. Each of these alternative scenarioscarries a risk of poorer protections than in full formal employment (Tran, 2018). It also seems reasonable to assume that self-employment or family work may be less likely as options for care leavers given the family history leading to life in a care setting, and the financial challenges of self-employment without the cushion of loans from family or associates as a 'float' to launch or sustain the venture.

Young people may thus face challenges in seeking quality employment for a range of reasons – including the special significance of the informal sector in the Vietnamese economy, the gap between education offered and learner needs and interests, and 'the economic burden' faced by many young people (Tran, 2018). A recent study on how to help marginalised youth in Vietnam (in this case, minority ethnic young people) to access better quality work ('Decent Work') highlighted the importance of networks of different actors in this process. These ranged from those in educational and other institutions to employers, or community or representative groupings all with potential roles in providing encouragement, information and support to young people as they seek out job opportunities. This view gained support in the responses of various stakeholders in the wider employment and educational system ecology, and also from young adults themselves (Wall, Ngo, Luong, Ho & Hindley, 2024). This issue of access to supportive networks may prove challenging for care leavers given international evidence of the risk they often face of weakened social networks linked to their care history and

status.

Care leavers in different countries may also face issues arising from their cultural as well as their socio-economic context. Vietnamese culture is heavily influenced by the introduction of Confucianism during the 1000 years of Chinese colonization. Filial piety is one of the core principles of Confucian ethics. Filial piety is also emphasised quite early in the Vietnamese education system through poems and folklore. This cultural focus on filial piety in societies influenced by Confucianism underlines the significance of family life in the culture (see Sarkissian, 2010).

The influence of this tradition of filial duty gives rise to norms and expectations for adult children in relation to the honouring, care and support of older parents and relatives. Where filial piety is a norm, each young care leaver must find their own way of negotiating these expectations, and adapting to how norms shift amidst wider social change. While the filial duty is often seen as being owed to the older generation, it has been suggested that in Vietnam there is cultural recognition of a reciprocity across the generations in the performance of these duties with both child and parent getting attention at different times (Mai and Le, 2024). It should be noted that there may be additional complexity in this process for care leavers given the likely disruption, ambiguity and special meanings of family ties in their lives (Boddy, Hanrahan and Wheeler, 2023).

In Vietnam, care placements end legally at age 16, as compared to age 18 in many other countries. The legal provision on care leaving age and care leaver support 20/2021/ND-CP "Regulations about welfare policies for eligible recipients" provides that children may remain in care until they reach age 16 . Where they are a student at that point in community colleges, universities, vocational training, etc.), they remain in care up until they graduate but no later than age 22.

There are two further features of provision of care and after care in Vietnam that are of note. Firstly, placements are in *residential* centers, run mostly by the public authorities, but also including some run by international or local NGOs. Secondly, there is no *general* public welfare state-like ongoing conditional provision to support care leavers either as care leavers, or as young adults who experience financial poverty or precarity. These two features are certainly not unique to Vietnam, but they provide an important introductory backdrop to the current study and the challenges care leavers in Vietnam may face. As noted earlier, in countries where formal support is absent or scarce, care leavers must rely more on informal sources of support such as care centers, NGOs and individual actors.

The government in Vietnam uses the "hộ khẩu" (household registration) system to manage interaction between residents and government services. Each family will have a "hộ khẩu" book listing the names of each family member living at a house address which is considered their permanent address. There is a lead person in the household book (often the father or grandfather of the house) whose name is in the land or house title as legal owner of the house. If some family members move to a different house to live, they will need to register as "temporary" residents of the place where they are then currently living. It is similar to the hukou system in China, but with less restriction. People who reside out of their permanent address can still apply for their children to go to schools in the area of their temporary residence; however, they might need to go back to their permanent residence to seek welfare benefits. Overall, this registration system may pose challenges potentially for care leavers (Collins and Tuyền, 2016 p. 342–3), in terms of demonstrating proof as to their official recognised household. Difficulties in this regard could give rise to potential challenges in accessing generic public benefits and other relevant services.

1.5. The key messages from the evidence reviewed

While each national context brings its own distinctive features, socially, economically and culturally, this introduction reminds that that there are also recurring similarities in care leaver experiences across different national contexts. Besides negotiating the risk of financial precarity, securing stable accommodation and viable education/training and work opportunities also loom large as issues for care leavers. Other challenges reported across national studies include access to relational support (Feather et al, 2024), stigma linked to care status (Kelly et al., 2024), and negotiating relations with birth family (Boddy (2019). Becoming a care leaver poses many demands for the young person. While the care leaving literature has tended to stress practical (and important) matters like accommodation, income, employment, education and the like, there is now also a gradually emerging appreciation of the emotional pressures of the care leaver journey. Their new status as care leavers changes their relationship with previous carers and may also open up new challenges in negotiating their ties with biological family members (Boddy, 2019). Adley and Jupp Kina (2017) argue strongly that professionals and services must broaden their focus beyond material and practical issues and make greater efforts to recognise and respond to the often hidden and personal *emotional* challenges care leavers face. In their view, in addition to practical challenges, care leavers typically must also manage a significant emotional burden (associated with the implications of their status and family history) when compared to non-care leaving peers. This wider view of the challenges care leavers face will be an issue to which we will return when considering the findings of this study.

2. Research methods

2.1. Research aims

This paper reports on a study of the lived experiences of a sample of care leavers in Vietnam (the fifteenth most populous country in the world). The focus of the study was primarily on participants' lived experience of their immediate and early stage transition from the care setting to life outside the care center when they reached the upper age limit for remaining in care. This paper seeks to give particular attention to how they responded to the social, emotional and practical challenges they encountered; how they seek support; and how they found their experiences in relation to further or higher education, the world of work and certain other aspects of life.

The study was a collaborative effort between researchers (two of them Vietnamese) working in three different countries - Ireland, New Zealand and Vietnam - and was conducted with the support of a small advisory group in Vietnam of people with specialist knowledge of provision for children in care and care leavers.

2.2. Research methods

2.2.1. Sampling and recruitment

The final inclusion criteria for this qualitative study sample (following consultation with the study advisory group) were: young people who spent substantial time in care centres as children and were now aged between 18–30 years old. In composing the sample, we also sought to maximise diversity in terms of gender, age, marital status, ethnicities, and education levels. Recruitment was organised through contact with care centers recommended to us by the study advisory group. With the assistance of the care centres, our researchers identified potential participants based on our inclusion criteria. The centres were all in Ho Chi Minh city, but with a mix of public and private funded (INGOs and local NGOs) settings.

The achieved sample for the study comprised 25 participants – 15 identified as male and 10 as female. They ranged in age from 21 to 34 years old. The majority of the sample were in their mid-twenties, with 16 aged 23–26; a further five were aged 21–22 and the remaining four were aged between 27 and 34. They had left different care centers, including Social Protection Centers operated by public authorities, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or international NGOs. Centers with public funding are operated under the oversight of the Ministry of

Labour- Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). Local NGOs are privately owned and receive funding from different sources, both local and international. International NGOs are established by international non-profit organizations and funded from international sources. In the final achieved sample, ten of the 25 participants came from an international NGO care center; four from a local NGO; and 11 were from four different public-funded care centers.

The centers through which participants were recruited were located in different districts of Ho Chi Minh city, also known as Saigon, the country's largest city. The children and young people placed in these centers do not necessarily all come from those same districts. They may also come from different provinces or cities in the southern or central regions of Vietnam, and this also applied to our sample members (from public service and NGO settings). The study had ethical approval from the relevant Research Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin and also had necessary local approvals in Vietnam (there being no university-based ethics processes in Vietnam established at the time, similar to the position at that point in many countries).

Reflecting on the composition of the sample, we acknowledge that it is to some extent a convenience sample, in that the sample was based on feasibility, in terms of our limited resources and reliance on network contacts to facilitate approaches to centres withing a certain geographical reach. We achieved some diversity as intended mainly by age, gender and work / education profile, and auspices of centre management. It also the case that a small qualitative study cannot hope to achieve a sample that 'catches' a wide range of differences in such a populous and geographically dispersed country (stretching 1000 miles / 1650 km from North to South).

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Data was gathered through one-to-one interviews with 25 participants where the focus was on their lived experience of adjusting to life outside the institution. It was a grass roots, 'bottom-up' person-centred study, not unlike similar 'first generation' small qualitative research studies to be found in many countries, especially in the Global South, for example, Keshri (2021); Sekibo (2020). This focus on the individual participant's own experience does not discount the power of cultural and structural forces in their lives but rather seeks a better understanding of how those play out as seen through the lens of lived experience.

Interviews were held at a place convenient and comfortable for the interviewees, and were conducted in Vietnamese by the Vietnam-based researcher and a research assistant. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to freely tell their stories in ways that gave particular attention to issues that were important to them. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then translated into English for analysis.

The analysis was primarily conducted by - the first two authors (also co-principal investigators). They both read and analysed the transcripts independently and then compared and discussed the themes that they had individually identified. The third researcher, Nga Hanh Do, also provided feedback and appraisal for the data analysis in addition to other key tasks - the convening of advisory group, recruiting and interviewing participants, and organising transcription of data. All interviews were transcribed into Vietnamese, and then translated into English. The two lead investigators undertook coding separately and then resolved differences following careful review and discussion. Themes then identified reflected relevance in the transcripts and to the focus on lived experience. Final coding of each interview drew on the transcripts in both languages.

3. Findings

The interviews highlighted some of the issues that the young care leavers encountered in making the transition to life outside the care center as well as some of the progress they had achieved amid adversity. They also illustrate many examples of the capacity of the young people to access personal support in daily life, whether from peers, former carers, employers or work colleagues and others. As in many such studies, there is evidence of challenges of a practical nature in relation to matters such as accommodation, money, education and employment. However, there is also evidence, often less explored in other studies, of positive and challenging relational or emotional experiences including instances of feelings of loneliness and difficulties in building new relationships with others. There were also issues linked to negotiating relations with birth family as a young adult, accessing social support when needed, feelings of being stigmatized, and in one instance problems in securing official personal identity papers linked to their care status/history. Some experienced precarity in immediate daily life (for example, finding stable accommodation and income) or uncertainty in relation to longer term issues (for example, finding a well-fitting educational pathway). However, despite the significant challenges they faced, it was also clear that the care leavers were often active in seeking to navigate the emotional and practical difficulties they sometimes encountered. Overall, it is important to stress that broadly these findings are not unique to the Vietnamese context and are also reported to a greater or lesser degree in studies from other places.

We begin the presentation of findings with a focus on emotional challenges encountered by the care leavers, since it generally is as we have already noted a less visible issue in much of existing international evidence on care leaver experience. Again, we stress that the issue is not necessarily unique to the Vietnamese experience; its priority here is more a reflection perhaps of our sensitivity to this aspect in our approach to analysis. The remaining presentation of findings covers in turn the issues of accessing social support, seeking progress in relation to education, employment and accommodation, the experience of stigma, personal identity issues and finally the experience of filial duties in line with cultural norms. The topics that structure these findings also resonate with key issues identified in the literature already discussed above, for example (especially Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä & Karki, 2018; but also Stubbs et al., 2023; Feather, Allen, Crompton, Jones, Christiansen & Butler, 2024; and Kelly et al., 2024).

3.1. Responding to the emotional challenges of the transition after leaving the center

Prior to leaving their residential care center, the care leavers in the study had been used to living in a communal setting with close involvement with many other people (caregivers, other center staff, and other young people) (see for example, Emond, 2010). Some had experienced transitional support arrangements which eased the shock of the change from the relational nature of life in the center, to a different reality in wider society. But whether immediate or gradual, many of them had found the change in moving out and managing on their own a new, demanding and sometimes lonely experience, where daily life now meant being by themselves (or with strangers) most of the time, and having to rely on themselves much more. As one young woman recalls: "There was no one to take care of me, I needed to solve all problems by myself, there was no one to confide in because the ones living with me were strangers, so I just cried." (Linh, 24 years old, Female, international NGO). The transition from life at the center could also mean exposure to new aspects of culture, and to a different overall lifestyle, especially for people who had also moved originally from a small home town and were now adjusting to the demands of life in a big city.

The young people reported dealing with stressful feelings in different ways. As Khanh explained,

> "I feel loneliness and loss every day. If there is no one to talk to, I read books or watch movies which have similar characters like me, or watch comedy shows to laugh it off, then going to sleep. I know that trying to sleep can be a waste of time sometimes. But I wasted lots of

time trying to ease my mental stress." (Khanh, Male, 24, international NGO).

The loss of the routine in the center and managing on his own had proved stressful for Khanh:

"I find it sad (soft and sad voice). It means that I have to start again, prepare everything for myself from the smallest things. In my old house, everything is at hand, and I did nothing but to use and enjoy them. Now, I feel stressed because I have to take care of everything." (Khanh, Male, 24, international NGO).

Reflecting on their sense of their own vulnerability having left their center, some participants reported a sense of feeling forgotten. Kien (Male, 20 years old, public funded center), felt disappointed that no one was checking on him regularly: "when I came here for college, I rarely received any phone calls."

On the other hand, not all of the interviewees mentioned such feelings. The risk of feeling loss and loneliness could be reduced where the young person continued to live near to their previous care center since this allowed them to maintain a close relationship with people at their center. For instance, Binh who rents a place close by and goes back to his previous care center on a weekly basis reported that "I felt normal because I often hung out with the kids and teachers." (Binh, male, 21 years old, public funded center).

Linh found new strengths in herself as she adjusted to life beyond the center:

"After leaving the village (care center), I become more independent, more self- confident, I mean I can survive. When I lived under the full protection of the village, I could not. I was so scared when I first left the village, but then I became more independent and stronger." (Linh, Female, 24 years old, international NGO).

Finding support was often a help in achieving a more positive adaptation, but the experience of how to do so varied for different participants.

3.2. Finding social support and striving to create their own safety net

According to our participants, the support that they received after moving away from the centers differed. Most centers (both public and privately funded) were reported to provide some regular cash allowance for up to the first three years, but the amount could vary across the centers and might not have been sufficient to enable the young person to cover the actual costs of food and accommodation. Apart from the care center where they grew up, the participants seemed to have a very limited support network. When asked whom they could call on for help, people from the centers figured in many responses. Three participants said they would approach the mothers (caregivers) at the center. Linh said she had been in steady contact with her caregiver at the center since leaving, and could even borrow money from her if needed: "She supports me with social difficulties. I feel safe to ask her for support when there is any challenge" (Linh, female, aged 24).

Some participants in the study had older 'siblings' (as in peers from the villages or centers) or friends who had moved out before them and who could support them in finding accommodation and when they faced difficulties. Khanh was able to draw on various center-related support in finding solutions to her accommodation needs. She continued staying at the care center while she studied at university. Upon graduation, she had to move out and found herself forced to move from place to place until she began sharing with a couple who were her friends from the care center:

First, I stayed with a younger girl who paid attention to small and tedious things, which made me a bit stressed. So, I wanted to move out. I found a place near my work through my church community, but the landlord did not keep her word at the last minute and told me that she had decided to let another person rent [the property] because she did not hear from me. So, I moved in with a couple who were my brother and sister from the village. They just had a newborn baby, so I was able to help them a little bit and they helped me too. (Khanh, 24, Female, international NGO).

The findings suggest that those care leavers who had little or no support to call upon could end up in quite precarious or risky circumstances. For instance, Nhien had to move out of the center when he was 18 years old, and he was not enrolled in any education program. The center gave him 2 million VND (about US$80) to support him in the first month after moving out. He tried to find a place that provided both accommodation and meals within this budget, but could not find anything.

During the first week after leaving the center, I walked around and looked for houses where the people went to sleep early and where they had a clean front door. I just slept in front of their doors. I had phone numbers of some people who had left the village before me, but I did not have any phone to call them. Then, I met this man who took me in and introduced me to work for a restaurant where I can work during the day and sleep there at night. (Nhien, 21, Male,).

Not having access to support can lead to a sense of real pressure on the young person to find a stable job to support themselves as they have no one else to rely on if things get tough. This issue could also affect their decision as to which university/college course or career pathway to follow. They may avoid career pathways where there are limited job opportunities, even if those pathways are actually their first preference. They put job opportunities and stability before a preferred choice involving "risky" passion because they knew they didn't have any safety net to fall back on. For example, Xao, loved Natural Sciences but he decided to study computer science, rather than following his passion because he saw other people got good jobs upon graduation with a computer science degree. He said he just had himself to rely on and the village couldn't support him forever, so he needed to have a good job to support himself rather than being able to follow his own preferred career interest.

3.3. Seeking progress on educational pathways, jobs, and accommodation

In line with each of the care centers' own policy, as the young people reached the local leaving age (possibly later than the legal age of 16), they needed to start moving to (semi-) independent life: either enrolling in some type of further / higher education or finding a job. A majority of the interviewees chose the option of vocational training which is free. Some vocational training centers offered free accommodation for students who could also earn a living by working alongside study. The participants were learning job skills in areas such as cooking, trade, fashion design, graphic design, room service, and sewing. Some managed to go to universities for courses including nursing, tourism, electrical engineering, and social work.

The jobs that the young care leavers obtained were often linked to their education and the training they took during their time in or after leaving the centers. Access to jobs was segregated broadly according to the level of skills the young people had acquired. Participants who graduated from universities often found professional jobs that fitted with their majors. Those who attended vocational training found jobs that matched their skills (often in restaurants, bars or bakeries), with some running their own business, for example, home-based catering. Participants without any qualifications typically found general laboring jobs.

Some of those who studied at vocational school (two year program) had ambitions to study at university level, but often faced personal and structural barriers to such progress as illustrated by the case of Dat who reported that he failed his high school graduation exam due to his home situation (after leaving the center):

> I failed the graduation exam due to family circumstances. I had no light after 6 pm for study. Therefore, I could not study much at home. At that time, I lived with my two aunties. They were very poor and could not afford having light on in the evenings. So I had to try to study in the class as much as possible. (Dat, Male, 29, local NGO center)

After failing high school, Dat worked as a bartender for a fruit company for three or four months, but then had to quit to care for his sick mother. Later, a co-worker of his mother then took him in and he was able to take some community education classes at night and re-sat his high school graduation exam. Upon graduating from high school, he enrolled in vocational training to study fashion design.

> I studied there for two years, and then worked in a fashion sale office linked to a UK brand-name. I was promoted to manager and also became a member of the display team. Based on my fashion knowledge, I knew how to dress, match color and choose style. When that brand-name closed, I moved to other companies, about five different companies since then. (Dat, Male, 29, local NGO center)

While Dat faced many challenges, he seemed to gain confidence from overcoming some of these difficulties. Reflecting on his experiences, he saw his progress as arising from a combination of trusting that he would find some support, a commitment to his own learning, his self-reliance and his own agentic actions. Despite the challenges he encountered, he remained determined to learn and succeed:

> Each move like that makes me start from the beginning without any instruction. If they are easy-going, they will guide me, if not, I had to try my best to search, look up to gain knowledge. However, thanks to that, I do not feel fearful or hesitant any more. (Dat, Male, 29, local NGO)

A challenge discernible in the comments of some of the participants was the reported lack of access to meaningful guidance or support for educational choices. Their previous caregivers often did not have higher education and came from rural areas so lacked experience for advising on educational pathways or career choices relevant to urban conditions. Since their life had been constrained within the institution, the care leavers also didn't have family members or a wider informal network with other older adults with such knowledge. The closest role models that they might have had were older 'siblings' who had left the center. Their choice was, thus, often influenced by the experience of peers who had chosen a certain course or educational institution, rather than being based on responding to their own passion or interest in a fully informed way.

In terms of accommodation, the participants reported relying on a wide range of 'options', access to which often seemed linked to their education or work setting. The care leavers who studied at vocational schools or were doing apprenticeships for trades such as electrician, plumber or silversmith were entitled to free accommodation, and even free meals in some programs. People who attended universities could sometimes choose to continue staying at the care centers. However, due to the distances involved, some ended up sharing with friends so as to live closer to their universities. For people who were working, they often rented a place with friends whom they knew from the care centers or workmates. Some connected back with their biological family members and stayed with aunties, biological grandmothers, mothers, or siblings. Overall, our findings are a reminder of how important family and friends may be in the care leavers' search for accommodation. While relationships of different kinds could be important, they were also not without their challenges for some of the participants.

3.4. Stigma and other challenges in personal relationships

Concerns about issues of both stigma and trust were mentioned by some participants as potential barriers to their forming new relationships in their lives. Once out in the world, some of the young care leavers reported fears of being stigmatized about their ex-care status and often chose not to disclose it. They sought ways to avoid what they found as undermining attitudes among certain people towards their former care history:

> In the past, I shared [my ex-care status] with some friends and they felt pity for me, but I didn't like it. Therefore, I hardly share about it, I just share this with some people that I am close to. (Tien, 24, Male, publicly funded center)

Whether related to feelings of self-doubt linked to their ex-care status or not, some of the young care leavers reported finding it hard to trust people or make new friends in their new life beyond the center. A number of participants reported having no close friends to hang out with regularly. Nhien, for example, was a 21 year old man who found himself homeless and jobless after leaving the care center, and said that he did not have any close friends that he could rely on. He was silent and looked sad when being asked about this topic and did not want to talk about his social life. Xao, on the other hand, was a 24 years old man, outwardly successful in the world of work, having a good job as manager of a foreign company, and earning a good and stable income. Yet, he had chosen to isolate himself from close friendships and embrace solitude:

> Honestly, I have told you that I am a positive person, but I don't have any close friends for hanging out with or anything like that. When I am outside, at work, I am positive, dynamic, quick, and hard-working, but when I come home, I like the quietness and want to be alone. (Xao, 24, Male, Youth Village).

Given this evidence on the challenges experienced by some participants in building new relationships, it is notable that more than half of them said that their close friends were from the past: childhood friends from secondary high school, or friends who lived in the same care center or fellow students from university or from the vocational training centers they were attending. Some of the young care leavers also reported finding it hard to share their feelings or difficulties with others:

> About my colleagues, I have to be close to them, really close, then I will start sharing more about myself and show them my true self. With strangers, I often feel an obstacle to sharing. In general, I can't stop thinking about my weakness, it is hard for me to work with new partners or move to another job in the future. (Tien, Male, 24, Youth Village).

Even in romantic relationships, some also found themselves feeling "insecure", finding it hard to trust people, to express and articulate their feelings, all of which could negatively affect their relationship. For example, Tuong, a 22 years old man, had dated two young women. He could not speak about his emotions with his girlfriends and found it hard to go further in his relationships:

> My relationship lasted for one year. When I lived with the first one, we rarely talked. I was embarrassed whenever I wanted to say something, I wanted to talk but I couldn't speak it out. (Tuong, 22, Male,).

Tuong was happy and felt relaxed when they went out for their dates but found it difficult to get closer and think about the future: "I went out with her, went for a drink and that time was very relaxed, comfortable. But when I thought more deeply, I found it difficult…".

Their time in care could cast a long shadow emotionally for some of the participants with risks linked to relational connections and stigma.

3.5. Negotiating challenges relating to their personal identity

In addition to all of these challenges and hardships (including the identity threat of stigma), one additional reported challenge related to accessing official identity paperwork needed for job applications and public services (Collins and Tuyền, 2016 p. 342–3). For example, Thuy

was 19 years old and did not have any formal personal identification. After her mother left home and brought her to the care center, her step-grandmother removed her name from the household registration book and as a result she could not get her official ID when she turned 16, which created some barriers for her in finding jobs with good employers:

> If I wanted to apply [to work] in a good environment like a 4——5 stars restaurant, they wouldn't hire me because I didn't have proper paperwork. Without my own personal ID card, they can't know how old I am. Birth certificate is not enough. So, I can only work in milk tea shop where they don't require much paperwork. (Thuy, 19, female, SOS village).

Collins and Tuyền (2016) (p. 342–3) note that assistance with resolving such documentation issues can be an important contribution by care centers, and for most in our sample this seemed to have been the case since it was not an issue widely mentioned. This issue of paperwork and care leavers is not unique to the Vietnamese case: it is also reported as an issue, for example, in China (see very informative discussion of related policy approaches in Yin, 2024) and India (arising in Keshri's (2021) study of care leavers in Mumbai).

3.6. Honoring filial duties to their two families

A few participants still had either a biological mother or father alive, and / or biological sibling(s). For people whose biological parents had passed away, they still had relatives such as grandparents, aunties or uncles and kept in contact with these to varying degrees. Upon leaving the care centers, the participants often did not expect any support from their biological families, as they knew their families were struggling themselves. Instead, there were instances of their trying to work hard to earn income so that the care leaver could offer support to their families in some way. While the young care leavers did not grow up with their biological families, now that they were adults and had income (where relevant), there were reports of their experiencing a strong sense of responsibility to offer support to their biological family. This pattern was especially strong in the cases where the biological parent or grandparent was still alive and biological siblings were around.

For example, Loan who was 23 years old at the time of the interview, had two brothers (one older and one younger). She reported helping them find jobs, hosting them at her place when they were in town and sending her younger brother some money every month. Her father was still alive, although he was already remarried, and rarely in contact with her. She still visited her maternal grandmother sometimes and provided her with some support.

In another case, Tung (25 year-old man) had a biological mother and grandmother still alive, and a younger sibling. Although not living with his mother at the time, he considered that supporting his mother was his greatest concern, "My mother is old now, therefore, I should take care of her health, food, and also finance." Tien had a sense of responsibility towards his mother and five siblings. He was very focused on working to earn money because he wanted to build a house for them. Supporting his family was also a source of pride and motivation for him: "I feel that I can give a hand to support for my family and I am a part of it." (Tien, Male, 24, public funded care center).

The sense of duty and obligation to care and support may also apply to others beyond biological family ties. There were examples of the young people also honouring a sense of obligation to give back to or support the center that had cared for them. Khanh said, "I should find a job that gives me enough money to live, and in the future, I should support the center because I have received a lot of support from the Center" (Khanh, 23, Male). In another case, Tien would give money to the children at the village when they received high grades as a reward or gave his 'care mother' money to buy better food sometimes:

> "My responsibility is taking care of my blood family, myself, and my family in the village [center]. Sometimes, I have to do things for my 'siblings' or take them to the supermarket or something else. Because, my foster mother [in center] is very good to me and I also see her like my blood mother. Therefore, the more love you receive, the more responsibility you have in the future." (Tien, Male, 24 years old, publicly funded care center)

This quote shows how filial duty helped Tien to re-build or maintain a positive status and connection with both his biological family and his 'care family'. In addition to filial duty, we have also seen how there are many other innfluential aspects to the care leavers' experiences as reflected in their responses.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Lived experience studies of care leavers remain comparatively rare outside the global north. While there may be some distinctive findings from this study reflecting its Vietnamese / Asian / majority world context, we are also struck by how many issues flagged in other studies from other contexts recur in this study. We remind readers again of two big differences between the care leaving context in Vietnam (and in much of the majority world) and that in many of the minority world countries: the very heavy reliance on residential centers as the default setting for care in majority world countries; and also the absence typically of some form of wider and longer-term social and economic 'safety net' for those struggling economically and socially beyond the initial transition from the care center..

In framing our analysis in this section, we draw on some key themes outlined in our literature review, relying especially on many of the key issues identified from the systematic review of qualitative studies of care leaver experience by Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä & Karki, (2018). The full set of issues identified in this review as mentioned earlier were 'academic qualifications, housing problems, employment and financial instability, building relationships and assimilating to cultural norms, and access to health care.' Of the seven they identified, only one (access to health care) did not figure prominently in our data, whereas issues of identity and stigma were more visible in our study (and are also identified in others). This suggests that there may be important convergence (as well as some divergence) in the global patterns to be found in the experiences of care leavers. The analysis that follows covers five topic areas, four linked to six of the themes from Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä & Karki, (2018) with the fifth and final issue addressing the emotional demands of care leaving (prominent in our findings and visible in the literature).

4.1. Barriers to educational progress

Our study data provides a reminder of how attainment on the educational journey heavily influences the quality of work opportunities for the care leaver, and that educational attainment is influenced by the relevant types of support reaching the care leaver. In the current study, progress after leaving the care setting seemed heavily stratified in terms of two different pathways of opportunities linked to the extent of educational progress / attainment. Those with the *educational capacity* (understood here as level of attainment *and* advisory and other support to progress educationally) seemed to fare better than those with limited educational attainment or support. While this may seem perfectly predictable, our study underlines the importance for care leavers of access to well-informed and well-suited educational advice drawing on accurate knowledge of educational provision and relevant work opportunities in the wider economy (an issue already noted as important for analogous populations in the literature review). In some of the accounts, there seemed to be evidence that some young people had struggled to find the relevant educational path best matched to their capability and interests, leading to frustration and disruption in their educational progress. It is of note that similar issues were also recently reported among a sample of care leavers in Ghana (Frimpong-Manso, 2021). Care

leavers may lack access to educational capital in the form of well-informed advice that non-care leavers may often be able to draw upon or take for granted within their family and related networks. Accordingly, our findings suggest that in the absence of such knowledge in their networks, care leavers may lack access to the right types of formal educational support (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä & Karki, 2020). The implications of failing to get the right educational advice and guidance are considerable representing a further challenge to educational progress, but crucially also to work progress. This deficit thus may become a potential additional barrier to accessing the advantages of accommodation and friendship as a student in the shorter term, and thereby a barrier to accessing, as a graduate, less precarious forms of employment in the longer term (due to acquiring more relevant skills).

4.2. Precarity relating to accommodation, employment and money

In the absence of a wider welfare state safety net and with weakened immediate supports after leaving the care setting, some of the care leavers reported a risk of uncertainty as to supports in managing everyday life, thus necessitating a very high degree of self-reliance (see Samuels and Pryce, 2008). Uncertain work and housing situations, whether for short or longer periods, were not uncommon among the participants. In such circumstances, the young people faced many challenges in negotiating their way independently.

For many care leavers, aging out of the care system required a new level of autonomy as they sought to navigate the demands of adult life without the same level of support (and dependence) that they could previously count on while living in the care settings and under the responsibility of the system of public care. This pattern is very much visible in our data, and a recurring theme in a wide range of international studies. Furthermore, care leavers must often negotiate this new autonomy with less support and more uncertainty than their peers who are not care leavers. In our sample, we observed how many of the participants faced risks of ongoing uncertainty or instability in one or more domains of their life, accommodation, education, employment, income and more. Based on our analysis, we propose the relevance of the concept of 'precarious autonomy' for understanding the challenges facing care leavers, a concept that we believe has application both in Vietnam and internationally. Originally this term was coined by Wong and Au-Yeung (2019) to reflect the impact of choices by young adults who prioritised leisure time freedom over a better income (and the demands involved in securing the latter). Here we use the term of *precarious autonomy* in a different way, not as a term to reflect a lifestyle choice in (privileged) journeys of emerging adulthood, but instead to capture the harsh reality frequently imposed on care leavers by their overall circumstances. We apply this concept in our study here, but also see it as having wider relevance for understanding care leaver transitions and lives far beyond the case of Vietnam. We propose the concept of *(enforced) precarious autonomy* to draw attention to important likely dimensions of the care leaver reality. While reaching the age limit of formal care may confer some new freedoms for the young person, the young person's exercise of autonomy and agency may often remain constrained by the precarity of their lives – due to the uncertainty they may frequently encounter in the personal and structural influences on their lives, and in their living arrangements and life supports (Tran et al., 2018).

4.3. Building relationships

Our findings suggest that for many of the participants their previous care setting provided important relational support, in line with similar evidence already noted in the literature review above. The transition away from the care setting may thus lead to disruption both in relational ties there and in access to any material supports previously received through the setting, both being types of support which may prove difficult to replace. The potential erosion of previous supportive relationships raised the risk of isolation and loneliness for some participants. Further, the transition to life outside also required, depending on the circumstances, a sudden or gradual switch from a life with structure and material support to a life with real risks of precarity especially related to uncertain livelihood and living arrangements.

While relationships are clearly important, building new ones did not seem easy. Our analysis shows how work assumed additional importance for the care leaver given uncertainties about their securing formal or informal support. Work gave the young person access to an income, and sometimes to living quarters directly through the workplace, or indirectly through sharing with work colleagues. In this and other ways, work may help to reduce the risk of precarity for the care leaver. The workplace may also be a source of valuable friendship and relational support, and a site where relevant relationships may be built (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2020). Apart from the workplace, another potential source for renewing or nurturing relationships seemed to be networks connected to their care centre, whether linked to peers or former carers. In some ways, the accounts of some of the participants remind us of the possible role of care centers as a source of social capital in adulthood, although there is also countervailing evidence from other participants that suggests the need to avoid overly simple assumptions in this regard. In addition to the workplace and the former care centre, the biological family may also be a source of potential connections, that may be sustained or renewed by relevant cultural practices.

4.4. Assimilating to cultural norms

An important finding in this study reflecting the Vietnamese cultural context relates to examples of a sense of filial duty among care leavers who still have connections with their birth families. We saw how care leavers often embraced this cultural norm of filial duty by providing material and other support to elders, siblings, or vulnerable relatives. While fulfilling filial duty might pose financial and emotional demands for these young people in some respects, participants also seemed to regard filial duty as helping affirm precious aspects of their sense of cultural, familial and social identity within wider society. Honouring their filial duties became a relevant way to renew or own family ties and to 'demonstrate "normality" by fulfilling normative social requirements'(Groinig and Sting, 2017, p.280). Such a performance of family ties could help to resist the risk of stigma. The performance of filial duty thus helped their sense of having a positive identity or respected place not only in their birth family but also in wider networks and society.

However, as was noted earlier in the literature review, there may be lingering issues that unbalance the inter-generational 'pact' envisaged by filial duty as understood in Vietnam. Placement in care may have disrupted the Vietnamese norm of reciprocity in filial duty (Mai and Le, 2024), depending on how the young person's sees the parents' role in that decision (to place the child in a care centre), and the consequences of that decision. Similarly, the care leaver's capacity to 'deliver' the material support to parents may depend on their security and standing in the labour market (whether providing sufficient stable income). Financial problems may make it difficult for some to achieve compliance with the norm of filial duty which is seen as the most important of all the virtues within the Vietnamese tradition (Mai and Le, 2024). Having a sense of 'succeeding' or 'failing' in complying with cultural norms on filial duty may become powerfully symbolic for the young adult's view of their status and role in the family and wider society.

Challenges in relation to having a positive sense of identity also surfaced in other ways in our study. There were references to the sense of stigma that some of the young care leavers encountered from others – and/or, crucially, from themselves in relation to their history as a child from a care institution. The relevance of stigma in our data resonates with its growing profile in the wider care leavers and children in care literatures (Kelly et al., 2024; Dansey, Shbero & John, 2019). In various ways, issues relating to identity could lead to emotional challenges for the young care leavers.

4.5. The emotional demands of the care leaving experience

Our study suggests that *personal emotional labour* (understood, as we propose here, as emotionally engaged effort in the face of personal challenges within daily lived experience) is an intrinsic part of the daily experiences of the care leavers in our sample. Examples of these challenges identified in our data included negotiating loneliness and isolation, the burden of self-reliance in the face of precarity, feelings of being stigmatised, other threats to positive sense of identity, and filial duties to two 'families' (biological and in the care center). There were also the pervasive issues of seeking support where necessary, and adapting to disruptive changes in their lives following transition from the familiar world of the care center where they had lived to what were frequently the uncertainties of life outside. All told, we would argue that our evidence lends support to the work already referenced in the literature review section that more attention should be given to the emotional dimensions of the care leaver experience (Adley and Jupp Kina, 2017). As noted throughout, a legacy of growing up in a care center is the potential risk of isolation in young adulthood. While certainly not a reality for all of the participants, there were examples where participants reported seeking to avoid or cope with emotional isolation, efforts involving a form of personal emotional labour for at least some of the care leavers. Without formal support systems, accessing informal emotional (and material) support becomes more important. This often depended, however, on the young person having enduring and supportive connections through which to access such support. This is not a straightforward matter. Life in care may have stemmed from, or amplified, disrupted ties to birth family. It may also have weakened the potential for developing enduring long-term friendships. Yet there are also examples of how young people found supporters and support to assist progress in one or more of arenas such as accommodation, education, work and personal relationships through friendships or family or family like ties. These positive experiences led to what might become displays of resilience through a combination of the care leaver's agency and the support of others such as former carers (see also Neagu, 2021, p. 134), or to some of their peers – their former 'siblings' from the care centers (a grouping also important in this regard in the Dima and Pinkerton (2016) study in Romania, or the findings of Kessler, Levy and Smith (2024) in Latvia. We suggest that the importance of preserving existing friendships and building new ones may be under-recognised as valuable (and often challenging) emotional labour for care leavers, and an understudied aspect of the overall care experience (Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021).

4.6. Policy Implications

While acknowledging the need for caution in drawing out policy implications based on a small study, we suggest that our findings (combined with insights from the range of literature reviewed) raise a number of issues worthy of consideration in terms of developing policy, provision and practice both in Vietnam and in other comparable systems. Given the widely established norm internationally of the formal *legal* **care leaving age** being the young person's 18th birthday, it would seem desirable that provision in Vietnam sets a target of matching that norm, thus raising the current care leaving age limit from age 16 to 18, in line with the common international standard. The experiences reported in our study and others suggest that negotiating these at age 18 is very challenging, but even more so at the younger age of 16 years. The concept of extended care (interpreted differently in different countries) can lead to informal extension of time in the care setting and/or other support for a certain period (van Breda et al., 2020) – and there was some evidence of such local informal extensions in our study.

The importance of multi-layered **transitional supports** in the process of moving from life in the care setting to life in wider society is increasingly seen as important (Feather et al, 2024). There is evidence that many care systems face challenges in achieving a consistent 'offer' to all care leavers at age 18, in terms of transitional measures linked to financial support, accommodation and relational support / advice for a specified period. There is growing debate internationally as to the importance, the optimal level and the nature of supports to be provided to care leavers, and the duration of same (van Breda and Pinkerton, 2020). This debate on potential forms and definitions of aftercare / extended care is uncovering a wide range of approaches with many jurisdictions accepting that support measures should extend out to early to mid-twenties. Our findings lend weight to the case for formal and informal social and emotional support to care leavers amidst the challenges of the transitions they must negotiate. Internationally, the special potential of former carers as sources of support is increasingly recognised. While this is especially true for foster family carers, there has been some recognition of how residential carers can also play a role. Our study offers examples of how former residential carers are also active in supporting care leavers in Vietnam. Policy and practice for young people in care centers and care leavers should recognise the potential of former carers – and peers – in previous care centers as possible actors in the support networks of care leavers.

Chiming with evidence from the wider literature, the absence of certain forms of educational support seemed to have negative effects in the progress of some of our participants. By its nature, education is a pivotal and long-term process requiring student effort and family and/or other equivalent support over time. There is a broad consensus in the international research literature that placement in care and linked factors (for example potential absence of family support for education) may be associated with disruptions in educational progress (Brady & Gilligan, 2018). This has led to many calls for additional tailored educational support for care experienced people while in care, and after they leave care. The findings certainly illustrate examples of unmet needs for greater support for care leavers' educational journey in Vietnam, not least financially, but also in accessing relevant advice on options and supports for first (or second chance) opportunities in the further / higher education system (Baker, Ellis, & Harrison, 2024; Gilligan and Brady, 2023). Investment in effective **educational guidance** and other supports for care leavers and analogous populations makes economic sense – it can bring benefits to these young adults and to the wider society and economy in Vietnam.

It seems important that Vietnam also considers these issues within its own policy process at both the national *and* local levels. Further, it is increasingly recognised internationally that policy responses need to reflect the diverse range of care leaver pathways. One size will not fit all, and provision should accommodate different levels and variations of need with fuller attention to potentially additional need groups, for example care leavers with disabilities. Policy needs to be built on evidence, and in this instance, it seems important for further **research evidence** to be generated to track the progress of care leavers in the years beyond the initial transition from the care setting within Vietnam, and thereby to assess differential support needs and effects of formal and informal responses to such needs.

Reflecting on our own study, we feel privileged to have been granted access to the lived experience of our sample of care leavers. We are grateful to our participants for giving us a glimpse of the issues they face. While our once-off cross sectional design yielded valuable insights, looking to the potential of further such studies in the future, we would hope that there would be opportunities to study in more depth various aspects of care leavers' experiences *over time* – in relation for example to family ties, educational and work journey, peer connections and support among care leavers, and the specific experiences of minorities in care – for example ethnic minority or rural young people, or care leavers living with disability. Drawing sub-samples from different districts / regions might also yield valuable insights – but all of this has resource implications in terms of carrying out such studies. With more resources and capacity to train more interviewers, there could be scope to undertake multiple interviews over time and to explore certain issues in greater depth.

We hope that our findings can contribute to strengthening policy responses for care leavers by, for example, informing policy engagement with issues in the areas of care leaver supports, influencing the training of social workers (and other relevant public officials more generally), and identifying future lines of research enquiry in relation to the needs of this particular sub-population of young adults who have a special claim on the interest and support of people not only in Vietnam but elsewhere. We are grateful to our participants for sharing their specific experiences in Vietnam. We have sought to reflect how agentic and committed we found the young adults to be as they adapted to life beyond the transition from their care setting. But our data also reminds us of how important the right support at the right time is for care leavers, and how relevant policy debates about providing extended care supports into early adulthood are for care leavers in every country (van Breda and Pinkerton, 2020). Their own agentic effort alone cannot suffice in enabling young care leavers to negotiate the challenges they face in the world beyond the care setting; progress is also strongly linked to well matched support. These are important messages for social workers and relevant officials to consider in their work with children in care and care leavers.

4.7. Three conceptual points

For our Vietnamese and other international research colleagues, we suggest that there are three *related* conceptual points from this paper that can help us better understand the care leaver experience within and beyond Vietnam. While the transition from care generally opens up a pathway to some degree of autonomy for young people leaving care settings, we have proposed applying the concept of ***precarious autonomy*** (Wong & Au-Yeung, 2019) to capture the risk of precarity and uncertainty that may so often be part of the transition experiences of care leavers internationally. We have also drawn attention to the often-overlooked emotional dimension of the challenges facing care leavers in the transition from care (Adley and Jupp Kina, 2017) and have proposed the concept of ***personal emotional labour*** to reflect the emotional effort that is, we suggest, an intrinsic part of the transitions experiences that care leavers must negotiate. In addition to the emotional aspect of the care leaver experience, we have also highlighted another less visible aspect of care leaver experience – the cultural dimension using the case example of issues facing care leavers in responding to the norm of ***filial duty*** in Vietnamese society (Mai and Le, 2024). We believe that these three concepts can help sensitise us in our efforts to better understand care leaver transitions and challenges in Vietnam and elsewhere.

4.8. A final note of caution

We owe it to the reader to acknowledge that this paper has limitations, while also laying claim to certain strengths. The study adds to the body of work internationally on care leaver experiences, and represents to our knowledge the first such study from Vietnam. This paper also sets the study in a context framed by a range of recent relevant reviews and other papers from the literature. We add a note of caution however as to the limits to generalisability of our study. We may offer insights as to what may be live issues for care leavers in Vietnam. We also acknowledge, however, that our study design (and resources) did not provide a basis for any definitive claims about the *overall* experience of care leavers in Vietnam. Our sample is small, our study is qualitative. It is not designed (nor resourced) to yield generalisable insights for the whole of the care leaver transition experience in Vietnam. It is also important to acknowledge that social research suffers a risk of bias in that often people faring better are more willing to come forward for interview. Participating in research may come low down the priority list of people who are finding life too much of a struggle at the time the researchers come calling. The composition of this and every other sample in research studies must be considered with that in mind We have however sought to reflect the realities experienced by the members of our sample, and thus to *illustrate* some of the issues that care leavers more generally in Vietnam may encounter in the transition from care, and in the years thereafter. It is worth noting that this point-in-time glimpse the study offers of life for this sample of care leavers may not continue to reflect their experiences as they grow older. Circumstances and lives may change. Indeed, a recent Austrian study (Hagleitner, Sting & Maran, 2022) noted that by their late twenties care leavers in the study seemed to be faring better than they had been in their early twenties. Again, this may not necessarily hold true across other studies in Austria or elsewhere, but it is nevertheless a useful reminder of how nothing is necessarily fixed in stone. Stories unfold. We have seen in this study – both from our own data and the literature review- that how the stories of care leavers unfold depends on the formal and informal supports that are available and how well these align with the agentic efforts of care leavers themselves.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank our study participants who gave generously of their time and experience. We are also grateful to our advisory group in Vietnam who supported us in the development of the project, and to our research assistant, Thao Phuong Nguyen, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City who contributed to key phases of the project. Finally, we appreciate three small grants we received for this international collaborative project from the International Association of Schools of Social Work, the Arts and Social Sciences Benefaction Fund, Trinity College, Dublin and the Research Voucher Fund, Unitec Institute of Technology.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

References

Bengtsson, M., Sjöblom, Y., & Öberg, P. (2018). 'Well, it's up to me now'–young care leavers' strategies for handling adversities when leaving out-of-home care in Sweden. *Nordic Social Work Research, 8*(sup1), 8–18.

Adley, N., & Jupp Kina, V. (2017). Getting behind the closed door of care leavers: Understanding the role of emotional support for young people leaving care. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*(1), 97–105.

Arnau-Sabatés, L., & Gilligan, R. (2020). Support in the workplace: How relationships with bosses and co-workers may benefit care leavers and young people in care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 111*, 104833.

Baker, Z., Ellis, K., & Harrison, N. (2024). Theorising educational engagement, transitions and outcomes for care-experienced people: Introduction to the special issue. *British Educational Research Journal, 50*(2), 455–460.

Berlin, M., Kääriälä, A., Lausten, M., Andersson, G., & Brännström, L. (2021). Long-term NEET among young adults with experience of out-of-home care: A comparative study of three Nordic countries. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 30*(3), 266–279.

Boddy, J. (2019). Troubling meanings of "family" for young people who have been in care: From policy to lived experience. *Journal of Family Issues, 40*(16), 2239–2263.

Boddy, J., Hanrahan, F., & Wheeler, B. (2023). *Thinking through family: Narratives of care experienced lives*. Policy Press.

Brady, E., & Gilligan, R. (2018). The life course perspective: An integrative research paradigm for examining the educational experiences of adult care leavers? *Children and Youth Services Review, 87*, 69–77.

Cleminson, T., Naoshima, K., & Kumagai, T. (2017). Overview of care leavers and aftercare services in Japan: Measures for extended and gradual transitions to independence. *Kawasaki Journal of Medical Welfare, 22*(2), 89–101.

Collins, M. E. & Tuyền, B. T. T. (2016). Youth Leaving Care in Developing Countries: Observations from Vietnam. In *Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care* (pp. 329-348). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Committee on the Rights of the Child (2022). *2021 Day of General Discussion Children's Rights and Alternative Care Outcome Report*. Geneva.

Dansey, D., Shbero, D., & John, M. (2019). Keeping secrets: How children in foster care manage stigma. *Adoption & Fostering, 43*(1), 35–45.
Dickens, L., & Marx, P. (2020). NEET as an outcome for care leavers in South Africa: The case of girls and boys town. *Emerging Adulthood, 8*(1), 64–72.
Dima, G., & Pinkerton, J. (2016). The role of informal leaving care peer support networks in Romania. In *Young people transitioning from out-of-home care* (pp. 409–426). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Dutta, S. (2017). Life after leaving care: Experiences of young Indian girls. *Children and Youth Services Review, 73*, 266–273.
Emond, R. (2010). Caring as a moral, practical and powerful endeavour: Peer care in a Cambodian orphanage. *British Journal of Social Work, 40*(1), 63–81.
Espinoza, P., Benny, L., Duc, L., & Hang, N. (2018). Youth transitions: Skills, work and family formation: Preliminary findings from the 2016 Young Lives Round 5 Survey: Vietnam. *Young Lives*. January.
Feather, J., Allen, D., Crompton, R., Jones, Z., Christiansen, A., & Butler, G. (2024). Transitional support interventions for care leavers: A scoping review. *Children & Society, 38*, 1579–1601. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12825
Frimpong-Manso, K. (2021). Educational experiences of care leavers from residential care in Ghana. *Child & Youth Services*. https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2020.1866984
Gilligan, R. (2019). Resilience, transitions, and youth leaving care. *Leaving care and the transition to adulthood: International contributions to theory, and practice, 11*, 51–68.
Gilligan, R., & Brady, E. (2023). What helps adult care leavers return to education? exploring the relevance of learner identity and the life course perspective. *Journal of Youth Studies, 26*(10), 1373–1386.
Groinig, M., & Sting, S. (2017). Educational pathways and the influence of social context conditions on educational biographies of care leavers. *Hrvatska Revija za Rehabilitacijska Istrazivanja, 53*(2020), 278–287.
Häggman-Laitila, A., Salokekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2018). Transition to adult life of young people leaving foster care: A qualitative systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 95*, 134–143.
Häggman-Laitila, A., Salokekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2020). Integrative review of the evaluation of additional support programs for care leavers making the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing, 54*, 63–77.
Hagleitner, W., Sting, S., & Maran, T. (2022). Socio-economic status and living situation of care leavers in Austria. *Children and Youth Services Review, 142*, Article 106620.
Harder, A. T., Mann-Feder, V., Oterholm, I., & Refaeli, T. (2020). Supporting transitions to adulthood for youth leaving care: Consensus based principles. *Children and Youth Services Review, 116*.
Ibrahim, R. W., & Howe, D. (2011). The experience of Jordanian Care leavers making the transition from residential care to adulthood: The influence of a patriarchal and collectivist culture. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(12), 2469–2474.
Ilie, S., Rose, P., & Vignoles, A. (2021). Understanding higher education access: Inequalities and early learning in low and lower-middle-income countries. *British Educational Research Journal, 47*(5), 1237–1258.
Kelly, B., van Breda, A. D., Pinkerton, J., Frimpong-Manso, K., Chereni, A., & Bukuluki, P. (2024). Youth in transition: Exploring a life course perspective on leaving Care in Africa. *Youth & Society, 56*(5), 926–945.
Keshri, A. K. (2021). Life after leaving institutional care: Independent living experience of orphan care leavers of Mumbai, India. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review, 15*(3), 255–266.
Kessler, Z., Levy, S., & Smith, M. (2024). Working together to create meaning: Narratives of care leavers in Eastern Europe. *The British Journal of Social Work, 54*(4), 1459–1476.
Mai, V. H., & Le, V. H. (2024). The interdependence of happiness and filial piety within the family: A study in Vietnam. *Health Psychology Report, 12*(2), 124–132. https://doi.org/10.5114/hpr/172091
Mendes, P., & Snow, P. (Eds.). (2016). *Young people transitioning from out-of-home care: International research, policy and practice*. Springer.
Mishra, R., & Sondhi, V. (2021). Theorizing pathways to resilience among orphaned adolescents in institutional care in India. *Children and Youth Services Review, 124*, Article 105972.
Neagu, M. (2021). *Voices from the silent cradles – Life histories of Romania's looked-after children*. Bristol: Policy Press.
Nguyen, T., & Nguyen, T. T. H. (2018). *Leaving no one behind in a growing Vietnam: The story from Young lives*. Oxford: Young Lives.
Nho, C. R., Park, E. H., & McCarthy, M. L. (2017). Case studies of successful transition from out-of-home placement to young adulthood in Korea. *Children and Youth Services Review, 79*, 315–324.
Radityaputra, R., Mendes, P., & Baidawi, S. (2024). What is known about the numbers, experiences and outcomes of young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Indonesia? *Institutionalised Children Explorations and Beyond*. https://doi.org/10.1177/23493003241286390
Roche, S., Flynn, C., & Mendes, P. (2021). 'They became my second family': Children's relational lives and relationship-based practice in residential care in the Philippines. *Child & Family Social Work, 26*(4), 652–663.
Roesch-Marsh, A., & Emond, R. (2021). Care experience and friendship: Theory and international evidence to improve practice and future research. *The British Journal of Social Work, 51*(1), 132–149.
Samuels, G. M., & Pryce, J. M. (2008). "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger": Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(10), 1198–1210.
Sarkissian, H. (2010). Recent approaches to Confucian filial morality. *Philosophy Compass, 5*(9), 725–734.
Sekibo, B. (2020). Experiences of young people early in the transition from residential care in Lagos State, Nigeria. *Emerging Adulthood, 8*(1), 92–100.
Shang, X., & Fisher, K. R. (2017). *Young people leaving state care in China*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
Shpiegel, S., Simmel, C., Sapiro, B., & Ramirez Quiroz, S. (2022). Resilient outcomes among youth aging-out of foster care: Findings from the national youth in transition database. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 16*(4), 427–450.
Stein, M., (2008). Transitions from Care to Adulthood Chapter 21 IN Eds. M. Stein and E. R. Munro *Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
Strahl, B., Van Breda, A. D. P., Mann-Feder, V., & Schröer, W. (2021). A multinational comparison of care-leaving policy and legislation. *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy, 37*(1), 34–49.
Stubbs, A., Baidawi, S., Mendes, P. (2023). Young people transitioning from out-of-home care: Their experience of informal support. A scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 144, 106735.
Tran, T. T. (2018). Youth transition to employment in Vietnam: A vulnerable path. *Journal of Education and Work, 31*(1), 59–71.
Tran, T. Q., Tran, A. L., Pham, T. M., & Van Vu, H. (2018). Local governance and occupational choice among young people: First evidence from Vietnam. *Children and Youth Services Review, 86*, 21–31.
United Nations General Assembly (2010). Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children: resolution/adopted by the General Assembly.
Uptin, J., & Hartung, C. (2022). Living in a crowd: Young people's counter-narratives of care in a Thai orphanage. *Children's Geographies*, 1–14.
Van Breda, A. D., & Hlungwani, J. (2019). Journey towards independent living: Resilience processes of women leaving residential care in South Africa. *Journal of Youth Studies, 22*(5), 604–622.
van Breda, A. D. P., & Pinkerton, J. (2020). Raising African voices in the global dialogue on care-leaving and emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, *8*(1), 6-15.Other authors, Author et al, (2020).
van Breda, Adrian D., Emily R. Munro, Robbie Gilligan, Roxana Anghel, Annemiek Harder, Mariana Incarnato, Varda Mann-Feder, Tehila Refaeli, Renate Stohler, and Jan Storø. "Extended care: Global dialogue on policy, practice and research." *Children and Youth Services Review* 119 (2020): 105596.
Wall, T., Ngo, N. T. H., Luong, P. M., Ho, T. T. H., & Hindley, A. (2024). 'Decent work'as a higher education policy myopia: An ecosystem framework for policy-making. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–15.
Wong, V., & Au-Yeung, T. C. (2019). Autonomous precarity or precarious autonomy? Dilemmas of young workers in Hong Kong. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review, 30*(2), 241–261. https://doi.org/10.1177/1035304619838976
Yin, S. (2024). Investigating Local Policy Responses to Support Care-experienced Young People in China-A Scoping Review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 107433*.
Yin, S. (2025). Exploring leaving-care and post-care experiences: What have helped care leavers in China? *Children and Youth Services Review, 168*, 108024.