Pathways of out-of-home care in the Netherlands

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Abstract

When the safety of a child is threatened (by abuse, neglect, loss of parents, or severe anti-social behavior), he/she may experience out-of-home forms of care in foster families, residential facilities or family-style group homes. In 2017, over 46,000 children in the Netherlands lived apart from their biological parents in a variety of formal care arrangements. These children vary enormously in the out-of-home care settings they experience and, to date, an understanding of this diversity is sorely lacking. Using sequence analysis, I will provide a meaningful classification of youth care experiences by integrating elements such as types of placements (parental, residential, grandparental and 'other' foster care), timing of entering out-of-home care, duration of stay, number of placements, and the order in which placements occur. Moreover, these groups will be described in-detail based on various family-of-origin, individual and demographic characteristics (e.g. parental separation, unemployment, crime, or socio-economic status; family composition at first placement; ethnic background). This study is based on the use of register data from Statistics Netherlands and includes an entire population-based birth cohort of children in out-of-home care (children born between 1990-1992). My study is innovative as I move beyond simple classifications of children in out-of-home care using isolated features (e.g. number of placements, duration of stay), and provide an integrated multi-faceted typology accounting for entire histories of youth care. This classification will be used in future research to study long-term consequences of various out-of-home care pathways for adult functioning.

Introduction

In the past decades, many studies attempted to classify children in out-of-home care and tried to explain how they fare as minors[1,5,8,9,10]. However, the large majority of existing studies used isolated features to describe out-of-home care experiences (e.g. number of placements, duration of placement). Although insightful, the use of such detached characteristics does not properly capture the complexity of youth experiences for these disadvantaged children. Let's think

of an example of two children who stayed in out-of-home care for 10 years. Can we regard them as being similar if one stayed for 10 years with grandparents and the other switched between different care arrangements (started to live with grandparents but moved into a residential facility, later on he returned to his mother but as this did not work out he moved back to a different residential facility)? Can we envisage a reality in which we place an equal sign between stability and instability in care? Most developmental psychologists and child welfare experts would not agree to that. Several authors have argued that the complexity of out-of-home care pathways may be best captured if we implement a holistic approach in classifying these children[4,6].

In my study I address the large diversity in out-of-home care histories by implementing a life-course approach. Specifically, the life-course perspective[3,7] argues that events can be defined by their type, duration, number, timing and ordering, and a classification of developmental pathways should integrate these different elements. In my study I will distinguish between different types of care (parental, residential, grandparental and 'other' foster care), will consider the timing of entering and exiting each form of out-of-home care, the duration of stay for each separate placement, the number of placements as well as the order in which placements occur. Based on the scarce research classifying youth using some forms of placement histories[4,6], I expect to find at least four different pathways: I. *short-term* single-type stay, adolescence limited; II. *medium-term* stay throughout childhood and adolescence, experiencing about two different placement arrangements; III. *long-term stable* stay, mostly in kinship foster care, entering out-of-home care in toddlerhood or childhood; IV. *long-term turbulent* stay, experiencing multiple placement changes over the entire youth period, possibly leaving care from a residential facility.

Data

This Veni-project will use individual-level information on all children born between 1990 and 1992 who experienced out-of-home care in the Netherlands. Population register data from Statistics Netherlands will be used to construct day-by-day dynamics in the living arrangements of these children by matching the residential addresses of biological parents and children for the entire youth span. Additional information on household composition and residential facilities allows a fine-grained distinction between types of out-of-home care in which these children lived. Data on multiple life aspects will be added from additional Statistics Netherlands micro-data

sources (marital and parental histories, employment, benefits, personal and household income, crime reports, educational attainment, household composition, ethnical background and other demographic characteristics). In addition, I will link similar micro-level data for these children's parents, grandparents and uncles/aunts. Based on yearly statistics of youth in residential and formal foster care for the years 1985-2000[2] I expect to find about 20,000 youth who will have spent some time in out-of-home care.

Innovations of the study

My study is innovative in two major aspects. First, it is substantively innovative as it moves beyond simple classifications of children in out-of-home care based on separate characteristics such as duration of stay or number of placements, and provides an integrated multi-faceted typology accounting for the constellation of care experiences throughout youth. Second, the methodology I propose is cutting-edge as I will construct a unique dataset combining large-scale population-based register data from various micro-data sources from Statistics Netherlands. This will allow me to follow respondents throughout their entire youth (from age 0 to age 18). Many previous studies investigated small or selective subsamples of children in out-of-home care.

Future research developments

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

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