Young people leaving care and institutionalised vulnerability in the Russian Federation

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A B S T R A C T

Care leavers are often considered to constitute some of the most disadvantaged young people in society, and there exists a significant body of research that seeks to understand why some young people 'succeed', whereas others struggle due to accumulated 'vulnerabilities'. Despite this extensive research base, policy and practice aiming to support young people leaving care remain diverse, indicating a lack of consensus on why some experience 'poor outcomes' and what might be done better to support them. This article focusses on the experiences of young people leaving care in the Russian Federation and makes two contributions; firstly, it provides theoretical insights through a critical discussion of the notion of vulnerability. We argue for attention to institutional vulnerabilities, which heavily structure the potential outcome of transitions available to young people leaving care in Russia. We note discourses and practices of dependency-related victim-blaming, which indicate the operation of 'attribution errors' in the Russian care and post-care systems, erroneously positioning individuals as responsible for their vulnerability rather than the dysfunction of systems of care. To fully understand the reasons for many young people's 'poorer outcomes', we suggest refocussing attention towards the combined operation of discourses, systems and structures through the conceptual approach of 'institutionalised vulnerability'. Secondly, the paper provides an empirical contribution in shedding light on the experiences of young people transitioning out of the care system as well as practitioners working in both the state and third sector in Russia, as the country experiences an ongoing process of deinstitutionalisation. This is important for other contexts given global efforts to deinstitutionalise residential child care settings.

1. Introduction

The transition to 'independence' for many young people is complex. Literatures across the social sciences have demonstrated how the path to adulthood is now increasingly fragmented and individualised (Settersten et al., 2015), with prolonged reliance on the family unit (Cote and Bynner, 2008). For many disadvantaged young people, the transition to adulthood occurs in a context of growing precarity (Antonucci, 2018), increasing the importance of familial and kinship connections as vital forms of support. This situation is particularly precarious for young people transitioning out of care, or 'care leavers', who often constitute some of the most disadvantaged members of any society. These young people face 'compressed and accelerated' transitions to adulthood (Stein, 2006a), often lacking the social and economic capital of their non-care experienced peers. There exists a significant body of research that seeks to understand these transitions, exploring why some young people 'succeed', whereas others struggle due to accumulated 'vulnerabilities' (Stein, 2006b). Despite this extensive research base, policy and practice aiming to support young people leaving care remain diverse, indicating a lack of consensus on why some experience 'poor outcomes'

and what might be done better to support them.

In this article we focus on the experiences of care leavers in the Russian Federation, where the need for strong forms of aftercare support is especially acute as the social and economic dislocations of post-Soviet transition have magnified the role of family and kinship in managing young people's access to education, work, and housing (Walker, 2010, 2018). In the past decade, the Russian state has pursued a process of deinstitutionalisation and what has been termed a 'paradigm shift' in child welfare practice (Kulmala et al., 2017), but little is currently known about the systems for and experiences of transitioning out of state care for young people in the country. The contribution of this article is twofold; firstly, it provides theoretical insights through critical discussion of the notion of vulnerability, addressing a call in the field for more theoretically-informed research (Glynn, 2021). We argue for attention to institutional vulnerabilities, which heavily structure the potential outcome of transitions available to young people. The Russian care system illustrates this very clearly with elements of the existing welfare system dysfunctional in many respects (see Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2020a; Chernova and Shpakovskaya, 2020b; Abramov et al. 2016). We note problematic discourses and practices of dependency-

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related victim-blaming, which indicate the operation of 'attribution errors' in the Russian care and post-care systems, erroneously positioning individuals as responsible for their vulnerability rather than the dysfunction of institutions of care. We argue that there is a need for a conceptual approach within research on leaving care, which captures the interaction between the various forms of vulnerability and their impact on young people leaving care. To fully understand the reasons for many young people's 'poorer outcomes', we suggest refocussing attention towards the operation of systems, structures, and discourses, and how they coalesce, through the conceptual approach of 'institutionalised vulnerability'.

Secondly, the paper also provides a significant empirical contribution to the field in shedding light on the experiences of young people transitioning out of the state care system as well as practitioners working in both the state and third sector in Russia, a country experiencing an ongoing process of deinstitutionalisation (Kulmala et al., 2017; Kulmala, Chernova et al., 2021). Such findings are important in the context of global moves towards the deinstitutionalisation of care settings for children to identify best practice for supporting young people as they leave care (see Uptin and Hartung, 2022, and United Nations, 2019).

We begin this article with a discussion of the concept of vulnerability and its relevance to studies of transitions from care, in particular for making sense of apparently 'poorer outcomes'. We then contextualise the study with an overview of the Russian system, outlining the mechanisms of support available in the country as it transitions through processes of deinstitutionalisation, followed then by our sample and methodological approach. In drawing on the experiences of our participants, we explore perspectives on preparation for leaving care from both practitioners and young people. We argue that young people are subjected to individualising and responsibilising discourses, which position them as underserving because they do not perform vulnerability acceptably. Such approaches mistakenly attribute the production of vulnerability to care leavers, whereas we argue that the Russian care system itself is in many respects a source of vulnerability and exclusionary processes.

Leaving care and institutionalised vulnerability

In 2017 there were estimated to be nearly 2.7 million children globally living in residential care alone (Petrowski et al., 2017), with the overall figure for children living apart from their birth families likely to be much higher. The end of legal responsibility of the state for young people in out-of-home care constitutes the formal definition of leaving care, which in many countries happens when the young person turns 18 (Mendes and Snow, 2017). Youth transitions to adulthood have been regarded as becoming increasingly prolonged and fragmented, as interlinked transitions in education, employment, housing and family are all beset with both an array of new choices and growing forms of instability and insecurity (Coles, 1997; Settersten et al., 2015; Cote and Bynner, 2008; Walker and Stephenson 2011). Thus, while non care-experienced youth draw increasingly on familial resources well beyond their teenage years as they experience an extended youth phase, young people leaving care are seen as facing a sudden and instant transition to 'independence' and adult responsibilities (Stein, 2006a). Existing literature comprehensively points to a number of poorer outcomes for young people leaving care as a result of their relative disadvantage, with many at higher risk of experiencing homelessness (Courtney and Dworsky, 2006), unemployment (Biehal et al., 1994), poorer mental health (Baidawi et al., 2014) and overrepresentation within the criminal justice system (Blades et al., 2011).

Theoretical contributions which seek to explain 'poor outcomes' among care leavers have often focussed on the production of 'resilience', broadly defined as the capacity of people(s) to survive or flourish in the face of adversity (see Stein, 2006a; Daining and DePanfilis, 2007; Driscoll, 2013; Refaeli, 2017; Schofield et al., 2017). Approaches that highlight a differential capacity for resilience, which is primarily

situated at the individual level, have been criticised for privileging 'the status quo that may be causing *vulnerability* in the first place' (Sou, 2021, emphasis ours). Care leavers are often described as 'vulnerable' in both policy and academic literatures; they are considered to exhibit vulnerability in relation to having experienced early trauma, for the transitions they must make and for the outcomes of these transitions. Yet, unlike the term 'resilience', which has received considerable criticism (see van Breda 2018 for a review), the terminology of 'vulnerability' or 'vulnerable' has been subjected to less critical engagement in research on leaving care.

The term vulnerable comes from the Latin *vulnerare*, 'to wound', and is thus interlinked with harm or to be at risk of harm. As such, measures focussing on vulnerability may appear as a benign attempt to achieve social justice and inclusion, yet the term manifests in complex ways in social welfare policy and practice. The application of the concept in policy and welfare provision has been noted to encompass individualising discourses as well as paternalistic, oppressive practices engendering social control and stigmatisation (Brown, 2015). As McLeod (2012: 13) argues: 'the designation of vulnerability reflects neo-liberal processes of individualisation and an accompanying self-responsibility for demonstrating, claiming and enacting citizenship.' Brown (2015) traces the encroaching use of vulnerability in U.K. social policy, identifying what she terms the 'vulnerability zeitgeist'. She notes that in relation to children and young people, the concept is often individualising in explanatory approaches due to childhood being understood as an innately and biologically vulnerable developmental stage (see also James and James, 2017; Mayall, 2002). Innate conceptualisations of vulnerability have been problematised within Childhood Studies scholarship where consideration of children's competence and capacity for action has stimulated significant critiques of previously dominant psychological developmentalist approaches (James and Prout, 2003). Despite this, welfare systems for children and young people often form around notions of vulnerability, which present:

> social-structural marginalisation and exclusion … [as] an individual responsibility, a move camouflaged in the language of vulnerability and developmentalism which lends a kind of moral, emotional and biological inevitability to differential youth experience and outcomes … Vulnerability is [thus] disarticulated from the social and firmly located in the individual. (McLeod, 2012: 20)

The deployment of vulnerability in welfare policy and practice can also be read as a form of governmentality; a form of power, dispersed in society through institutions, norms and systems of thought that produce compliant subjectivities (Huxley, 2008). In tracing vulnerability governance in welfare interventions, Brown (2015) identifies that welfare recipients must perform vulnerability convincingly in order to receive support, highlighting the ways in which vulnerability is often structurally determined. Certain groups risk exclusion from support should their behaviour transgress societal norms. For example, Brown (2015: 146) points to the exclusion of young men who adopt hyper-masculine displays, and of young women who are perceived to be overly sexual, on the grounds of transgressing acceptable gendered performances. Vulnerability is thus strongly aligned with deficit approaches and notions of 'deservingness' and contributes to the exclusion of those who do not perform it effectively according to societal norms.

These designations of vulnerability in welfare practice can be seen as indicating the operation of an 'attribution error' or 'signalling symptom'. Rachael Stryker (2013) uses the former notion in her research on the treatment of previously institutionalised children, adopted by US families, who are diagnosed with Reactive Attachment Disorder (an inability or unwillingness to form reciprocal emotional relationships) in cases where adoption arrangements have fallen apart. She argues that this medicalisation of a dysfunctional relationship is an attribution error because it results from 'a tendency to over-value dispositional or pathological explanations for the observed behaviors of children … while under-valuing structural explanations … in ways that distract and/or

deflect attention away from the violence associated with the systems through which formerly institutionalized children are circulated' (Stryker, ibid: 1186). Not only is the operation of structural violence made invisible, but also, diagnosis creates further violence in the form of controlling clinical treatments that only pander to the unrealistic expectations of adoptive parents. Stryker here relates her findings to the work of psychological anthropologist Howard Stein (1985) who develops the concept of social problems as 'signalling symptoms', using the example of alcoholism. The alcoholic:

> symbolizes irresponsibility, lack of containment, disorder, and dependence, all equally real parts of ourselves, the institutions we create, and the systems in which we take part that we prefer to hide or conceal from ourselves… [the alcoholic] contains these negative qualities so that systems themselves may be considered free of them. (Stryker, 2013: 1185–1186)

We follow Stryker and Stein in suggesting that the operationalisation and designation of vulnerability in welfare provision and practice for care leavers can be understood in a similar way. Vulnerability is erroneously attributed to individuals, either as a psychological property or as the fault of their own behaviours, rather than through dysfunctional care institutions. We therefore suggest turning the lens towards the role of systemic, structural and discursive forms of vulnerability.. This approach draws further inspiration from geographical and environmental risk literatures that argue for a focus on the 'inherent characteristics of a system that create the potential for harm' (Sarewitz et al., 2003: 805), which we argue also needs to be understood in the context of structural determinants of vulnerability and harm (see also Virokannas et al., 2020). We argue that care leavers are subjected to, and experience, a range of forms of vulnerability, which coalesce to form what we term 'institutionalised vulnerability'. This encompasses systemic vulnerability in the form of dysfunctional systems of care, structural vulnerabilities such as exclusion from labour markets, and discursive vulnerability whereby policymakers and practitioners position care leavers as inherently vulnerable and therefore prone to failure. While elements of these have been considered within the wider literature, there is as yet no conceptual and empirical framing that demonstrates that such processes are not experienced in isolation but operate together, as nodes situated along institutionalised pathways that strongly structure the transitions available for care leavers. In refocussing the attribution of vulnerability in social policy and welfare practice, we suggest this conceptual framing is useful in correctly identifying and addressing the issues that care leavers face in transitioning to life beyond care. We deploy this below to explore the production and operation of institutionalised vulnerability alongside broader forms of social structures within Russian society and other contexts where care leavers navigate transitions out of care.

Young people leaving care in the Russian Federation

Residential care has long constituted the dominant form of care for children living outside of the family in Russia, with large scale institutions the norm. The Soviet state constructed these institutional settings as closed spaces, often separated off from wider society, and although able-bodied children in care were integrated into the industrial and agricultural economies through the vocational training system (Walker, 2010), there was little focus on teaching young people life skills or facilitating their independence. In the early 21st Century the state care system was increasingly criticised for failing to support the facilitation of familial relations and placements (Khlinovskaya Rockhill, 2010). In the past decade the Russian state has, however, pursued a policy of deinstitutionalisation and system change to the child welfare institutional network (Kulmala, Jäppinen et al., 2021). The deinstitutionalisation agenda centres on the notion that every child has the right to grow up in a family, with the reorganisation of existing infrastructures such as repurposing children's homes (*detskie doma*) as

'Family Rehabilitation Centres' (*Tsentry Sodeistviya Semeinomu Vospitaniu*) with a statutory duty to find children family placements (Kulmala, 2017). The implementation of this process has been noted as fragmented and complex (Tarasenko, 2021), yet there appears to be a general statistical trend which suggests a consistent reduction in the numbers of children in the care system (Biryukova and Makarentseva, 2021). Despite this, there remain large numbers of children residing in care and 'a relatively high level of institutionalisation' (Biryukova and Sinyavskaya, 2017: 368); fundamentally, Russia remains a country with a significant number of children deprived of parental care at 2% of the total child population (Kulmala, Jäppinen et al., 2021). While Russia has no federal monitoring system to track the outcomes of young people leaving care (Stepanova and Hackett, 2017), some Russian studies suggest that many experience 'poorer outcomes'. Oslon (2016), for example, notes that only 7% go on to Higher Education, while other reports suggest as many as 40% of care graduates may become involved in substance misuse or experience the criminal justice system (Philanthropy, 2015). Therefore, there remains a vital need for effective aftercare services to support the many young people who transition to life beyond care each year.

Across Russia, most children age out of state care between sixteen and twenty-three years of age (Stepanova and Hackett, 2017). In many respects, on paper, the Russian aftercare system provides significant support to those ageing out of care; reflecting emerging practices in many countries, young people leaving care have the right to 'stay put' and reside in their care settings till the age of 23, they have the right to train in two vocational education courses (which can total 5 years) supported by grants (*stipendiya*), and are supported through higher education (Kulmala, Chernova et al., 2021). Similarly, in addition to the monthly payments they receive while studying, care leavers are afforded support in the form of a one-off payment at the point of leaving care, the right to a living space (an apartment or similar), which is transferred into their personal ownership after five years, as well as subsidies for housing and communal services (ibid). Despite this, Stepanova and Hackett (2017: 368) suggest that while material provision for care leavers in Russia appears relatively generous, other forms of support, such as practical or emotional support while *in* care, may be lacking. Echoing this, the biographical narratives of our respondents point to disconnects between the aims of the system and practitioners, and certain outcomes.

The perceived generosity of the state's provisions upon leaving care has also been critiqued in the Russian media and by practitioners who see it as further embedding forms of psychological dependency (*izhdivenchestvo*) on the welfare system, which have their roots in young people's experiences while in care, when everything is done and provided for them. In Khlinovskaya Rockhill's (2010) ethnography of children's homes in the Russian Far East, for example, she notes that practitioners articulated a sense of disbelief that care leavers did not thrive when provided with such generous material support both in and on leaving care. Similarly, Abramov et al. (2016: 18) note that some practitioners see young people in care as learning primarily how to manipulate the state in the acquisition of resources without demonstrating responsibility for their own transitions, thus exhibiting symptoms of what is depicted in media discourses (Chashchin and Bormotova, 2019, for example) as a kind of 'dependency culture' (*izhdivencheskii nastroi*) (see also Dovzhik and Archakova, 2015). This paradoxical discourse, in which care leavers are at once positioned as knowing subjects capable of manipulating a welfare system and as docile subjects, too institutionalised to be capable of anything, echoes similar discourses globally, in which care leavers are positioned at the sharp end of narratives of state dependency (Inchley et al., 2019), and creates another layer of stigmatization for an already stigmatised group. The tendency to position care leavers in this way in Russia is especially pronounced because of Russia's specific institutional history and the shifting forms of governmentality operating around the care system, which, as our evidence further illustrates, is transitioning from a model

of total institutionalisation to one focused on the production of independent subjects with both the right and the responsibility to participate (as workers, learners, consumers) in the new market economy. We argue that this type of discourse is another signalling symptom that, as Glynn (2021) finds, not only conceals the real ways in which systemic inadequacies are themselves producing vulnerability, but also constitutes a form of symbolic violence to care leavers that denies them the recognition and sense of solidarity that welfare recipients might otherwise receive in a less judgemental context. This underscores the importance of revealing how systems, structures, and discourses coproduce uneven vulnerability to illustrate the complexity of transitions to life beyond care.

2. Methodology

Project context and aims

The research discussed in this paper emerged from a British Academy funded project focused on young people's transitions from care in the Russian Federation. The project involved fieldwork over several visits in 2018–2019 and focussed on St. Petersburg and the wider Leningradskaya Oblast'. These field visits were preceded by a workshop in St. Petersburg organised by the authors, which involved practitioners, academics and third sector experts to help guide and refine the research process.

This was an exploratory project and aimed to shed light on both the forms of aftercare services available to young people ageing out of care and also the outcomes of transitions to employment, housing, and education in Russia. The project examined different contexts (rural, small town, city) across a singular region to gauge the full range of services available to, and experiences of, young people leaving care, as well as the views of practitioners in the state and third sectors.

Sample and ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the lead university before research activities began. In order to recruit for the study, we adopted a purposive sampling technique, approaching practitioners in this field from both the state and third sector as initial gatekeepers. Through these initial contacts we followed a snowballing approach, relying on practitioner and care leaver networks to identify further participants. While gatekeepers facilitated initial contact with care leavers, the researchers spoke to participants separately and explained the aims of the research and nature of participation. This provided the opportunity for participants to decline involvement. Informed consent was granted for all interviews, and no incentive such as remittances were offered to participants for their involvement. To protect the individuals involved in this project we have anonymised participants and changed certain details such as names of locations and employers.

Our sample included a diverse collection of participants, which helped to capture the range and quality of service provision for care leavers in Russia. Over the course of the three research trips interviews were conducted with young people who were about to leave care or had left care recently, and with a range of practitioners working with care leavers, including staff both in children's homes and in educational institutions, social workers tasked with assisting care leavers with any aspect of the transition to adulthood, teachers in the mainstream schools care leavers now attend, and NGO staff working in this sphere of child and family welfare. In total the research team interviewed 25 care leavers ranging from age 18 to 31. A relatively wide age range of care leavers emerged organically from our snowballing approach, and we chose not to exclude anyone with potentially relevant experience. This meant the inclusion of two older care leavers (aged 30 and 31), one of whom now worked in a children's home and thus offered perspectives of both living and working in the system. Our sample also included 16 practitioners. The sample of participants came from a variety of different

sites: a Centre for Family Rehabilitation (*Tsentr po Sodeistviu Semeinogo Vospitaniya*) in Staraya Dugda,[1] a small town in the region; the school local to the Centre for Family Rehabilitation; a vocational college (*litsei*) in the Vyborg district of St. Petersburg, which had large numbers of care leavers due to having hostel accommodation; social housing in a rural region; a youth centre and hostel on the outskirts of a regional town, which provided accommodation for young people who had left Children's Villages; two NGOs which provided care leavers with a range of forms of support; and the offices of social workers at the Sector for Social Support Measures (*Sektor mer sotsialnoi podderzhki*) within the Social Welfare Department (*Otdel sotsial'noi zashchity naseleniya*).

Methods

A semi-structured interview technique was used with participants, following an interview schedule that was devised before the research began, although participants were also free to discuss any topic that felt important to them related to the process of leaving care. In certain interviews participants preferred to speak openly and widely, without any prompting questions, producing rich narratives of their biographical experiences, while in other interviews, participants appeared more comfortable to adhere to the more rigid interview schedule. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, all interviews were led by the participants to set them at ease and respect their wishes to avoid any possible distress. Since interviews with care leavers were biographical, they included information about a wide range of institutions and care settings experienced by the respondents over the course of their lives that were not themselves a direct focus of the research. For example, several participants had been in and out of foster care arrangements between periods in institutions. With regard to the institutions directly involved in the research, insights into relationships between staff and the young people in their care at the Centre for Family Rehabilitation, the college, the youth centre and the social housing setting in rural Leningradskaya Oblast' were derived both from interviews and from overt ethnographic observations made while visiting them. Interviews were conducted in Russian by the researchers in settings that were selected by participants.

Analysis

Transcripts were analysed in Russian using a form of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), to identify key themes within the experiences of transitions from care for young people. The data that forms the basis of this paper explores a central theme among professionals, highlighting deficit perspectives in rationalising care leaver outcomes. We then explored care leaver perspectives on their outcomes and how they navigated these transitions. What emerged was a disconnect between the perspective of the practitioners and that of the young people, which we seek to demonstrate here, drawing upon our conceptual framing of institutionalised vulnerability. Quotations used in this article from the data have been translated into English by the authors.

3. Findings

In what follows we begin the presentation of our findings with a discussion of practitioner perspectives. Within these perspectives, a paradoxical discourse emerges positioning the young people as both innately vulnerable and yet also agentic, and therefore culpable for their outcomes. The care leavers in our sample were diverse and experienced a number of different 'outcomes', but all achieved degrees of stability and were managing to live independently. We challenge the practitioner discourse by exploring three contrasting biographical narratives of

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[1] All names, including place names, have been changed to protect the identities of respondents.

young people who left state care and now live independently, who we have called Masha, Anya, and Pasha. These three participants were selected because they fit the practitioner perspectives of innately vulnerable and 'poorer outcomes', but we argue that the conceptualisation of them in these ways is indicative of an attribution error. All three demonstrate the role of institutionalised vulnerability shaping particular aspects of their transition (education, housing, and work). While these transitions are presented separately to clearly illustrate the role and interaction of various vulnerabilities and attribution errors in operation, we acknowledge Johnston et al.'s (2000) holistic approach suggesting that these transitions are always interlinked and interdependent. We augment the biographical narratives with a note of their status in relation to of the outcomes and context of our wider sample of care leavers. We also suggest recommendations that would improve outcomes for young people leaving care and the avoidance of attribution errors in the welfare system. In drawing on individual participant biographies, we situate this work within the tradition of Youth Studies, where researchers have used biographical research to understand how young people 'make sense of their lives within the dynamic processes of transition and change' (Cieslik and Simpson, 2013: 11).

Practitioner discourses: Care leavers as innately vulnerable or dependent and strategic agents?

Practitioners in our study appeared very committed to supporting the young people in their care to navigate and achieve successful transitions to adulthood. This was especially evident at the Family Rehabilitation Centre, which, among the state and non-state organisations in which interviews were conducted, was the most closely and actively involved in preparing young people for adult life, in many cases looking after children from a very young age all the way up to 23 years old. Throughout our visits to the Centre, it was clear that the formation of supportive and loving relationships with the children was a paramount concern for staff. This was reflected not only in the communications between staff and children in their care, but also in the ongoing bonds they had formed with young people who had left their care, who returned regularly for social visits, as well as for our research. According to the director of the Centre, they are so well looked after, both emotionally and materially, that '*it's difficult for them to leave, they like it so much here*'. However, while practitioners were often supportive of the young people they were working with, they were also often frustrated at what they perceived as care leavers' poor outcomes. They struggled to make sense of why these young people, who had so much support, did not appear to achieve 'better outcomes'. They proffered, at times, paradoxical rationalisations which were powerfully marked by discourses of dependency and vulnerability. A form of innate vulnerability, transmitted across the generations, related to repeated trauma emerged as a key component for practitioners' explanations; care leavers were inevitably prone to failure because they had experienced so many traumatic phenomena before care, essentially positioning them as 'damaged products'. This was evidenced in our interview with the director of a Family Rehabilitation Centre, who provided us with an example case of a care leaver and the institutional churn of the care system:

> *She is the product of flawed socialisation … the children who are removed from dysfunctional families have been ruined by them; they have seen it all, this is a whole generation, a generation of alcoholics and drug addicts, the grandchildren of these alcoholics are already coming to us… this is a typical case of the children in the system.* (Director, *Family Rehabilitation Centre*)

Such perspectives are not uncommon globally; young people who experience trauma in early life have often been conceptualised in policy and practitioner discourse as inherently vulnerable to social exclusion (Brown, 2015). While such trauma should rightly be recognised, this can also form the basis of problematic and reifying welfare discourses. Such discourses present trauma-experienced people as constituting a homogenous population trapped in a perpetual cycle of intergenerational social exclusion through joblessness and crime (see MacDonald et al., 2014). If the care system is positioned as an intervention to break such cycles, then it is notable that practitioners also associated care leavers' time in state institutions with a failure to transition to life beyond:

> *[This] conflict with authority figures and the lack of independence - it, well, remains [throughout life] … That, in fact, is why these kids, on the one hand, get used to the fact that the state takes care of them for them. On the other hand, they believe that they are adults and do not owe anything to anyone from the age of 18, when they finally have this long-awaited freedom. And this is where these two tendencies collide: that is, the inability to actually take care of oneself and conflicts with others.* (Teacher-Psychologist, *Vocational College*)

This dependency on support was rationalised as a result of socialisation processes of state care; having been provided for their entire lives, these young people were seen to be unable to cope with their independence. Whilst positioning care leavers as passive and incompetent following life in care, the teacher-psychologist at the college also suggests they have agency in their denial of further support and acknowledgement of their vulnerable status. In such approaches, vulnerability acts as a form of governmentality, where young people are problematised for not accepting help in accordance with the state's conceptualisation of their vulnerable status. It reflects what Brown (2015) has termed the 'vulnerability transgression nexus', where young people are positioned as both passive, vulnerable and in need of support but also agentic and capable when their behaviour transgresses social norms and positions them as in need of social control.

While practitioners perceived these young people as vulnerable, they also insisted that the system operated effectively, expressing exasperation that young people leaving their care did not achieve more. Significant levels of financial and practical support were understood as not incentivising care leavers to work and generating dependency on the Russian welfare system, but care leavers themselves were positioned as responsible for this:

> *They do not want to work, and we cannot do it all for them … You go to the store, and they just don't give you bread, you have to buy it … we explain this, but by and large they go and steal. They go and steal, so this is a very significant proportion [of the population].* (Director, *Family Rehabilitation Centre*)
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> *After they leave college they can claim unemployment benefit for six months… they get something like 50,000R a month, which is a decent sum… so the state constantly offers them jobs, and the kids do whatever they can not to take them… They think they're owed something, the state should give them everything: 'I've got no parents, so it follows that I'm owed something. Why work if the state has to pay me something'. Then he [sic] goes and works for 25, 30,000R, and he doesn't want that job, he doesn't need it, and they don't understand that this job is better than having no money. Unfortunately, this idea doesn't form in their heads.* (Teacher-Psychologist, *Vocational College*)

Both the director and the teacher-psychologist thus position care leavers as knowing and agentic, while also having considered them innately vulnerable. Classifications of vulnerability in social welfare are often highly moralised, positioning certain groups as deserving and excluding others from support for behaviour (Brown, 2017). For practitioners, while care leavers were vulnerable through their traumatic biographies, they were also positioned as knowledgeable; practitioners considered them fully aware of their rights and entitlements and thus responsible for their poorer outcomes:

> *If we are accustomed to go to do something ourselves, then when people come from under close control, they by and large do know what to do, [they know] what benefits they are entitled to. And in fact, the benefits for graduates [are significant].* (Social worker 1)

Here, again, care leavers are positioned as strategic and positioned at the sharp end of dependency narratives; not only keenly aware of their rights, as the social worker suggests, but also displaying agency through extracting resources from the overly generous welfare system. Such perspectives among practitioners were also common in Chernova's (2016) exploration of the social adaption of care graduates. In our discussions with young people about their experiences of navigating life beyond care a different picture emerged; young people highlighted aspects of systemic and structural failure which contributed to situations that made them vulnerable.

Institutionally limited educational choices – Masha's story

Masha was 24 at the time of the interview and had lived in two different children's homes from the age of 5, after the state took her and her younger brother into care due to her parents' substance misuse. Her mother, with whom she did not get on, visited her in care only three times over seven years before dying when she was twelve, while her father had died five years earlier. She described her second children's home in positive terms, having established close relations with both staff and other children, and maintained links long after leaving:

There's one carer [vospitatel'], I've been calling her mama since the first class, we chat often. And there's another carer, we met by chance on the beach in the summer before the first class. She lives right next to me, so we're also in touch. Mostly though we communicate on social media. (Masha)

At the same time, the home was described as a heavily structured and bounded environment; Masha's school was a short walk down the corridor. She and the other children were allowed out at weekends as a means of 'preparing them for the outside world'. Reflecting this, her interview emphasised a lack of control over life:

Up to the age of 23 we're considered to be living on the state, whether you've started studying somewhere or whatever, all the same the state controls you… They control you; they do everything for you. (Masha)

Masha completed the 9th grade within her children's home school, at which point she wanted to go to a primary vocational education (IVET) college to complete her secondary education and learn a profession; her dream being to attend a medical college where she could train to be a nurse or a physical therapist. Such a pathway is eminently achievable through Russia's vocational education system for young people leaving school at the 9th grade and should not have posed a problem. However, as Masha had experienced at first hand, care leavers' choice of college, and therefore of which profession to pursue, is heavily limited by the fact that they have to go to a college with accommodation (*obshchezhitie*) and a teacher-psychologist (*pedagog-psikholog*) who acts as a kind of social worker to care-experienced students. In this way, newly-reformed Centres for Family Rehabilitation, like children's homes before them, continue to act as part of an institutional eco-system in which children are streamed from care into particular vocational colleges (Chernova & Shpakovskaya, 2020a; Chernova and Shpakovskaya, 2020b). In Masha's case, she chose what was regarded as the best college available, and had the choice of either 'chef' or 'manager-organiser', but, as she explains, since care leavers are entitled to train in two professions, she thought she could go to medical school afterwards:

At one point the whole class was going to be chefs, but at the last minute a social worker persuaded me to go for 'manager-organiser'… So, it turned out that all my acquaintances studied another profession after this, since care experienced children have the right to two professions at secondary vocational level. I wanted to go to medical college but, because I have this joint diploma, they couldn't take me. I was gutted. I called all the social workers, and they said you should be able to join the college, but they wouldn't take me because of the joint diploma. (Masha)

Masha's description of needing and receiving help from her social worker – something echoed by our other participants – jars with practitioner assertions that young people were strategic subjects seeking to extract financial support from the system and unable to listen to advice. However, despite seeking advice, in Masha's case her educational pathway came to be a dead end, in more ways than one. Since 'manager-organiser' did not appear to open many doors for her, Masha's employment options also became heavily limited as she made her way through various forms of low-skilled, 'gendered work' at the bottom end of the service sector:

I didn't work according to my profession… I've worked in bars, cleaned floors, where have I not worked! Washed floors, washed dishes, minded children, sat in an office, worked in a shop for a while, I just need to learn how to work on a till as I get into a panic when I start dealing with money. (Masha)

Masha's narrative here points to a highly structured, but ultimately directionless, educational transition, which then shaped her subsequent precarious location in the labour market. Thus, Masha's experiences resulted not from her innate vulnerability emerging through trauma, but from a system that produced vulnerability. In the context of our wider sample, Masha is far from alone in feeling restricted in her educational opportunities, indicated by the fact that only one of the 25 care leavers we interviewed had managed to go onto higher education. For many, they considered it not even an option.

While reforms of the welfare system have taken place, the legacies of the original system still strongly determine care leaver trajectories and life chances. One suggestion to address this is to introduce greater monitoring of educational pathways and developing programmes to support, promote, and realise the aspirations of young people leaving care and improve practitioner awareness (see McNamara et al., 2019).

Unsafe housing transitions – Anya's story

Anya was 24 years old and had left care at 16. She had initially entered the state care system following the birth of her brother at age seven, although in this first instance she only stayed in a children's home for a short period of time before her aunt took her. From the age of seven to eight she lived with her aunt until she was returned to her mother and father again. Her parents soon began to drink heavily, and she requested to go back to a children's home, demonstrating agency in seeking out alternatives to a traumatic family home. Anya liked the first children's home she went to: *'it was generally really good there.'* But then the home was soon closed because the director was found to have been embezzling funds, which meant a move to a boarding school for children in state care (*internat*). Such institutions are typically more separated off from society. Anya, like Masha, also went to a vocational college but qualified as a hairdresser. While she had liked the carers of the boarding school, she recalled the lack of preparation for life beyond care with bitterness:

Anya: They never talked about it in any of the children's homes I was in. Even if you went straight to the actual director [of the home and said]: 'I am leaving care now, no one has even put me in the waiting list [for a home], where do I go?' He doesn't give a damn where you go. They don't care.
Researcher: So, there was no kind of programme, no financial literacy training, no public organisations that helped?
Anya: Nothing.

Anya's narrative was emblematic of some of the most problematic housing vulnerabilities that were produced, through a combination of practitioner error and systemic dysfunction. Firstly, when it came time to leave, she was told that she was technically already registered as having a share of a property (eight square metres) where her parents lived so was not eligible for a social housing property. Rather than have to live with her parents, she chose to live with a friend and then became briefly homeless before moving to a convent:

They didn't give me any housing, nothing, they told me: "You have your own 8 m in Pavlovsk, so get down there and live there." Initially, no one even put me on in the waiting list for social housing, even though both mum and dad have been deprived of parental rights for a long time … I left and I had nowhere to go at all, I lived with friend probably for about 5–6 months, I worked in a salon, fully provided for her for that period and for myself, and then one fine moment she found love and all that … she kicked me out… (Anya)

Such findings reflect literatures in anthropology and human geography demonstrating that the home is not necessarily a safe space for everyone but can be a site of danger, violence and precarity (Brickell, 2012; Jupp et al., 2020). The institution where Anya lived produced vulnerability by pushing her back into the orbit of those who had been considered harmful to her in her childhood.

Care leavers are legally entitled to reject the housing they are offered and request to be housed elsewhere. However, Anya's interview also highlighted how she, like many of her cohort and others she had met, were often unaware of their rights in relation to housing, or how to realise them, echoing Lerch and Stein's (2010) earlier findings. Indeed, it was in relation to housing that the NGOs in the study had been most often called on for assistance, echoing findings elsewhere that the third sector was often instrumental in filling the gaps left by a dysfunctional system (Frölich, 2012; Abramov et al., 2016; Chernova 2016). Despite this, practitioners often emphasised the financial irresponsibility of care leavers as the reason for the problems they faced, such as refusing to listen to advice on using their generous entitlements sensibly.

While some of the young people we spoke to did describe various forms of support from practitioners in the welfare system, including assistance from social workers in dealing with applications for housing, Anya's recollection of a lack of support was not uncommon. Despite a system that ostensibly guarantees social housing and support from a social worker, transitions into safe housing were challenging for several participants. Removing any requirement for care leavers to live with family members would address a significant flaw in the system. Furthermore, as Leal-Ferman et al. (2022: 18) note in their work on the Canadian system, care leavers often rely on caseworkers for knowledge about their entitlements, but may have poor relationships with them, or caseworkers themselves may have imperfect knowledge. A lack of understanding of rights and entitlements appears to persist among care leavers in Russia, and an intervention to educate practitioners and care leavers of these would help to reduce the production of institutionalised vulnerabilities.

Cliff edge care and fragmented transitions to work – Pasha's story

Pasha, 24, took part in the research through his involvement with an NGO that offered practical and emotional support to young people who had left care. Like Masha and Anya, Pasha's entry into care was also marked by traumatic experiences; he lost his mother when he was 9. Initially his aunt cared for him but gave him up after she realised that she could not claim her sister's flat through him, placing Pasha back into the care of the state. When asked about his experiences of these homes Pasha used language that described a punitive, prison-like space in contrast to a caring institution:

It depends on how you [are perceived]. If you show yourself to be a weakling, you will be treated like a weakling… If you show yourself to be tough, there will be respect. It all depends on your character. (Pasha)

Pasha's overall experiences of care were largely negative (he left as soon as he could) and were compounded by movement into and within the care system. While institutional care networks, such as the children's homes, are often considered to be static environments, they often encompass mobility that may be generative of harm to those within (Schliehe, 2021). Pasha moved three times and alongside these institutional journeys, the staff also regularly moved on; he commented that he

had never had the same carer for more than a year. The turnover of staff was noted by the teacher-psychologist at the college, who felt that a focus on bureaucracy in the system meant that people became frustrated and left their roles, with those who stayed constituting 'those employees who are more focused on bureaucracy and less on people.' The director of the Centre for Family Rehabilitation agreed with this and lamented that the system was essentially overburdened, telling us that there was just not enough time to work with children on an individual basis. These practitioners' concerns suggest that while the system is generous in terms of financial entitlements and protections, as Stepanova and Hackett (2017) argue, the forms of emotional and practical support that are also key components in facilitating effective transitions from care (Glynn, 2021) are not reaching every care leaver. Pasha's narrative of leaving care was like Anya's, suggesting that he had little preparation for life beyond the children's home:

No, they didn't prepare us. They didn't even explain what would happen to us in the future. To be blunt, we left the womb and were just left to get on with it. (Pasha)

Pasha's transition out of care reflected many of our participants' experiences; like both Pasha and Masha, virtually all participants enrolled in vocational colleges that their children's home helped them and encouraged them to attend. Pasha described a very structured transition to the vocational educational system, over which he had had even less control than Masha:

When I was thrown into a college; there were connections [with the children's home], so they sent me there. I wrote and applied to two other colleges, but they just threw me into the one where there was an empty place, so I just went to study there … I'm not going say where I went because it's too embarrassing … it didn't work out and I got expelled. (Pasha)

Pasha provided a further clue as to the nature of the 'embarrassing' subject he was made to study – most likely in a subject associated with femininity, such as hospitality (Walker, 2015) – when he declared his unwillingness to work in a service sector role demanding deference from an employee, or what he called '*kissing arse for money*'. Constructions of masculinity amongst young men leaving care clearly played an important role in processes of inclusion and exclusion, not only in relation to employment, but also in their plans to establish partnerships and families (see Walker and Disney, 2022 for a wider discussion). Nevertheless, Pasha's lack of choice surrounding the vocational training made available to him – which he described (and experienced) as depressing – was clearly central in placing him in a very unfavourable position in the labour market. At the time of the interview, he was working as an unskilled loader in a warehouse, which he described as '*horrendous*'. This outcome was not what he had aspired to and might be conceptualised from a policy perspective as 'unsuccessful', given that he did not complete his vocational training and transition into a form of secure employment connected with his education.

As Inchley et al. (2019) note, care leavers are often keenly aware of the dependency and deficit discourses practitioners use about them, and our participants often explained how this felt to them. In Pasha's case, despite the clear lack of choice he had had in shaping his pathway into adulthood, such discourses were reflected in the internalisation of stigma and, subsequently, of self-blame for the position he had ended up in:

I am a lazy person in life, I was never taught to love work, it's something that wasn't instilled during childhood in me … Now I understand that I should have chosen a profession carefully, to grow and advance, but now that time has been wasted. (Pasha)

Such cases of constrained agency and self-blame for poor choices amongst those with no choices to make illustrate how far neoliberal discourses of 'self-making' have progressed in Russia. As already illustrated in Masha's case, however, Pasha was far from the only respondent

who had quickly reached a dead end in the labour market. Even those who made it through their vocational education faced a range of insecurities that were structurally rather than individually produced. Care leavers in Staraya Dugda for example, graduated as hairdressers *en masse*, such that there was no chance they could be absorbed into the local labour market, as one of our respondents explained: *'there are too many hairdressers in Staraya Dugda… maximum 5 got jobs from the 20 in my group'*. Others did everything expected of them – trained at their recommended college and took a job through a college recommendation – only for employers to withhold pay. One respondent was even fired from her supermarket job when it became clear she was pregnant but was convinced that supermarket jobs would be all she could get when she returned to work. Job and income insecurity were thus widespread, as amongst the wider population of working-class youth in Russia (Walker, 2010, 2018), regardless of any individual choices respondents made. As with transitions through the education system and in housing, the assistance care leavers received from the state in relation to labour market transitions was perfunctory at best.

Finally, Pasha's statement that it is now too late to improve his situation relates to being past the age at which he is eligible for state support, demonstrating systemic dysfunction alongside the discursive and structural issues already noted. The director of the Centre for Family Rehabilitation also discussed this cut-off point of support for young people, noting that it is problematic:

> *I plan until the age of 23, but they say that more is possible. I would like people not to disappear at 23 … [A care leaver] under 23 years old can use his [sic] benefits, he has certain benefits, if he gets older, he can no longer take advantage of these benefits … we still have guys who are 25 years old who come to us, but they just do not receive any benefits by this point.* (Director, *Centre for Family Rehabilitation*)

As well as mistakenly identifying young people as the sources of their vulnerability, a concurrent attribution error is to assume that the welfare provided, even if it were fully functional, is sufficient to support these young people and then withdraw. While Russian aftercare services are generous in many respects, lacking the elements of eligibility and conditionality in some Global North contexts (see Van Breda et al., 2020), many care leavers in our research still echoed the sentiment of the director of the Centre for Family Rehabilitation, expressing a desire for some form of care to continue beyond this new statutory cessation of support. While the extension of state support appears welcome to both practitioners and care leavers alike, in certain respects this also simply moves the cliff edge that many young people must face in leaving care. Longitudinal research has highlighted that many care leavers may engage in higher or further education in later life than non-care experienced peers (Brady and Gilligan, 2019), which suggests that systems that withdraw support earlier are inadvertently producing systemic vulnerabilities even while they were designed to remove them. This brings into sharp focus the operation of aftercare services, not only in Russia, but globally. Writing in 1983, the anthropologist Lorna Rhodes wrote of aftercare services for psychiatric patients in the U.S.:

> '[The] whole idea of "after-care" implies that care can be finished, that someone else can take up where one leaves off, and that patients go out to something which comes "after" ward. But patients often don't want "aftercare," they want more care. Even when they do leave for good, the fundamental problems of delivering … care in an inner city area remain. Thus to ask the anthropologist to study aftercare and come up with recommendations for improvement is to request a magical solution for a central contradiction of the institutional task.' (Rhodes, 1983: 6)

Rhodes' argument about aftercare services some 30 years ago is still powerfully relevant; to simply increase aftercare services is an indication of the 'attribution error' or 'signal symptom' at work in a system that intends to support care leavers. There ultimately remains an institutional 'cliff edge' within the system, which cannot help but produce vulnerability for young people who arguably want more effective care for life rather than its abrupt end.

4. Conclusion

This article has provided empirical insights into a system undergoing reform, which also have implications well beyond the Russian context as many countries and international bodies seek to deinstitutionalise residential child care globally (United Nations, 2019). Through the experiences of young care leavers and the perspectives of practitioners, we have illustrated how transitions to life beyond care are often mediated by vulnerabilities that have powerfully structured young people's transitions to education, work, and safe housing. These findings point to the need to look beyond individualising conceptualisations of care leaver transitions and consider how practitioners and policymakers can best be designed to support them. Our findings point to the need for: greater monitoring of educational transitions; enhanced programmes to promote and realise educational aspirations; increased efforts to improve understandings of care leaver rights and entitlements among young people and professionals; and finally, a reconceptualization of aftercare support, thinking beyond the current modes of 'extensions' to more durable forms of emotional and practical support. Services designed in collaboration with young people may help to identify institutionalised vulnerability and avoid its implications for care leaver transitions. Such approaches have been recognised internationally as important in effective transition planning for young people (Park et al., 2021). This could form the basis for future research in this area, drawing on participatory approaches and action research. Similarly, future research might further explore the views of carers working in children's homes across multiple Family Rehabilitation Centres. While our sample does include participants from this group, a limitation is that this sample was small.

We have also shed light on the transitions of young people leaving care and developed theoretical engagements in this field. The transitions of many young people to adulthood are increasingly fragmented, with increased reliance on the importance of kin and familial networks for support, which underscores the precarity of young people leaving care, who typically lack such ties and the associated social and economic capital this provides. While there exists a considerable evidence base and rich set of academic literatures exploring care leaver transitions, there remains significant diversity in policy and practice to support care leavers across the globe. In this article we have developed a notion of institutionalised vulnerability, which identifies the determinants of care leaver vulnerabilities as a combination of structural issues, such as preparation for a labour market that cannot absorb them as workers, and dysfunctional care systems that facilitate transitions that inevitably leave young people in precarious positions. These are compounded by problematic practitioner discourses; an ingrained approach of presuming that care leavers are innately vulnerable and thus inevitably prone to failure. These phenomena coalesce and are experienced by care leavers at various points in the life course, at times concurrently. Far from being individual failings, the concept of institutionalised vulnerability shows how multiple forms of systemic, structural and discursive vulnerability powerfully shape and structure young people's transitions from care and restrain their agency, and thus addresses calls for more theoretically informed research in this field (Glynn, 2021).

We argue that there needs to be greater attention to the production of institutionalised vulnerability and how this shapes the potential outcomes of the transitions available to young people. The Russian care system illustrates this very clearly as, despite a thorough ongoing deinstitutionalisation process, it remains embedded in state socialist-era structures and institutionalised patterns that militate against young people's inclusion and achievement of independence. It also illustrates, as a case facing an extreme shift in terms of the modes of governmentality shaping young people's rights and responsibilities, the dangers of dependency-related victim-blaming narratives in dealing

with care leavers, which easily obscure the institutional roots of vulnerability. Such findings should encourage welfare practitioners and policy makers to reconsider how services and systems can be more effectively designed to meet the needs of young people navigating life beyond care.

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.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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