

# Social support provided to care leavers by residential care facilities in Gauteng Province, South Africa, during their transition to independent living

Lizane Wilson<sup>1</sup> and Lydia Mokgoko<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This study explored the social support of the residential care facility to care leavers during the transition phase to independent living as perceived by the social workers as well as the care leavers. Purposive sampling and semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with 12 care leavers as well as 12 social workers to gain a detailed picture of the participants' views on the social support provided in preparation for independent living. Content analysis was used to analyse the data. Finding highlights were that ongoing residential social support and motivation are of paramount importance to shape the transitioning of the care leavers toward independent living. Strong ties with other people and networks assist them with access to the resources they need for goal attainment. Care leavers apply both theoretical knowledge and practical skills to their advantage. They appeared to appreciate the significant part played by the group networks. Care leavers mostly preferred to stick with their existing relationships as it provided them with a sense of belonging and strengthened their self-esteem, reiterating the central importance of ongoing residential support. care facility during the transition phase.

**Keywords:** Selected: care leavers; child and youth care centre; independent living; social support; transitioning

1. Senior Lecturer and Research Supervisor COMPRES, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
2. Masters in Social Work student, COMPRES, North-West University.

**Address for correspondence:** [Lizane.Wilson@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Lizane.Wilson@nwu.ac.za)

**Date of first (online) publication:**

## **Introduction and background**

Care leavers are one of the most vulnerable and deprived groups in society (Mendes et al., 2011). At the same time, they are also faced with multiple challenges during their period of care leaving (Stein & Munro, 2008; Mendes & Snow, 2016; Mann-Feder & Goyette, 2019; Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020). These challenges, according to Mendes, Johnson and Moslehuddin (2011:14), include lack of self-regulation skills in terms of occupation, financial management, academic achievement, law abidance and drug avoidance. In the context of a country such as South Africa, youth need to handle additional challenges such as high national levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality, and the sometimes doubtful quality of education in low-income areas (Bond, 2018). Not only do care leavers have to cope with these challenges during their transition to independent living, but they also need to deal with sentiments of loneliness and isolation due to not feeling emotionally supported by their residential care facilities (Oelofsen, 2015). This emphasises the importance of continued contact with and social support from their residential care facilities (Oelofsen, 2015) to safeguard them from negative outcomes during their transition (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the social support of residential care facilities to care leavers during these young adults' transition towards independent living. The research question that guided this study was the following: What social support is provided to care leavers during their transition to independent living, and how is this perceived by these care leavers?

## **Children in need of care**

In South Africa, the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) recognises the impossibility of always protecting the life of a family, hence the provisioning for substitute care. Section 150 of the Children's Act (RSA, 2005) specifies in which circumstances a child may be considered in need of care and protection and placed in alternative care. These circumstances include minors who have been abandoned, minors who are parentless, mistreated, uncontrollable, abused, or addicted to substances, minors who have been subjected to child labour or exploitation, as well as children in child-headed families (RSA, 2005).

Within the South African context, children are placed in alternative care until the age of 18 years, at which point they must leave the care facility (Children's Act 38 of 2005). However, according to the country's Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005), children are allowed to stay in the care facility until the end of the year when they turn 21. This provision depends on two conditions: The facility must be willing and able to accommodate the child, and the extended stay is needed to enable the child to complete their education. After this allocated period of time, the child is

compelled to take up independent living. At this stage, the residential care facility continues to have a responsibility to assist the care leavers with their adjustment and reintegration into the community (Children's Act 38 of 2005).

Although Bond (2018) stated that the outcomes for care leavers in South Africa reflect that of care leavers in other countries, care leavers in South Africa are also challenged by social conditions such as high national levels of unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Despite the nation's unemployment rate being 27,6% in the first quarter of 2019, the rate for young people aged 15 to 24 was 55,2% during the same period (StatsSA, 2020). Furthermore, 62,1% of children (aged 0 to 17 years) in South Africa are identified as multidimensionally poor (StatsSA, 2020), which encompasses various deprivations such as ill health, illiteracy, inadequate living conditions, and violence threats. Additionally, more than half of all young people (aged 15 to 24 years) live in income poverty (De Lannoy et al., 2018). The high numbers of school dropouts and the quality of education in South Africa also pose challenges. In 2016, only 51% of youths aged 20 to 24 completed grade 12 (De Lannoy et al., 2018), while 77% of youths aged 16 to 17 completed grade 9 or higher (De Lannoy et al., 2018). Young South Africans' risk-taking behaviour, such as substance misuse, crime, violence, and risky sexual practices, is increased by poverty and high unemployment rates (Graham et al., 2017).

## **The experiences of care leavers**

For care leavers, their transition to young adulthood is more challenging than for young people who transition from their families (Stein 2008; Van Breda et al., 2020). The care leavers may experience the transition to adulthood as unexpected and earlier than they were ready for due to lack of social support (Rosenberg, 2019) and/or parental support (Collins, 2001; Wade, 2008). Care leavers without social support are often at risk of homelessness, low educational achievement, unemployment, as well as young parenthood (Berzin et al., 2011; Mendes et al., 2011; Braciszewski & Stout, 2012; Mersky & Janczewski, 2013). In addition, as Sulimani-Aidan (2017) pointed out, although care systems may provide protection to children against further harm, care leavers may not completely overcome the negative consequences of earlier disadvantages. These consequences may include multiple placements, disrupted education, no response to their individual needs, low ambitions, and exposure to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, which may further compromise the lives of care leavers (Rahilly & Hendry, 2014; Tregeagle et al., 2019). Despite several studies highlighting the challenges and barriers care leavers face, other studies (Refaeli, 2017; Van Breda & Dickens, 2017; Frimpong-Manso, 2018) have shown how care leavers present with resilience due to their experiences to cope with their challenges.

Collectively, care leavers need to transition from a very structured and familiar environment to one that is complex, new and extremely challenging (Sulimani-Aidan,

2017), especially without adequate support (Stein & Munro, 2008; Mann-Feder & Goyette, 2019; Van Breda et al., 2020). Research indicates that many care leavers do not receive adequate support during this transition to adulthood (Stein & Munro, 2008; Stein, 2014; Mendes & Snow, 2016; Mann-Feder & Goyette, 2019).

Various studies on care leavers have confirmed that strong social support safeguards against negative outcomes during the transition from care to emerging adulthood, and encourages the pursuit of future goals (Melkman & Benbenishty, 2018). Social support also has a direct positive effect on care leaver outcomes, including educational, employment, housing, and financial outcomes (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018).

The challenges that care leavers encounter as they make the transition from care to independent living have been the subject of several South African studies, such as that of Oelofsen (2015),

who investigated young adults' experiences of their transitioning from family care to independent living, and that of Maposa and Louw-Potgieter (2012) who, in Mamelani Projects, reviewed the programme outcomes of young people transitioning out of a children's home. Muller, Van Rensburg and Makobe (2003) recounted the narratives of a handful of young people transitioning out of an SOS Children's Village into young adulthood; Mmusi (2013) evaluated care leavers' application of social skills in independent living; and Meyer (2008) explored the experience of a late adolescent state care leaver. Other studies have looked at young women's care leaving journeys toward independent living (Hlungwani, 2017), and young people leaving Girls & Boys Town's care and transitioning towards young adulthood and independent/interdependent living (Van Breda, 2018). While most of these studies focused on the transition process from residential care, none of them focused on the social support that the care leavers receive during care leaving.

## Methodology

This study explored the social support provided by residential care facilities to care leavers as they made the transition from being dependent on others to being independent. To gain a thorough understanding of this phenomenon, a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2014) was utilised. This approach seemed suitable for this study as a phenomenon needed to be studied through participants' views of that particular phenomenon (Nicholls, 2009).

## Research design

The study's qualitative descriptive research design allowed the researcher to explore and explain the social support that care facilities offer to care leavers as they

transition to independent living by providing a “summary of an event in everyday terms” (Sandelowski, 2000).

## **Eligibility criteria and participants recruitment**

Social workers and care leavers from Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCCs) in the Tshwane region of Gauteng Province, South Africa, participated in the study. These CYCCs provide care to six and more children, as specified in the Children’s Amendment Act (No. 41 of 2007), and are registered as CYCCs with the Department of Social Development. Of the 36 CYCCs in Tshwane, four met the inclusion criteria of the study and were selected and invited to participate in the study. Only three CYCCs agreed to participate in the study.

Purposive sampling (Strydom, 2021) was used to select participants from two population groups (social workers and care leavers) who complied with the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this study (Strydom & Delpont, 2011). The inclusion criteria for social workers included registration as social workers employed by the specific CYCC and work experience of more than three years at a CYCC. It is believed that after three years of working at a CYCC, social workers should be able to provide insightful information about the support of care leavers. The inclusion criteria for the care leavers included having lived in one of the three CYCCs, having left the centre’s care within the past two months to two years, and living in the Tshwane region at the time of conducting the study. The lack of support might at first not be felt by the participants. The care leavers may have adapted to their new surroundings and circumstances after two years. As a result, the emphasis is on the transition stage.

## **The participants**

Twelve social workers from the three different CYCCs participated in the study. Each participant had a formal social work degree and was registered as a social worker at the South African Council for Social Service Professions. There were three supervisors among the participants, and ten of the twelve social workers were female. The work experience of the social workers ranged from six to 21 years. In total, 12 care leavers who grew up in three different registered CYCCs in the Tshwane region participated in the study. Their residential stays lasted between seven and 18 years, and their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years.

## **Data collection, interview design, and analysis**

Semi-structured individual interviews (Greeff, 2011) were used to collect data. To ensure privacy, the social worker interviews were conducted in the social work

offices at participating CYCCs. The CYCC board room nearest to the care leavers was utilised. Each interview lasted no more than an hour, with a 15-minute break for the interviewer in between. Gaining in-depth comprehension of the participants' opinions on the social support offered to care leavers by residential care facilities during their transition from residential care to independent living was the goal of the interviews. To direct the interviews and allow for a flexible flow of the discourse (Daniel, 2012), an interview schedule (Forrester, 2010) was implemented. The formulation of the interview questions was influenced by the study's objective and research question. Interview questions for the social workers and care leavers included: (1) How does the CYCC support care leavers during their transition towards independent living? (2) How do you think the CYCC's social support for care leavers impacts their transition to independent living? (3) Are there any recommendations regarding the residential care social support, and who should be providing this support?

The first two interviews served as a pilot for the interview schedule, which was then modified accordingly. With the participants' consent, the researcher recorded each interview on audio and then had it transcribed verbatim. The two data sets of the social workers and care leavers were analysed together using content analysis (Bryman, 2012). According to Bryman (2012), qualitative content analysis is the most established approach in qualitative analysis. It involves the "searching out" of underlying themes in the documents that are being analysed to allow categories of themes to emerge from the data, in this case the narratives provided by the participants. During this process of analysis, it is essential to understand the meaning of the context in which an item is being analysed. The six interconnected steps as stipulated by Creswell (2014) were followed: Firstly, the researcher organised and prepared the datasets for analysis by transcribing the interviews verbatim. The researcher then read through all the transcribed interviews to get a general sense of the information and possibly its overall meaning. Next, the researcher started with the manual coding of the data by arranging the data into portions of facts and marking them with a term that symbolises a group. The researcher provided a detailed description of the setting and the categories or themes for analysis. The themes were reviewed, and data was evaluated in terms of the main themes and objectives of the study. The findings of the analysis were then presented. The findings were compared to existing literature to see whether the themes link to information that is already available. The research question was also considered during the entire process. A report was produced to share the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006:23).

## **Ethical considerations**

Legal authorisation for the research and ethical clearance from the university were granted. The managers of all three centres gave their goodwill permission. To lower

risks and safeguard participants from potential harm, precautions were put in place. All the participants gave their informed consent. Privacy was protected by conducting the interviews in a safe and private office. Confidentiality was ensured throughout the study. Although the participants were not paid for taking part in the study, they did receive a gesture of appreciation. Anonymity was maintained by replacing real names with pseudonyms in the final report. Hence, the participants are identified by numbers: PSW = social workers and PCL = care leavers.

## **Findings**

This section explains the three themes with subthemes that emerged from the study findings. The findings are grouped into the three phases of care leaving, namely the pre-transition phase, transition phase and post-transition phase.

### **Theme 1: Social support received from the residential care during the pre-transition phase**

#### **Subtheme 1.1: The importance of preparing care leavers for disengagement**

The social workers in this study acknowledged how difficult it was for the care leavers to leave the care facility due to the fact that they are emotionally and psychologically affected by the challenges they faced. Given the care leavers' situation and level of maturity, they need extensive social support and preparing them to leave the facility was an important aspect of their journey. The social workers' voices are reflected in the following quote:

*Facing independent living is not child's play. These people struggle to stand on their feet. Remember their damaged self-esteems. They are emotionally and psychologically affected. They need extensive social support in preparation to cope facing independent living*

(PSW2).

#### **Subtheme 1.2: Informational support provided by the care facility**

In order to help prepare the care leavers for care leaving, informational support was provided to them in the form of various residential programmes on independent

living. These programmes typically focus on life skills, social skills, communication skills and career guidance. The social workers said the following about the support:

*We assist them with communication skills, how to complete the forms. The institution invites the future planning specialists in career guidance. It's extremely important career guidance*

(PSW6).

*Reality check sessions are also considered as very powerful weapons to face independent living. The care leavers are guided on how to attend an interview and how to compile a CV. There are role plays whereby they dress formally and being interviewed by external people in order to prepare them to the real world*

(PSW2).

The social workers also emphasised the importance of providing the care leavers with life skills to help them to sustain independent living:

*Life skills programmes are self-sustaining skills that assist the care leavers to sustain independent living*

(PSW2).

*Both male and female care leavers are being educated in terms of the importance of family and family planning. Those are very significant aspects to consider in terms of the residential social support to successful independent living*

(PSW3).

*They are taught ordinary social skills, you know, such as cooking. We give them permission to experiment in the kitchen individually, of course under supervision. Most of the times we offer them jobs to do and give them sort of stipends as well, and this is to teach them on how to earn some money as well as to budget*

(PSW4).

The care leavers who participated in the study confirmed the value of these programmes as it taught them basic life skills, which they needed for independent living:

*The programmes also focused on investing in basic life skills to independence living. We were taught skills such as food gardening, dress-making, cooking and baking*

(PCL4).



*They are the ones who taught us basic things such as washing dishes and cleaning our rooms, like the basic house chores. I was very proud to be chosen as the one who washes the car of my house mother. It was actually such an honour for me. At the moment, I don't need a helper. I can now do anything for myself based on what I learned. And another thing is that, starting from Grade 10, we start practising to use public transport like taxis and buses to and from the school*

(PCL9).

### **Subtheme 1.3: Emotional support received during their stay in the residential care facility**

The care leavers voiced their gratitude for the love and support they received at the residential care facilities. The interview data confirmed that the care leavers perceived the residential care facility as their family. For the care leavers, the emotional support that they received during their stay in the residential care facilities was important:

*Like a parent, the CYCC has always been there for us. I was only five years and my brother was two when we were placed in this CYCC ... I mean we were raised under the wing of this CYCC. Our house mother used to bath us until we were taught how to bath ourselves here. We do not know the taste of parental love except for the love we received from the CYCC. When we talk about family, we refer to this CYCC and its residents. I was longing to meet my relatives, but they were not available. Nobody ever came to visit me and my brother at the orphanage, and that made me realise that the only family that I have was the CYCC residents. They were my only hope*

(PCL4).

*I was so attached to my caregivers, my house parents. I called them mama and papa from the bottom of my heart. I appreciated each and every drop of love that I received from them. They really supported me throughout my life*

(PCL1).

According to the care leavers, the lessons they learned in the residential care facility as well as the support they received gave them a strong foundation to be resilient and make a success of their lives:

*I was taught self-discipline. That foundation made me who I am today. I found myself. I am now working and ready to become a responsible husband and a father in future*

(PCL1).

*I was admitted in a CYCC when I was only four years old. My younger sister was two and the other one was a year old after the passing away of our mother. I have spent almost 16 years in an institution. I am a qualified teacher. I managed to take my younger sister from the residential care, and I am currently staying with her at my place*

(PCL2).

The social workers highlighted the fact that emotional support on a professional level through therapeutic sessions assisted the care leavers to deal with their behavioural challenges. A care leaver (PCL4) also acknowledged the value of these therapeutic sessions in dealing with bereavement:

*... trauma debriefing and counselling, stress and anger management sessions often help them to deal with lots of behavioural challenges*

(PSW1).

*I went through therapeutic sessions that helped me so much towards dealing with bereavement*

(PCL4).

#### **Subtheme 1.4: The support of relational support networks**

As the care leavers lack parental support, the social workers emphasized the importance of forming relational support networks within the CYCC and also assisted them to form relationships during their stay in the CYCC. Comments such as the following speak to the value of these relationships:

*We assist them to start supporting each other to form the relationships. We also encourage them to form support groups in terms of supporting each other and maintaining the relationships they are having amongst themselves as a family*

(PSW1).

*I still have a good relationship with my house parents, my biological family, and the friend whom I got way back in the institution because I was taught to love*

(PCL1).

## **Theme 2: Social support from the residential care during the transition phase**

### **Subtheme 2.1: Continued relational support**

During the care leavers' transition to independent living, the importance of continued support from significant people in their lives was emphasised. The social workers explained that they always support the care leavers during their transition to independent living. When the care leavers experience challenges, they would come to the social workers for emotional support. The social workers also assist care leavers who decide to go back to their families. The data indicated that social workers provide continuous support during the care leavers' journey:

*To be honest, we always have their backs. Whenever they face hiccups on their journey to transitioning, they know they can always look back. They often come for emotional support whenever they face challenges. In case a care leaver decides to go back to his or her family, for the first few months we offer him or her support in terms of adjustment to the family environment*

(PSW2).

The importance of ongoing support from the social workers was acknowledged by the care leavers, as PCL4 found that the support of the social workers assisted him in a difficult time in his life:

*For instance, the emotional intelligence helped me to overcome many obstacles on my path to independent living. There was a time when I saw darkness in front of me but because of the support of my social worker on my back, I was able to face such situation and conquered the trials*

(PCL4).

### **Subtheme 2.2: Support with regard to housing**

The social workers agreed that after leaving care, a person's basic need for shelter supersedes all other requirements. The data indicated that care leavers struggle with employment as well as housing as they do not have a place to go to after leaving the residential care facility. The social workers realised that the care leavers struggle and need support just like any other teenager with family, and therefore assisted them by referring them to places that provide shelter. The passages below demonstrate that the participants were indeed concerned about the potential inability of the care leavers to find stable housing and assisted them where possible:

*Care leavers struggle with employment and housing because the majority of them do not have homes. They do not have anywhere to go after residential care. They struggle to start life. They also need support like any other teenager who has parents*

(PSW1).

*... it is our duty as social workers to refer these young people to places where they will provide them with a shelter. However, they still have to live independently in those shelters*

(PSW4).

*Our CYCC supports these people by arranging places where homeless people can stay*

(PSW3).

### **Subtheme 2.3: Support groups**

The social workers furthermore emphasised the importance of social support groups. Care leavers were encouraged to form support groups in order to support each other. Most of the participants said that support groups were essential for care leavers making the transition to independent living:

*We also encourage them to form support groups in terms of supporting each other and maintaining the relationship they are having amongst themselves as a family ... It takes effort for a care leaver to get out of the shell and fit in with her or his peers*

(PSW1).

## **Theme 3: Support of care leavers during the post-transition phase**

The importance of continued support, even after the transition to independent living, was emphasised by the participants.

### **Subtheme 3.1: The role of residential support in the social integration of care leavers towards independent living**

It is clear from the data collected from the care leaver participants that the support they had received from the residential care facility played a significant role in their

ability to integrate into the community and society. The care leavers expressed their gratitude for the continued support that they received from the care facility:

*Here I am now. I have been in a healthy relationship with my fiancée for more than three years now. My foundation made me who I am today. I found myself. I am now working and ready to become a responsible husband and a father in future*

(PCL1).

*I took my two siblings out of care last year. I am currently staying with them in a rented house. They regard me as their mother. However, the CYCC is still part of us. I sometimes leave my siblings with my previous house parents if I have to go somewhere, such as attending funerals*

(PCL2).

### **Subtheme 3.2: The importance of social networks outside residential care**

A social network is most frequently used to provide social support (Lin, 1999). It is crucial for care leavers to build connections with specific organisations outside of residential care in order to offer care leavers extra support. The social workers discussed how they believed social networks may help people to lead independent lives. Hence, they would connect the care leavers with organisations that can offer support. The quotes that follow demonstrate this:

*We link these youth with organisations to get the support towards independent living. However, these organisations are very few*

(PSW4).

*So, it will be much better if they are connected with the Housing Department in terms of being placed in a data base whereby they would be able to be provided with houses just for a start in life*

(PSW5).

The care leavers acknowledged that they found it difficult to make friends outside the residential care facility but realised the value of social networks outside the residential care facility:

*From the start I was reluctant to making friends in and outside the CYCC, but later I realised that friendship is very important. Look, I was connected to get a job through a friend*

(PCL3).

### **Subtheme 3.3: Maintaining supporting relationships after leaving care**

The participants stressed the value of nurturing continuous supportive connections after leaving the residential care facility. The care leavers mentioned that they were able to maintain relationships with other people as they realised that they need ongoing support:

*I was able to maintain the relationships with other people and interact with my peers and the society at large*

(PCL5).

*You know, sometimes it is very difficult to face life alone suddenly. Like other youngsters, we need ongoing support – a shoulder to fall back on when life becomes tougher. Hence myself, like now, I am independent, but I still regard my previous house parents as parents in my life. I still seek advice from them, discuss my challenges with them*

(PCL2).

## **Discussion**

The findings indicated that during the three phases of care leaving – the pre-transition phase, transition phase and post-transition phase – the care leavers received different forms of social support on different levels.

### **Support received from the residential care facility during the pre-transition phase**

It is often expected of care leavers to transition straight into independent living. However, the findings of this study emphasised the importance of preparing care leavers for disengagement and was agreed upon by both social workers and care leavers. These findings are supported by [Harder, Varda, Oterholm and Refael \(2020\)](#) who highlighted the importance of adequate preparation. According to [Refaeli, Benbenishty and Zeira \(2019\)](#) as well as [Sulimani-Aidan, Benbenishty, Dinisman and Zeira \(2013\)](#), adequate preparation for leaving care is associated with positive outcomes for care leavers as it helps them to avoid a psychological relapse (Van Breda et al., 2012). [Stein \(2005\)](#) explained that the chances of success are higher for young people whose leave from care has been planned carefully, and for those who

leave care later. Therefore, when preparing care residents for independent living, a carefully thought-out disengagement process can help to foster resilience.

The findings also indicated that the care leavers are provided with informational support in the form of various residential independent living programmes. These programmes, which focus on essential life skills, are aimed at preparing care leavers for independent living. This corresponds with the findings of [Harder et al. \(2020\)](#) who stated that care leavers should be adequately prepared by acquiring a variety of skills, including how to search for accommodation and employment, plan one's finances, and locate community resources for help. [Stein and Dixon \(2006\)](#) identified five primary preparatory areas: self-care skills, practical skills, interpersonal skills, education, and identity development. [Mmusi and Van Breda \(2017\)](#) also found that care leavers frequently use the social skills they had learned in residential care in a variety of social settings. Likewise, the participants in this study confirmed the value of these programmes. Although the findings of this study and most of the literature support the importance of these programmes, [Mamelani Projects \(2013\)](#); [Tanur \(2012\)](#) and [Massinga and Pecora \(2004\)](#) stated that children in foster care frequently do not have the opportunity to develop fundamental skills like doing their own laundry, preparing meals, and managing money. One reason for this is that, practically, clear instructions must be followed for daily home operations to function.

Based on the findings of this study, the care leavers received emotional support from caregivers as well as professional support from social workers during their stay in the residential care facilities. The importance of emotional support was emphasised by the social workers as well as the care leavers. The care leavers regarded the residential care facility as their family. [Cudjoe et al \(2022\)](#) in their study also found that the care leavers considered the organisation as their family and that a sense of family is important to them. A study by [Harder et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasised the importance of providing interventions to care leavers, allowing them to work through trauma. Improvements in self-control, self-reflection, information processing, and relational engagement are linked to trauma-informed therapies ([Zelechowski et al., 2013](#)), all of which are crucial for adjustment in adulthood.

According to [Dolan, Zegarac and Arsic \(2020\)](#), children undoubtedly have the right to family support. Yet, many of the care leavers lacked parental support and hence they needed to build relationships within the care facility. The study found that, to compensate for the lack of parental support, the social workers encouraged the care leavers to form support groups in order to support each other while also maintaining good relationships with their caregivers and social workers. Similarly, [Becker-Wedman \(2009\)](#) emphasised the importance of relationships as relationships can help young people integrate their experiences from the past and present into a coherent autobiographical account that will boost their self-esteem. [Stein \(2005\)](#) found that stable relationships with trustworthy adults can foster a sense of attachment and belonging in care residents. [Cashmore and Paxman \(2006\)](#) explained that adolescents who have positive relationships with the professionals who interacted with them

during placement tend to transition better after leaving care. Relationships are crucial for practical, emotional, informational, and affirmative reasons, and serve as a safe platform for care leavers as they shift towards independence (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010; Marion & Paulsen, 2019).

## **Social support from the residential care facility during the transition phase**

Research by [Oelofsen \(2015\)](#) on care leavers in South Africa revealed that, during the transition phase, care leavers experience feelings of isolation because their residential care facility no longer provides them with emotional support. [Zwijnenburg, Van Regenmortel and Schalk \(2021\)](#) found in their study that to overcome social isolation, the social support that people receive from others and give to others needs to be strengthened. The participants in this study experienced the support provided by the social workers as well as the CYCC residents as highly valuable. [Bond \(2020\)](#) discovered that care leavers who experience difficulties first try to navigate their way unsupported before asking for help, which suggests that professionals should be proactive in helping young people establish and maintain formal and informal networks of support during and after their time in care ([Harder et al., 2020](#)). This highlights the importance of continuous relational support as these care leavers exit the care system and beyond.

Most of the participants, social workers and care leavers, agreed that after leaving care, a person's basic need for shelter supersedes all other requirements. Although the residential care facilities did attempt to assist them with this, housing was cited by the participants as a sensitive subject since the inability to find safe, respectable, and affordable housing can impede the entire process of becoming independent. [Sulimani-Aidan et al. \(2013\)](#) stated that affordable housing is a basic requirement, especially for people who have resided in residential care for a long time. However, many care leavers encountered housing instability or homelessness ([Dworsky et al., 2013](#); [Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013](#)). [Stein \(2008\)](#) also found in his research that the majority of participants during the post-transition phase resided in impoverished areas. Likewise, the participants in this study who started out in unsatisfactory accommodation wanted to seek better lodgings.

In terms of social support for care leavers making the move to independent living, it was evident from this study that support groups play a key role during this transition phase. Most of the participants said that support was essential for care leavers making the transition to independent living. According to a study by [Olsson and his co-researchers](#), the care leavers' ability to handle obstacles is significantly influenced by their various support networks ([Olsson et al. 2003](#)). In this study, too, support groups were found to be crucial in providing care leavers with the social



support they need as they make the transition to independent living. However, [Ibrahim and Howe \(2011\)](#) noted that “care leavers are dynamic representatives of their social lives; they also have the ability to develop relationships that might assist them to accomplish their objectives”. Yet, various researchers have noted that care leavers have limited access to appropriate support systems.

## **Support of care leavers during the post-transition phase**

The importance of continued support, even after the transition to independent living, was emphasised by the participants. Care leavers must quickly assume responsibility for their own survival when they make the move to independent living, whereas other adolescents may have more time to mature while benefitting from their parents’ support. It is clear from the data collected from the care leaver participants that the support they had received from the residential care was a significant factor in their capacity to integrate into the community and society.

The findings showed that most care leavers were resilient despite the unfavourable conditions that initially resulted in their placement in a CYCC. They advanced toward successful independent living by effectively navigating the inherent obstacles of life. According to [Sulimani-Aidan \(2014\)](#), this improves the prospects for care leavers’ futures. The personal resilience process of optimism or hopefulness of youth in care has an impact on housing, family relationships, well-being, and financial security. Additionally, care leavers who exhibit resilience and optimism are more likely to become capable problem solvers who can source employment and accommodation.

The majority of the participants thought that the transition from care leaving to independent living required network support. The care leavers discovered that expanding their support networks increased their chances of getting help in a variety of circumstances. [Frimpong-Manso \(2012\)](#), [Stein \(2008\)](#), and [Sulimani-Aidan \(2014\)](#) asserted that having a strong social network boosts care leavers’ chances of success on their quest toward independence, which complements the conclusions of this study. [Ibrahim and Howe \(2011\)](#) claimed that the presence of support networks can separate successful care leavers from unsuccessful ones. According to the participants in the study of [Cudjoe, Amoateng, Nti-Gyebour and Wistiz \(2022\)](#) they received support on how to build networks which enabled them to meet new people. Several of the care leavers in this study, too, admitted that social networking gave them the fortitude to handle difficult circumstances. When young people leave foster care, those who do so with a solid social network are more likely to seek post-secondary education, find employment, and live in stable housing than those who do not. It has been noted by [Hass, Allen and Amoah \(2014\)](#); [Tanur \(2012\)](#), [Frimpong-Manso \(2012\)](#), and [Stein \(2008\)](#) that social support from friends, acquaintances, and other

social groups is crucial for maintaining resilience, as they are better able to use their support resources.

Although building a solid social network after leaving care is challenging for many young people, most young people reported having at least one supportive adult they could turn to for assistance or guidance (Courtney et al., 2001). According to Brendtro, Mitchell, and Jackson (2014), social interaction is a basic human need. People who have left care and who are connected are probably healthier and have access to more resources and assistance. These care leavers feel comfortable participating in their communities.

Most of the people who leave foster care are aware of how desperate they feel. The participants stressed the value of preserving continuous supportive connections. Their ongoing relationship of support with the social workers gave them strength. According to Mamelani Projects (2013), care leavers frequently worry about how their futures will turn out in terms of their ability to live independently. Additionally, they started to have second thoughts about receiving moral and practical support from those around them. Most care leavers, according to Ibrahim and Howe (2011), received unofficial support from friends, landlords, and co-workers as they made the move to independent living. According to Van Breda (2015), the majority of care leavers lacked access to the practical aid and direction that parents and other social network members frequently provide. Pinkerton and Rooney (2014) believed that care leavers' chances of better outcomes are strengthened by having access to support during the transitional period. Broad (2005) and Stein (2005) said that, should ongoing relationships not be possible, alternative provision should be made, such as matching youth leaving care with specific advisers, mentors, and caregivers who can provide them with emotional and practical support during the transitioning phase. This study therefore came to the conclusion that residential care facilities must continue to provide psychological support to those who leave foster care.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore the social support provided by residential care facilities to care leavers during these young adults' transition towards independent living. This study, as several other studies, emphasised the importance of the residential care facility providing continuous social support to care leavers on their journey to independent living. The value of the various residential independent living programmes aimed at preparing the care leavers for independent living was also highlighted. The emotional support that the care leavers received from the caregivers as well as the professional support from the social workers during their stay in the residential care facility enabled the care leavers to work through their trauma.

The value of support groups inside as well as outside the residential care facility was emphasised. Accommodation as a basic need is still a big concern as the inability to find safe, respectable, and affordable housing can impede the entire process of becoming independent. The study showed that most care leavers were resilient despite the challenges and the unfavourable conditions that initially resulted in their placement in a CYCC. It is clear that support networks, as a form of social support, were valuable to the care leavers as this increased their chances of getting help in a range of circumstances.

## Limitations

Since only care leavers and social workers were interviewed in this study, the data obtained is limited to their perceptions. The care leavers who were interviewed for this study left residential care in the province of Gauteng. The nine provinces of South Africa differ significantly in terms of lifestyle choices, conventions, and values. To ensure wider representation across the nation, further research is required.

## Recommendations

The social support provided by the residential care system is intended to be improved through recommendations based on research findings. The findings may also provide a foundation for future studies on care leavers to help close the knowledge gap in this area. The following recommendations are made:

- Residents of care facilities should begin independent living skills training early in life. Like any other children, they should be given the chance to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes.
- Adolescents will develop resilience and become better prepared for life after leaving the care facility with the aid of a well-organised disengagement plan.
- Each CYCC should put in place a programme that focuses primarily on assisting care leavers with their transition to independent life while still in care.

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