

Reimagining Transitional Support Systems for Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Care: A Global Framework for Housing, Workforce, and Psychosocial Integration

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ABSTRACT

Care-experienced youth worldwide face significant discontinuities upon leaving out-of-home care systems often experiencing housing instability, unemployment, psychological distress, and legal vulnerability. Building on a review of empirical and policy-focused studies, this paper develops a Global Framework for Transitional Support that integrates four core domains: stable housing, mental health and psychosocial care, education and workforce pathways, and legal identity and youth empowerment. Comparative insights from the UK, Australia, Canada, South Africa, and Latin America reveal shared strengths and systemic gaps such as fragmented service delivery, inadequate coordination, and lack of youth centred planning. To address these, the proposed framework introduces a modular, Integrated Transition Model featuring a central coordination hub, data-driven risk monitoring, and decentralized local implementation. Designed for both high- and low-resource environments, the model emphasizes adaptability to cultural contexts and developmental readiness, leveraging trauma-informed approaches and peer mentorship. The framework also outlines policy mechanisms legislative mandates, funding integration, outcomes tracking to ensure scalability and sustainability. By synthesizing existing evidence with a structured, globally applicative model, this work offers a practical roadmap for national and international stakeholders aiming to fortify the social infrastructure for care leavers. It provides a timely contribution to the literature on youth welfare and offers a policy-aligned strategy to enhance life outcomes among care-experienced populations.

Keywords: Housing, psychosocial integration, youth leaving out-of-home care, workforce



Article information

Received 5 June 2025
Accepted 20 July 2025
Published 27 July 2025
<https://doi.org/10.26765/DRJSSES65845596>

Citation: Aloro, T., and Adejimi, P. (2025). Reimagining Transitional Support Systems for Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Care: A Global Framework for Housing, Workforce, and Psychosocial Integration. Direct Research Journal of Social Science and Educational Studies. Vol. 13(2), Pp. 124-134. This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is widely acknowledged as a critical developmental period, requiring

support systems that facilitate autonomy, resilience, and social integration. For young people leaving out-of-home

care, this transition is often abrupt and marked by vulnerability. Globally, these care-experienced youth face disproportionately higher risks of homelessness, unemployment, mental health difficulties, incarceration, and social exclusion compared to their peers in the general population (Jayman, 2025). The abrupt withdrawal of state or institutional support at the legal age of majority often between 18 and 21 years creates what researchers have called a “care cliff,” exposing youth to multiple systemic gaps at a time when they are most in need of continuity and guidance (Palmer et al., 2022).

Despite variances in child welfare systems across regions, the transitional challenges faced by care leavers are strikingly similar. In high-income countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, the trend toward deinstitutionalization and family-based placements has not always been matched by long-term planning for independence (Goldman et al., 2020). Youth are often discharged without housing arrangements, stable income, or mental health supports. In low and middle-income countries (LMICs), the picture is even more frightful, as care systems may lack formal structures altogether. Many youths are raised in informal kinship care or residential institutions that operate without regulation, which further complicates post-care tracking, planning, and service delivery (Witter et al., 2022).

Research from South Africa highlights that while cultural collectivism may provide some informal buffers, care leavers in LMICs are frequently subject to legal invisibility, stigma, and extreme economic marginalization (Mupaku, 2024). Similarly, studies in Latin America and Asia reveal that government investments in aftercare remain limited, with most support ending at age 18 and little cross-sector coordination to ensure continuity of care (Navarro et al., 2016). In many contexts, care leavers must navigate complex bureaucracies, secure housing, continue their education, and find employment without the guidance or safety nets typically afforded to non-care peers (Palmer et al., 2022).

In recent years, countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have introduced extended care policies and independent living programs aimed at addressing these vulnerabilities. These include initiatives like *Staying Put* (UK) and *Foster Youth to Independence* (US), which allow young adults to remain in care placements beyond age 18 under specific conditions (Montgomery et al., 2006). However, these interventions remain unevenly implemented, often limited to certain regions or budget cycles, and seldom address the full continuum of youth needs especially in relation to legal identity, psychosocial healing, and long-term housing security (Campbell, 2020).

Moreover, many existing systems adopt a siloed approach, where education, employment, health, housing, and legal support are managed separately, leading to service fragmentation and duplication of efforts (Vallabhaneni, 2025). The lack of centralized data systems and predictive planning tools further undermines

accountability and outcome measurement (Adepoju et al., 2023). This paper contends that there is a pressing global need for a coordinated, scalable, and culturally responsive framework that addresses the multifaceted challenges faced by care leavers. The proposed model draws on comparative case studies and best practices from high, middle, and low-income countries to articulate a holistic support system rooted in four key pillars: stable housing, workforce development, psychosocial integration, and legal empowerment. Unlike country-specific models, this framework is intended to be adaptable to diverse social protection infrastructures, making it relevant to both resource-rich and resource-constrained settings.

In doing so, this paper contributes to the global discourse on youth development and social welfare reform. It offers policymakers, practitioners, and development agencies a strategic guide for designing and implementing integrated support systems that foster successful transitions from care to independence. By reimagining transitional support not as an afterthought but as a structural imperative, nations can better fulfill their obligation to protect and empower this vulnerable but resilient population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparative Analysis of Existing National Policies and Outcomes

The global policy landscape for care leavers is highly heterogeneous, shaped by differing welfare ideologies, legislative structures, and economic resources. Nevertheless, there is growing international recognition of the need for structured aftercare services that support young people transitioning out of state or informal care. This section compares the existing models and policy frameworks in selected high, middle, and low-income countries, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges in achieving favorable long-term outcomes for care-experienced youth.

The UK is considered a leader in legislating support for care leavers. The *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* and the *Children and Social Work Act 2017* laid the foundation for policies such as *Staying Put* and *Staying Close*, which allow young people to remain in foster care or maintain links with residential placements beyond age 18 (Thoburn, 2016). Additionally, Personal Advisers are assigned to care leavers until age 25 (Turner and Lewis, 2024). Yet studies suggest implementation gaps, especially in ensuring equitable access to housing and mental health support (Omiyefa, 2025). Housing insecurity and youth unemployment remain high among care leavers (Zhao and Waugh, 2025).

Australia's state-based child protection system means that aftercare policies vary across jurisdictions (Fernandez, 2014). States like Victoria and New South Wales have implemented transition planning mandates

and post-care support until age 21 (Beauchamp, 2016). However, national coordination is lacking. Research reveals that many care leavers struggle with insecure housing, low educational attainment, and mental health issues, pointing to a need for more integrated and trauma-informed approaches (Chikwava et al., 2025). In Canada, the age at which care ends varies by province, ranging from 18 to 24. While some provinces offer extended support, services often lack coordination across sectors. Indigenous youth, who are disproportionately represented in care, face systemic barriers rooted in colonial legacies and intergenerational trauma (Wilson et al., 2012). Despite recent reforms, access to housing, education, and culturally appropriate support remains inconsistent across the country (Aidoo, 2023). The U.S. introduced the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* (2008), which provides federal funding to extend care to age 21 (Day and Preston, 2013). Programs like *John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood* and *Foster Youth to Independence (FYI)* offer services related to housing, education, and employment (Collins, 2020). However, services are fragmented, with significant variability across states. Racial disparities, limited housing stock, and mental health service gaps remain critical issues (Mongelli et al., 2020). In South Africa, the child protection system is guided by the *Children's Act 38 of 2005*, yet provisions for care leavers remain minimal. Institutional support ends at age 18, often without formal transition planning. *Power and Raphael* (Power and Raphael, 2018) notes that although cultural networks offer some support, many care leavers face homelessness, unemployment, and educational exclusion. The absence of dedicated aftercare legislation and cross-sector mechanisms hampers effective support (Spink, 2024). Countries like Argentina and Brazil have begun to explore aftercare strategies, but services remain limited and underfunded. McKechnie et al. (McKechnie et al., 2018) emphasize that residential care often lacks planning for transitions. Youth leaving care often face challenges such as informal housing, unemployment, and stigmatization, exacerbated by weak public service coordination.

Outcomes Associated with Young People Leaving Out of Home Care

Lower Educational Attainment

Canadian research consistently indicates that children and youth in out-of-home care (OHC) experience significant educational challenges, often resulting in lower academic achievement (Tessier et al., 2018). For instance, a 2012 report from the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Ontario revealed that only 44% of youth in OHC earned a high school diploma in 2011, compared to 81% of the general student population. Similarly, a study conducted in British Columbia by Shaffer, Neal (Neal, 2017) found that just 32% of youth transitioning out of care had completed

high school in 2013–2014, in contrast to 84% among their peers. The same study also reported that these youth pursue postsecondary education at about half the rate of the general population and are significantly less likely to attend or graduate from university with graduation rates being as low as one-sixth of those in the broader population. Earlier findings from British Columbia also highlighted this disparity, showing that youth in care were 20 times less likely to attend college or university (Wang et al., 2024).

Incarceration

Warburton et al. (2014) found that, by age 19, youth in British Columbia who had been placed in out-of-home care (OHC) had incarceration rates more than twice as high as their peers who had not been in care (Lindquist, 2023).

Lower Employment Rates and Income

Youth who have experienced out-of-home care (OHC) are less likely to complete high school or pursue post-secondary education, which often results in reduced employment opportunities. A Canadian study involving 210 young adults who had aged out of care found that only 32% were employed full-time, while 46% were unemployed at the time of the survey (Kovarikova, 2017). Similarly, Grimshaw, (2011) reported that employment among this group tends to be limited to low-wage jobs, with a significant dependence on government assistance. Overall income levels are typically very low often falling below the poverty line. A cost-analysis by Gaetz et al (2018) further underscored the economic impact, revealing that youth aging out of the child welfare system in Canada earn approximately \$326,000 less over their lifetimes compared to their peers.

Teen Pregnancy and Intergenerational Trauma

International studies have shown that while youth in out-of-home care (OHC) tend to have similar median ages for first sexual activity and comparable numbers of sexual partners as their peers, they are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors such as inconsistent use of contraception which increases the likelihood of teen pregnancy (Szucs, 2020). As a result, young women in foster care are approximately twice as likely to become pregnant as those not in care. A study conducted in Manitoba by Asghari et al. (2024) analyzed data from 576 adolescent mothers in the child welfare system and 5,366 adolescent mothers not in care. The findings revealed that young mothers who had been in OHC were significantly more likely to have their children apprehended by child welfare services before the age of two, with many of these removals occurring within the first week of the child's life.

Physical and Mental Health Challenges

Although some differences in physical health exist among youth aging out of care, the most significant disparities are seen in mental health outcomes (Kang-Yi and Adams, 2017). A longitudinal study of 37 former youth in care in British Columbia found that 38% experienced depression, 14% reported having an eating disorder, and 11% suffered from anxiety (Bunka, 2025). Similarly, Engler et al. (2022) found that a history of foster care was an independent predictor of mental health conditions such as major depressive episodes, panic disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Early Mortality

A 2018 review by the British Columbia Coroners Service Death Review Panel examined the deaths of 200 youth who died between January 1, 2011, and December 31, 2016, either shortly before or after aging out of care. The review found that youth transitioning out of the care system died at five times the rate of their peers in the general population. Overall, both Canadian and international research consistently identify youth aging out of foster care as a highly vulnerable group, facing significantly elevated risks across a range of negative life outcomes. This report aims to synthesize current knowledge and highlight critical gaps in understanding how to better support youth in out-of-home care as they transition to adulthood.

Crime

Research has shown that involvement in out-of-home care is generally associated with a higher likelihood of criminal behavior in adulthood (Yoon et al., 2018). In a study of 36,653 school-aged children with documented maltreatment, Maguire-Jack et al., (2020) found that non-white children receiving in-home child welfare and mental health services were at the highest risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system. However, the relationship between Out of Home Care and criminal offending can vary depending on a youth's specific experiences while in care. Factors such as the number and type of placements have been linked to increased risk of offending (Yoon et al., 2018). For example, Crawford et al., (2018) found that each additional placement was associated with a 3% increase in violent offenses, and youth placed in group homes committed 80% more crimes than those in traditional foster care settings. Similarly, a large-scale study in British Columbia by Shah et al. (2017) identified a history of foster care combined with traumatic experiences as a significant predictor of both adult incarceration and homelessness.

Core Pillars: Housing, Mental Health, Education/Workforce, and Legal Identity

Effective transitional support systems for youth leaving

out-of-home care must be built around four core pillars: stable housing, access to mental health services, pathways to education and employment, and legal and civil identity (Figure 1). These domains, while interdependent, require coordinated responses from governments, service providers, and civil society. Drawing insights from international literature, this section outlines each pillar's role in fostering successful transitions to independent adulthood.

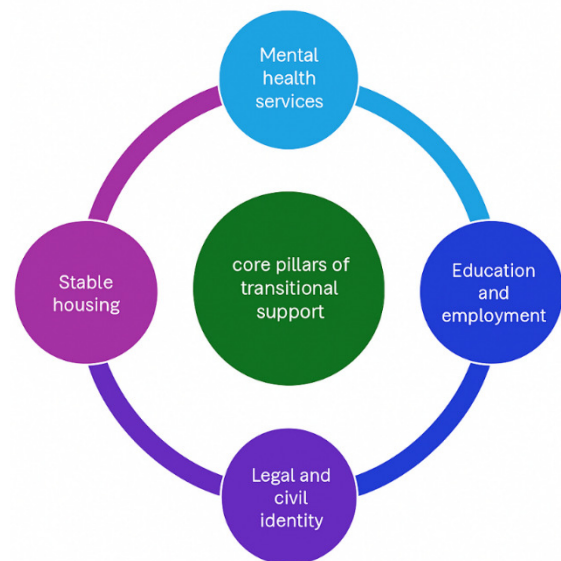


Figure 1. Core Pillars of Transitional support

Housing Stability

Housing stability is a foundational component of successful transitions from out-of-home care (Starr et al., 2024). Youth leaving care systems frequently face immediate housing insecurity, which exacerbates vulnerability to exploitation, unemployment, and poor mental health (Hock et al., 2023). While some countries have established semi-independent housing or “aftercare” arrangements, implementation remains inconsistent and often fails to address the long-term housing trajectories of care leavers. For instance, in Canada and the UK, structured support such as “Staying Put” programs have shown positive impacts on delaying transitions out of care until housing is secured (Picker et al., 2024). However, in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, such support mechanisms are less formalized or absent altogether (Ribeiro, 2020).

A global framework for transitional housing should embrace tiered support systems tailored to local capacity and policy. Tier 1 could provide immediate post-care housing solutions integrated with life skills training. Tier 2 could offer medium-term subsidized housing with embedded mentorship and employment linkages, while Tier 3 transitions youth into independent housing with ongoing voluntary check-ins (Worton et al., 2018). Cross-

national evidence suggests that the presence of a reliable adult connection, accessible tenant education, and streamlined access to social services are key factors in preventing homelessness among care leavers (Taylor et al., 2024).

Governments should prioritize affordable housing policies that allocate a proportion of units to care leavers. Innovative models such as Housing First for Youth (HF4Y), originally implemented in Canada, have shown that combining housing with wraparound supports leads to better long-term outcomes (Gaetz et al., 2023). In the absence of public funding, community-based and NGO-led programs, such as those in South Africa and Brazil, offer grassroots alternatives to formal housing provision (Devkar et al., 2019). Ultimately, housing stability is not merely a shelter issue, it reflects national priorities around youth equity, social protection, and inclusive urban planning (Meerow et al., 2019).

Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing

The psychological burden borne by youth exiting care is often profound and multi-dimensional (Kelly et al., 2025). Histories of trauma, neglect, or institutionalization intersect with the abrupt withdrawal of structured support systems, increasing the risk of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and substance abuse (May, 2025). Mental health challenges are often compounded by stigma, service gaps, and mistrust in authority figures developed during their time in care (Mantovani et al., 2017).

Across different global contexts, psychosocial interventions remain underfunded and under-integrated in youth aftercare models. The United Kingdom and Australia have developed trauma-informed therapeutic programs embedded in community-based transitional support systems (Matte-Landry et al., 2025). However, their reach is often limited to urban centers or pilot programs. In the Global South, where mental health infrastructure is still developing, youth aging out of care may not receive any form of psychosocial assistance unless through faith-based or civil society initiatives (Nanji and Olivier, 2024). A global framework should mandate the integration of trauma-informed care, culturally responsive counseling, and peer support mechanisms into the youth transition architecture. Programs should emphasize continuity of care, ensuring that therapeutic support initiated during the care experience extends into adulthood. This requires not only service provision but also strategic workforce development: training professionals in adolescent mental health and child development within a transitional framework (Adu et al., 2022). Peer-led interventions, as implemented in Canada and the Netherlands, have demonstrated success in reducing isolation and increasing care leavers' sense of agency and belonging (Barry, 2012; Stephenson et al., 2023).

Finally, psychosocial frameworks must reflect intersectionality: for instance, LGBTQ+ care leavers often report higher rates of discrimination, mental illness, and

homelessness (Milburn, 2023). Intersectional programming ensures that services are not only available but also equitable, inclusive, and sensitive to diverse identities and experiences. Without addressing mental health, any transition framework remains incomplete (Edyburn et al., 2023).

Education and Workforce Integration

Education and workforce participation are critical levers for ensuring long-term stability and economic independence among youth transitioning out of care. However, care leavers consistently experience lower levels of educational attainment and higher unemployment rates than their peers (Hagleitner et al., 2022). Barriers include disrupted schooling, undiagnosed learning difficulties, and limited access to financial aid or adult guidance during key transition phases (Boyce et al., 2020). These challenges often compound, leaving young adults ill-equipped to compete in formal labor markets or to pursue postsecondary education. Countries like the United Kingdom and Australia have instituted post-care bursaries and dedicated university support programs for care-experienced students, which have helped improve educational persistence (Darmody, 2025). In Canada and parts of the United States, workforce development programs tied to housing or mental health services such as the Foyer model have proven effective in reducing NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) rates among care leavers (Redmond and McFadden, 2023). However, these successes are often localized, and many systems remain fragmented, lacking a unified mechanism to bridge education and employment support for youth exiting care. A global transitional framework must integrate early career planning and vocational mentorship beginning within the care experience, with a continuation into aftercare. This includes access to apprenticeships, public sector job quotas, and subsidized skill development programs (Clivet, 2021). Governments should ensure that national labor policies recognize the care-experienced population as a distinct group deserving of affirmative action and tailored support similar to veterans or persons with disabilities. Moreover, digital literacy and remote job access should be prioritized, especially in regions where youth face geographical or infrastructural barriers (Choudhary and Bansal, 2022).

An inclusive transition framework also calls for coordination between ministries of education, labor, and youth development, as well as partnerships with private sector employers. Programs such as "Youth Employment Services" (YES) in South Africa demonstrate how multi-sector approaches can expand job access for marginalized youth (Nyagani, 2022).

Ultimately, education and workforce inclusion must be reframed not as optional aftercare components but as core indicators of state responsibility and developmental justice for care leavers.

Legal and Civil Identity

Legal identity and documentation are often overlooked components of transition planning, yet they are essential to accessing healthcare, housing, education, financial services, and full citizenship rights. Youth leaving care systems may lack valid identification, birth certificates, or legal residency papers, barriers that can delay or prevent them from securing employment, voting, or applying for public services (Courtney and Hook, 2012). This issue is especially acute in low- and middle-income countries, where civil registration systems are fragmented or exclusionary (Siqueira et al., 2021).

Globally, there is significant variation in how legal identity is supported during the transition process. In the United States and Australia, some jurisdictions mandate that care leavers exit with essential documentation such as state IDs, social security numbers, and proof of residence (Mendes and McCurdy, 2020). However, in many countries, the onus falls on young people to navigate bureaucratic systems alone, often without guidance or legal advocacy. This increases their risk of statelessness, criminalization, and long-term marginalization (Marandett, 2024).

A global framework should prioritize civic identity as a central pillar, mandating that every young person exiting care has access to verified identification and legal representation where necessary. This includes birth registration, legal name changes procedures (especially for transgender youth), voter registration, and pathways to legal emancipation or adult guardianship as needed (Manby, 2021). Legal clinics, ombudspersons for children, and digital ID systems could be integrated into youth transition services to streamline access and reduce administrative friction.

Moreover, rights education must be embedded into transition planning, empowering youth to understand and claim their civil, social, and economic rights. In countries like Brazil and Colombia, rights-based approaches to child welfare have begun to influence transition planning through participatory policymaking (Grugel and Riggiozzi, 2018). Legal empowerment is not merely an administrative necessity, it is a form of structural inclusion that allows care-experienced youth to participate fully in society, advocate for themselves, and hold systems accountable.

Proposed Global Framework: Scalable Design and Local Adaptation

Building on comparative evidence and the foundational pillars of housing, mental health, workforce readiness, and legal identity, this section proposes a Global Transitional Support Framework (GTSF) aimed at equipping care-experienced youth with the resources and stability needed for a successful transition into adulthood. The GTSF is intentionally modular and flexible, emphasizing intersectoral collaboration and youth-centered design while allowing for local contextual adaptation across

economic, cultural, and governance landscapes. The framework is grounded in principles of social justice and practical system reform, offering a blueprint that can be scaled across different levels of development while maintaining core fidelity to youth empowerment and developmental continuity.

Foundational Principles

The GTSF is underpinned by five foundational principles that ensure equity, scalability, and relevance. First is the principle of youth participation and agency. Systems must include young people as co-creators of their transition experience. Empowering them to participate in decision-making, contribute to service design, and evaluate the supports they receive. This principle aligns with literature calling for active youth voice in policymaking, noting that such engagement strengthens service relevance and accountability (Blakeslee and Walker, 2018). Second is the continuity of support, which emphasizes that transitions must begin early ideally by age 15 and continue past age 18 to reflect the prolonged developmental trajectory of care-experienced youth. Research confirms that the abrupt withdrawal of support at 18 is detrimental, while extended care improves housing, education, and health outcomes (Palmer et al., 2022). Third, integrated service delivery is essential. Fragmentation across child protection, health, education, justice, and housing systems often leads to disjointed care. A coordinated system, with shared outcomes and unified case management, ensures a smoother transition (Ahmed, 2016). Fourth, interventions must be trauma-informed and culturally responsive. Care leavers often carry complex trauma and belong to marginalized racial or ethnic groups. Interventions must be adapted to their identities, experiences, and cultural worldviews to foster trust and effectiveness (Sharma, 2025). Finally, scalability and context sensitivity are critical. The framework is not prescriptive; instead, it presents adaptable tools that stakeholders can tailor to fit their institutional capacity and community resources, an approach proven effective in multiple international studies (Sun et al., 2024).

Framework Components

The GTSF is structured into three interrelated tiers that together form a robust and adaptable infrastructure for supporting youth in transition. The first tier focuses on transition planning infrastructure at the individual level. Each young person is paired with a Youth Transition Coordinator, who serves as the primary navigator of services and supports. This role is vital in maintaining relational continuity and ensuring accountability across sectors. The coordinator works with the youth to co-create an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP), which captures aspirations and needs across domains such as housing, education, mental health, and employment. Digital case management tools should support these plans, integrating

data and service updates from all involved stakeholders (Ferreira, 2024). The second tier encompasses coordinated service networks, which operate at the institutional level. Governments are encouraged to formalize interagency agreements among ministries of welfare, housing, justice, education, and labor. These agreements should define roles, timelines, and referral processes. A “hub-and-spoke” model connects central service hubs to community-based organizations, enhancing outreach and localization. Agencies involved in the network must commit to shared outcome metrics, enabling collective impact measurement and accountability (Williams, 2021). The third tier includes the community and policy ecosystem. It establishes Youth Advisory Boards at both national and local levels to guide reforms from the lived-experience perspective. It also encourages legislative action to extend care duration, mandate service integration, and secure sustainable budget lines. Finally, cross-national knowledge exchange platforms enable countries to learn from each other, sharing strategies, tools, and lessons across global and regional networks (Dawes et al., 2012). Together, these three tiers ensure that services are youth-centered, systems-aware, and embedded within a supportive policy environment.

Adaptation Pathways

Given the varying levels of national wealth, infrastructure, and governance, the framework must be adaptable to a wide range of implementation environments. High-income countries, with strong digital infrastructure and robust governance systems, are well-positioned to adopt the full framework. These countries can integrate predictive analytics, AI-enhanced case management, and centralized data systems to coordinate multi-agency responses. They may also pilot new technologies, such as mobile transition planning apps or real-time feedback loops, to enhance youth engagement and responsiveness. For middle-income countries, phased adoption is more practical. These countries can begin by strengthening education-to-employment pathways and building regional youth hubs that concentrate transition services in a single location.

Over time, these hubs can evolve into multisectoral service centers, expanding to include legal, housing, and mental health supports. Low-income or crisis-affected countries, where formal systems may be weak or underfunded, should prioritize community-led peer mentorship, transitional housing managed by NGOs, and the integration of informal care systems into the broader youth development agenda.

Donor funding and technical support from multilateral agencies can help jumpstart initial infrastructure, while social accountability mechanisms such as community scorecards can be used to maintain transparency and trust. This tiered adaptation model ensures that the

framework remains accessible to a wide array of countries while preserving core principles of youth empowerment, equity, and continuity of care.

Monitoring and Learning

Monitoring, evaluation, and system learning are vital to ensuring that the framework remains effective, relevant, and responsive to changing youth needs (Sparkes and Werners, 2023). At the program level, Youth Outcomes analysis should be implemented to track metrics across core domains such as education participation, housing stability, mental health outcomes, and employment retention. These analyses must allow for disaggregation by gender, ethnicity, disability, and care history, enabling nuanced analyses of equity and effectiveness. Feedback loops are equally critical. These mechanisms include structured check-ins with youth, anonymous service ratings, and focus groups that allow young people to share insights and suggest improvements. Embedding these loops into service delivery ensures that the system evolves in response to those it serves. Periodic independent reviews conducted by universities, think tanks, or civil society coalitions further strengthen accountability. These reviews assess fidelity, efficiency, and outcomes, identifying bottlenecks and recommending course corrections (Vallon, 2024). Moreover, longitudinal studies of care leavers can offer deep insights into the long-term impacts of transition support. An area where data is still lacking globally. By investing in monitoring and learning, governments and service providers demonstrate their commitment not only to policy implementation but also to iterative improvement based on real-world evidence and lived experiences.

Cross-Sector Implementation and Policy Reform

The successful implementation of the Global Transitional Support Framework (GTSF) requires deliberate, coordinated, and long-term policy and systems reforms across multiple sectors. This section outlines practical recommendations for operationalizing the framework at national, regional, and community levels, emphasizing inter-agency coordination, policy coherence, sustainable funding, and the central involvement of youth with lived experience.

Establish Legal and Policy Foundations for Extended Care

A consistent finding across countries is that youth aging out of care at 18 face abrupt withdrawal of support, leaving them vulnerable to housing insecurity, unemployment, and mental health crises (Malone, 2025). Governments must legislate extended care policies that allow continued access to transitional supports until at least age 21, and ideally up to 25. These policies should include legal

entitlements to housing subsidies, educational grants, access to mental health services, and mentorship programs. Lessons from Australia's "Better Futures" and the UK's "Staying Put" initiatives show that extended care can significantly improve housing and employment outcomes (Judd, 2022; Mayhew, 2022).

Create Cross-Ministerial Task Forces and Shared Governance Models

Fragmentation between ministries (e.g., welfare, housing, labor, justice, and education) is a persistent barrier to effective service coordination (Cejudo and Michel, 2017). To address this, countries should establish cross-ministerial task forces with a dedicated mandate to implement transition strategies for care-experienced youth. These bodies should develop joint funding mechanisms, integrated referral systems, and unified outcome indicators. Collaborative governance structures, such as the "hub-and-spoke" service model employed in Canada and parts of Europe, can foster alignment between national policy and local service delivery (Khan, 2024).

Invest in Workforce Development and Interdisciplinary Training

Delivering integrated, trauma-informed, and culturally competent care requires a skilled, well-trained workforce. Governments and NGOs should invest in interdisciplinary training for frontline workers, equipping them with tools to understand adolescent development, trauma recovery, cross-cultural communication, and youth empowerment (Welhenage, 2023). Peer-mentorship roles should be formalized and funded as part of the transitional workforce (Harrod, 2019). Such roles not only create employment pathways for care leavers but also increase the trustworthiness and relevance of services.

Mandate and Fund Youth Participation Mechanisms

Youth voices are central to the legitimacy and effectiveness of transitional programs. Governments should institutionalize youth participation through the formation of Youth Advisory Boards that influence national policy, program design, and service evaluation (Palmy and Buchanan, 2020). These bodies should be diverse, inclusive, and compensated for their contributions. In addition, service providers should embed feedback tools such as anonymous surveys, storytelling platforms, and youth-led audits into their operational processes.

Develop Scalable, Digital Infrastructure for Case Management

Digital systems can play a transformative role in integrating data across housing, health, education, and employment domains. Governments should invest in

scalable digital case management platforms that enable real-time data sharing, risk prediction, and personalized service planning (Poudel, 2024). These tools must be secure, accessible across agencies, and include features that allow youth to track their own goals and progress. Particularly in middle- and low-income countries, international donors and tech partners can support the development of open-source, mobile-first solutions that enhance coordination and youth engagement.

Promote International Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange

Countries at all income levels can benefit from knowledge sharing platforms and communities of practice focused on transitional support. Regional networks such as the Latin American Network for Post-Care Transitions or Africa's care reform alliances can serve as hubs for policy exchange, innovation diffusion, and joint research initiatives (Van Breda, 2017). International development agencies, universities, and philanthropic actors should support south-south and north-south collaboration to localize global frameworks and co-create scalable interventions (Saric et al., 2019).

Conclusion

As this review has demonstrated, the transition from out-of-home care to independent adulthood represents a pivotal juncture in the lives of care-experienced youth—a juncture too often marked by structural disadvantage, systemic neglect, and heightened vulnerability. Across diverse national contexts, youth aging out of care face disproportionate barriers to stable housing, education, employment, health care, and social inclusion. While some countries have developed promising models of transitional support, implementation remains uneven and fragmented. There is an urgent need for globally informed, locally adaptable frameworks that prioritize continuity of care, cross-sector collaboration, and youth empowerment.

This paper has introduced a conceptual Global Transitional Support Framework (GTSF) grounded in four core pillars housing stability, psychosocial well-being, education and employment access, and legal identity and social inclusion. Drawing on comparative policy analysis from countries including Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa, and Latin America, the framework emphasizes participatory governance, trauma-informed practice, and scalability across varying levels of national capacity. Its design incorporates integrated service networks, tiered infrastructure, youth-centered digital tools, and institutionalized feedback mechanisms to ensure responsiveness and long-term impact.

Crucially, this framework is not intended as a prescriptive solution, but rather as a flexible guide for governments, practitioners, and civil society actors seeking to improve outcomes for care leavers in their own contexts. Implementation requires sustained political commitment,

inter-ministerial coordination, and dedicated funding alongside a deep commitment to including the voices and lived experiences of care-experienced youth at every stage of design and delivery. As the global community continues to advance the Sustainable Development Goals particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) ensuring equitable life chances for youth leaving care must be a shared moral, social, and developmental priority. The GTSF provides a foundational step toward that vision. By investing in more just, inclusive, and supportive systems, nations can not only foster individual resilience and independence but also strengthen their broader social infrastructure for generations to come.

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