

LIFE AS A CARE-LEAVER IN KENYA

Nairobi, 20.06.2009



"We are dead wrong if we believe children can be successful by just spending thousands of dollars to provide, food, education, shelter and clothing. If we really care and if we really believe that children are our future, you better do a research of what these young adults need, how young people are discriminated once leaving care."

Stephen Ucembe

Introduction

Care-leavers are generally recognized as young people who leave an institutional care settings without a stable family. This means that they are in the process of leaving or have recently left care placements (where they have been raised) once they have reached a legal fixed age (usually 18 years old).

Young care-leavers who have lived for a long period of time within an institutional care settings apart from their birth families represent a target group of persons at great risk of poverty and social exclusion.

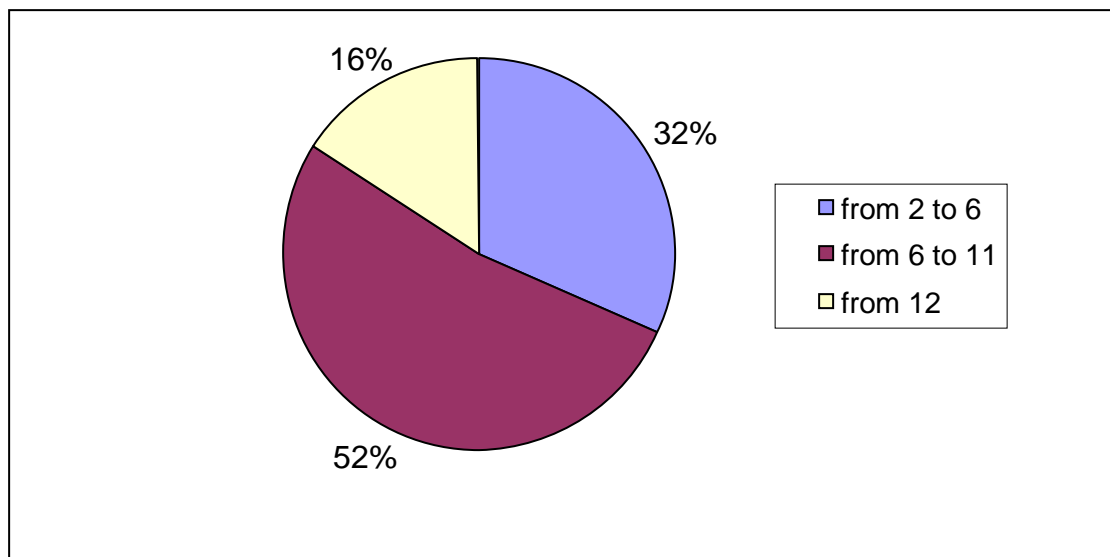
This report is the result of a workshop held with a group of 19 young care-leavers drawn from ten different charitable children's institutions or rehabilitation centres and of a questionnaire carried out on the young care-leavers. The objective is to hear their voices and to better understand the challenges and problems facing children living in institutional care.

1. LIFE IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE

Overview of Age of Admission into Institutional Care and Length of Stay

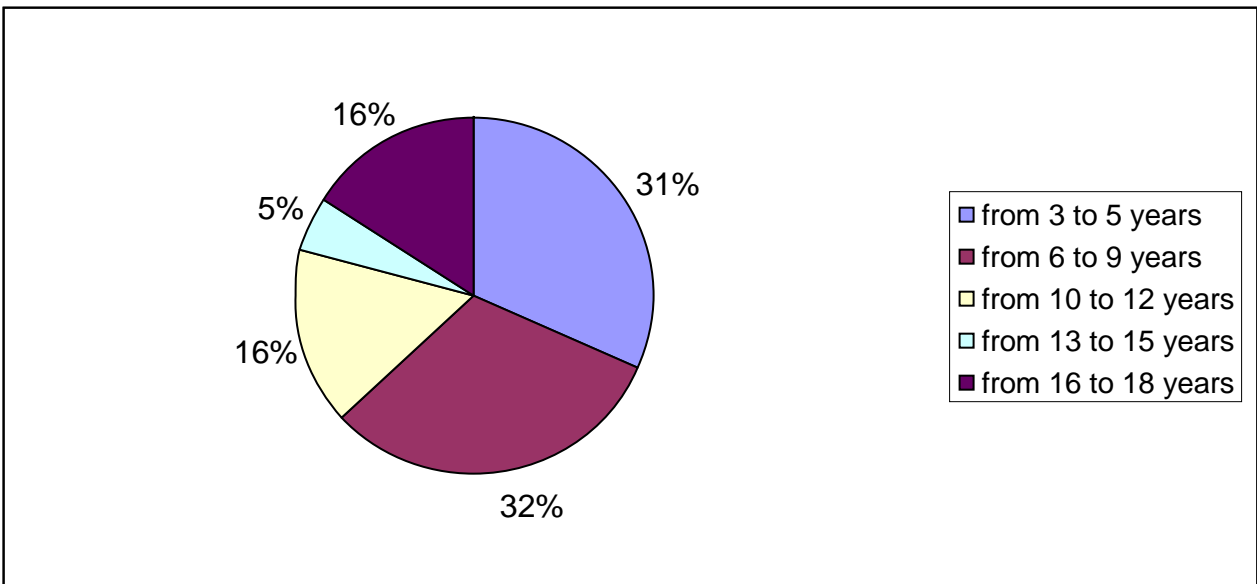
The majority (10) of the respondents to the questionnaire have been institutionalized between the ages of 7 and 11, six respondents between the ages of 2 and 6, and three respondents at the age of 14.

Graphic 1. Age of admission into institutional care



All of the care leavers spent more than three years in institutional care. The majority spent between three and nine years in institutional care. The study found that majority of the children admitted to the institutions between the age of 6 to 11 stayed in the institutions until they were 18 years old.

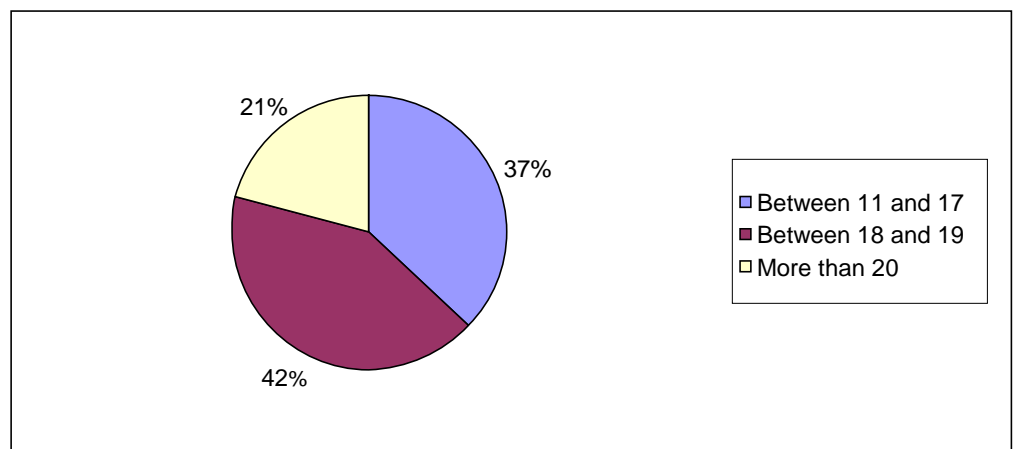
Graphic 2. Years spent in institutional care



As we can see from the table below, the majority of the care-leavers lived in the institutions until 18 and 19 years of age; and some even longer, two until 20, one until 22, and one until 24.

Graphic 3. Age they left care

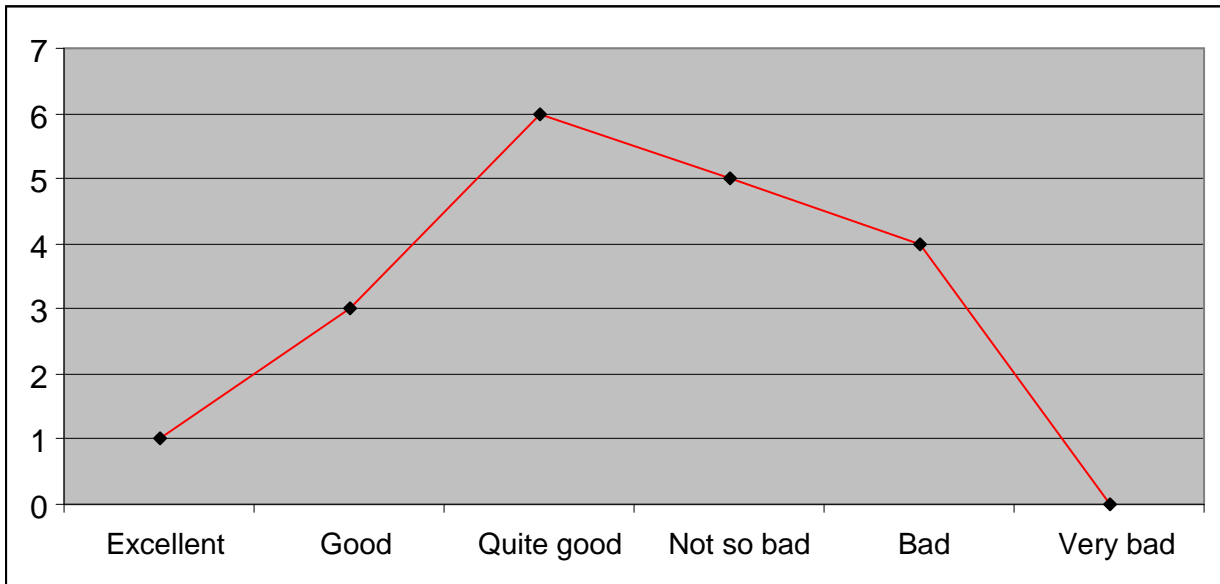
Age of exit	Nr
11	1
12	1
13	1
14	1
15	3
18	3
19	5
20	2
22	1
24	1



Care-givers views of life in institutional care

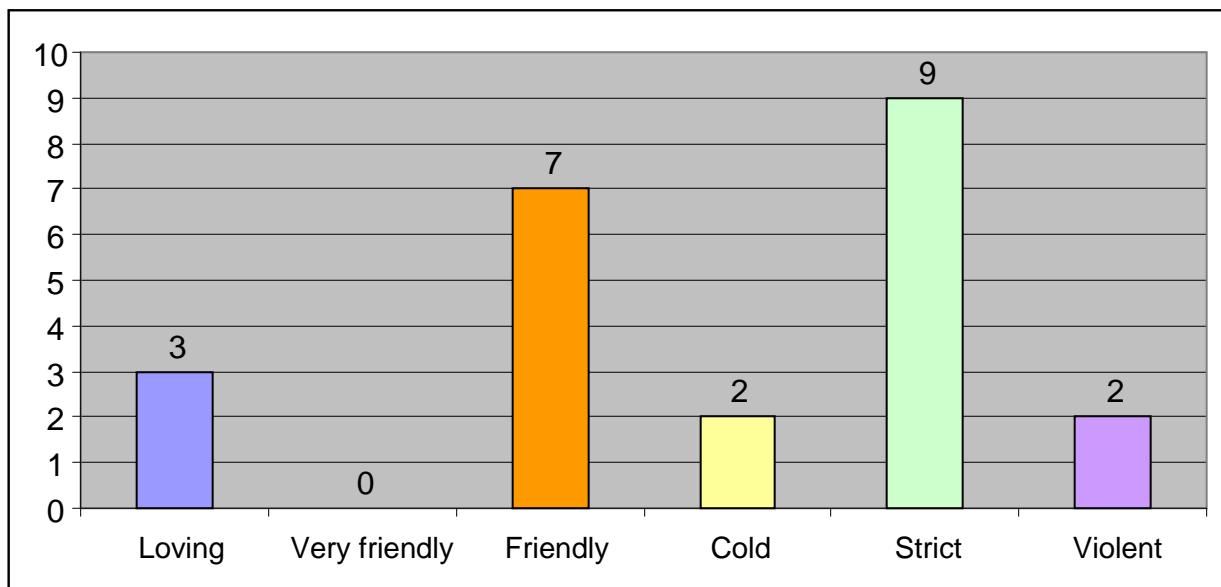
Concerning their perceptions on life in institutional care, the majority were impartial, as shown in the graphic. Only one has a very positive idea of institutionalized care declaring that “life in care was excellent.” On the contrary, four answered that “institutional care was bad.”

Graphic 4. How was life in institutional care?



These perceptions are enhanced by feelings towards the staff. The majority of the care-leavers said that the care-givers were friendly and loving, but at the same time, some felt that they were strict and, in two cases, violent.

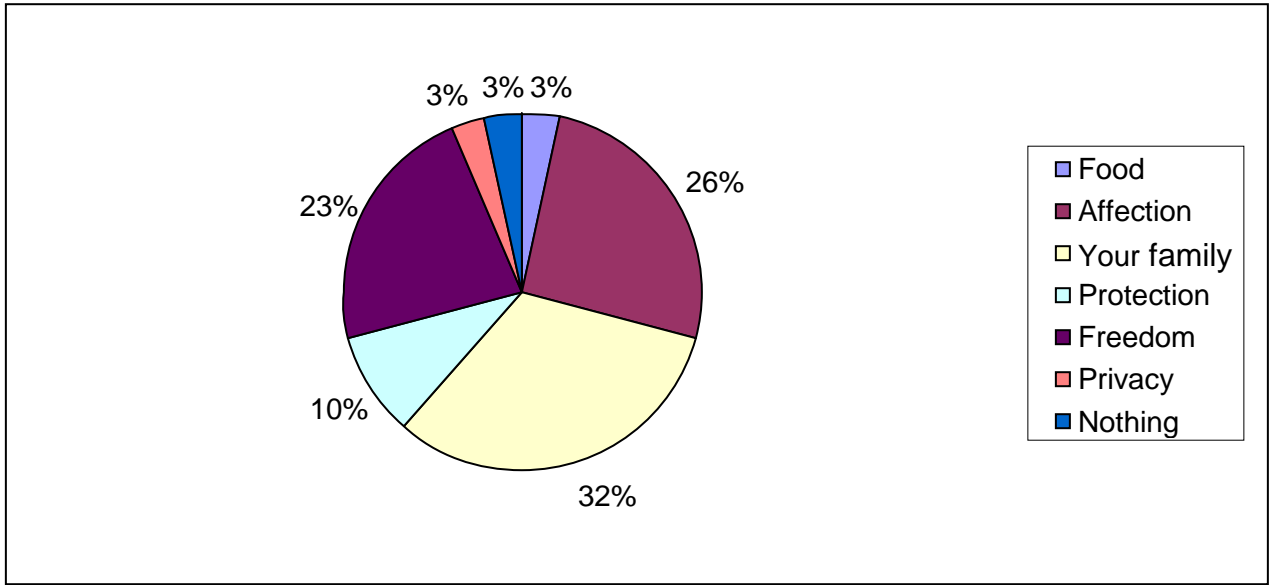
Graphic 5. Feelings about care-givers



Prior to entering care, many of the care-leavers experienced great trauma, such as abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Most of the institutions did not have counselors or psychologists to help the children to overcome their traumatic past and pain. Only five care-leavers had a counselor in the institution, four of them meeting regularly. When these young people are forced to transition out of the institutions, having not overcome their pasts, adjustment to everyday life and forming relationship with others becomes even more difficult. Only eight of the participants in the study talked to the institution staff about their troubled past and problems. The other participants said that they did not open up because the staff was unavailable, there were never any opportunities to talk privately, or they were too afraid and did not want to remember their past.

For the question, “what did you miss most in the institution?,” the majority answered that they missed family and affection, while few missed lack of freedom, protection, and privacy (“having to share everything”). One care-leaver said that he did not miss anything while living in the institution and his time spent in institutionalized care was very good.

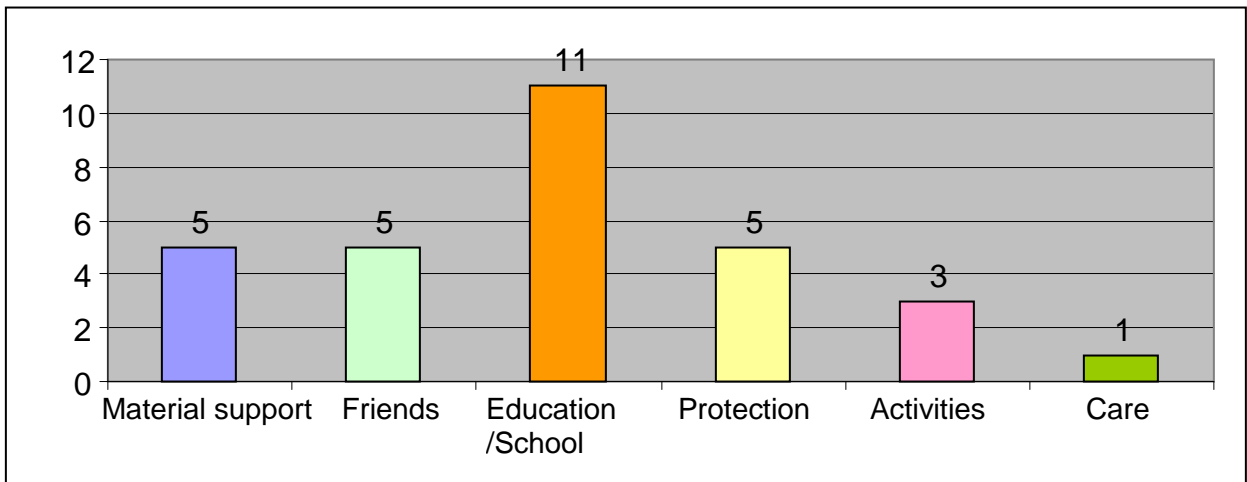
Graphic 6. What did you miss in the institution?



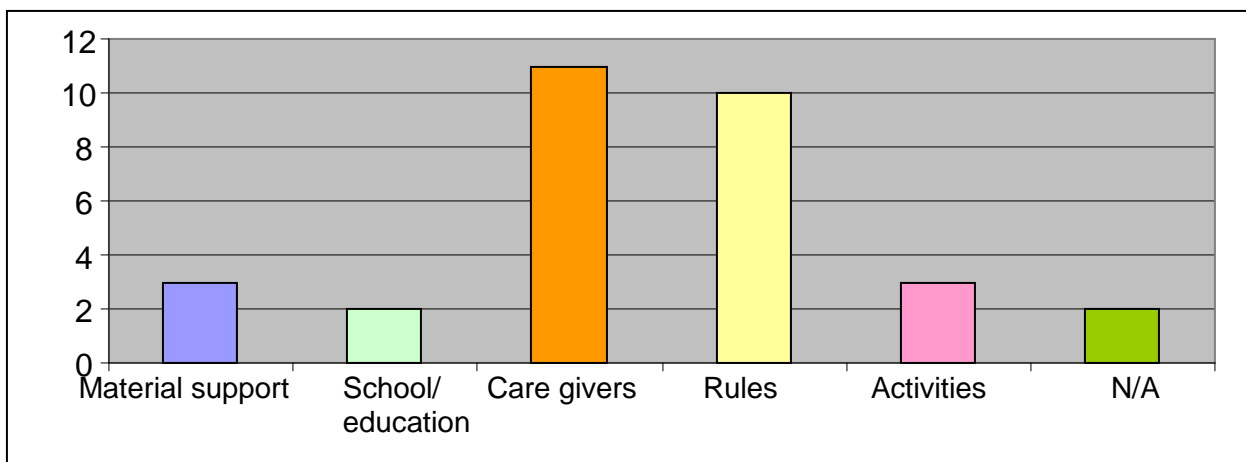
While in institutional care, the care-leavers claimed that they had very rare contact or no contact at all with the local community. They also said that they were not free to practice their own religion (e.g. in the case of Catholic institutions, they were all obliged to follow Catholicism).

Concerning the things that they liked or disliked in the institutions, the majority said that they liked the educational opportunities within the institutions and the possibilities of going to school. However, the majority disliked the care-givers because of harassment and mistreatment and the rules which were so strict.

Graphic 7. What did you like most in the institution?



Graphic 8. What did you dislike most in the institution?



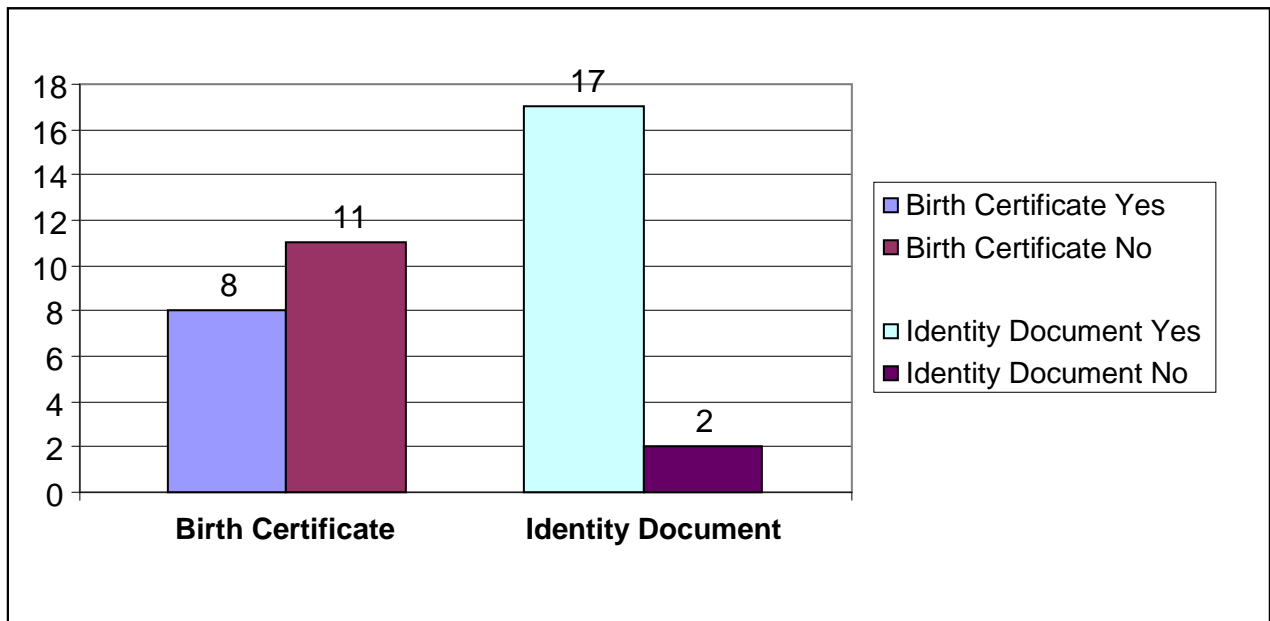
Care-givers relationships with their family

In terms of the relationships the care-leavers had with their families when they were in the institutions, nine said that they did not receive any visits from their families. Among the ones who said that they were visited by their families, five said that it was on special occasions. Out of the 19 study participants, only one noted that his family visited him regularly. The majority (11) never went back home during school holidays, and eight said that they went back only during summer or Christmas holidays. One of the care-leavers said that he never saw his sister when he was in care, because she was fostered by another family and they met only after high school. The sister never looked at him as a brother and never believed that they were siblings. Now, they avoid one another for long periods of time. Another care-leaver mentioned, although he was in the same institution as his sister, they rarely saw each other because the girls stayed in a separate building and no one reminded or wanted to tell them that they were siblings. When they left care they rarely talked to each other, even when they stayed under the same roof.

Care-leavers documentation and legal protection

In order to better understand the kind of legal assistance that should be provided to the care-leavers, we asked them if they had a birth certificate and/or an identity document (ID). The majority (17) had an ID. The two care-leavers who are still living in the institutions answered that their IDs were in the process of being issued. They stressed the difficulty in obtaining it and the need for additional support by the institutions, the schools, and/or other “Samaritan” people such as a priest, a friend, or a guardian. Nevertheless, even if almost all the youth have their ID, the majority (11) do not have their birth certificates. Unfortunately most of the children in institutions are orphans and the institutions do not provide them with a birth certificate even though it is an important document that is required in order to attend school and to work.

Graphic 9. Birth Certificate and Identity Document



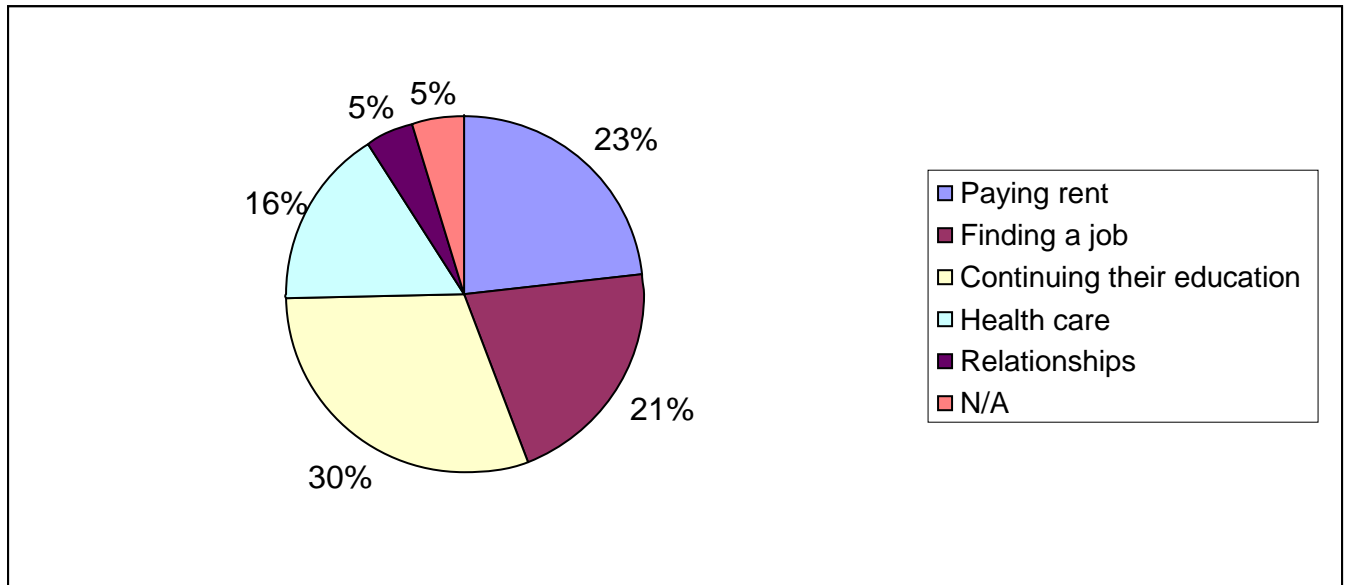
2. LEAVING CARE

Challenges after leaving care

The care-leavers faced multiple challenges after leaving care. The majority did not receive any assistance by the institution or the government once they left care. Considering that the majority had lived in the institution for many years, they were very disappointed that the institution did not check up on how they were doing and they felt as though they were left completely alone.

As highlighted in the graphic below, the majority had difficulties in continuing their education, finding a job, paying the rent, and accessing health care. Two of them said that they are continuing to have difficulties in establishing relationships due to their lack of social skills and inability to form attachments.

Graphic 10. Difficulties after leaving care



Education after leaving care

According to the questionnaires, all of the care-leavers attended at least primary school and all except one went on to secondary school. Some of them had the opportunity to go to college, but only two went to the university thanks to the financial support of a sponsor, the institution, or a friend. And, as illustrated by the graphic below, few of the care-leavers are still in school. However, many were very disappointed because they were not able to finish their education once they left care because they were either alone or their families could not pay the school fees for them. They also felt that the institutions should grant them the possibility to continue with their studies or help them get in touch with sponsors in the institutions so that the sponsors may be able to sustain them once they leave care.

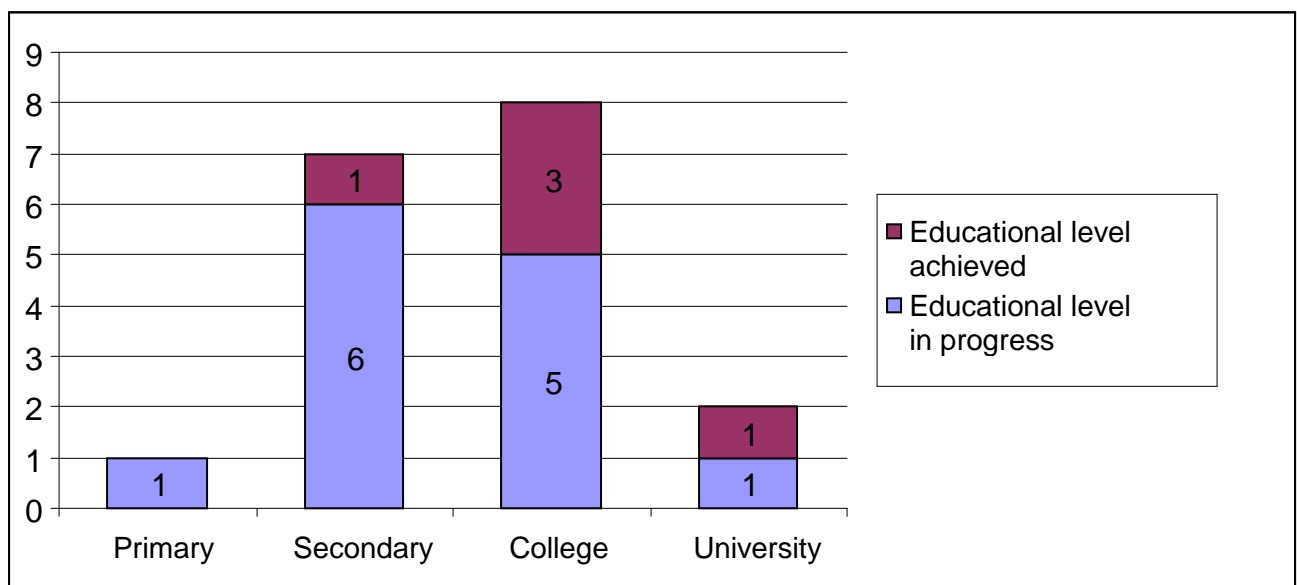
In general, the majority of the care-leavers confided that, without a higher education, life has been very difficult for them and upon leaving care realize the importance of

importance of education. The majority feel that education is one of the most important rights of children and they are conscious that having a good educational background will help them to find a job and to be successful in life.

However, as illustrated by the data below and as noted by many of the care-leavers, for many their education ended at the age of 18. Majority of the institutions view these young people as “burdens” and do not feel an obligation to support them after they become legal adults (18 years). And, even in the institutions, the care-leavers felt that no one motivated them to work hard and encouraged them to do well in school. One of the care-leavers even said that he was told by a person in the administration of the institution that he did not have to go to high school. The general feeling of lack support when it came to higher education is illustrated by one of the youths comments: “it would have been better to have been left on the streets than to get into institutional care, because I left without any preparation and social skills.”

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Graphic 11. Educational level



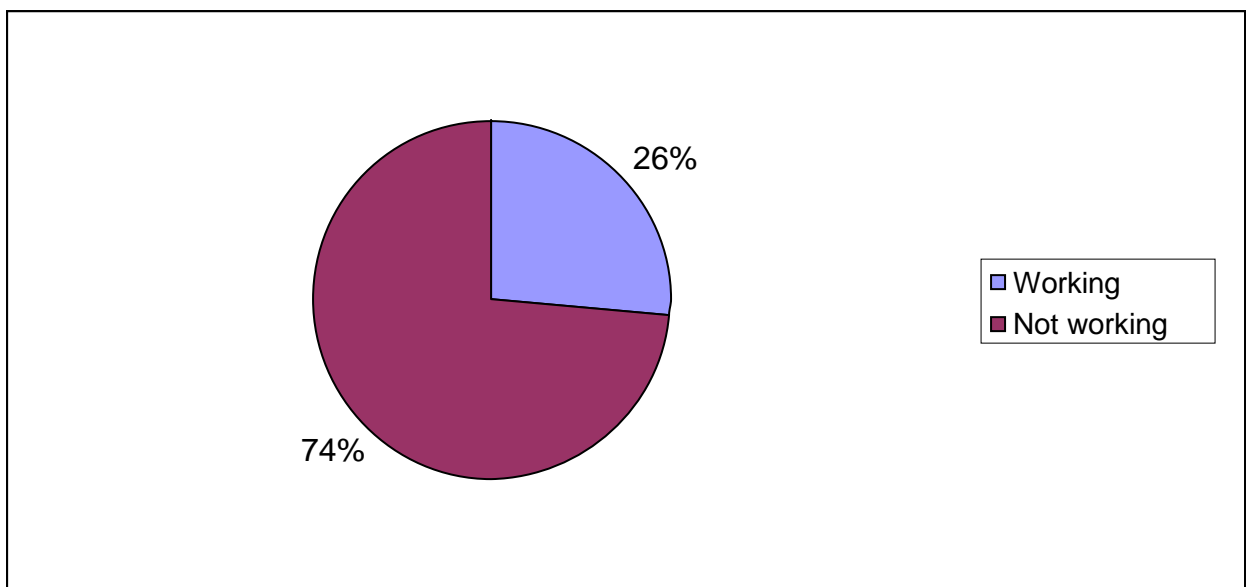
Employment after leaving care

For the care-leavers, they found that without proper job skills, assistance, and social network, it is difficult to get work and to earn a living. The majority of the care-leavers are not being supported by their former institutions. However, most of the care-leavers expressed that they would prefer to be given jobs on merit rather than sympathy. And, they should be given equal opportunities and given the same tools to be in a competitive position to get the jobs.

As the graphic below illustrates, majority of the care-leavers (14) are not working at present and only five have jobs. It was also noted that some worked in their former institutions and would like to work elsewhere but since they were not given in an assistance or job training, this was their only alternative.

Some of them have temporary/part-time jobs but are often exploited by working for long hours and earning very little money. Therefore, they live in poverty and are not able to meet their basic needs like food, clothing, medical care, and rent.

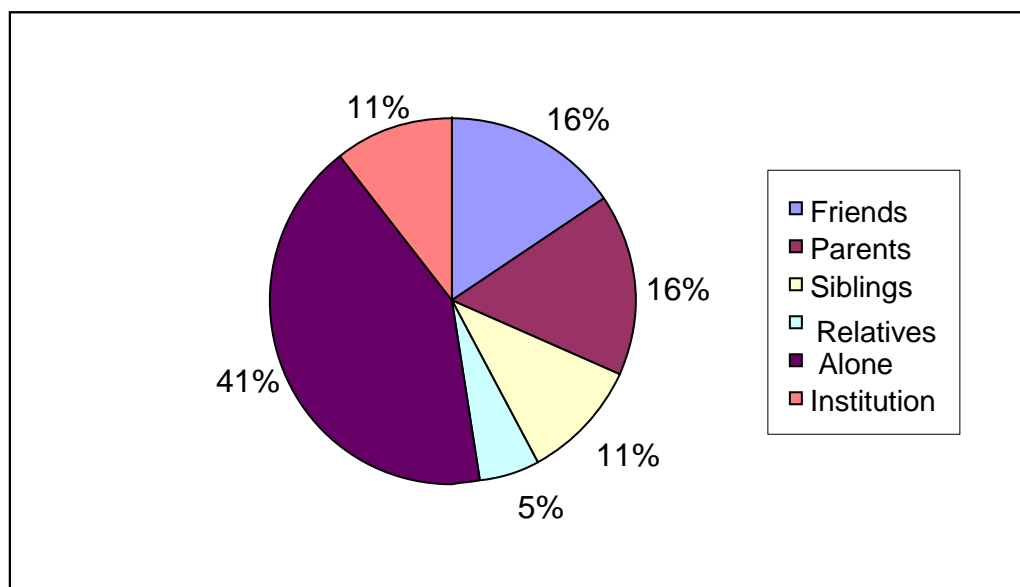
Graphic 12. Work situation



Living situation after leaving care

The majority of the care-leavers live alone, two are still living in the institutions, three live with friends, five with the parents or siblings, and one with relatives. The ones who live with friends or families said that the relationships with them were good; only one answered that the relationship was very bad. One of the care-leaver said once he left care it was hard for him to be accepted by his relatives because they do not know him and could not understand his feelings and sense of abandonment. Some of the care-leavers said that they were accepted by the same people who had neglected them only because they had an education and they could now get a job to assist them.

Graphic 13. Living arrangements



When these young boys and girls are placed in the community, they do not know how to interact with other people, particularly with adults. It is hard for them to ask for assistance and most of them end up being lonely and withdrawn. The only people they can talk to are people who have also left institutional care. Considering that they do not have any mentors and role models in the community, in most cases they end up being exploited, abused and neglected: they are often drawn to other groups living on the margins of society (e.g.: drug and alcohol addicts, criminals and prostitutes). According to the study, it seems that the situation is even worse for girls because some of them end up in relationships resulting in early pregnancies and extra-marital sex. One of the care-leavers said, “they were an easy target because there was no one to protect them and they were left alone once they had been abused.”

The community is not prepared to welcome the care-leavers: some of them said they avoid saying that they were orphans because they feel it is stigmatizing. One of them added that people in the community have a perception that if you are an orphan, you cannot excel and succeed in life.

The care-leavers feel that it is important to be connected to sponsors who used to assist them when they were in institutions. They said that these sponsors could be their mentors to guide them in their daily life as well as support them financially until they are independent.

However, many of the institutions do not allow the care-leavers to go back to seek assistance. The institutions feel that the care-leavers are too dependent on them. Since the policy of charitable children's institutions stipulates that they should exit care when they are 18, some institutions do not feel a responsibility towards the care-leavers.

Although the majority of the care-leavers are not aware of national and international child protection laws (i.e., Children Act 2001 or United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Children), they feel that it is important to have a better understanding of these laws.

3. RECOMENDATIONS

To Charitable Children's Institutions (CCIs) and Rehabilitation Centers

- CCI's should respect and uphold minimum standards of residential care and operate in transparent manner, respecting the local and international child protection conventions.
- Develop a data base and reporting mechanism in each institution and in the community for children in institutional care and care-leavers as well.
- The CCI's board should ensure representation and involvement of the key community members as well as decision makers for the best interest of the child (e.g.

representatives of Parliament and government, care-leavers, biological and adoptive parents, counselors and priest/pastor, etc.)

- There should be minimum requirements for care givers and social workers in CCI's. Social workers and care-givers should be trained on how to deal with, meet the needs, communicate with, and to enhance the normal development of an orphaned, abandoned, or street children . All care-givers should have been trained on early child development and have some basic skills on the psycho-social evolution of a child.
- The talents, skills, and potential of the children should be identified and enhanced so that they can deem themselves important and have their interests cultivated.
- Opportunities should be created for recreational activities.
- The individual's denominations should be respected and their feelings should be heard.
- Adequate supply of basic needs should be supplied considering that, in some cases, there is no food for the children and there is not enough clothing for all of the children.
- The right attention and protection should be given to every child.
- The relationship between the care-givers/social workers and children; between the children and the parents/guardians; as well as the children and community should be enhanced.
- Siblings should not be separated and their relationship should be enhanced and maintained
- Counseling should be given to the children, as well as to their families, in order to overcome their problems and restore their relationship, with the aim towards family reintegration.
- The children should not be criticized but helped to improve and made to feel important when they do something right.
- Adequate education should be provided to the children in order to avoid dependency in the future.
- Job skills and internships should be provided before leaving care through job officers.

- CCIs should identify the family roots and connect them with their parents and /or extended family.
- CCIs should ensure that a person is stable before leaving the institution.
- CCIs should ensure fair and just treatment to all.
- There should be an open communication between the staff and the Administrator/Board of the CCIs in order to share problems and improve the quality of the services offered.

To Government (Services of Children’s Department)

- There should be policies in place to support care leavers with the objective of integrating them into the community, helping them to become independent, supporting them in the achievement of their dreams, and protecting them from abuse and mistreatment.
- The government, together with local NGOs, should launch a special job program for care leavers in order to ensure that they can at least meet their basic needs and avoid being exploited.
- The government, together with local NGOs, should launch a special education program for care-leavers in order to complete their basic education and go to college on merit.
- The government should establish national minimum standards of care for residential institutions.
- The care-leavers should temporarily be included in the Cash Transfer Program, especially those who have left care and have no one to support them, at least for the first year after they have left care.
- The government should provide the care-leavers (particularly double orphans) with legal assistance in matters of inheritance and in obtaining birth certificates, death certificates of the parents and identity documents. CCIs should encourage the government to produce these documents on behalf of the children.
- The government should ensure that children abandoned or rescued in a specific area are placed in an institution in the same or neighboring area. Children are often

rescued and in placed in care in different area/neighborhood. This makes the promotion of the family reunification difficult, as well as the possibility of establishing a bond with the extended families or neighbors, and contributes to the loss of the culture and traditions of the area.

To the community

- Children leaving care should have a guardian or mentor who can supervise and mentor them, which will help guide their development and protect them from truancy and related vices.
- Children living in institutions should be integrated within the local community. They should be invited by the community to take part in events, churches, and groups so that they can socialize and find support outside the institution.
- The community members should be educated and sensitized about the problems of children in institutions in order to prevent child abandonment and discrimination, and promote alternative family- and community- based care (kinship care, adoption or foster care).
- The community should ensure solidarity among and between the care-leavers.

4. THE ACTIVE ROLE OF THE CARE-LEAVERS

The role of the care-leavers in this report is to ensure that their views and opinions are well-represented. They should be recognized and accepted by the CCIs and the government in order to contribute in the formulation of institutional policies and regulations that should be taken in the best interest of both the children in care and the care-leavers.

The care-leavers who succeed in life should be role models to the children and other youths. An independent body should be created with the aim of promoting the rights of institutionalized children and care-leavers, as well as lobbying and advocacy in their behalf.

The care-leavers should sensitize the CCIs and interact with the staff and children in order to share the problems they had to face and improve services for children leaving care. Most of the care-leavers hope to finish their education and to be successful in life. They would like to have a stable job and, in future, have a family. They would also like to do something for the children who are leaving an institution, and for the care-leavers are living in difficult conditions. Therefore, it would be important to train these people with skills and knowledge so that they can be able to assist others and have a mission in life.

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International Network of associations of adoptive parents and care leavers:

www.childout.org