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Talia M. Schwartz-Tayri & Shimon E. Spiro

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# The Other Side of the Bridge: A Follow-Up Study of Israeli Young Adults Who Participated in A Transitional Housing Program after Aging Out from Care

Talia M. Schwartz-Tayri and Shimon E. Spiro

Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

## ABSTRACT

The *Bridge to Independence* program aims to provide youths who age out of residential group homes or foster care, and cannot be reunited with their families, with a roof over their heads, emotional and instrumental support, and services that they may need during their transition to adulthood. A follow-up study focused on how youths who graduated from this program fared in terms of their military or civilian service, housing, tertiary education, employment, income, health, leisure activities, social relations, and general satisfaction with their lives. The study was also designed to obtain a retrospective evaluation of their experience as residents in the housing provided by the program. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 25 participants revealed a complex picture of young people facing a variety of hardships, and experiencing some of the same challenges that face youths when they age out from care. Changes introduced in the program in response to the findings are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

Independent Living Programs (ILP); Transitional Housing Programs (THP); military and civilian service; family support; youths aging out of care

## Introduction

### *Youths Leaving Care and Transitional Programs*

It is now widely recognized that young persons who age out of care are catapulted into “instant adulthood” (Rogers, 2011). Unlike most young adults, they do not enjoy the luxury of gradual assumption of adult roles and responsibilities (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Recent decades have seen a plethora of studies of the situation of care leavers several months or a few years after leaving care (Mendes, 2009; Stein, 2012). Studies that compared care leavers with the general population of young adults showed lower levels of achievement in the areas of education, employment and income (Mendes, 2009; Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006). Compared with other young adults, more of them suffered from inadequate housing and periods of homelessness (Reilly, 2003; Stein, 2012). More of them were involved in criminal activities or risky sexual behaviors (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006;

**CONTACT** Talia M. Schwartz-Tayri  [meitaltayri@gmail.com](mailto:meitaltayri@gmail.com)  Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, POB 39040, Tel Aviv 6997801, Israel.

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Mendes, Bandai, & Snow, 2014). Some studies found some care leavers suffering from poor physical and mental health, and inadequate medical care (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Mendes, 2009). Other studies found that they experienced poor support networks (Hales, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013), loneliness and social exclusion (Biehal, Clayden, Stein, & Wade, 1995; Mendes, 2009; Stein, 2012), inadequate life skills, and low self-confidence and self-image (Stein, 2012).

In response to perceived needs, programs have been established to help care leavers achieve a better transition to adult life. Many of these programs go under the heading of Independent Living Programs (ILP), but these vary greatly in the services they provide. Some attempt to impart independent living skills to adolescents before they leave care (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2015). Others offer care leavers various services, such as counseling, income support, vocational training and referrals to social agencies in the community (McDaniel, Courtney, Pergamit, & Lowenstein, 2014; Mech & Rycraft, 1995).

ILPs have been extensively evaluated (Montgomery, Donkey, & Underhill, 2006; Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008). Criteria of success included acquisition of life skills, tertiary education, career paths, self-confidence, renunciation of delinquency and drugs, etc. (Biehal et al., 1995). Most of the studies have reported some positive outcomes of such programs. However, controlled experiments failed to detect the advantages of ILP participants over care leavers who did not participate in such programs (Courtney & Zinn, 2008a, 2008b; Courtney, Zinn, Johnson, & Malm, 2011; Courtney, Zinn, Koralek, & Bess, 2011; Greeson et al., 2015).

One sub-category of services offered to care leavers is Transitional Housing Programs (THP). These are of particular importance to care leavers who are not reunited with their families—either because they have no family, or because the family poses a threat to their safety and well-being (Mendes et al., 2012). These youths are in acute danger of becoming homeless shortly after they leave care (Biehal et al., 1995; Dixon & Stein, 2005). A roof over one's head is seen as a prerequisite for success in other areas, such as education and employment (Jones, 2011b, 2014; Smith, 2011). THPs usually offer free or subsidized housing, in supervised settings, along with various elements of ILPs, such as individual counseling, financial support, vocational and educational counseling, and more. The length of time a youth can stay in a program ranges from a few months to up to three years (GAO, 1999).

There have been only a few evaluations of THPs. Studies that have evaluated the outcomes of THPs differ in methodology. Some compared persons who had participated in THPs with care leavers who did not participate in such programs (Boston, 2013; Jones, 2011a; Mallon, 1998); others studied only a sample of participants, and drew conclusions from observations of the changes in their behavior and well-being, or from the

participants' self-reports (Jones, 2011b; Klein, 2012; Kroner & Mares, 2009; Rashid, 2004; Sanders, 2002). Some studies measured outcomes, while others focused on the participants' subjective experience (Jones, 2014; Schiff, 2006).

Studies that compared young persons who, after aging out of care, participated in THPs with those who did not found that the former were more likely to enjoy stable housing, to be employed (Jones, 2011a; Mallon, 1998; Rashid, 2004; Sanders, 2002), and to pursue post-secondary education (Jones, 2011b). Some studies have found that THP participation results in a higher income (Jones, 2011a; Sanders, 2002); less incidence of drug abuse or involvement in criminal activities (Jones, 2011a); and a positive effect on the participants' health and locus of control (Sanders, 2002). Others have reported enhanced life skills and self-sufficiency (Boston, 2013; Klein, 2012; Mallon, 1998). Klein reported enhanced self-image among THP participants, although Sanders reported that no such difference in his study. Mallon (1998) and Klein (2012) found that participation in THP resulted in enhanced social support.

On the whole, previous research has reported positive changes in various aspects of functioning for youths who participated in THPs. However, most studies do not differentiate between THP participants who have the support of their respective families, and those who do not. This is important because studies have found that many care leavers enjoy the support of their families (Dixon & Stein, 2005), and that relationships with family during their period of transition from care result in positive self-identity and self-confidence (Mendes et al., 2012).

Accordingly, a follow-up study of a THP for care leavers with no family support whatsoever should be of interest. In this article, we describe and evaluate a program designed exclusively for care leavers with no support from, or contact with, their families of origin during and after their stay in care.

### ***The Bridge to Independence Program***

The aim of this program is to provide youths who leave residential group homes or family foster care at the age of eighteen, and have no family to accommodate or support them, with a roof over their heads, social, emotional and instrumental support during their military or civilian service, educational and vocational counseling, life skills development, medical, psychiatric or legal advice and other kinds of support that they may need during their transition to adulthood. Participants are housed in apartments throughout Israel. Each apartment houses six young men or women, and is assigned a part-time staff member, who does not live on the premises, but is available to the residents at all times. Each participant, with the help of the staff, develops his or her own tailored plan for the near future. A special effort is

made to maintain and cultivate the resident's independence and self-determination, while respecting the interests of all other residents.

The program targets youths who grew up with no family or kin support, many in more than one residential setting. Many of them were not visited by their families and were unable to visit home or relatives during the weekends and holidays. Participants were referred to the program by their social workers, and were interviewed by the staff of the program to determine eligibility.

Currently in 2016, the program operates 31 apartments, which house 186 care leavers. Each participant is entitled to reside in the apartment during their military or civilian service, plus 18 more months. The program staff continue to be available to them for support, advice and advocacy after they leave the apartment. At the time when the data for this study was collected, 56 youths had graduated from the program.

### ***The Significance of Universal Military or Civilian Service in Israel***

A unique feature of young adulthood in Israel, which must be taken into account in any program designed for care leavers, is universal military service at the age eighteen—three years for men, and 2 years for women. While most young Israeli adults enter such service, some are exempt: members of the Arab minority; Jewish women or men whose religious beliefs and practices preclude such service; individuals with physical or mental disabilities; and others who are considered unfit for military service. Those who are exempt from military service are offered opportunities to do one or two years of civilian service (in hospitals, schools, nursing homes, etc.).

Since military or civilian service is nearly universal, the successful completion of such service is seen as an entry ticket into Israeli society. For many young persons, the skills and experience acquired during service, and benefits that are contingent upon military service (e.g., scholarships) may enhance their subsequent careers. Accordingly, in order to assure the future of children placed in residential group homes, the staff of such homes make a special effort to ensure that all the youths who age out of the homes enter military service—or, failing that, civilian service. However, the staff of the residential group homes are mostly unable to provide the support that care leavers may need during their service to ensure their successful completion or “honorable discharge” (Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006).

Due to the small size of the country, most Israeli young adults continue to live with their families during their military or civilian service, and benefit from their families' support, while coping with the challenges and hardships encountered during this period. Young adults who age out of care and are unable to return to their families may find themselves homeless during this crucial period in their lives. This puts them at risk of not completing their

service, with all the consequences that this entails. Thus, in Israel, the support of care leavers during their military or civilian service is a crucial aspect of any ILP or THP program, and evaluations of such programs must examine how effective the program is in supporting care leavers during this period.

## Purpose and Method

The purpose of this follow-up study, conducted in 2013, was to establish how those who participated in the *Bridge to Independence* program are faring a few years after leaving the program. In particular, we wanted to learn how they fared in terms of military or civilian service, housing, tertiary education, employment, income, health, leisure activities, social relations, and general satisfaction with their lives. We also sought their retrospective evaluation of their experience as participants in the program, with special emphasis on the support they had received from the staff.

## The Sample

The first author obtained a list of 56 young men and women who had resided at seven apartments between 2007 and 2012. Fifteen could not be reached, two refused to be interviewed, 14 consented to an in-depth interview but were not available, and 25 (10 men and 15 women) were ultimately interviewed. The interviewees ranged in age from 21 to 27. Before joining the *Bridge to Independence* program, 22 had aged out from residential group homes, two from foster families, and one from a hostel for girls at risk.

The sample was therefore a convenience sample that comprised all those who could be reached and agreed to be interviewed. To check for possible bias, we compared the characteristics of the 25 who were interviewed with the 31 who were not. No differences were found in age or gender, but the time that elapsed since leaving the program was somewhat longer for those who were interviewed, and their stay in the program had been somewhat shorter. Almost all of those who were not interviewed had completed military service, while some of those who were interviewed had completed civilian service. Usually, those who serve in the military are considered to be a more resilient population. Thus, the sample was not strictly representative, and the study's findings and conclusions have to be interpreted with some care.

The respondents were given a choice between face-to-face and telephone interviews, and all opted to be interviewed over the phone. They were told that their participation in the survey was voluntary, and that they could terminate the interview at any time. In some cases, background noise of home or workplace interfered with the interview, and some interviews required more than one session. The length of the interviews ranged between 60 and 120 minutes. At the end of each interview, the interviewer gave the

interviewee her phone number so that they could call her if they wanted to add information, or ask for help. In a few cases, when she detected acute distress, she referred the respondent to the staff of the program for assistance.

A semi-structured questionnaire, adapted from one developed by Benbenishty (2009), was used. It consisted mostly of multiple choice items, followed by requests for examples and elaboration, as well as a few open-ended questions. The interviews addressed two main topics: a retrospective evaluation of their experiences as participants in the program, and their current situation in areas such as housing, employment, health, social support, service utilization, life satisfaction and outlook for the future. Responses to open questions were subjected to thematic content analysis.

## Findings

### *Respondents' Evaluation of Their Experience as Participants in the Program*

By and large, the respondents expressed a positive opinion of the program. Many of them saw the program as having a major positive impact on their lives. "If it wasn't for the program I don't know how I would have managed," said one; "The program gave me the strength to keep going. Thanks to the program I have more confidence in the world," said another. Their evaluation of the program as a whole was more positive than that of some specific aspects (Table 1). Most reported that the program, and especially their counselor, had provided them with emotional and material support during their military or civilian service, and helped them gain independence. However, only a minority felt that they had been helped in areas such as post-secondary education or employment.

### *The Staff*

The respondents were most positive in their responses about the staff—namely, the person who acted as counselor to the residents of their apartment. Most described their counselor as responsive to their needs, accessible, and treating them with respect. They saw him or her as someone they could confide in with their problems and worries, and on whom they could depend. Thirteen of the respondents reported that their counselor continued to be available to them after they left the program.

Staff members were described as significant sources of support and as fostering real change. The atmosphere in the program was likened to that of a family ("Suddenly it felt like I had a family"; "I felt that they were proud of us"; "They didn't let go until I got settled"). Relations with the staff were described in terms of emotional closeness, and continuous support:



**Table 1.** Responses to Questions that Evaluated the Experience of Participation in the Program (“Do You Agree with the Following Statement?”).

Item		Not At All	Not Much	Yes and No	Some- what	Very Much	Mean	SD
Participation in the program helped me—	with employment	5	5	7	5	3	2.8	1.3
	with education	6	6	7	1	5	2.7	1.4
	with issues concerning my military/civilian service	4	1	2	7	10	3.9	1.7
	to succeed in life	4	2	5	7	7	3.4	1.4
	to be independent	5	0	4	8	8	3.5	1.4
	financially	2	0	4	7	12	4	1.1
	when I experienced hardship and sadness	1	3	6	3	12	3.8	1.2
The counselor	I am satisfied with my participation in the program	0	0	6	2	15	4.4	0.8
	was eager to help me	0	3	0	12	10	4.1	0.9
	understood me	0	3	0	13	9	4.1	0.9
	treated me with respect	0	2	1	11	11	4.2	0.8
	could be trusted	0	4	2	9	10	4	1
	I felt that I could confide my problems and worries to her/him	0	4	4	5	12	4	1
	I’ve learnt a lot from him/her	3	6	4	4	8	3.3	1
	I wish to be like him/her	4	3	4	6	7	3.3	1
	I was generally pleased with him/ her	1	4	1	4	15	4.1	1

“[...] like a mother”

“She was with me when I gave birth”

“She didn’t try to educate me—just to be with me”

“She is still in touch with me, although she is not required to be”

“When he is with me, he is totally attentive to me, not focusing on anything else.”

Only a small minority described their counselor as distant, providing instrumental assistance without emotional involvement.

### *Life at the Apartment*

The interviewees’ portrayal of life at the apartments was mixed. Most described the experience of living at the apartment and the interaction with staff and peers in positive terms, and peers and staff were cited as sources of support during and after their stay at the apartment. However, a few of the respondents complained about roommates who disregarded the rules, did not take part in cleanup or other chores, and were generally inconsiderate of their peers. These respondents felt that the staff did not always know what was going on at their apartment, and thus were unable to control the situation. They thought that the staff should intervene more actively to enforce rules such as the ban on alcohol, drugs, and overnight guests. Conversely, a few complained that the rules were too strict, and did not



give them sufficient independence. As one participant noted: “You can’t tell someone that they are now adults—and also tell them what to do. What’s wrong with a couple of beers after a day’s work?”

### ***The Other Side of the Bridge: Life after Leaving the Program***

#### ***A Sense of Crisis***

Most respondents described their departure from the apartment as a crisis; eight of them noted it as severe and ongoing. They talked about insecurity, loneliness and social isolation. They felt that the transition was too abrupt:

“[...] all alone in deep water”

“[...] nobody to help”; “ [...] didn’t know what happens next”

“I got used to being with friends, and all of a sudden I was all alone.”

Turning to the staff of the program was seen as an admission of failure. Those who were able to cope with the transition proudly claimed that they did it all alone.

When, following a routine follow-up phone call, a staff member identified a crisis and offered help, this was often described as life saver, which prevented the next fall (“when I needed her most she was there for me”). They appreciated the fact that the staff took the initiative, since they themselves were not sure that they were entitled to further help after graduating from the program (“Eran always said that when anybody needed him they should call, but I felt uncomfortable calling him. That was really hard.”).

#### ***Military or Civilian Service***

Fifteen of the respondents did military service, and all but three completed it successfully. Nine others did civilian service. Most described their service as a positive, and even a life-changing experience:

“The service built up my personality.”

“It changed me: I’m a much more responsible adult now.”

“It gave me a new perspective of life...”

Some acquired new skills, which served them in their civilian careers (“After doing so well in the military police, I’m ready to pursue a career in the police”; “My service opened the door for work”), and some acquired new friends, who provided them with support when needed.

Most of the respondents appreciated the program staff’s support during the service, which often helped them to overcome crises.

### ***Housing***

For most of the respondents, finding housing after leaving the program was described as difficult. Forty percent had moved 3–6 times since graduating from the program. Only a few had been able to secure adequate housing for themselves—either in another program that offered subsidized apartments to army veterans, or in apartments shared with friends. Fourteen of the respondents reported bouts of homelessness, or not knowing where they would spend the night. Rejoining family was seen as a temporary and very undesirable last resort. When they needed to find a place, some turned for help to the staff of the program. A few were helped by friends or community services. When describing their current living arrangements, none used terms that expressed a sense of ownership, such as “my home” or “my place.” They tended to refer to themselves as “a migrant fowl,” reflecting a sense of disconnectedness and insecurity in their transition to independent living (“My boyfriend helped me once, and then I crashed with friends, and twice at my workplace, and again with friends”; “I’ll have to leave this place soon and have no idea what will happen”).

### ***Post-Secondary Education***

Eighteen of the respondents expressed the wish for further studies. While in the program, some had learned a trade or prepared for college placement exams. Those who were unable to continue with their studies attributed this to financial difficulties. Their income was barely sufficient to cover their basic needs, and they were unable to support themselves, while studying. Some had to drop out of college or vocational training because of a lack of resources.

### ***Employment***

Almost all the respondents were employed at the time of the interview—albeit mostly in low-paid temporary employment. Quite a few were dissatisfied with their job, but stayed on because they feared that they might not find other employment and would suffer economic hardship. Others found it difficult to hold on to a job because of their frequent moves. Some found employment independently, while others were helped by program staff or by friends. Some reported long periods of unemployment, while looking for a job without success. This was accompanied by a sense of low self-efficacy, which they attributed to their lack of experience, qualifications or connections (“It’s very hard to keep a job if you don’t know someone there.”)

### ***Continuous Economic Hardship***

At the time of the interviews, 13 of the respondents reported that they were suffering economic hardship, and 23 of the 25 reported that at one time or another they were unable to cover basic needs such as adequate nutrition, dental care, medicines, or rent. Example testimonies:

“They were shocked to see that I had nothing to eat. I was unable to buy food, and lost weight [...]”

“Dental care is important, but I had to set priorities.”

Some borrowed money from the bank, or from friends (“I’m always in debt”). Those who were married and had a child described life in poverty in spite of efforts of relatives or the program to help. Many expressed a feeling that nobody could help them, or that it was shameful to ask for help. Since most had severed ties from their families, they could not turn to relatives for help. Besides, in most cases the relatives also suffered economic hardship (“my mother and grandmother depend on welfare, and my mother is harassed by creditors”).

### ***Health***

The majority defined their health as good, but eight reported serious problems, which were exacerbated by their lack of money for major expenses such as dental care, diet, or psychiatric help (“I suffer from serious and very risky over-weight... but I don’t have enough for a proper diet”).

### ***Social Support***

Economic hardship brought with it social isolation (“You’re stuck at home for months at a time, and go out of your mind”). Respondents told us that they were unable to spend time with their peers, because “most of my friends are from normal families. They have a life—but I don’t.” Only a few took part in leisure activities such as going out with friends, or sports.

The respondents explained that their detachment from support networks was due to the lack of time and money needed to spend time with peers. They also felt that they couldn’t share many experiences with peers, because people from “normal families” cannot understand them.

Twenty of the respondents had had a boyfriend or girlfriend at some time since they left the program, but only 12 were currently in a relationship, and of these, only seven reported feeling really close to their partner.

### ***Life Satisfaction***

When asked about their general life satisfaction, most of the respondents found it difficult to respond to this question. After some hesitation, six declared themselves satisfied with their lives, seven were dissatisfied, and 12 were “in between.” All those who were satisfied were men; six of the seven

dissatisfied were women. Those who expressed some satisfaction with their lives attributed it to social support or to a belief that their situation will improve, and that they will achieve economic stability, enter a meaningful relationship and establish a family. The three respondents who already had a child said that their child gave them strength to carry on, and those who had not yet established a family expected this to be a way of healing wounds from their past. Those who said that they were not at all satisfied with their lives attributed this to helplessness, barely surviving, and the difficulty of dealing with memories of their past without an adequate support network.

### **Recommended Changes**

We asked the respondents to tell us how the program might be changed to provide a better response to the needs of persons age out from care. Most suggested that the staff continue to support participants after they leave the program. Some felt a need for continued material support; others suggested better preparation for life after leaving the program; and some suggested specific help with education, employment or housing.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The *Bridge to Independence* program was designed in response to the hardships faced by youths aging out from out-of-home care. It differs from other ILP or THP programs described in the literature in three respects: almost all the participants had aged out from residential group homes rather than family foster care; the program was designed specifically for young persons who have no family that can support them in any way; and, importantly, it provides support during military or civilian service. *Bridge to Independence* provides care leavers with a roof over their head and employs counselors, whose job it is to support the youth during their military or civilian service and beyond, in order to give them a good start in life, and to make the transition out of residential care less abrupt and challenging.

Nonetheless, the above findings are disturbing. Many of the participants appeared to face the same challenges after leaving the program as those facing youths who age out of residential care (Biehal et al., 1995; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Mendes, 2009; Reilly, 2003; Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006; Stein, 2012). Might it be the case that, for some youths, the program only postpones the crisis that they face after aging out of care, rather than preventing it?

Previous evaluations of ILP or THP programs compared participants in such programs with care leavers who did not take part in them, and often found that the participants were better off than their counterparts (Jones, 2011a; Klein, 2012; Mallon, 1998; Rashid, 2004; Sanders, 2002). It is quite possible that if our study had included a comparison group of care leavers

who had not been part of any program, we might have found that they were even worse off than the *Bridge to Independence* program participants. However, this would be a small consolation. The aim of the program is to give all the participants a good start in life as independent adults, and if it does not achieve this for a significant minority, the program should be re-examined. In line with the recommendations of the respondents, our findings suggest that there is a need to maintain close contact with THP participants after they leave the program, and continue to support them socially, emotionally and materially. Furthermore, there is a need to strengthen the elements of the program that are designed to prepare the participants for life on their own.

Besides the hardships faced by some graduates of the program, another disturbing fact emerged from our findings. While most of the respondents judged their experience as residents of the program-sponsored housing as positive, a minority complained that the oversight of the apartments was either inadequate or, conversely, too strict. Those who complained about insufficient control were mostly young women of traditional backgrounds, who were offended by the behavior of some of their co-residents, as well as students who needed to concentrate on their studies, or others who had to rise early for work or for military duty. Their complaints, and the complaints of those who claimed that the rules were too strict, raise a paradoxical issue for a program that wants to provide its participants with the best conditions for success, while respecting their quest for independence as emerging adults.

## Postscript

In January 2014, the findings of this follow-up study were presented to the program's Steering Committee and staff, and several changes were instituted. The most important of these is a more consistent follow-up of participants after they leave the apartment. The staff person in charge of a given apartment is now required to keep in close contact with those who leave the apartment for a period of three months, during which time the program graduate is expected to establish a relationship with a follow-up counselor who is required to be available to the person for as long as needed. Participants are assured that this is an integral component of the program, and they are encouraged to approach the staff whenever they feel the need.

In addition, efforts have been made to enhance the career development aspects of the program—specifically: to acquaint participants with opportunities in academia and in the labor market; provide scholarships where needed and English language tuition; recruit employer friends; subsidize medical or psychological care where needed; and more. To reduce social isolation, volunteers are recruited as informal foster families, and a special effort is made to enhance the social life within and between apartments, to provide the leavers

with a continuing support network of peers. A similar follow-up study is being planned for 2017, to see whether these changes do in fact enhance the experience of the residents at the apartments and their life chances after leaving.

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