

# (UN)USED POTENTIAL – THE PROCESS OF BECOMING INDEPENDENT BY YOUNG-ADULT FOSTER CARE CHILDREN

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**Abstract.** *The transition to adulthood of young people leaving foster care is an important research topic. The results of many international studies show that care leavers are at high risk of social exclusion. In 2023, an amendment to the Act on foster care was introduced in Poland to increase the number of successful transitions into adulthood. The aim of the empirical study we undertook was to analyse the relevance of long-term care solutions implemented in Poland for children leaving foster care, from the perspective of professional caregivers of the process of becoming independent. The study had the character of a field reconnaissance (Minski, 2017), as it allowed us to verify the issues undertaken before the next stage of the research. We decided to conduct individual in-depth interviews with guardians of empowerment. Our research shows that, despite many pertinent statutory solutions, in practice the system does not work as it should. The main problem is the systemic marginalization of carers' problems and the lack of substantive and psychological support for them.*

**Keywords:** *care leavers, foster care, process of gaining independence, transition to adulthood.*

## Introduction

In many countries, and not only the European ones, there has recently been an increasing interest in the processes of entering adulthood and becoming independent by young-adults. As J. Grotowska-Leder (2019) claims, this is because the course of human life which covers three major phases – youth, adulthood, old age – becomes more complicated due to the increasing dynamics of social life triggered by several processes, including economic modernization and the accompanying transformation of the labor market, individualization of life, but also globalization and migration. The contemporary destandardization of the normative model of entering adulthood (Grotowska-Leder J., Rek-Wozniak M., Kudlinska I. 2016; Kohli, 2007), including: completing education, leaving the family home, running one's own household, taking up professional activity, starting a family, results in the emergence of new phenomena in the process of becoming an adult, such as: delayed adulthood (Brzezinska, 2017), nesting (Piszczałowska-Oleksiewicz, 2014), *transitional yo-yo effect* (Winogrodzka &

Sarnowska, 2019) and others, like returning young adults syndrome (Schnaiberg & Goldenberg, 1989). They prove that modern adulthood is changing its shape, pace and punctuality, and the patterns of paths leading young people to independence are becoming more and more diverse.

As Kudlinska-Chroscicka (2019) and A. Golczynska-Grondas & M. Błaszczuk (2020) report, changes in the determinants and the course of transition into adulthood do not apply to young people from non-privileged groups, including those raised in care-and-education facilities. In their case, destandardization of the normative model of transition into adulthood is marginalized by public policies, whereas the proposed systemic solutions "push" young pupils, who are not ready for adult responsibilities, into adult life.

Amended in Poland in 2023 The Act on Foster Care (Kancelarija Sejmu, 2014) has introduced several significant changes that have been postulated for years by practitioners and researchers and are expected to increase the number of successful transitions into adulthood for foster care children. Six months after the implementation of new legal regulations, we have started research aimed at assessing the accuracy of the legally adopted solutions. In the first stage of the survey reported in this article, we have conducted *Individual In-Depth Interviews* with supervisors of the independence process. We wanted to find out how existing solutions in the field of long-term care for pupils leaving foster care are perceived by persons acting as professional supervisors of independence, determine which legal and institutional solutions aid and which block the support system for young pupils in pursuit of becoming independent, and which practices in the process of entering into a self-dependent life should be promoted and disseminated?

### **The process of becoming independent by foster care pupils – legal and organizational framework**

Data from the Statistics Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2022) inform that at the end of 2022, there were 72.8 thousand pupils in the foster care in Poland, including 56.2 thousand in family care and 16.6 thousand in institutional care. About 6,000 of them reached adulthood. The pupils over 18 years of age can start an independent life outside the facility, and those who want to continue their education can receive assistance until they are 25 years old.

The course and forms of support for children becoming independent from care facilities are regulated by the Act on Family Support and the Foster Care System of June 9, 2011, as amended. However, as P. Chrzanowska (2017) emphasizes, the legal provisions lack an explicit definition of the process of becoming independent that would describe its components, a pattern of its course and outcomes that would allow for a clear determination of whether the process has turned a success or a failure.

The analysis of the provisions of the Act enables stating that, undoubtedly, the process of entering into a self-dependent life consists of two stages: (1) before the pupil reaches the age of majority in the facility, and (2) after leaving the facility (after reaching the age of 18 or until 25 years of age if the pupil continues education).

The aim of the first stage preparing the pupils to enter into adulthood is to develop an individual independence program (IIP). The IIP is a type of contract prepared by the person wishing to become independent together with the independence supervisor, at least one month before the pupil reaches the age of majority. Work on the IIP is intended to enable a person entering into self-dependent life to recognize their own resources and limitations in basic areas of life as well as to plan their future life and educational path, and is the basis for applying for financial benefits granted for continuing education, development, and appropriate housing conditions.

An important role in constructing and monitoring the implementation of IIP is played by the independence supervisor. The supervisor is chosen by the pupil at least one year before they reach the age of majority. The supervisor's tasks include supporting the person becoming independent in IIP preparation, assessing IIP implementation, introducing possible modifications, providing opinions on applications for financial assistance in becoming independent and continuing education. A supervisor may be chosen from among persons creating a foster family, running a family children's home, a coordinator of family foster care, a social worker of a district family support center, a person who is an educator or a psychologist in a care-and-education facility or a regional care and therapeutic facility, an employee of a non-governmental organization or another person designated by this organization to act as a supervisor of independence. The supervisors do not receive additional salary and their work is not formally assessed, but it falls under indirect assessment due to the undertaken obligations expressed in the achievements of the pupils being empowered (final assessment of succeeding in the process of becoming independent).

The aim of the second stage of the process of becoming independent is to achieve the goals set in the IIP from the moment the pupil leaves the facility until he or she reaches relatively completed adulthood.

As previously mentioned, the amendment to the Foster Care Act of 2023 (Kancelarija Sejmu, 2024) introduced several changes to the provisions regulating the process of becoming independent for foster care pupils. The new regulations allow for a one-time return of a person who has left the foster care to the current foster family or facility, and for persons with a significant or moderate degree of disability to remain in the current form of foster care without having to meet the requirement of continuing education at the same time. The income criterion of PLN 1,200, which was taken into account when granting assistance for becoming

independent and for installation assistance to persons becoming independent (i.e., persons leaving foster care after reaching the age of majority), was also abolished.

The scope of the introduced statutory changes is consistent with the policy of deinstitutionalization of foster care implemented in Poland since 2012. However, not only the developed legal provisions, but also real possibilities of their implementation into the foster care system and the development of systemic practices to support young-adults and their supervisors in the difficult process of achieving independence in life are important for the successful transition of pupils into adulthood.

## Methodology

The process of becoming independent by foster care pupils can be analyzed from many perspectives. One of them, crucial for monitoring the introduced systemic changes, is the perspective of the supervisors of the independence process, i.e., persons employed in various institutions and organizations who assist the pupils on a daily basis in the process of preparing for an independent life and support them in solving problems they face in everyday situations.

The aim of the empirical survey undertaken by a team of Polish researchers<sup>1</sup> was to analyze the accuracy of the solutions implemented in Poland in the field of long-term care for children leaving foster care, from the perspective of professional supervisors of the independence process.

At the conceptualization stage, the scope of the addressed research issues was determined by the following questions:

1. How are existing solutions in the field of long-term care over children leaving foster care facility perceived by persons acting as professional supervisors of the independence process?
2. Which legal and institutional solutions aid and which block the support system for pupils in their pursuit of becoming independent?
3. Which practices developed in various forms of foster care regarding the process of becoming independent should be promoted and disseminated?

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DEUTSCH	POLSKO
POLNISCHE	NIEMIECKA
WISSENSCHAFTS	FUNDACJA
STIFTUNG	NA RZECZ NAUKI

<sup>1</sup>Work on the project of the Polish-German research team. *The process of independence of foster care pupils - the perspective of professional caregivers. Exploratory comparative research of practices in Poland and Germany* are supported by the Polish-German Science Foundation / Gefördert aus Mitteln der Deutsch-Polnischen Wissenschaftsstiftung / Projekt wspierany przez Polsko-Niemiecką Fundację na rzecz Nauki.

The survey's nature was a field reconnaissance (Minski, 2017) as it enabled to verify the addressed issues before the next stage of research. That is why, we have decided to conduct individual, in-depth interviews with independence supervisors. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation (Boyce & Neale, 2006, p. 3).

Many researchers (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001; Boyce & Neale, 2006; Minski, 2017) recommend that a more or less structured interview guide be prepared before conducting an interview. Thanks to this, topics important to the researcher will not be omitted during a casual conversation. The guide prepared for the needs of this survey consisted of three parts: (1) an introductory part, in which we asked the interlocutors to present the organization in which they work, their role/function in it, and the circumstances of making the decision to act as a supervisor of the independence process of a foster care pupil; (2) the main part, which included questions exploring the research field, allowing the respondents to describe their experiences and reflections, and (3) the summary part, in which we asked them to complete their statements, and provide their comments and suggestions. The prepared guide served only as an auxiliary tool and was dynamically modified depending on the course of the conversation, the answers given by the respondents or threads introduced into the conversation that were not taken into account at the stage of guide preparation.

The interviews, with the consent of the respondents, were recorded on a dictaphone and then transcribed. The collected text material was subjected to the thematic inductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the inductive analysis, the data is coded without trying to fit the themes into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher's preconceptions about the research. So, themes emerge through the data itself without paying attention to the themes included in other studies. Themes are strongly linked to the data instead of the researcher's theoretical interest in the topic (Dawadi, 2020, p.63). The process of analysis was divided into 6 stages: (1) familiarizing with data: transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes: checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing a report.

Table 1 **Guide matrix of the main part of the interview** (made by authors)

Research question	Information sought	Questions asked to the interlocutor
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– motivation behind taking the role of a supervisor of the independence process</li> <li>– reflections and experiences after the amendment to the Act</li> <li>– experience</li> <li>– the needs of the supervisor and the pupil, the possibilities of meeting them in the new legal situation</li> <li>– cooperation with other persons and entities potentially involved in making successful transitions</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How can you describe your experience so far as an independence supervisor?</li> <li>2. How did the amendment to the Act affect your work with a pupil who is becoming independent?</li> <li>3. Whose help do you use/would you like to use when acting as an independence supervisor? What type of support do you need most?</li> <li>4. What difficulties do you encounter in direct work with a pupil, and how do you solve them? What are your goals?</li> <li>5. What institutions/organizations/persons could be engaged to cooperate in the process of becoming independent by pupils to enable their successful transition into adulthood?</li> </ol>
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– assessment of the adopted legal and institutional solutions and their adequacy, and effectiveness of the actions taken.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Which legal and institutional solutions do you think support the process of independence?</li> <li>2. Which legal and institutional solutions block /impede the process and what would you change?</li> <li>3. How do you assess the recruitment system for independence supervisors, what would you change, and what works?</li> </ol>
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– good practices worth disseminating</li> <li>– ideas worth pursuing/ implementing in the future.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What changes would you expect in the activities of your institution that would allow the pupil to be better prepared for independence?</li> <li>2. What activities undertaken by you/institutions are worth promoting?</li> <li>3. Referring to your own experiences, what ideas do you have that could be implemented in the future in your institution, in the entire care system and in the process of becoming independent?</li> <li>4. What role can/should the local community play in the process of becoming independent by foster care pupils?</li> </ol>

### Study sample

The provisions of the amended Foster Care Act do not specify recruitment procedures for fulfilling the role of a supervisor of the independence process. Art.

145 of the Act specifies a group of employees of social welfare institutions and governmental and non-governmental organizations who can be entrusted with such a function. The current foster care system consists of family and institutional care. Forms of care within a family include foster families (related non-professional; professional, including families acting as family emergency, as well as specialist and family foster homes). In turn, institutional forms comprise educational care facilities, regional care and therapy centers, and intervention preadoption centers. An educational care facility can provide educational care in terms of socialization, intervention, specialist therapeutic activities or family. An educational care facility can combine the functions of different facilities (Ruszkowska, Lovasova 2023, p. 223). Given the above, we have decided to invite employees representing various institutional foster care environments to participate in the survey.

Using the register of regional care and therapeutic facilities and pre-adoption intervention centers in the Warmian-Masurian and Masovian Voivodeships, we selected care institutions and then asked their employees for consent to participate in the research. When selecting the sample, we were guided by two criteria: (1) acting as a supervisor to help a foster care pupil become independent and (2) having at least 3 years of work experience in care facilities or social welfare institutions. As a result, we conducted 6 individual in-depth interviews with independence supervisors employed at County Family Assistance Centers (3 persons) and family-type care and educational facilities (3 persons).

### Research results

The thematic analysis conducted allowed us to distinguish 4 main thematic groups, shown in Figure 1.

Generally, the surveyed supervisors of the independence process do not report an urgent need to introduce new legal solutions to organize the process of reaching independence, although, as they emphasize, they encounter a number of difficulties in their daily work during IIP preparation and implementation. Many of these difficulties stem from the desire of pupils, especially those staying in institutional foster care, to start an independent life as soon as possible. However, this does not mean, as the respondents emphasize, that those under their care who reach the age of majority are well prepared for independent living.

*Pupils appoint a supervisor of their independence process at the age of 17, so tell me, what do they know about life then? They know so little, even how to cook and pay bills, when we prepare IIP sections related to moving out and potential place of living, we cannot force them to meet our expectations, and everyone is waiting for them to turn 18, finish school and cope by themselves, this is often our reality (Ewa)*

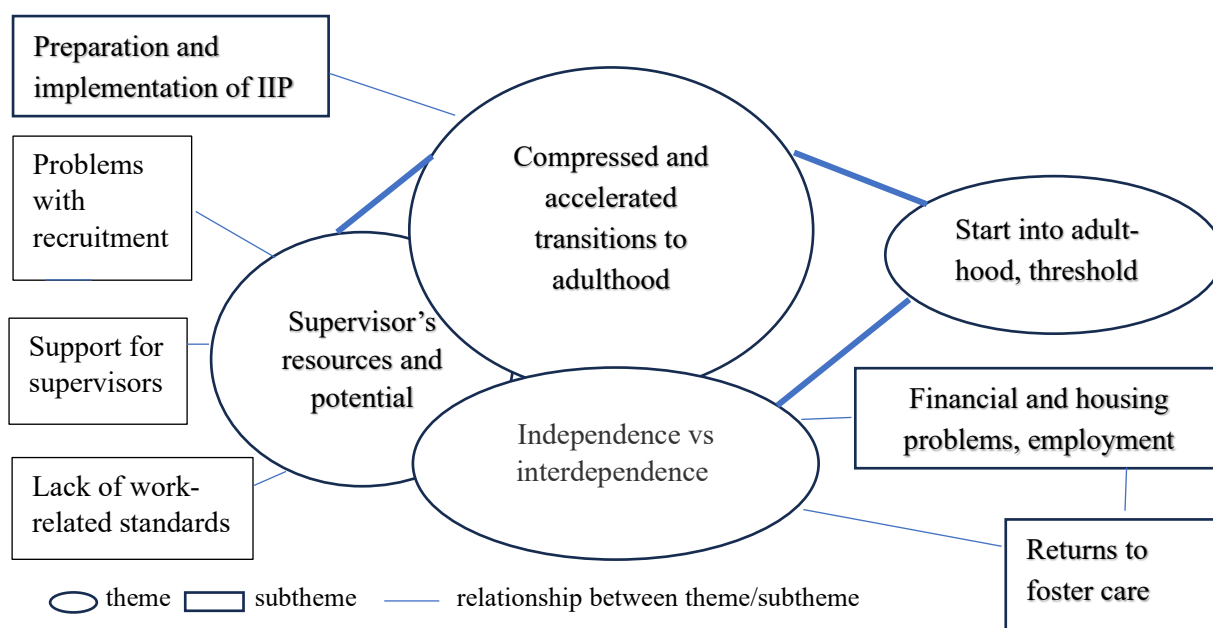


Figure 1 **Thematic map demonstrating four main themes** (made by authors)

When preparing an IIP with a pupil, it is necessary to design solutions that are realistic in the conditions of a given local community, ensuring appropriate housing, financial and employment conditions for the pupils. Their fate at the beginning of their adult lives, as well as their biographical experiences are very diverse. Unfortunately, the provisions regarding support for pupils pursuing to become independent do not always allow for an individualization of the independence plan in accordance with their current legal, financial and housing situation.

*Sometimes the payment of benefits is delayed, even by several months, which is a serious threat/problem to a pupil who leaves the facility because he/she has no other sources of income (Julia)*

As other international research shows (Stein, 2006; Camerona et al., 2018), the entering into adulthood is a compressed and accelerated process for foster care children. Within a very short period of time, pupils must undertake all the tasks of adulthood, which are often simply beyond them.

*For example, we cannot apply for social housing for a pupil before he/she turns eighteen, so this is also a regulation that is not entirely good because, on the one hand, it requires the pupil to leave the facility and only then start applying for an apartment, while we know a year beforehand that he/she is leaving us, so we could look for this apartment throughout this year. Yes, indeed, we have such a comfortable situation now that the pupils receive funds from the “500 plus” program and this money is some kind of security there, at least when renting a room, sometimes it happens that the pupils return to their family and with the*



*money they receive from the Municipal Social Care Center (MOPS), their room is renovated and equipped with electronic devices or household appliances (Anna).*

The unfavorable situation of pupils in pursuit of becoming independent is intensified by emotional problems and low social competences in terms of their independence in life. If the pupils start their independent life without a safe and supportive foster environment, they may feel fear of abandonment and loneliness in the process of becoming independent as a result of their childhood experiences and traumas. In practice, the IIP is insufficiently personalized and does not enable practicing adulthood in the form of the so-called extended dependency. As the respondents argue, preparation for entering into adulthood cannot take place only in the conditions of institutional care. Supervisors recognize the need to “buffer” the process of becoming independent by increasing the number of places (e.g., training apartments, supportive housing) where pupils could develop competences necessary in everyday, independent life in safe and supported conditions, outside the facility.

*The point is for the pupil at this last stage, before reaching the age of eighteen, to acquire as many social competences as possible, which he/she is not able to develop in a care and educational facility; the facility is a place where a lot of things happen in a closed group of pupils, therefore we of course try to “push” children outside for additional activities, for social contacts to take place outdoors, not only in groups. Their social competences are great at the level of a small group where they know all of us, but the problem begins when they have to enter the office to take care of things for themselves because they are adults, find their way among people, officials, co-staff in the workplace, when they change schools or go to an outpatient clinic or to a doctor (Paweł)*

Having a quite realistic picture of the readiness of pupils to start adulthood, supervisors try to encourage them to postpone the decision to become independent and take actions that increase their chance for a successful transition (continuing education, participating in workshops, vocational training, etc.). Unfortunately, the principles of operation of care-and-education facilities are not consistent with the different developmental needs of pupils of different ages. It is not a surprise that young people demand a constant expansion of dependence, as happens in well-functioning biological families, along with progressive changes in the physical and psychosexual maturation of young people. The rigidity of the facility’s rules and regulations, which impedes the possibility of “trying out adulthood”, discourages many pupils from the transition into adulthood, and thus increases the risk of their unsuccessful start into adulthood.

Attempts to solve the problem of failures of foster care pupils in becoming independent resulted in the inclusion of a provision in the amended Act on the possibility of a one-time return of foster care pupils (in justified cases). The return has to be approved by facility’s director and the city major. According to supervisors, however, it remains a dead provision in most cases.

*Indeed there has been a provision on return, in force since twelve months, but it has not been formulated in such detail (.) Maybe that's a good thing (.) because the final decision is made by the director, the only problem is that in order to admit a pupil who has become independent back to the facility, you have to have vacancies, but there are no such places, and this is actually a dead provision, because when a pupil leaves the facility, the director must accept a new one in that place, whereas he can only accept an adult pupil when there is a vacancy but usually there are no vacancies. [...] and there are a dozen or so underage children waiting for their turn to be admitted to the facility in our city and we cannot add, for example, one bed in a room because the law limits the number of children in the facility (Paweł)*

A topic that appeared many times in various parts of the respondents' statements was the lack of statutory regulations regarding recruitment standards, task implementation and care for the well-being of independence supervisors.

The Act on Foster Care, apart from indicating the groups of employees who can take on the role of a supervisor, does not regulate the scope or forms of their work or any financial gratification for work on the preparation and implementation of IIP.

*In fact, the tasks of the independence supervisor do not stem from the regulations in any way. There is no catalog of what a supervisor should do, what competences, predispositions he/she should have, what he/she should actually do, the law only states that the pupil should appoint a supervisor within a statutory period of time and that is where it really ends (Anna).*

For the independence supervisor, a good practice in institutional foster care is to be an educator with whom the pupil has established an open and trusting relationship over the years.

*The leading educator becomes the supervisor of independence because he/she knows the most about the child, and more often than not, the closest relationship is built between the leading educator and the child, because we, as the tutors, are responsible for everything: from everyday activities to court cases, through decisions and sometimes fighting for the children to contacts with parents and external institutions, so we actually have the greatest knowledge about the child's possibilities, because becoming a supervisor of independence involves at some point making a difficult decision about what to do next with the child (Igor).*

In the case of social workers employed at Poviast Family Care Centers (PCPR), the main factor determining the choice of a supervisor is the opinion about them in the local environment, related to their official efficiency and personal commitment as well as the ability to take actions to support pupils in pursuit of becoming independent.

*They come to me rather by "from word of mouth" recommendation. Recently, a grandmother came to say that she explained to her grandson that if he should choose a supervisor, he should only take Mrs. Julka from PCPR, that he should*

*deal only with Mrs. Julka because she is the best, she can take care of everything.* (Julia).

According to the respondents' statements, a drawback of the process of becoming independent is the lack of a system for recruiting independence supervisors and/or the low quality of this support as well the lack of any financial benefits for the tasks undertaken. As a result, the choice of a supervisor is often random and inadequate to the needs of the person striving to become independent. Even if educators have a bond with the pupil, their ability to support the child who becomes independent is limited when they are overloaded with current tasks at the facility. In the event of a random selection of a supervisor from the group of PCPR social workers, their role is limited mainly to providing opinions on applications for financial assistance to continue education or become independent.

The phenomenon of non-exploiting the potential of independence supervisors, observed in the respondents' statements, stems from the lack of legislators' concern over the well-being of supervisors. As indicated by the respondents, the psychological costs resulting from providing care and responsibility for the success of pupils in becoming independent include: deterioration of functioning at work, somatic ailments, sleep disorders, etc. The support they receive from colleagues in their work teams, although extremely important for efficient operation in the organization, is not always sufficient to maintain the optimal level of their psychological well-being.

*We, as a team, provide each other with all kinds of support, because in a problematic situation we also have a rule that no one is left alone [...] we are a form of support group for each other* (Ola).

Supervisors also report the need for specialized training as part of the professional development path, specific to the problems of the independence process, aimed at maintaining and strengthening their competences in providing support, searching for sources of difficulties at work and means to overcome them.

## Conclusions

Our preliminary analyses of the accuracy of existing solutions in Poland in the field of long-term care for children leaving foster care, made from the perspective of professional supervisors of independence, prove that despite many accurate statutory solutions, "in practice, the system does not work as it should" (Fundacja Dobrych Inicjatyw, 2023, p. 8).

At the same time, answering the questions posed earlier, the conclusions from the research can be summarized as follows. Persons acting as professional independence supervisors indicate that the existing legal solutions in the field of long-term care for children leaving foster care (even after the amendment) do not eliminate the shortcomings of the entire system. The resources of local governments lack social housing and training apartments where pupils could

safely “practice adulthood”. Insufficient state support for foster families, lack of places in institutional forms of foster care, resulting in minors waiting for a place in a family or institutional care facility, in practice block the implementation of the provision on the possibility of return of a person becoming independent to the facility and obtaining support in a difficult life situation.

In turn, when it comes to legal regulations in foster care, our findings show that the most neglected area of the independence process is the lack of regulations and practices regarding recruitment, work standards and support for independence supervisors. The systemic marginalization of their problems and lack of substantive and psychological support for them are the most urgent, yet solvable problems, affecting the success of foster care children transition into adulthood.

Although, in the opinion of respondents, the legislative amendments introduced in 2023, including the declared increase in financial outlays and remuneration for foster families and the pursuit of further deinstitutionalization of the system, are conducive to increasing the chances for a successful transition into adulthood for foster care pupils, they are still insufficient.

In this situation, it is worth disseminating good practices regarding the transition process. One of them is to ensure that the supervisor of independence is the educator or another person with whom the pupil has actually built a lasting relationship. It is also important to secure an appropriate number of places, always available for pupils returning to facilities in difficult life situations.

The research reconnaissance carried out by our group indicates the need for continued investigations focused principally on diagnosing the needs of independence supervisors and the standards of their work as well as the systemic organization of substantive and psychological support.

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