

# ASPECTS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING THE CHILD PROTECTION INSTITUTIONS

F.Chipea, C. Marc, C. Oşvat

**Floare CHIPEA**

PhD, Professor

University of Oradea, Romania

**Cristiana Marc**

PhD,

University of Oradea, Romania

**Claudia Oşvat,**

**PhD, Assoc. Prof.**

University of Oradea, Romania

**Abstract:** The issue of social inclusion of young people who come from child protection system in Romania was and still is at the center of concerns of decision-makers in the system, especially due to the fact that much of the effort focused in the last 25 years on this effect, apparently produced no substantial changes in terms of integration into society of the category of young people leaving the child protection system. In post-communist Romania, the legal framework that is governing the creation and diversification of services oriented to preparing young people for independent living has developed. How these regulations are implemented depend upon the concerns of the social actors invested with responsibilities in this field locally. This paper aims, on the one hand, to highlight the specific problems faced by this group of young people and, on the other hand, to capture specific aspects of life strategies adopted by individuals in this category, as reactions to the measures taken by social actors invested with specific responsibilities. The study was conducted in Oradea, including both young people from the protection system and professionals who interact with them.

**Keywords:** post-institutionalized young people, social inclusion, dependency, subculture of reliance on institutions.

## **Introduction**

Institutionalized young people who leave orphanages at the age of 18 years are a vulnerable group with the greatest risk of social exclusion, meaning that they face scarcity of financial resources, they have high chances of negative socialization, by association, at early ages with young people who have dealt with crime, with poor housing conditions, who experience the situation of marginalization and stigmatization from other members of society, young people who face difficulty entering the labor market, all these features preventing their minimal participation in the social, cultural and political community (Zamfir, Preda, Dan, 2004; Becker, 1963; Sutherland, Cressey, 1966). The success of social inclusion of young people in this category "depends on the involvement of all the factors that influence child welfare in general, it depends on the existence of family support, the support of a social worker / educator in the initiation of independent living, the formation of skills necessary for independent existence of alternatives offered by the society in terms of finding a job and housing" (Alexandru, 2013, p. 219).

In practice, it is emphasized that "there aren't enough solutions to offer real protection to this group". It is believed that problems persist due to insufficient support on leaving the institution, this adding to the problems that already exist due to institutionalization (Dărăbuș et al, 2006, p. 14).

Social inclusion and professional integration of young people has been and remains a topic of interest for the decision makers in our country. Through social policies adopted in regard to this problem (e.g.: National Strategy for the protection and promotion of children's rights 2008 - 2013) it was intended to develop a legal framework to govern the

creation and diversification of services aimed at preparing young people for independent living, the formation of skills and abilities according to society's expectations in relation to them.

This paper captures, firstly, the specific problems of this category, highlighted by research conducted in the field, making particular reference to studies in Bihor County. The second part of the paper gives the results of a qualitative study conducted in Oradea which aims to highlight specific aspects regarding some mechanisms of social exclusion of people from the social security institutions in the process of their integration into the community.

### **Theoretical background**

Studies on young people who come from residential institutions reveal that they exhibit a social behavior specific to subclass (Murray) and "that adults have a difficulty in establishing social relationships and exercising parental roles, affecting all their family and social life" (Ludușan, 2007, p. 401).

Regarding the emotional affective, personality or behavior disorders, studies show that they originate in the socialization process, conducted in the institutions of social protection, in which methods of discipline prevailed by punishments, threats, insults because of low increase of affective-emotional behaviour, hostile and cold emotional contacts, and because of the accumulation of various affective deficiencies over time (Brătianu, Roșca, 2005).

Also, another feature may be the lack of attachment or disoriented attachment to which children are exposed in institutions (Bolbay, 1994). This development of disoriented attachment overlaps personality structure characterized by affective and emotional immaturity, which

induces a low development in feelings and being unable to develop affective relationships, showing isolation, withdrawal or rejection.

A study undertaken in Bihor County in 2006 on a sample of 90 subjects (Onica-Chipea, 2007) sought to identify personal and group characteristics, and factors that influenced the social integration of young people from child protection institutions. The data reveal some features: poor preparation for life offered in institutions, the structuring of relations of friendship and mutual help that remain after deinstitutionalization, promiscuous sexual life, homosexuality, deviant behavior formed in institutions and further developed (theft became an occupation and a way of life for a large proportion of the subjects). Regarding their exclusion from the labor market (a situation encountered in most of the subjects), the explanations are different: young people mentioned negative attitudes and reluctance of employers to hire people from the child protection system; the employers who were interviewed cited poor training of young people for work, lack of a responsible attitude in relation to an organized work program and tasks involved in holding a job.

Another study, conducted between October 2007 and January 2008 by University of Oradea, Department of Sociology and Social-Assistance included 206 young people in Bihor and highlighted the following: people with the lowest chance of social-professional integration come from those who spent more time in social protection institutions; young people who did not receive support from society, didn't develop relationships of attachment to a reference person who could be for them a positive role model, those who don't have permanent employment practice, a community lifestyle, developing the same type of life and group behavior, "the gang"; the majority believes that their shortcomings are due to the protection system which abandoned them at

the age of 18 and the society who labeled and rejected them; young women usually do what their parents did, they breed their behavior, giving birth to a large number of children, and even if they agree to raise them (often alone) they don't have the skills to look after the children; the biggest problems of raising children and care for the families were invoked by people in Oradea and Beius, facing the greatest financial difficulties and quality of housing (Chipea, 2010).

A 2011 study that targeted beneficiaries of the project "Young People for Society" of Felix Family Foundation (Sava and Szabo, 2011) revealed the following: most young people interviewed are prone to inclusion within closed subcultures, with a small social capital; social integration is regarded as desirable, "a good thing", the main elements of integration are represented by the possibility of holding on to a job and housing, but without knowing or being interested in the means to achieve these objectives; reference people, those who are perceived as having an important role in the development of young people are "parents" from the home, "sponsors" abroad, or colleagues at work.

The results obtained in a survey conducted in 2012 (Oşvat and Marc, 2013) indicate the need for emotional support, communication and development of self-confidence of young people and it confirms the significant role of NGOs (Christian foundations from Oradea) in the integration of young people, the importance of education and support provided by peers, professionals, close people.

### **Study on the social inclusion of young people from child protection institutions**

#### ***Objectives.***

This study aimed to talk about specific issues regarding the integration in the community of young people from the protection system. The specific objectives were: to highlight the difficulties faced by

young people from institutions in socio-professional integration and outlining some proposals on how to support this vulnerable group.

***Methodology.***

For the study we used the sociological inquiry based on individual semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted with young people from institutions (12 subjects) and experts in the field (3 respondents). Note that most subjects were part of the research sample taken in 2006 by Lavinia Onica-Chipea, allowing a longitudinal analysis approach on the process of social inclusion of subjects, of the changes compared to the situation in 2006. To supplement the information we have included in the investigated population the informal leader of the group of subjects. The study did not include beneficiaries of services provided by non-governmental organizations working in the field, in Oradea.

The interview guide included questions for young people on personal life (present situation, problems and ways of solving, family relationships, friendships, support network) and employment (employment, labor relations). The interview guide included questions addressed to specialists on the difficulties in work done with post-institutionalized young people, ways of solving the problems encountered, suggestions on how to support the target category.

The data collection was conducted in October - November 2014 and was held in Oradea. The sampling is theoretical and considers the relevance of research investigation units. The number of interviews considered reaching theoretical saturation. Participants in the study were informed about how the data provided are going to be used and were assured of the confidentiality; they expressed verbal consent to be involved in this type of activity.

### ***The analysis and interpretation of results.***

data obtained from the survey shows that, of the 90 subjects included in the sample in 2006, 15 have died, 22 are in prison, 10 have no shelter (are homeless), 43 people living in housing assigned by Oradea City Hall. To this, there are added another 50 people who came out of system after the study in 2006, of which 5 are in prison, 10 living on the streets and 35 were eligible for social housing, distributed by Oradea City Hall. The places where you can find young people living on the street are the train station and two of the parks in the city center.

Housing for deinstitutionalized people are most of the times old, have a poor state in terms of space and utilities, providing unsuitable living conditions.

*“The house is old, I don’t have heat... In the winter I wear thick clothes and I sit under the blanket...”(V.M - subject).*

Of these, 16 have minor children who are socialized in the same subculture of predominantly negative attitude to work, on learning, on social life. Most children attend school, mainly to procure basic food offered by the "Milk and cracknel" (noting that if their colleagues refused food this would be offered to them, thereby supplementing the family food), and obtain benefits from the social assistance system. For reasons of insecurity, material and financial resources, two of the families have recently abandoned their children in institutions. *"The problem is their behavior. Women have one night stands to have a place to stay, the baby is born, they receive state allowance, this is what they are interested in, they don’t do very well, many are single mothers, the man is in jail ... (specialist).*

From the analysis we saw only two cases (families) who have managed to integrate into the local community. In both cases, the partners

of the couple are employed in a permanent job, are interested in an equipped living space with necessary facilities for a decent living, they have children attending school and avoid to have relationships with members of the deinstitutionalized group. Instead they try to relate to coworkers, striving to be accepted in the work group and neighborhood, avoiding undesirable behaviors specific to the group of which they were part of. Interviews have reiterated that a predictor of social inclusion of young deinstitutionalized group members could be their chance to attach people significant to them to provide positive examples of inclusion. *"I was fortunate to be helped by one of the carers who took me home on holidays and weekends, checking homework and buying me books that I read with pleasure"* (R.N. subject).

Regarding employment, the data reveals that only members of the two families have stable jobs, unlike the rest of them who are employed for short periods of time, unable to keep a job or never had a job. The latter situation is applicable to the young people who have mental deficiency and / or psychiatric disorders, who do not qualify for either distribution built homes for the homeless. Many who do not have jobs get their income from begging, stealing and prostitution.

Interestingly, those who rent housing / social housing prefer, or are tolerated by neighbors that have the same standard of living characterized by poverty, sharing their goods with them and consider themselves stigmatized and discriminated against those with higher living standards than their own. All people living in houses provided by the Municipality, coexist in the same yard with members of their own group or family who have the same social and educational characteristics, risk of social exclusion.

*"I sit in the yard with poor neighbors, like me, living from day to day ... When they don't have enough to eat I give them, and then they give to me. I like them because we are the same ... I sat close to others and I didn't like them "* (C.S. group leader).

Young people say that they and their children are reluctant to provide information on their background so they won't be offended and stigmatized. This lack of adaptation may be due to lack of confidence in themselves and in others, negative labeling and negative differentiation in relation to those outside the group. For them the positive attitude discrimination from others are perceived as rejection, degradation, exclusion. *"I worked for some ... they made fun of me, they were shouting: rags ....they gave me food and were offensive, I left ... "* (R.S. subject).

Most behavioral traits highlighted are negative consequences of socialization made in institutions, the system consists of dependency, lack of independent living skills, respect for work, discipline and organization, not assuming the responsibilities of a program of work and work tasks, the trend to live with those who come from the same environment and reproduce abuse and aggressive attitudes to which they were exposed. It is done as a process of self-education through continuous interaction between group members, the strongest managed to dominate the weak, imposing strong informal leaders in positions that require others own rules, behaviors, interests. Interviews reaffirmed the idea that social environment of institutions, although there are improvement in policies applied, it reiterates abuses of various forms (most commonly physical and sexual abuse). *"If there is a clean girl who learns and tries to be different than others is sexually abused, humiliated in front of all by the most powerful leader to show that she is submitted, being debased"* (C.S. group leader). The same opinion is shared by the

experts surveyed who believe that major problems are fostering of reliance on protection system and subculture that perpetuates further reducing the chances of integration into society.

Acquired behavior from institutions persists in setting up of family relationships, often emphasizing the relationship with partner or children, leading to domestic violence. Most often, children internalize subcultural norms and values described above, practice deviant behavior, committing physical assaults, offenses of theft, deception, which is why they are not accepted at work or school, and still being at risk of exclusion .

*"Sometimes, the spouse / life partner of the woman is also the pimp ... whenever they have no money" (specialist).*

*"Children steal, because that is what they saw. If they see a phone that belongs to a colleague, left on a desk, they will steal it, because they want one too... "(specialist).*

The success of those who have managed to integrate is explained by distancing themselves from the rest of the group, rare contacts with former colleagues from institutions and support provided by work colleagues, neighbors or other relevant people in the community.

*"Those who come to work and to break away from the traumatic past have an extra chance. In fact, their chance to integrate is to separate from the others, it is essential "(specialist).*

The answers reveal that the group manifests attitudes of group solidarity, "the gang", manifested by dividing goods with other members, aid provided in difficult situations, including those in prison. *"I give to them, because I know how it feels not to have food, we lived the same, we know each other ..." (S.M. subject).*

The results show that one of the reasons why some of the post-institutionalized young people become homeless is not accepting rules imposed in the services that can be provided to them, the fact that they don't want to be integrated into a workplace or fail to maintain a place of work, only for very brief periods of time, which deprives them of income and therefore places them unable to pay the rent (modest as is). There are people who believe that one should not pay rent, on the one hand because they do not agree to allocate a portion of their own money for this purpose, and secondly because the institutions created the reliance mentality on the institutions claiming that "they must be helped" and "they don't have to do anything".

*"Some young assisted by the foundations have refused to live in an environment where there is discipline and rules and prefer to live on the street ..."* (specialist).

Regarding labor integration, the specialists that were interviewed believe that there is a reluctance of employers about institutionalized young people, based precisely on the difficulties of young people to follow a work program, to perform assigned tasks and to accommodate in a group. Not even the benefits granted by Law 250/2013 for insertion employers appear to be attractive.

*"Another reality that I noticed is that employers give up the facilities of the law, just so that they don't have to deal with people who are so difficult to integrate, with low efficiency ..."* (specialist).

A relevant aspect stressed by experts was the need to increase involvement on employment services to help young people through information, advice and training.

*"The intention is good but the implementation is difficult ... How to get young people to be informed? ... to benefit from these services ... there is*

*a missing link, the responsibilities should be specifically presented ..."*  
(specialist).

The proposals indicated by interviewees that help optimize social inclusion of young people leaving child protection system are: assigning housing, "their place", avoiding the perpetuation of specific subculture lifestyle in socialized people in institutions, in the vicinity of community members, which interact in the sense of taking over positive models of social life; ongoing assistance / support from specialists trained in social work, at least until the corresponding integration and acquiring life skills and property management in social housing; providing opportunities for learning trades within social economy initiatives, under specialist supervision; development of trust and attachment to the reference person entourage (e.g. workplace colleagues, professionals); stimulating public-private partnership in providing services to this vulnerable group; incentives for those who engage in work activities, valuation, leading to increased self-esteem; inclusion in collective labor / support groups to give them individual sense of belonging to a group or community and loyalty.

Experts interviewed have outlined a profile of the young person who is more likely to socio-professional integration:

*"Greater chances for integration has the one who spent his/her early years in the family, entered the protection system, in the institution, later, the one who is healthy, had good results at school, was taken in by foundations ... "* (specialist).

## **Conclusions**

Studies, including the current one, points out that although during the postcommunist time, in Romania, there were adopted policies centered

on the young people group who were socialized in child protection institutions, their social inclusion target was achieved only partially. The formulated idea is supported by the low percentage of those who, after leaving the institutions fail to be included in optimal conditions in the community. The longitudinal study shows that about the same subjects who in 2006 were living on the street or in unsuitable homes offered by the Municipality can be found in the present difficult situation. Moreover, their children, even if they remain in their own families or entrusted in child protection institutions reproduce the same type of culture and practice similar behavior. Therefore the chance of reproducing the reliance culture on aid from institutions and deviant subculture character shared by group members is very high.

The intervention of the state or civil society for social inclusion of vulnerable group consists of people who at the age of 18 years old leaving the protection system, is focused mainly on two areas: providing housing and providing support for employment .

Failure in both directions is motivated, according to research conducted in poor socialization of the child protection system, which, in essence, failed to develop the skills necessary for independent living, has not developed a sense of responsibility towards work, family and to his own life. Furthermore, negative socialization, mainly driven by the daily interactions between group members without close supervision from staff and responsible institutions generates a type of deviant subculture, values and norms promoted by the repetition of deviant behavior, reinforced by informal control group leaders recruited from the strongest individuals who exercise discretionary dominion over group members. Reliance on the group thus formed is so strong that even after leaving the institution, they are following the group leader who exercises rough abuse, they are

the only ones who ensure the protection they need in relation to other members of society, which often stigmatizes them and rejects them.

The study revealed that the main solution approached aims to change the way of achieving socialization in child protection institutions, through their involvement in a greater extent in the training of life skills and developing self-esteem, by using to a higher extent case management rather than treating the children undifferentiated. The same approach would be required to be operated in the case of adults in this category, both for training and resource management skills to own property and to develop skills for inclusion in work groups.

"The answer of protection system to these problems is, however, one often inadequate." Motivation for this is understaffing, the intervention which is most often not being one custom made to the needs and peculiarities of the psycho-intellectual of the individual (Câmpan et al, 2010, pp. 8-9).

The main limitation of the current research is that individuals with higher education level weren't included in the study. This limit can be overcome by conducting a research on the category mentioned, which will enable comparisons based on social inclusion depending on accumulated cultural capital.

In summary, we believe that the main predictors of social inclusion of people socialized in child protection institutions are: the period in which they were subjected to socialization in institutions; the size of the group they belong to and the characteristics of the informal leader of the group; the implementation of measures of social inclusion post-institutionalization to avoid the perpetuation of life and culture in the deviant subclass, which consists of people undergoing socialization in

institutions; providing social and emotional support in a differentiated way, for those who need support.

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