

Residential Youth Care - Lessons Learned From A Cross-country Comparison Of Utilization Rates

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Abstract : Purpose and Background: Despite a global policy push for deinstitutionalization, residential care for children and youth remains a relevant and highly utilized out-of-home care option in many countries, fulfilling functions of care and accommodation as well as education and treatment. While many youths are placed in residential care programs temporarily or during times of transition, some still spend years in programs that range from small group homes to large institutions. How residential care is used and what function it plays in child welfare systems is influenced by a range of factors. Among them are sociocultural and historical developments, available resources for child welfare, cultural notions about family, a lack of family-based placement alternatives as well as a belief that residential care can be beneficial to children. As part of a larger study that examined differences in residential care across 16 countries along a range of dimensions, this paper reports findings on utilization rates of residential care, i.e., the proportion of out of-home care dedicated to residential care relative to forms of family-based foster care. Method: Using an embedded multiple-case design study approach where a country represents a case, residential care in 16 countries was studied and compared. The comparison was focused on countries with developed social welfare systems and included Spain, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Australia, Italy, Israel, Argentina, Portugal, Finland, France, the United States and Canada. Experts from each country systematically collected data on residential care based on a common matrix developed by the author. A range of sources were accessed depending on the information sought, including administrative data, government reports, research studies, etc. Utilization rates were mostly drawn from administrative data or government reports. While denominators may slightly differ, available data allowed for meaningful comparisons. Beyond descriptive data on utilization rates, analysis allowed to also capture trends in utilization (increasing, decreasing, stable) as well as the rate change. Results: Results indicate high variability in the utilization of residential care, covering the entire spectrum from a low of 7% to a high of 97%, with most countries falling somewhere in between. Three utilization categories were identified: high-users of residential care (Portugal, Argentina and Israel), medium-users (Denmark, France, Italy, Finland, Spain, Netherlands, Germany), and low-users (England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Australia, the United States). A number of countries experienced drastic reductions in residential care during the past few years (e.g. US), while others have seen stable rates (e.g., Portugal) or even increasing rates (e.g., Spain). Conclusions: Multiple contextual factors have to be considered when interpreting findings. For instance, countries with low residential care rates have, in most cases, undergone recent legislative changes to drastically reduce residential care. In medium-utilization countries, residential care reforms seem to be primarily focused on improving standards and, thus, the quality of care. High utilization countries generally face serious obstacles to implementing alternative family-based forms of out-of-home care. Cultural acceptance of residential or foster care and notions of professionalism also appear to play an important role in explaining variability in utilization.

Keywords : residential youth care, child welfare, case study, cross-national comparative research

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