

THE FAILURE OF POST-INSTITUTIONALIZED LIFE

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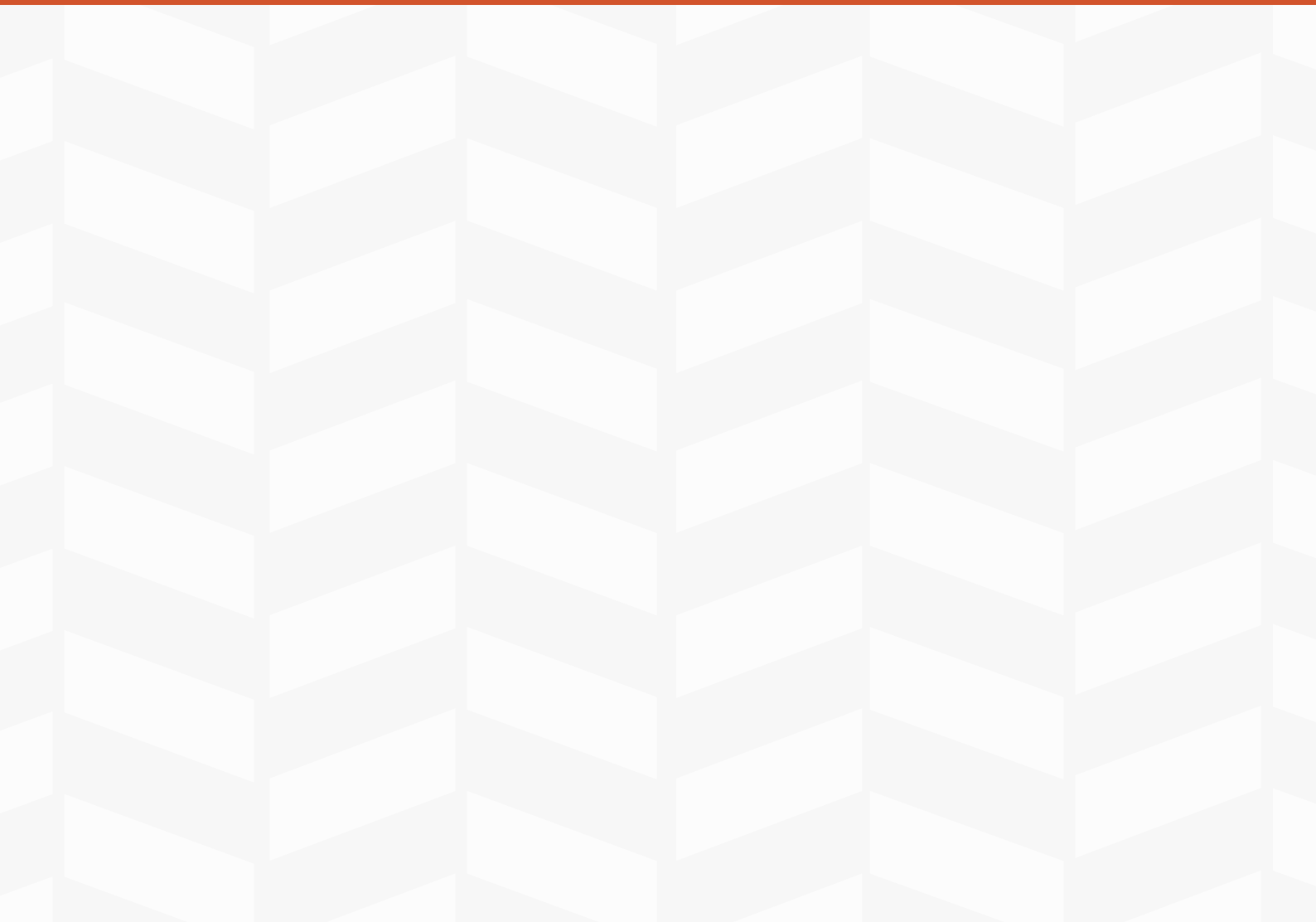
CONTENTS:

1. EXPLANATION	5
Who is Visinel BALAN	5
2. Chapter I: BACKGROUNDS	9
2.1. Briefing on the child protection system in Romania	9
2.2. Call for a radiography of the nowadays system	15
3. CHAPTER II: DATA GATHERING	20
4. CHAPTER III - SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES	26
5. CHAPTER IV - METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH	27
6. CHAPTER V - PERCEPTION, ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOR OF INSTITUTIONALIZED YOUNG PEOPLE REGARDING THE AUTONOMY OF INDEPENDENT LIFE HABITS	28
7. CHAPTER VI - THE QUANTITY DIMENSION OF THE SOCIAL ROLE WHEN LEAVING THE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM ..	31
8. CHAPTER VII - CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS	49
10. Annex:	56
11. Bibliography	59



RODICA MIHAELA STĂNOIU

"The increase of criminality, the exacerbation of violence are facts that must be looked upon with maximum responsibility"



MOTIVATION

WHO IS VIȘINEL BĂLAN?

Vișinel BĂLAN was born in Petrești, a poor village in Bacău County, as the youngest of 13 offsprings who one by one ended up being left to the State to be raised. At the early age of two months, he got into a State maternity care in Onești, and from the age of three he grew up in a child care center in Comănești without knowing his parents, his brothers or his sisters. He was a fair-haired child who succeeded in smiling to life with blue eager eyes despite the bleak surroundings - doorless toilets, shower taking by a hose on a cold concrete floor, ranged in a column naked next to dozens of colleagues, sanctions one more ingenious than another, such as walking hands and feet tied to the cafeteria while looking at the food without being able to touch it. The beatings of a nurse whom he never forgot, Aunt Celina, were ripping his back and drove him to flee away from the center frequently and hide at Comanesti railway station where he used to stretch his hand for a few pence, he deformed his back bones by carrying heavy weights for the near-by shops, and he stood squatting in the waiting room. He was one in more than 100 000 institutionalized children in one of the 700 mammoth centers that were functioning in Romania between the '80's and the '90's - a legacy of the pronatalist regime imposed on by Nicolae Ceaușescu.

He grew up at the same rate with the child care system and many times he experienced reforms the hard way. At the age of two months he was institutionalized in a maternity center until he turned three years old (a critical stage for a child's neurological development; fortunately, nowadays institutionalization under the age of three is forbidden by law), then in a preschoolers care center and in a schoolers center, at the age of 14, Vișinel got to be one of the first children experiencing the new solution of the system: maternal welfare. He moved from the grey children-staffed center to a small household that was managed by a mother and a father.

The father was battering the mother, and the mother was battering Vişinel who worked on a daily basis to buy them cigarettes not to see them mad. He took a refuge in books and study, convinced that he would not be able to put up with a life like “his parental models”.

Two tormented years later, he decided to run away and he did not rest until he got transferred to a family type home and until the two “parents” were forbidden to take any other children into care ever again. There were many persons in the system who tried to prevent him from doing what he wanted to, they even threatened him to call the police for his running away, they called him selfish, they implied that he wanted to make his “parents” starve, who put up with him for 2 whole years. He did not give in, all he wished for was that no child could ever enter the house he had suffered in again.

He had gotten the taste of justice and rebellion and by no means would he have allowed for any further abuse. The family type home - another innovation of the System - proved to be a better solution than the old mammoth centers but the shadows of the past kept rising through some nurse who had mastered the “Târgu Ocna technique” (where there used to be a care center that at its peak times counted up to 1100 boys among which many of Balan brothers): she took him tightly by the chin twisting the skin through her rough fingers, pulled until Vişinel felt a goitre swell, then she snapped him hard in the face, to make him learn to stop upsetting her with his protests or his infatuations.

During his adolescence, Vişinel dedicated himself to voluntary work and became more and more trustful of his power to demand and generate change among young people. He studied acting in order to learn how to control his emotions and the consequences of the trauma of institutionalized life. In parallel he studied Law, searching for a direction to match his spirit of justice, and since 2008 he has been working with the Department of Young People and Sports, where he acted among others as an organizer of “Summer University” and “Summer School” programs.

It is thanks to the theater that he unveiled his sensibility and vulnerabilities, he opened himself up piece by piece in order to know himself deeply, and then he recomposed himself back together again, piece by piece, through play.

Play also kept him close to the child care system, more precisely he remained an ally of institutionalized youngsters who were in need of a partner of dialogue, of career opportunities and personal development, of shelter. In 2012, he undertook the project “Their life is up to us!” for the purposes of consolidating independent life habits upon 45 young people in Bacău County. This very project was chosen by the European Commission as a model of good practice and was awarded with the “Project of the Year for Youth” award at the National Gala of Volunteers in 2012.

The organization Vocea Copiilor Abandonati (Orphan Children's Voice) he founded in 2013 contributed to fund raises that helped creating a multifunctional center for the children at the White Angel Child Care in Bucharest. Since 2014 he has been organizing the conference “My side of story”, and this initiative is meant to inspire teenagers and young people in the child care system, to provide them with models, landmarks and hope, to show them that there are chances in life even when your family is not near. Year after year, Vișinel invites young people on stage who grew up without parents and he asks them to tell their story in such a way that children could understand them. This made it possible for hundreds of young people in Bucharest to meet Daniel Rucăreanu - the founder of Federeii Association that fights for the recognition of the abuses, which institutionalized children were subjected to since the 1960' until nowadays - , Daniel Răzvan Iordan, officer in the National Defense Department, Ionut Nicolae, applicant for doctor's degree in Literary and Cultural Studies, Vasile Porumbaru, president of the Association for the Young People's Future, and Ionuț Ursu, medical volunteer who offered to help in Nepal after the earthquake in April 2015. These conferences were an opportunity for children and young people in the child care system, ranging between 13 and 26 years of age, to debate freely on their situation - on the shame they feel towards their colleagues who belonged to a biological family, on homesickness, loneliness, on the lack of freedom - and to ask questions.

Vișinel BALAN believes in the power of stories to motivate, open up new opportunities and horizons in the process of individual building and reframing - to change. Years passed by without him talking about his past and the emotional scars he was left with.

However, after deciding to work with vulnerable young people, he gradually began to use up chapters of his own story in order to captivate them, to earn their trust and help them look towards the future. He talked to them about dreams and taught them how to make a plan in order to achieve them.

The conferences “MY SIDE OF STORY”, the relationship with the young people he works with thanks to the organization Desenam Viitorul Tau, and also his academical formation at the master class of “Risk groups and support social services” he took for 2 years made him see the child care system in a new light, starting with the year 2015. Almost every week young people in the system call him to tell him they were beaten, that they want to run away, that they feel misunderstood, that they are threatened to end up in the street when reaching 18, and even that they have no place to sleep as a consequence of the protection measure expiry; this are the reasons why Vișinel wanted to grasp a better view on the situation of those who leave the child care system.

Ever since he was a child, he stood up against the system and he still considers himself to be the same problematic child. He refuses to accept papers, despite the reality young people describe, he does not give in to statistics results that seem to grow better and better, he does not look at the bright side of things. He believes that the young people are at the heart of the system and therefore its respective policies should gravitate around them and answer their needs whereas the viceversa should be unthinkable of.

CESARE BECCARIA

“If you want to prevent crimes, come up with clearer, simpler laws so that the whole force of the nation might focus on defending them, and not the slightest bit of it, on trying to bring them down”

CHAPTER I: BACKGROUNDS

THE REASON BEHIND A RESEARCH ON THE FAILURE OF POST-INSTITUTIONALIZED LIFE

2.1. BRIEFING ON THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM IN ROMANIA

In November 1966, the communist regime issued an act through which abortions were forbidden and the access to contraception became restricted. One year later, the annual number of births in Romania doubled and specialists estimate that the number of abandoned children doubled, too. Meanwhile, the State built hundreds of mammoth constructions where these children were supposed to grow up in. One of the largest centers in the country was built in Târgu Ocna in Bacău County with an official capacity of 600 places and actually sheltering up to 1100 boys during the crowded times.

The communist regime had terminated the instruction of psychologists and social workers, hence the employees of the child care centers lacked professional training, and handled the hundreds of children they had to take care of, their own way. It was a common habit for physicians to recommend mothers to pass their kid to the State health centers ("for raise") whenever they felt there was any risk of care prejudice at home. It was as common a practice for a mother to invoke poverty and leave her child at the hospital without having to pay for the consequences. A slogan "The state ordered it, the state should raise it" rapidly took over people's consciousness. One of the first measures that was taken after 1989 was to legalize abortions, and one million abortions followed in Romania in 1990. Abandoned children and liability-fleeing mothers in slippers and hospital gowns kept on loading maternities though.

It was April 1990 when Andy Guth, a physician from Braşov first stepped on the long white corridors of Oneşti Maternity State Care Center in Bacău where 400 children between zero and three years of age lived. He was 30, he had graduated in Cluj and during the last days of the regime he had been distributed by the graduation State grid to work there in a capacity of a general manager.

Nurses dressed in white, colourless walls and huge iron toyless cribs were expecting him. Few babies barely looked at him, most of them swung and kept on looking at their hands. Others wouldn't walk or talk at all although they were the right age to do that. Some of them, the nurses' favorites, who had learned to beg for attention to survive, were fine. The nurses took them home during holidays and some of them prepared for adoption. As for the rest of the children, it looked like there was no future. Unless they succeeded in complying to the evaluation committees opinion of normal development (evaluation committees who were always on the run to make way for a new wave of abandoned children) - such as talking, walking, excretion control - they were transferred, when coming of the age of 3, to hospital-homes for so called irretrievable children.

Guth started studying the children's files and in parallel to urgently equip the center with a playing room and a physical recuperation room. Taking notice that some of the transferred children had died in the centers for the irretrievable, he went to visit the place where they had ended up. When seeing the animal-like facilities where disabled children were being kept, and seeing that such entities had their own cemeteries, Guth blocked all the transfers, and 80% of the children that were expected to end up in hospital-homes under the old rules recuperated their development retard a few years later and easily got integrated into pre-schools and schools for typical children. The case studies of the new managers of child care centers drove the Department of Health to issue a derogation allowing such centers to keep the children up to their school age and stop condemning them to being transferred into those centers where mortality rose unusually high. (700 children had died in 1989 in hospital-homes in Romania.)

Under the international pressure, the first years after the Revolution were dedicated to closing child care centers and hospital-homes. The situation was so dramatic that no one had time to prevent the abandoning, to stop the flood. Places in child care centers became fewer and fewer, and newly hired social workers didn't know where to go with the thousands of abandoned children. Incredible situations occurred where "loaths" (as tightly wrapped in sheets newborns were referred to) were sent back to the biological family by ambulance. The delivery was followed by negotiations at the gate where social workers were trying to convince mothers to change their minds.

Sometimes they were successful, other times mothers refused because they could not afford to raise them (the most frequent reason) or because the baby had health issues.

Bacău County was the first in Romania to have taken children out of institutions and moved them into family-type homes for maximum 10 children. Guth was part of the team that ran the 12 house pilot program and saw the children in Onesti Care Center flower only a few months later, living in a loving and caring environment.

The energy of change echoed back at the level of the governments of the time and lead to the implementation of successful pilot projects in terms of public policies for the whole country.

The family-type home and maternal assistance solutions (firstly tested in Bacău County, too) were extended on a national level, all along with the first amendment of the legislation regarding child protection in 1997. The new law introduced concepts such as “child in difficulty” (referring to any child whose development, physical or moral integrity are endangered) and “measure of protection depending on the superior interest of the child”. Since 1997 Romania has thus been training and hiring maternal assistants meant to represent family-type temporary solutions up until a final solution was found - adoption, reintegration, placement into an extended family.

In 2003, the message of the EU was firm: unless Romania makes considerable progress in reforming the child care system, Romania is not ready to become a member state. There were no legal marks for the EU to impose on this requirement but the accession, and comparing to Bulgaria, Romania's accession depended on this reform.

In 2004, legislation was improved again and provisions was introduced to prevent child separation from the family. The monthly costs for child care under maternal assistance was twice less than the previous child care center solution, and until 2008, almost 21000 children got to be looked after by 15.000 maternal assistants. Comparatively, in 2009, in Bulgaria, whom we shared both the communist past and the accession process to EU with, there were only 250 maternal assistants.

Yet, the success of maternal assistance in Romania produced a boomerang effect and without an effective adoption system, the reintegration into the biological or extended family transformed into a long term solution: nowadays over 19000 children are looked after by maternal assistants and spend approximately six years in a substitute family.

The welfare of children in the protection system was one of the most significant criterion for Romania's accession to the European Union. The country was poor though, and the number of abandoned children permanently increased.

Annually, at the beginning of the year 2000, more than 5000 children were dumped in hospitals and maternities. Year by year, approximately 2000 young people left the old placement centers, most of them not knowing where they would live on, where they would work and how they would take care of themselves. Those who did not succeed to adapt were to be seen in the streets of the big cities and they became new complex cases that fell into the hands of the social workers again, who at their turn, sometimes felt like everything they did was ineffective.

Those were troubled years with powerful conflicts on the battlefield of the system reform. On one side there were the institutions managers and employees who wanted to keep their jobs and were resistant to any change. On the other side, the newly trained specialists couldn't wait to work with children, to help them get recuperated. Among them: confused children, dreamers, scared children. The elders had learnt for the first time that they had rights and they could oppose themselves to the nurses' treatments. Some didn't for fear of punishment, others protested, asked for heating, food, termination of abusive supervisors.

International televisions got thousands of calls from people who wanted to adopt Romanian orphans. Nowadays it is not known how many children were internationally adopted (there is an estimation of 30.000) and what destinies awaited those whose tracks were lost. The EU was pressing us through Emma Nicholson's reporting voice to make us stop the children traffic and export. They militated for international adoptions. They militated against them. They asked to close the big institutions. They built modern centers with as big a residential capacity.

Sometimes they got to anomalies like fully renovating an old type placement center, then closing it in less than 2 years and transferring children into maternal care, and teenagers to boarding schools and other centers.

10 years after the news being spread about Romania's abandoned children, over 200 million euros got to Romania through international NGOs, EU, World Bank and the USA and Great Britain governments. The money for the reform came in triggered by the emotional impact of the circumstances children had to live in. During the 90's, in the Eastern Europe more than 500.000 children lived under the same unacceptable conditions that the West associated Romania with.

A Child Pact research on the child care protection system in 2014 uncovered that almost 40.000 Romanian children who are now under the family type care service are living a better life than the generations who grew up within the institutionalized system.

Romania however scores low as regards the quality of services (recent analyses state that 80% of the centers for disabled children did not meet the corresponding standards) or as regards the mechanisms of public counseling with civil society and children concerned. Romania also scores low as regards the system financial support and the necessary human resources - hence derives a low capacity of search for the abandoned children's families, and of helping them to reunite;

It also lacks the resources to prevent abandoning (social shelters, direct material support) or to invest in a child's lawyer institution (that already exists in 40 European countries).

In April 2014, the National Agency for Child Protection and Adoptions (NACPA) was reinstated after being founded in 2005 and dissolved in 2012. One of the first measures of the NACPA was to forbid the institutionalization of the child under 3 years of age (in 2013, 723 children between 0 and 2 years of age were placed in emergency centers and placement centers).

Sorin Braşoveanu, director of Bacău NACPA looks back and it seems to him like yesterday when they were closing off Oneşti Maternity Care Center or Chimeş-Făget Hospital Home and they took photos of the lockers. Back then he says it was a novelty to tell old type institution employees that it was time for them to retire or to get training, that no child would ever grow into such an environment. It was complicated explaining to mothers who had been educated under the communist propaganda that the State could no longer take on their children to raise them.

Today, social assistants feel a change of mentality. The main reason of the child separation from the family is still poverty, but parents stopped believing that it would be any better to leave them up to the State care. Studies, especially Bucharest Early Intervention Project - that comparatively analyzed a group of institutionalized children and another group that were raised in maternal care (from the first months of life up to the age of 12) demonstrated beyond doubt that the lack of stimulation and care, inherent to childhood spent in an institution, slows the brain, and the dimensions of such effects depend on the age when the child was placed into that environment. Hope and Homes for Children Romania organizations work together with the public authorities to close all the institutions and there already are 100% “clean” counties (Bacău, Maramureş).

If right after the revolution Romania counted 100.000 children in 700 mammoth institutions, nowadays the system shelters 57.646 children - of which 37.000 in family type system and 20.400 in residential type system. 79 public centers are still structured according to the old model (and 3722 children live there) and 84 centers were rearranged in a modular system with fewer bedded sleeping rooms. There still exist 48 classic placement centers for disabled children and 44 restructured centers. Within 24 years, Romania dropped from a rate of 18% to a rate of 4,2 % as regards post-natal child mortality in the first year of life (from 8471 deaths in 1990 to 2250 deaths in 2009).

The figures that show the health and care system to have improved for the first year of life are the same that keep us first in the top of EU child mortality. Specialists say that 10 years after implementing the new legislation as regards child protection, Romania managed to put into practice approximately 50% of what was planned.

Beyond papers, in the absence of functional mechanisms of counseling and complaints registration, 25 years after signing the Child's Rights Convention, a research was needed at a national level, that render voice to the young who prepared to leave the child protection system - in order to see how this could be improved for the younger generations, in order to see what these young people were missing, to step whole towards an independent life.

(A version of this text was issued in DoR magazine no. 18, December 2014)

2.2. CALL FOR A RADIOGRAPHY OF THE NOWADAYS SYSTEM

On the 18th of January 2015, a few months after being constantly solicited by the mass media in Romania, that had a sudden interest in the projects of his association after being the topic of an article in The Guardian signed by the journalist Wendell Stevenson, Vișinel thought he was not doing enough. He thought he uselessly criticized the system and directly working with dozens or hundreds of young people. It was not enough and did not generate any change in the system. He felt responsible for the people who were reading his story and especially for the institutionalized young who would not believe he had once been like them. "From my actual position, I cannot solve problems on a methodological level, mechanisms, law issues", he told himself. "Let us see what the system looks like in 2015".

For him to be able to even conceive a change of the system, he needed to know the actual state of facts as specifically as possible. He wanted to know what happened next, to the young who left the system. Where would they go? Did anyone even ask what happened to them? The 18th of January was the day when he sent a demand of information to all the child protection centers boards of directors in the country. 47 emails and 47 recorded letters were sent and paid for from his own pocket. He wanted to know:

- Which were the applicable institutional mechanisms regarding post-institutionalized monitoring of the young people who left the special /social care system and if the General Board of Directors of the NACPA were in possession of such mechanism;

- How many young people left the child care system since 1989 until nowadays and what was the actual situation thereof;
- What was the number of the family type centers, residential type centers (since 1989 till present) and the number of professional maternal assistants, for these structures were subordinated and registered in the evidence of the NACPA institution;
- What methods / measures were being used in the relationship with the young benefitting from the special protection measure, as regards stimulation and consolidation of independent life habits as well as their length of participation to such a program;
- How many deaths had been registered among institutionalized children / young in 2014.

The first answers came from the Board of Directors of Sălaj NACPA only 5 days after receiving the solicitation.

“IN OUR INSTITUTION THERE ARE NO APPLICABLE INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS REGARDING POST-INSTITUTIONALIZED MONITORING OF THE YOUNG WHO LEAVE THE CARE SYSTEM. FROM A LEGISLATIVE POINT OF VIEW, THERE IS NO SUCH PROVISION. POST-INSTITUTIONALIZED MONITORING IS PERFORMED ONLY FOR THE CASES WHERE THE SPECIAL PROTECTION MEASURE CEASED DUE TO FAMILY INTEGRATION OF THE CHILD, AND NOT FOR THE YOUNG.”

Other institutions never answered to his demand or they wrote him back that they did not have the required information. On the 15th of February, Vișinel sent letters again. First to the Boards that had not answered him within 30 days according to the law, and then to all the Boards that had answered his first demand. He had additional questions for them:

- At what age were institutionalized children/ young being involved / included into stimulating and consolidating activities to achieve independent life habits according to the real facts and corroborated to the work procedure and methodology, specifically to the specialty structures subordinated to the institution;

- What is the total number in the evidence of the institution of the post-institutionalized young people who had integrated into society / community following the acquirement of independent life habits;
- How many post-institutionalized young people came back into the attention of the institution and were being awarded any type of social support / services as a consequence of not acquiring the objectives drawn by the Specific Intervention Plan, according to the Act no. 14 / 2007;
- How many young people are to leave the special protection system between 2015 and 2016 and which measures are to be taken for them to be prepared for an independent life, bearing in mind that many of them contacted the Association Desenam Viitorul Tau to mention that they had not benefitted from any specialized services under the Act 14 / 2007;
- Of the total of children / young who are registered under the Independent Life Habits Service / Department, how many of them have been involved in taking their own decisions regarding the establishment and elaboration of objectives of the Specific Intervention Plan (SIP) under the Act 14 / 2007 regarding the achievement of independent life habits ("The child / young is consulted when taking a decision as regards the activities and objectives of the SIP according to the age, experience, ability to understand and he/she has the right to being assisted in exercising such right"), or informed about the opportunities of social and professional insertion at a local / central level?

The whole purpose of the demands was to get a radiography of the situation of the young who had left or are leaving the child care system; based on the "diagnostics", Vișinel aimed at setting the foundations of an initiative group on a national level that harmonizes the legislative frame in effect, as regards child's rights protection and promotion, with the specific methodology as applicable to the area of intervention in personal autonomy stimulation and consolidation of post-institutionalized young people - as they are referred to, in the language of the system. In fewer and simpler words: his plan to be part of the change, to become a model by actually DOING something, not only by CRITICIZING.

Given that he was told that there was no information as to what he wanted to know, that such information has been neither centralized nor archived since 1989 till present, given that he got phone calls from certain representatives of institutions who, instead of answering in writing, asked him what he was up to, Vişinel realized that he could not get hold of the radiography he wanted. In April he talked to Lecturer Adrian Dan and told him that he was not getting the information he would have needed on the post-institutionalization stage preparation and on the life of the young who left the child care system. As he went along telling him about the young who ended up in the street on a weekly basis, who were reintegrated in biological families and thrown back to the street a second time (when the money they got when leaving the system was gone), he thought that the best radiography of the situation could be obtained by the very main actors' voice.

"What if we asked the children about how ready they are for an independent life? Let us look at the system through the lenses of the facts, and not through the articles of the law. Are you with me?", asked Vişinel his Professor from the master degree studies. He had never conducted a research before and he needed a specialized person to guide him and closely understand the concerned vulnerable category. The Professor gave him a lot of papers regarding limit situations children end up in, and told him: "Not only am I with you, I'm also supporting you."

Thus took form the idea of a quiz he would apply on a national level. After a series of consultations they came up with 14 questions and a section of observations, propositions and suggestions.

The questions were simply formulated, so that even children and young people could feel comfortable answering them anonymously.

On the 3rd of May, 47 demands were sent again to the NACPA's across the country, this time containing a proposition of dialogue:

“WE HEREBY ASK FOR YOUR SUPPORT AS REGARDS THE ACCESS TO YOUR INSTITUTION, FOR THE PURPOSES OF APPLYING A QUIZ ON INDEPENDENT LIFE HABITS, ON A NUMBER OF 100 YOUNGSTERS WITH AGES RANGING BETWEEN 14 AND 26.

PLEASE TELL US THE DAY, HOUR AND PLACE WHERE WE COULD MEET WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN ORDER TO APPLY THE QUIZ.

THE QUIZ SETS OUT TO OUTLINE A MONITORING AND INTERVENTION MECHANISM FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE COME OF AGE AND ARE TO LEAVE THE SOCIAL CARE SYSTEM AND MEANWHILE IS MEANT TO LEAD TO THE AMENDMENT OF THE ACT 272 / 2004; THIS ACTION WAS ALREADY UNDERTAKEN BY THE ASSOCIATION DESENĂM VIITORUL TĂU.

WE MENTION THAT THE MEETING WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE WILL INCLUDE NOT ONLY THE QUIZ BUT ALSO A PRESENTATION OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ASSOCIATION LIFE STORY; THIS IS MEANT TO STAND FOR A MOTIVATIONAL LANDMARK FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOWADAYS WITHIN THE SPECIAL CARE SYSTEM. WE STRONGLY BELIEVE THAT SCHOOL IS A CHANGE FOR ANY YOUNG PERSON, AND THE MORE FOR THE INSTITUTIONALIZED ONES.”

shirts made

During the same month, the NACPA sector 1, Argeş, Dâmboviţa, Prahova, Sector 6, Bistriţa Năsăud, Satu Mare and Covasna gave him a positive answer. It was the beginning of a 22.000 kms marathon for answers from 1000 institutionalized young people in Romania.

RODICA MIHAELA STANOIU

“The children of the street are only the visible part of the iceberg that is called child poverty”

CHAPTER II: DATA GATHERING

The research started on the 2nd of June in Bucharest sector 1 and ended on the 16th of November in Maramureş. Although the plan was that the quiz should last 15 minutes, the discussions with the young people lasted between 45 minutes (at least) and two hours and a half, depending on the questions they had, on how much they felt the need for a dialogue, on how interested they were in their perspectives for the future.

Vişinel traveled alone or together with one or two volunteers in Desenăm Viitorul Tău, and began his research with a short introduction where he told children about him, to draw their attention and gain their trust. On a national level, he was confronted with the same first reactions: “You’re making it all up!”, “You made up a story to fool us!”, “You couldn’t be like us!”, “You couldn’t understand”. In every county Vişinel talked about the days when he was 9-10 and he traveled by train begging, carrying loads, running away from the police for fear not to be sent back to the center. He tried to convince them that he could understand how it felt like to be a prisoner, to be harassed, to belong to nobody, that he knew what fear, loneliness, uncertainty, physical and emotional abuse were like. Gradually, the young people opened up and many of them had questions. They wanted to know how he had succeeded in putting the past behind him.

After the free discussion step, followed the quiz. At all times the NACPA representatives were requested to leave the young people to fill it up themselves, so that privacy and anonymity were observed and ensure them protection and safety. In certain counties the requirement was fulfilled accordingly; in lots of counties however, the personnel did not agree and insisted in participating, and some of the supervisors tried to suggest the answers to the young (“we did prepare for independent life, didn’t we?”, “write down that you swept, you peeled potatoes”, “how would the young understand such pompous words?”), or even to hand the quiz papers filled in before the volunteers came.

Vişinel and the volunteers who accompanied him often felt that the young were treated by the personnel as if they had a problem, as if their intellectual capacity was lower, only because they were living in a center. Instead of being stimulated to develop by language and attitude, they were encouraged to stagnate because anyway they “couldn’t” and “wouldn’t know” (“the children socialize in a different manner with us, they won’t understand you because your language is more complicated”). Vişinel knew from his own experience and from the children’s stories that unfortunately it was a common practice in the system for the supervisor to go to schools and ask teachers “to make them pass” because they had “problems”, “to pretend they didn’t see” so they could graduate 8 academic grades/forms (secondary school).

During the whole research, the main obstacle was the tendency of the institutions to hide and protect themselves even when they had nothing to hide. A fear of the public opinion, of press and superiors, was stronger than the desire to give the young the opportunity to talk about whatever they felt like to someone who might consider them in an objective manner. Many times Vişinel was told that the young people had no one to talk to about their fears, about the future and about getting ready to leave the system: the psychologist. A great issue was uncovered in the field: the psychologist of the center was perceived by the children as a “finger”. The young people did not go to him to talk about their problems (not even when there were serious problems - unwanted pregnancies, depressions, drugs consumption) because experience had shown them that whatever they told him, he would tell it further to the direction of the center.

Sometimes one felt as if the young people had been trained for the research. They answered robotically in fear, they denied any problem and looked like they couldn’t wait for the discussion to end. In certain situations, Vişinel noticed that the personnel chose “the best children”, not the revolted ones who could have revealed what was also not going well. In many emergency centers the young told him that they ran because it felt better in the streets, that in the centers they got beaten by their elder colleagues and their things got stolen.

In Timiș the research team was confronted with a difficult situation when a young lady under maternal care began to cry when being asked about independent life preparations and her plans after becoming of age. Her parents had died in a car accident and no one had told her that, when turning 18 or 26, she would have to go. She had never talked to a psychologist, no one had explained to her what a maternal assistant was, how the system worked, what were her rights and how to prepare for the future.

Another painful example was that of a young man who wrote to Vișinel on Facebook a few weeks after filling the quiz:

“Hi daddy, I’m in center no. 2, still here. Last night that girl next to me in the photo ran off. When you came to us back then, she took her bed sheets and her pillow and slept on the floor. She beated me with the slipper on the head, she beated me. That’s why those in the centers run away, tell it further.”

On Xmas Eve I will run away from here, I’ve been traumatized many times. I’m afraid of him because he acts very mad. I will delete this conversation. I hope you can help me.”

Another frustrating case was the situation of a young man who attempted suicide twice while being an applicant for a Doctor’s degree at the Faculty of Choreography. At the age of 24, despite all of his prayers, the prolongation of the accommodation at the center was denied to him under the personnel’s motivation that a doctor’s degree was no day education form.

So was also the moment when Vișinel was told by various young men in an old type center about the existence of a “torture room” that was called “isolator” where two individuals get shut whenever they are late. The personnel said such room did not exist, but all the residents talked about it, and maintained that two girls were being locked there at that very moment. After a lot of insisting, they admitted that it was a method of discipline.

Or when Iuliana, a volunteer accompanying Vişinel at Botosani, met several weeks after the research, a youngman who stopped her in the street and told her that two days earlier he had become of age and he had ended up in the street.

“He knew that I wasn’t able to do anything for him since his papers had already been sent away and he was in the streets already, nonetheless he wanted me to remember what to fight for, with respect to the others who were younger than him. That was a moment of immense helplessness and emptiness that I will never be able to repair”, says Iuliana.

The same volunteer remained deeply touched by the lack of cooperation of the authorities in one of the greatest cities where she applied the quiz:

We found the center where we were supposed to apply the quiz, with the help of the citizens who had guided us, given that calling the contact person proved practically useless. We hardly got there and found the doors locked. The young people were not allowed to leave the building and were looking at us unable to help. After a while, thanks to a disabled boy who had noticed us at the gate, we managed to draw the attention upon ourselves and get in. The young people were extremely upset. Despair was all over their faces. Each and every one of them had something to disclose or wanted to learn things.

All across the country there were situations when youngmen summoned Vişinel to “do something”, not to just research. “Many come and promise things, then disappear!”, “Since you uncover issues, solve them!”. Some were furious at the system, others were interested in changing it from the inside and asked for guidance on volunteering with their colleagues, on taking the initiative and helping each other.

Fortunately, the research uncovered also enough situations that might be a model on a national level. After the quiz session in a center in Bucharest, the director and the personnel themselves asked for a feedback from the young people, and wanted to know what problems had been identified (without infringing the respondents’ anonymity).

They wanted to know their needs and expectations and meet them, and they wanted to be let know about any cases of hidden violence among the residents, too.

Overall, there were directors who were eagerly waiting for the research to be over as well as there was personnel who stayed up awake with the volunteers till 11 p.m. and offered them guidance to the places in the city where young people normally go and asked for advice on the complex situations they were facing.

In Bucharest sector 3, the quiz was applied also in centers for “post-institutionalized” young people where these young people who left the protection system and got a job could live two extra years - which is a novelty of the system and surely of high necessity.

There was a situation in Olt County where the research was playfully involved into the daily program of the children who were having their holidays. Vișinel was invited to be part of the jury in an artistic show together with disabled and typical children; the personnel introduced and prepared the children for the quiz, then the research took place at a festive picnic on a meadow in a playful and joyful atmosphere. Accompanied by mustard and sausages, the children were more than willing to share their feelings, their wishes and their solutions on what they would change. They confirmed what the director had told Vișinel: from time to time, the director slept in the center to see how the children’s life was from morning till night and understand them better. That was a big difference compared to other places where the research team had been told by phone that they would not be allowed to access the children, that they had no right to address them and that no one was interested in answering their questions.

In another county, Vișinel was impressed to find that the system was sheltering a cancer-suffering young lady who was studying for her doctor’s degree although she was older than 26.

“If you were a mother or a father and I were ill, you wouldn’t abandon me when I turned 26. There you are, in certain circumstances, neither does the system.”

OSHO

“Behave to your peers as you would like them to behave to you”

CHAPTER III - SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

The analysis on the institutionalized young people's failure to achieve independent life habits was based on the need for qualitative and quantitative information as regards the training of institutionalized young people for an independent life in order to prevent the failure of post-institutionalized life. The main objectives of the research were the following:

- To identify the point of view of institutionalized young people as regards the quality of service they are provided with by the sheltering institution;
- The dimension of the professional relationship between the youngman benefitting from the measure of protection and the personnel of the sheltering institution;
- To identify the degree of personal autonomy of the young people in the social protection system and their ability to cope with the social and professional challenges once the protection measure is revoked.

PENALIST A. PRINS

"A man's sociability and re-socialization are not achieved by keeping the convicted imprisoned in the solitude and formalism of a cage".

CHAPTER IV - METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Taking into consideration the objectives set for this analysis, a double approach was chosen for the research:

- A qualitative type approach sought for the perception, attitude and behavior of the institutionalized young people with concern to the autonomy of independent life habits, respectively it was meant to identify the social actors involved into the development process of personal autonomy and to set some viable solutions to reduce the failure of post-institutionalized life;
- A quantitative type approach that implied the quantification of institutionalized young people's opinion as regards undertaking a social role after leaving the protection system.

The research method that was used was the quiz, observation and structured dialogue, which is a method that allows for detailed investigation of the subjects' perceptions and attitudes.

The target group was represented by 979 institutionalized counties and 5 departments in Bucharest City (Sector 6, Sector 1, Dâmbovița, Argeș, Prahova, Olt, Giurgiu, Timiș, Dolj, Alba, Sector 4, Bacău, Sector 5, Iași, Neamț, Suceava, Vrancea, Botoșani, Ialomița, Tulcea, Galați, Sector 3, Brăila, Satu Mare, Buzău, Maramureș, Bistrița).

HHC ROMANIA

"Home and family for each and every child".

CHAPTER V - PERCEPTION, ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOR OF INSTITUTIONALIZED YOUNG PEOPLE REGARDING THE AUTONOMY OF INDEPENDENT LIFE HABITS

Vişinel together with the team of volunteers of DESENĂM VIITORUL TĂU ASSOCIATION went across the country to talk to the young people in the system and implicitly to apply a quiz in order to identify their degree of personal autonomy after they leave the center. Before applying the quiz, he began his research with a short introduction about himself to draw their interest and gain their trust. There were doubts and different reactions as if what Vişinel was talking about was pure confection: “You’re making it all up!”, “You fabricated a story to deceit us!”, “There’s no way you could be like us!”, “There is no way you could understand”. Vişinel told them about those dark days in his childhood when he jumped from one train to another, begging, carrying weights, hiding from the police for fear he would be taken back to the center. He tried to convince the kids he did know what it was like to feel lonely, abandoned, subjected to all kinds of abuse. Gradually, the young’s attitude grew friendlier and they began to ask various questions, getting curious about different situations in Vişinel’s life. What amazed them the most was that he was able to put the past behind him.

The main obstacle that incurred while the research was performed was that the institutions representatives hesitated to expose themselves and made the quiz application process difficult, even where there was nothing to hide. Their main fear was towards the public opinion, press and their superiors. Their mission to help young people open up to someone else whom they deem objectively had already passed second. Many times Vişinel was told by the personnel that the young had whom to talk to about their fears, their own future and their getting ready to exit the system, invoking the quality of the psychologist in the center.

The reality on the site unveiled another big problem: the psychologist of the center was most of the times seen by the young as a “finger”. The young never turned to such specialist to talk about their problems and their turmoils (not even for extremely severe cases such as unwanted pregnancies, depressions, drug consumption), because their experience had taught them that no matter what they said, it would be passed on to the direction of the center.

Further to the discussions that took place and to the information that was gathered by questioning all the participants in the research, the following results were drawn:

“I believe that the child protection boards of directors should get more involved in more numerous development activities that are meant to help us on the future. They should ask what we need, what we want to do, if we desire for a change. The hardest thing is to let someone know you have a problem, that you need specialized support.” (18 year old woman - Iasi).

“I wish I were listened to by my supervisors, to get help from those around me when I need help and support. I wish I were always listened to whenever I’m upset or sad. I wish those around us would always listen.” (15 year old girl - Satu Mare).

“I think we should be treated like any other person without being punished. They should help us with advice more than what we are getting now on a daily basis - study, be good, etc.” (17 year old boy - Buzau).

“In my opinion they should talk to us more, they should ask us how we think, what we want for the future. We would need more money than what we get now, for us to buy the things we need and we are not given here” (15 year old girl - Tulcea).

“I have a proposition, that we get our own free time and permission to go outside the shelter. That we have money for the books that teachers ask from us. That we get peace, not to live in fear that we might wake up punched in the face or be forced and beaten while still sleeping. I want to have here only colleagues who deserve to get help, and no kind of those who believe they are better than anyone else. I want to stop living in fear here at the shelter. Please help me!” (14 year old girl - Bucharest).

As anyone can see, the reflections expressed by the young and the discussions on the occasion of the quiz underline their need to get involved in sessions on the rights to, and professional formation, respectively on the access to specialized services. The need for safety on the next day makes some anxious and fearful as regards the projection of their own future especially after leaving the protection system.

Fear and reluctance are noticed as regards the young people's drive to access and request for specialized help within the sheltering institution. Fear is running the relationship with the personnel, as a mechanism of self-protection, which hypothetically leads to the conclusion that tensions exist between the child and the specialized personnel or that barriers and limits are set by the personnel.

In spite of the Act 14/2007 on the approval of the mandatory minimum standards for the Service of independent life habit development and for the methodological guide of implementation thereof, one still has to deal with the personnel's lack of interest and indolence where young people's training for an independent life is concerned.

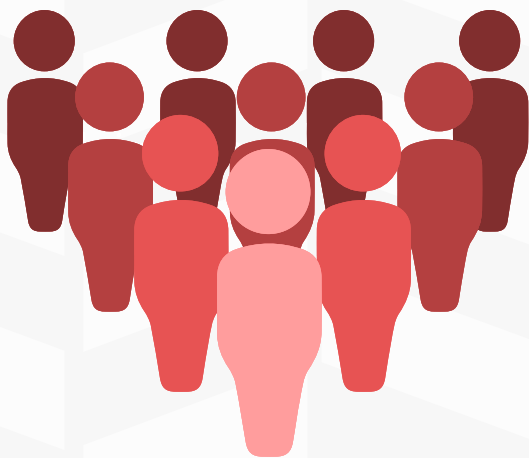
The representatives of the NACPAs boards of directors stated they lacked sufficient specialized force to train the young people for an independent life, and that the latter were being involved in all sorts of household activities that were meant to help them develop personal autonomy habits.

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPERY

"Every adult was a child first. Yet, only few remember it."

CHAPTER VI - THE QUANTITY DIMENSION OF THE SOCIAL ROLE AFTER LEAVING THE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

1. How happy are you with the way you are treated by the personnel of the placement / residential center or of the social home you live in?



31,3% - Very (happy)

28,1% - So and so

18,4% - Quite (happy)

15,9% - Hardly (happy)

6,3% - Not at all

According to the cumulated percentage of the degree of satisfaction regarding the relational system, the percentage of over 50% indicates that the respondents do not feel secure in relationship with the personnel of the sheltering institution.

Exploring the reverse of the above mentioned percentages, respectively the 31,3%, we are circumspect as regards the respondents' unlimited freedom to answer in accordance with their own options, and we relate it to the particularities highlighted by the working context of the institutionalized young people at the moment of the quiz application. My opinion is unqualified ill-willing personnel with a troubled personal / professional history will negatively impact on the personality structure of the institutionalized youngman, and this condition will make its presence felt later on in the latter's behavior.

A most concerning aspect that reactivated our attention is the high percentage of more than 90% resulting from the interview - the discussions with the young people who stated they did not trust the psychologist for he was a "finger" and they owed their big problems they were facing, to him.

2. Do you believe that the personnel in the center thinks about your future?



31% - Very (happy)

19,6% - So and so

17,3% - Hardly (happy)

16,8% - Quite (happy)

15,3% - Not at all

shirts made

The projection of the young people onto this aspect highlights individual structures of their need for security and safety in establishing the resilience factor that is necessary to adapt and achieve the premises and the requirements of the substitute sheltering environment, which is shown by the higher than 50% percentage (by cumulation: so and so, quite and very).

When you have nobody, you are forced by the substitute sheltering environment dynamics to restructure your individual expectations, to create alliances with the same age group and implicitly with the conventional / institutional personnel.

Over 32% of the young live with the feeling that no one thinks about their future. This leads to the raise of inner conflicts (traumas) that transpire in public through anti-social behavioral patterns.

3. Have you been informed about the independent life habits?



29,2% - Very (happy)

19,4% - Not at all

18,6% - Quite (happy)

17,6% - So and so

15,2% - Hardly (happy)

According to the percentage of 34,6% (by cumulation: not at all and hardly), the institutionalized young people know a little or have not at all been informed about or been involved in programs on the consolidation of independent life habits. It is no wonder that every year 25.000 young people leave the social protection system and have no idea where to go to, have no resources of their own as regards the achievement of an independent lifestyle.

It is necessary that the representatives of the sheltering institution give more room to these young people, for them to stimulate and consolidate the autonomous life habits so that, once they leave the social system, they may be equipped with all the resources available to ensure their own lifestyle in accordance with the requirements of the social and professional environment at hand.

The discussions with various representatives of the NACPAs revealed the young people to be involved in different specific activities that inherent to acquiring independent life habits such as: "peeling potatoes and cleaning". I consider it compelling for the young people to participate in a more laborious program with straight objectives that are accepted and dealt with by the beneficiary of the specialized services. The young people should be consulted about the programs they would participate in, what they wish for (appraisal of social parts) according to the principles for an independent lifestyle under the Act no. 14/2007 - The Service for the development of independent life habits and the methodological implementation guide for such standards.

4. Are you concerned about what is going to happen with you when you leave the placement center, the residential or social flat you live in at present?



66,6% - Very (happy)

19,5% - Quite (happy)

7,2% - So and so

3,5% - Hardly (happy)

3,3% - Not at all

Many of the young people are concerned about what will happen with their life when the social protection measure is revoked.

As the research activity was unruling and as the discussions with the respondents were corroborated, it was obvious that they were not ready to face the prerequisites of the social and professional environment, they had no precise landmarks as to how to become active citizens. Their answers proved of their dependance on the system as a proximal mechanism of self-defence.

5. Do you feel that your are ready to deal with the responsibility life on your own implies?



25,2% - Very (happy)

23,6% - So and so

18,6% - Not at all

18,3% - Quite (happy)

14,2% - Hardly (happy)

If tomorrow the social protection measure would cease for some young people, a percentage of 56,4% (by cumulation: not at all, hardly and quite) of the respondents exhibited they had not perspective and they were not ready to start a new life.

This result drives us to the hypothesis that there still are aspects to clarify and to implement into the child care system as regards the achievement of independent life habits, that the institutionalized personnel needs to rethink and reorganize their professional objectives in order to make the legislative frame effective when it comes to training young people for an independent lifestyle.

This situation reflects the personnel's lack of involvement into the young people's training for an independent lifestyle and acquirement of an active role in the community.

These young men have a predisposition to develop suicidal conducts and thoughts, or if lucky at all, to become homeless individuals who will live in holes and sewery in the countryside. Is that what they are raised for up to the age of 18? It is strongly advisable that we pay attention and be aware when it comes to training young people to consolidate their personal autonomy habits.

6. Do you know if there is any possibility for you to extend your stay with the placement center / residential or social flat?



57% - Not at all

12,4% - Very (happy)

11,5% - Hardly (happy)

9,8% - So and so

9,3% - Quite (happy)

Over 68,5% of the respondents stated that they knew nothing about any right they would have to extend their stay with the center according to the art. 55 section 3 of the Act 272/2004 as regards the protection and promotion of the child's rights with the subsequent amendments and completions. This is the reason why many of the young people have been "abusively" integrated into families and communities when coming of age. I believe no one can be integrated in a family if up to the age of 14 such measure was not possible, the less will it be possible at 18. This situation is sufficient reason for us to believe that the protection system first protects itself by papers - which is more important for the annual report - and less by the experience of the post-institutionalized youngman who is forced to live one more episode of abandonment to continue the series of the losses he/she suffered so far.

"I was brought in a family when becoming 18. The parents enjoyed the money they got from the child protection system for two months, then kicked me out. So much for integration" - post-institutionalized youngman in Prahova.

"I became 18 and they practically threw me out of the yard at 7 in the morning" - post-institutionalized youngman in Botosani.

The above youngmen's statements are some of the most unfortunate. There is no family integration after coming of age. It is an illusion! And it all starts with an internal methodology that compels the personnel to maintain that another number of young people got integrated into society. At the end of the day the system ticks one more "solved" case. Everything is on paper - while on site there is a "murder" being committed by the State on the social protection measure beneficiaries.

7. Has there been any situation where you were asked by the employees of the center or of the board of directors about the decisions that were to be taken in your name?

All along the process of interviewing the institutionalized young people and discussing with the NACPAs' representatives who were present at the meetings regarding the quiz, deficiencies were signaled in providing the information on the legislative frame and on the active participation of the young people in the opinion process with regard to their own decisions.

Young men are neither consulted nor involved in an active manner when decisions of their concern are taken. There are NACPAs at a national level that have no access to autonomous services regarding the provision with specialized services that stimulate and consolidate independent life habits under the effective law for that matter. We consider that one cannot pretend or expect the system to work as long as the young are no part of the dialogue, not to mention a specialized process that directly concerns them and has to do with their future. The most eloquent example was the way representatives of certain child protection boards of directors tried to influence as much as they could on the children's answers, and this situation became obvious when the assigned NACPAs' representatives requested to have the quiz before signing the partnership agreement and to be present in the working area.

Some have managed to suggest to the youngmen how to fill in the quiz, others monitored them to make sure the youngmen filled in the right answers - "right" from the monitor's point of view. I was forced to accept this institutional reality for the sake of finalizing the research, since it was a delicate situation running on the dynamics of the relationship between the respondent and the protection personnel.

Sometimes they are punished without warning that a certain punishment would be enforced. It is up to the way the nurse feels at the moment of the enforcement of the correction measure. It is mandatory to remove strategies of enforcement of any type of coercion that is willingly aimed at the institutionalized youngman. If a youngman is "wrong" he / she analyzes the causes that trigger that behavior.

If we only punish, we do not help the young realize that they are wrong. The youngsters need programs of specific therapy to enhance their self esteem, to manage their emotions when they collaborate with other people in the community. All across the 22 counties and 5 departments of Bucharest City we have not identified any program of specific therapy where young people say to be involved.

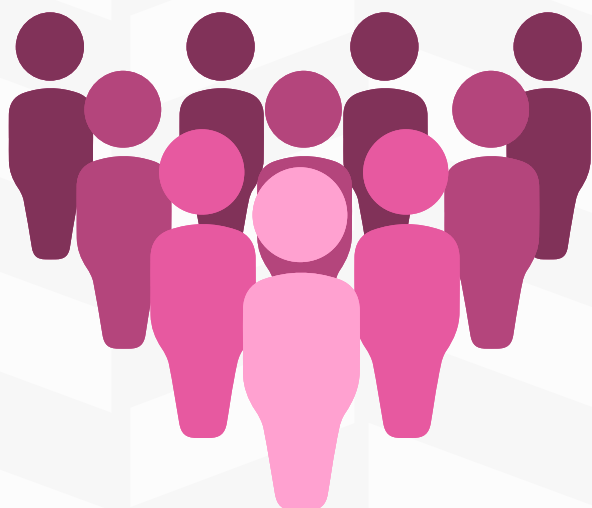


29,1% - Not at all
 27,5% - Very (happy)
 16,3% - Hardly (happy)
 13,7% - So and so
 13,4% - Quite (happy)

8. Is there at least one person in your life that supports or helps you in the event of your leaving the placement center / social or residential flat?

Generally young people rely on their acquaintances, friends, people who are close to their own convictions. They expect them to accommodate them when the protection measure ends. One viable resource may also be the network of reference persons for the respondent, however we cannot rely on those close persons to receive them with open arms, and there you go, one additional case was solved in the report regarding the young's integration into community,

The next questions were open questions, so that the young people might practise their freedom of opinion as regards the given sentence.



45,6% - Very (happy)
 15,3% - Not at all
 14,2% - So and so
 12,5% - Hardly (happy)
 12,5% - Quite (happy)

9. What is your opinion about the circumstances you live in?



43,3% - Satisfied

32,1% - Very good

15,3% - So and so

5,6% - Dissatisfied

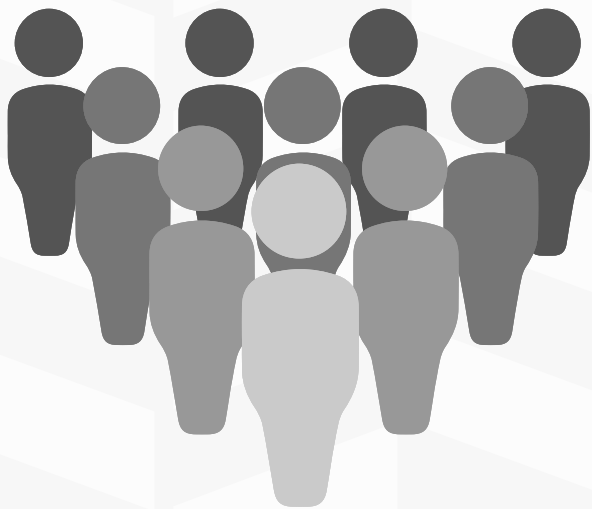
3,7% - Misery

The young people are happy with their life circumstances overall, except for the placement centers where the 24,6% percentage indicate that they are unhappy with the protection circumstances that are provided by the sheltering institution.

The special protection system went through remarkable improvements on the infrastructure level as regards the conditions of living and the rearrangement of the spaces for living. The great handicap of the nowadays system lies at the level of the relationship with the beneficiary. The young people complained about the default of programs that might meet their needs to spend their free time, train for an independent life and socialize outside the sheltering institution.

Other young people complained about not being allowed to have a he/she - friend upon case. The NACPAs' argument was: "We are protecting them. They do not understand and at any moment they can come up with babies at the gate etc.". No one talks to them about sexual contraceptive education, everything is taboo. This is how the youngsters come up with sexual identity crises, with episodes of seeking their own identity and belonging to a group of their own age.

10. What do you know about the Act 272/2004?



91,8% - I know nothing

**6,7% - Rights /
Responsibilities /
Obligations**

16,3% - Child legislation

It is not surprising that there is such a high score, that more than 90% of the institutionalized young people know nothing about the existence of the Act 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of the child's rights.

The discussions revealed a minimum knowledge about the young people's rights and obligations, however they knew nothing about any law that might protect them. What I discovered is that these young people do not know how to represent themselves in the relationship with the personnel of the sheltering institution.

Everything takes place on a paper and child protection is just a paper that only aristocrats may have access to. If they want to represent themselves they cannot because they are not allowed to. Who fights for these young people? What is the role of the social protection institutions since these young people live in a system that resembles to uniformless detention centers.

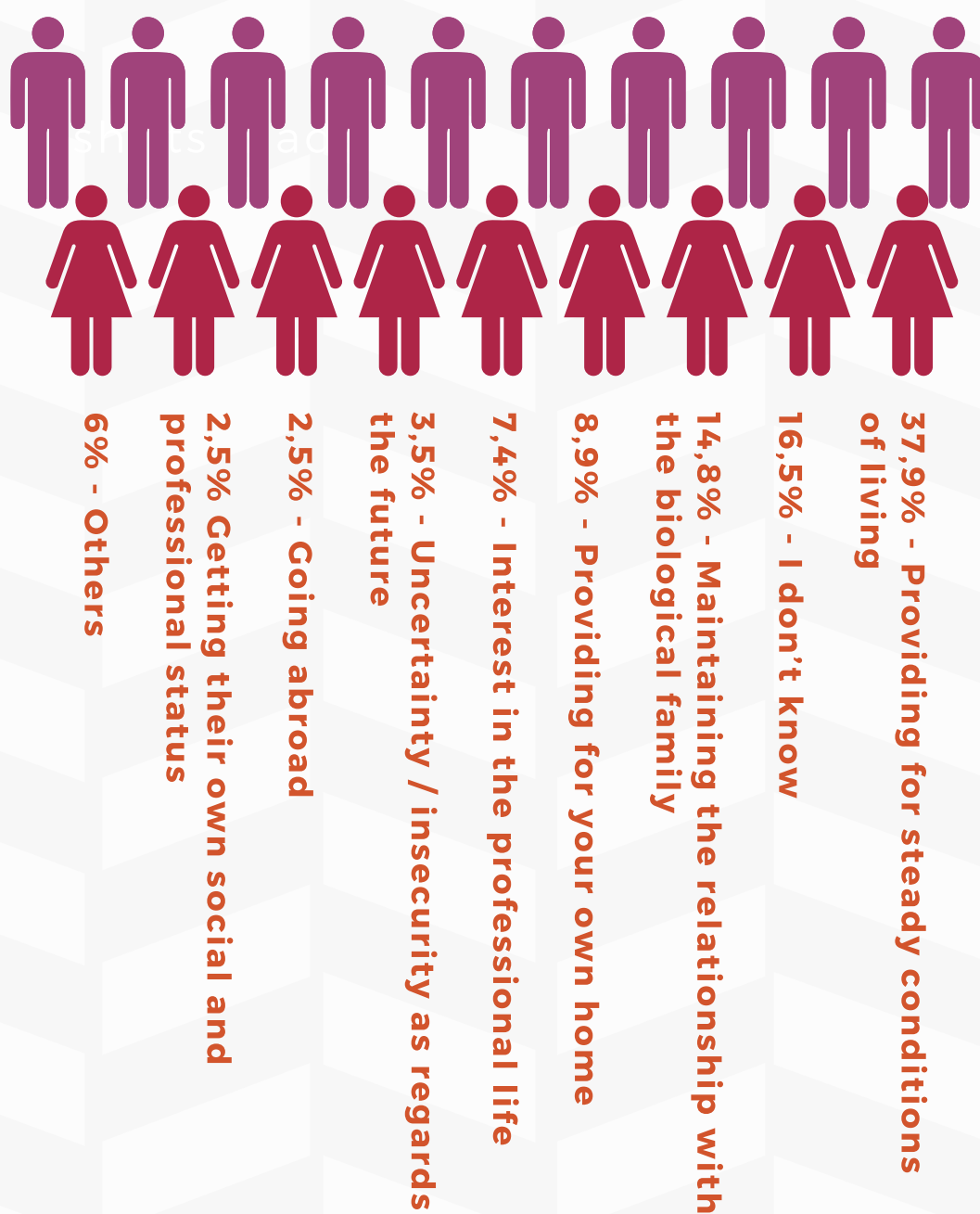
We let the young people know that they could file memoirs or petitions to the sheltering institution archive, and the NACPAs representatives infringed on their right to formulate petitions by calling the director of the center the beneficiary was from, so that the complainant might get punished. Under the principle: "unless you are with us, you are against us".

"One lady threatened to beat me and to tell about me to the director, and I don't know what to do!" - young lady in a center in Suceava County.

I advised her to file a complaint to the archive service of the NACPA institution, and the reaction of the representative was to call the director of the center where the young lady was located, to complain against her and to deny her the registration of the document.

“Mr. Vişinel, I wanted to go out in the city and the director wouldn't let me. She started yelling at me and pulling my hair!” - tells me another institutionalized young man.

11. What will you do when you leave the Center?



The young people need safety, many of them declared: "I shall work, provide for myself, look for a job, have a future, be on my own, go further, build a house and integrate".

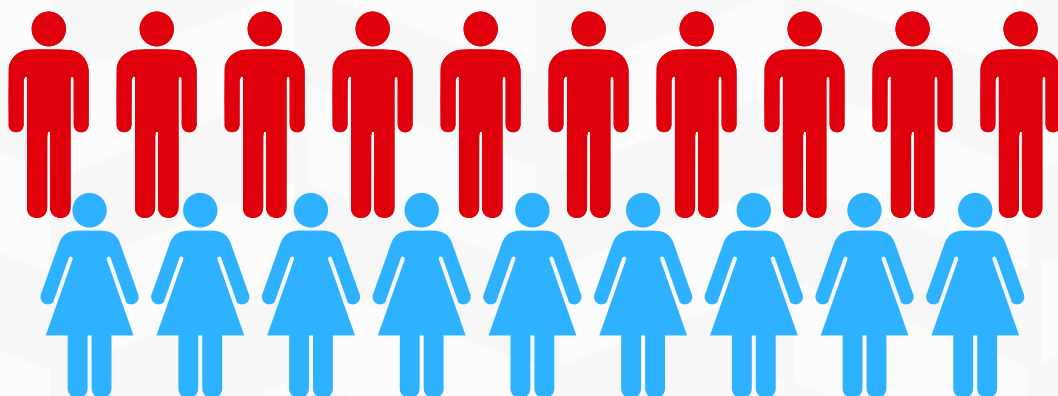
Safety is based on providing post-institutionalization support services. For example: to have a job that is adapted to their professional formation and to their individual skills, respectively to have a space to live in for at least 2 years or if not, to have their rent costs funded.

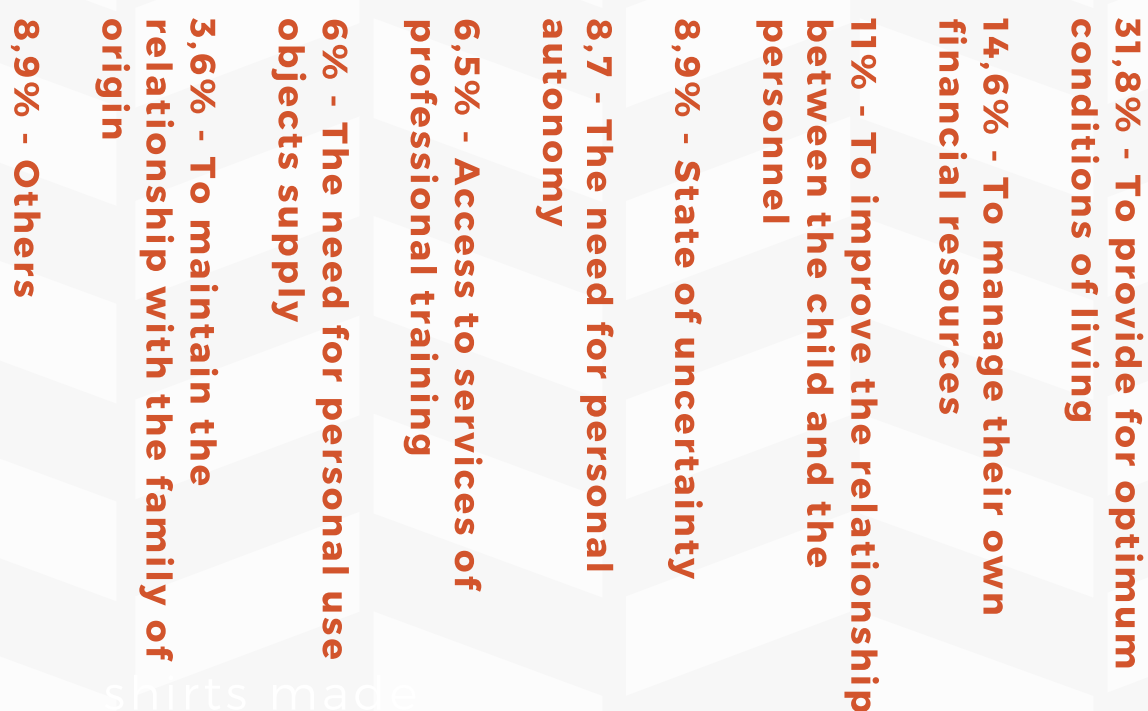
Anyway there are many of them who are afraid of the day when they have to leave the special protection system and have no idea where they will go. This topic may generate suicidal behavior or ideatic rumination and neuropsychic troubles.

As one can see in the above graphic, 16,5% of the respondents do not know where they will go when they leave the special protection system. A minatory percentage - if we think that these young persons will shortly have to take on their own lifestyle with the resources they have available. We have to deal with another abandonment. Other young people still hope for the biological or extended family to save them.

The young people find it very hard to think of school when they can't deem it as a future perspective. The effective system sets limits instead of offering perspectives, opportunities to develop and to enjoy the best educational programs and personal development programs as well as to train for an independent life.

12. What would you like the child care system to do for you?



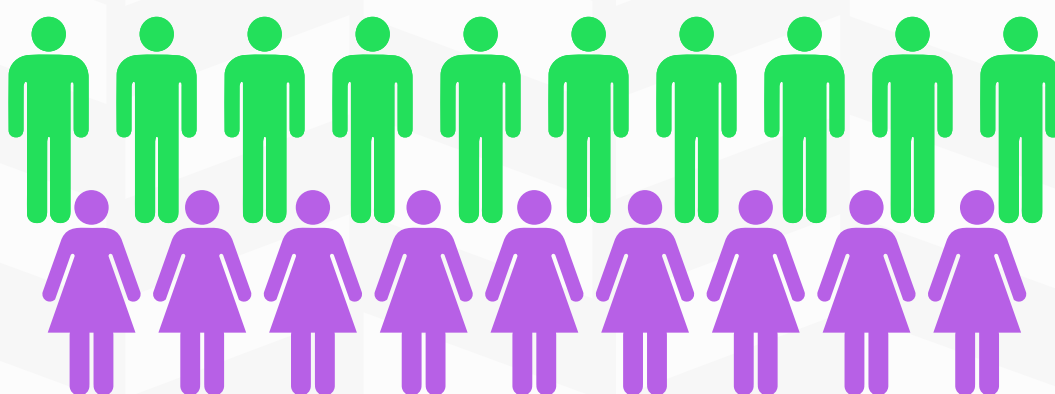


One can notice from the percentage of 31.8% that there is a need for optimum conditions of living among the institutionalized young people, and a need for objects of personal use in the sheltering environment; this situation is guaranteed by the legislation in effect with regards to the child rights protection and promotion. Another main need of the young people is the need for post-institutionalized protection. Many of them know that when coming of age they have to leave the protection system without knowing where they will go. More than 14% of the young people are willing to learn how to manage their financial resources or any other type of resources they may have. Consolidation of independent life habits is another feature that was identified in their answers. Over 11% of the young people are or were in a conflict with the employed personnel.

The research exhibited that they were cursed at, insulted and demoralized. For 11% of the institutionalized young people, this reality is called social protection system. It is surprising to notice their desire to develop in a free manner by active participation by activities, workshops, specific meetings that ought to be ruled by the social protection institutions. The right to the ownership of goods is unfortunately infringed nowadays. The young people have no possibility to keep their goods, while the personnel goes on infringing this fundamental right, motivating and arguing that so ordered the superior.

A very low percentage of young people (3,6%) still want to hear about their biological family, however the child protection system reports year after year that a big part of the young were integrated in the origin family. We consider that youngsters older than 16 cannot be integrated into families unless such situation was cleared before. If one reports youngmen over 18 to have been integrated into families, one ought to assume 100% of such young men's failures. Another crisis that was identified upon this chapter is the need for freedom. They want to spend more time in the community in order to develop and integrate more easily into the community. Privation of freedom causes a double emotional disability to the young. It generates conflicts between the personnel and the youngman and many times it leads to further argumentative actions, such as breaking the law as a form of protest against the infringement of such fundamental right - the right to freedom.

13. Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years?



24,5% - Accessing a job
 22,2% - Lack of future projection
 13,7% - Need to finalize education
 13,6% - Need to have a social status
 12,8% - In the origin / extended family
 7,6% - Leaving the country
 3,6% - In a placement center
 2% - Others

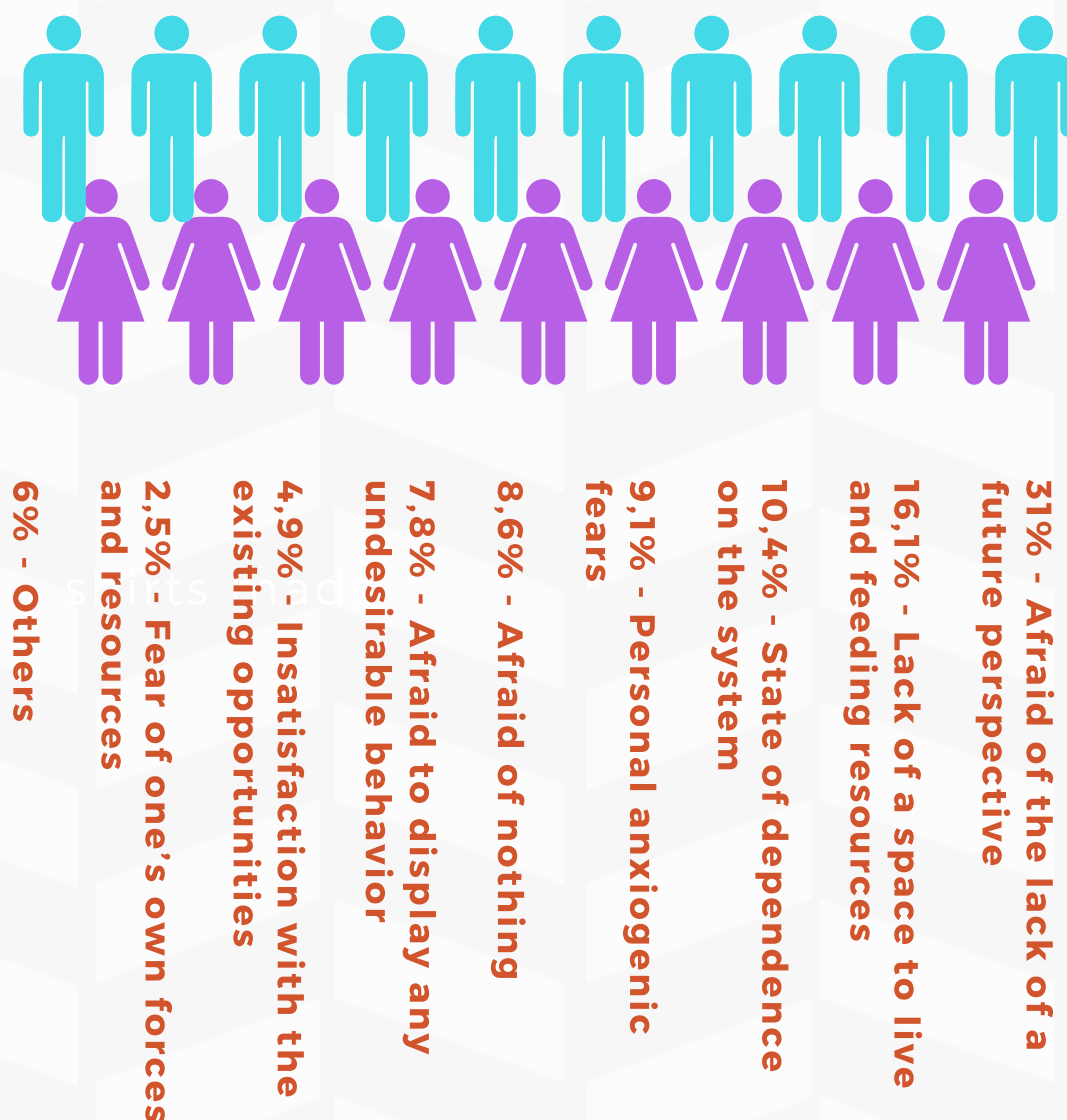
Over 24% of the young people go looking for a job, but what about the rest of 46%? One can notice that more than 22% have no future perspective. These young people answered that they would end up being “drug addicts, thieves, wanderers, convicted”. Unfortunately, the lack of certain programs of personal development, motivational programs and the low self esteem lead to the development of a new vulnerability: the vulnerability of adapting to groups and communities. The youngman’s image on the community is distorted thanks to the way they were raised by those who took care of them and transmitted them this image.

The youngman’s revolt for survival will immediately make itself noticed when he/she leaves the protection system. What we can assume responsibility for, according to this result, is that more than 20% of the young people who leave the social protection system end up in prison. Hence a legitimate question arises: if this is the life scenario they were raised by the State for, to be convicted to detention.

There is a positive percentage of those who want to continue with their education - 13 %. How do we encourage them to do that? Many of them said they wanted to work while being a student. According to the legislation, working is equivalent to “managing it”, and this draws by the cease of the protection measure.

There is a 3,6% of young people who can’t envision themselves ever leaving the system, and this makes us think of a dependency on the system and of the incurrance of the risk of suicide once the relationship with the system is broken. It is of the utmost importance to see what programs develop each direction as to the youngman’s training to leave the protection system. The same result exhibits no such training is performed.

14. What are you the most afraid of?

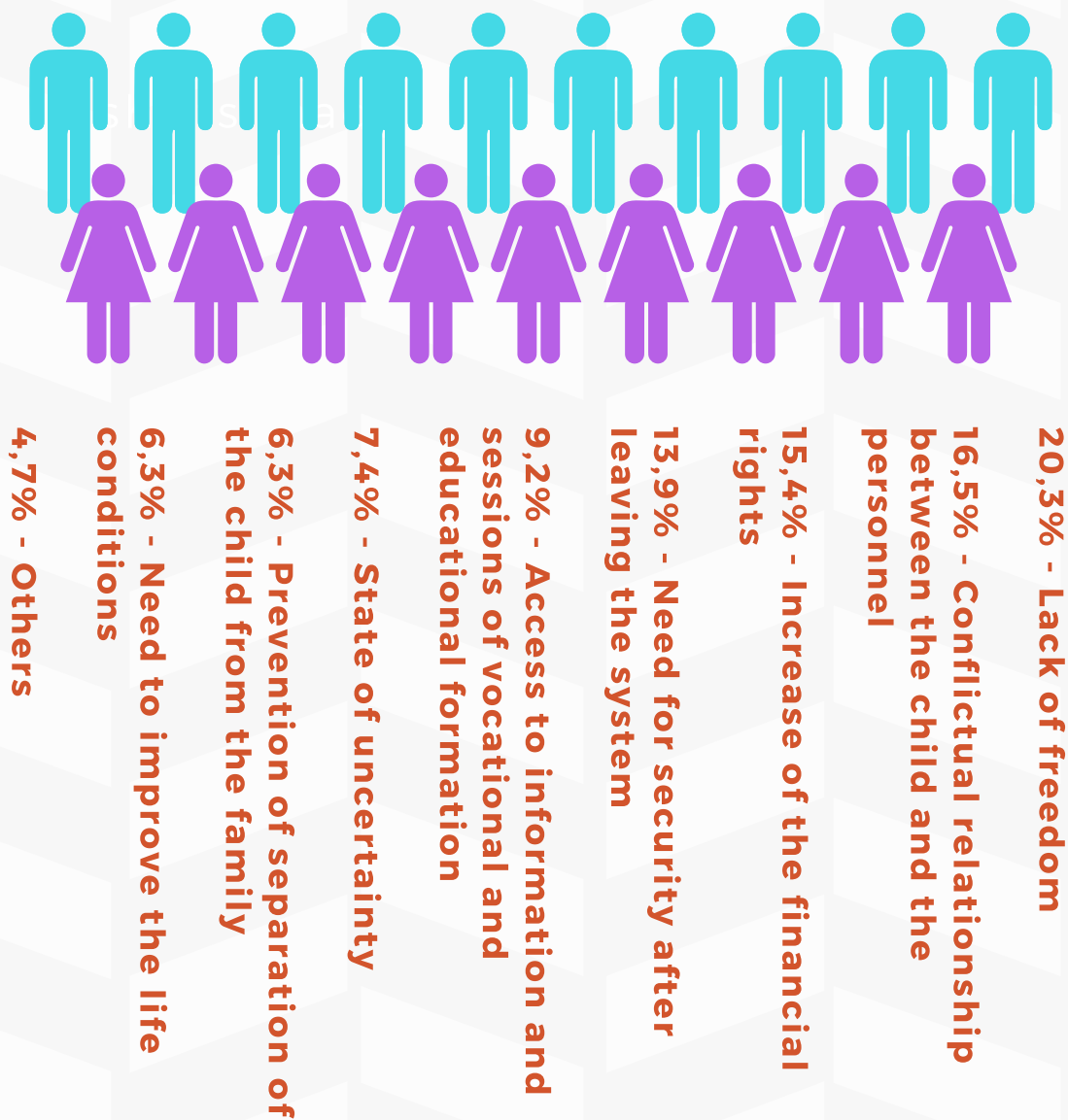


Upon a simple analysis of the percentage data, one can see that the respondents internalize a state of preoccupation or are concerned about their own projection of the future. The answer to the quiz question revealed another significant aspect from the point of view of the respondents as regards the need for a steady securing situation when the special protection measure is revoked: the lack of clearcut landmarks as to taking their own decisions and to undertaking actions of integration into the social and communitarian environment.

We admit and understand the institutionalized youngsters' lack of perspective with respect to the fears and anxieties they are confronted with, bearing in mind the resources the specialized personnel identified within the Romanian social reality, as regards the social and professional opportunities of insertion and their educational level and expectations.

Our sociological research also signaled a sometimes forced manner the social protection measure is revoked whereas such measure is in certain cases incongruent to the reality of the institutionalized young man's skills and abilities. The youngman is determined by the dynamics of the decisions that are taken, to handle a double hypostasis of abandonment and loss, whereas the overload of dealing with the origin social and communitarian environment requests will impact on his/her personal structure.

15. Observations, suggestions and propositions.



The graphic and the figures presented above lead us to state that the sheltering institution fails to comply with the articles 28, 29 and 30 of the Act 272/2004 regarding the child's rights protection and promotion, with their subsequent amendments and completions. The illegal privation of freedom is punished by the Criminal Code, article 205, with imprisonment.

How many of the youngmen who were deprived of freedom actually sued the personnel who infringed on their right to freedom? No one. More than 16,5 % confessed to have had a conflict with the personnel of the center. This conflict is generated by the infringement of the Act 272/2004 from the part of the personnel of the institution.

28 lei is the amount an institutionalized youngster gets for pocket money. How many of the young people actually come to receive this money, we don't know. What we learnt on the site is that one of the punishments that are enforced on these young people is the deprivation of such financial legal right, which means the article 129 of the Act 272/2004 and its subsequent amendments and completions are violated. The young people answered that this amount of 28 lei is not enough for a month time, therefore they asked us to do something to have this monetary value increased.

13,9% of the respondents to this question answered that they wished for a guarantee that they wouldn't end up in the street. They do not trust the origin family and they fear the worst.

It is natural that a state of uncertainty and a lack of trust in the future exist, many of the youngsters isolate themselves in the past and refuse to accept that one day they will have to leave the system. An original issue was discovered in the private centers, that implies the State's thinking of a solution to prevent the separation of the child from the family. There are no policies of support for the family to keep their child. The percentage of 6,3% of the young who wish for improved life conditions was met in the Centers in Tulcea, Suceava, Urziceni, Slobozia, Sector 5, Sector 4 and Galati.

CHAPTER VII - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over 20.000 kilometers were made across Romania in order to talk to the institutionalized young people and see how the system trains them for an independent life, and although it was a physically exhausting travel, it consumed me much more on an emotional level. Going back to the child protection institutions reminded me of my own childhood. Unfortunately grey-walled 1990's style centers still exist, with dozens of lonely children whom no one listens to. I met youngsters who were constantly asking me "Why can't you be our supervisor?", 17 year old teenagers saying that "This idea of living in captivity destroys one emotionally, psychically and mentally", children writing that they wished for "people who understand us". It was overwhelming because I have been trying to be there for them for years, to change something for the children and the teenagers in the system by activities of volunteering, camps, exchange of experiences or motivational conferences. At the end of seven years of activity, I understood that it was not enough, that those were only drops in the ocean and that I couldn't change the system on a national level that way.

While ten youngmen study next to me how to set objectives for the future and work to follow them, a few hundreds in the country dream of: "having peace, no fear of waking up with a punch in the face or of being beaten while still being asleep".

Hundreds of youngmen whom I met filled in the answers to the 14 questions of the quiz and wrote observations at the end that I could empathize with, and that hurt: "They should stop treating us as if we were some kind of animals" (15 year old), "The director of the center should stop beating us for the merest thing" (16 year old), "We should be offered a chance in life" (17 year old).

They wouldn't believe I was once like them, they wanted to know how my life was at the center, how many we were in a room, if the elders or the personnel had beaten me. They were trying to compare their life to mine, to see if there was any resemblance and if they could have a chance to part with the existence that had been swallowed by the system.

I often told them “Run! I ran, too. Neither could I cope with the permission letters! But do not abandon school, hold on to your objectives, transform the occasion of living in the system into an opportunity to learn as much as possible. Believe in yourselves! Living in the system is only temporary. You should prepare for your life.”

Some looked at me in hope, others were fascinated and untrustful at the same time. In Sinaia I was asked if I had made up my story and their faces looked sceptical when I was telling them how little different we were. I had to drop down everything and explain as intimately as possible how much we resembled. They believed me only when I told them that I had an emotional disability I was overall handling well, that I had a tendency to transform my partner into a mother and a father, that I got attached to a person very easily and I suffered exaggeratedly when that person disappeared. I left my contact data to every one who wanted to find me. I answered to every one (hundreds of messages) and I talk to a few dozens a week.

The conclusions I got to further to this research are strong recommendations for change:

FREEDOM

Institutionalized children and young people often feel prisoners of permission letters and at the mercy of the personnel's good will. They have no liberty to take spontaneous decisions on doing something for their own development or for relaxation. From personal hygiene, to managing goods or pocket money, these children have the right to receive information and be guided and involved into their own professional and educational formation. If one institution takes decisions during 26 years, in your name, as to what shampoo you should use, what movies you should see, what classes you should attend, how can you really be ready for an independent life? More freedom for institutionalized children means, among others, that if they want something, you should consult them. “Today I want to go volunteering. Let him/her go and talk to him/her: “What do you want to do? What does this organization or that young group you're going to, deal with?”. A type of parent to child open dialogue (the parent does not ask for a permission letter) is needed, and not personnel individual to young prisoner.

COMMUNITY

Emergency centers should not overpass a capacity of 20 children. There should be a selection there, the child should not live there for more than a few months until a custodian is found who take him/her and provide him/her with a decent life. Residential centers should accommodate those who were found in the street or who are originated in abusive families.

They play a highly significant part but, from my point of view and of the youngsters I interact with, there should family type houses, and not 4 or 5 floors old buildings where one feels like a prisoner. The youngsters need community, neighbours and friends to invite, to visit, colleagues to do their homeworks with, and not high fences.

If all the mammoth institutions are transformed into houses and if community is trained to interact with children and youngsters, and not to exclude them, then we can prevent the stigmata many children at the center feel nowadays, who are ashamed to admit where they live.

INFORMATION

The young are not aware of their rights and obligations, many live in fear of the moment when they will turn 18 and will have to leave. The personnel does not explain to them how important education is and that the system can accommodate them until they turn 26 only if they attend to a form of instruction; neither does the personnel prevent them that if they interrupted their education, they still have the right to live in the institution for two more years. At a national level there rules a panic of the future. I met cases of youngsters who felt revolted when I explained to them the provisions of the law and consequently they asked their supervisors why did they get threatened that they would end up in the street, why did colleagues of theirs get kicked out. Most of the young who are involved in this research knew nothing about the existence of such law that would protect them.

I do consider that the child and young protection legislation ought to be explained and formulated according to the understanding of its corresponding beneficiaries, since they are the first who need to understand how the system works. The trauma of the abandonment, living in the street, losing one's parents or extreme poverty are sufficient enough to destabilize a young person; therefore it is the duty of the system to reduce all the other fears (such as the "Exit", the fatidical moment of the coming of age), and not to feed them by maintaining the unknown.

AGGRESSIVITY

Violence between children and young people is one of the biggest problems I have met on a national level. They all need psychological counselling in order to identify where aggressivity comes from, and it is also as prioritary, I think, to stop and prevent the abuse from the very first incident. The children do not talk about the violence they are exposed to because the aggressors are not removed and they harass them even more if somehow they learn they have been exposed, told about to the personnel.

Mechanisms are needed to signal abuses that the young trust and make use of.

RELIABILITY

The young people do not trust the personnel, especially the psychologist. The very people whom they should turn to for the prevention of serious problems and for support, are deemed to be the enemies. "Supervisor!" is an insult institutionalized young people throw back to those who treat them in an authoritarian manner. The system ought to form its personnel to be close to the young or to mediate the personnel - children relationship when the site proves to present problems.

TRANSPARENCY

Centers in Romania still exist where access and contact with the young are not allowed, under the pretext that it is against the “child’s interest”. Closed gates and routine are against anyone’s interest. Specialists who want to be part of a mentoring program, volunteers, students in social assistance and psychology, as well as journalists (always in compliance with the child’s identity) should be encouraged to enter a residential center, they should not be restricted.

The harder it is to visit a center or to contact the young who are accommodated there, the higher the suspicions, and society will imagine one has something to hide. Open doors will open perspectives and will change the perception of the old image on the system.

URGENT NEEDS

- A mechanism of post-institutionalization monitoring ought to be implemented for a period of up to 3 years. Youngsters should be monitored, counseled and guided all along their being monitored. It is important that the break-up with the system is gradual, and not abrupt.
- Supply of a minimum guaranteed allowance (subsidy) for at least 2 years after the social protection system leave. This subsidy should be awarded to provide for a living - to pay the rent.
- To encourage the young to work even when they attend a day form of instruction. Nowadays it is forbidden by the legislation to work under the pretext that if one is employed, then one can provide for a living, therefore the protection measure is ceased. We cannot be as rigid as to act this way, it is against human dignity indeed to deprive the institutionalized young man of a chance to work. During this time only does he/she discover what independent life habits really mean.

“We must get rid of them” - it is under this slogan that integration into community of the post-institutionalized young people is done. If we want these young people to be fine after they leave the protection system, too, we must demonstrate we have support solutions for them. On paper statistics exhibit positive aspects regarding the integration of the young into society, however the reality is sad, and this is due to the fact that the system mocks them. Year after year, more than 2000 youngsters leave the protection system and have no idea where to go. Many of them did not answer: “I have been forced into a family when I turned 18, parents kept me for 2 months, then they kicked me out.”, “I have been integrated into a family and three weeks later they kicked me out because they were extremely poor.”

Examples go on and are very sad. What do we protect them for up to 18 if after this age we kick them out. Can't we be mature enough as to think of effective solutions for post-institutionalized life? I went to talk to various post-institutionalized young people in the non-governmental field, and I was pleasantly surprised by the way they enforced on the procedure of integration into society, by the personnel's formation and by the latter's relationship with the young. If such thing is possible in the privatized field, I am sure that it can be possible in the State field, too, otherwise I would recommend all the placement, residential or family type centers to be finished, and the attributions thereof to be transferred to the non-governmental area. Nevertheless, such transfer needs to be supported financially from the State's funds, and a monitoring agency ought to be created for social services supply.

- Subsidies of 1000 lei for families to prevent abandonment. Such subsidy should be awarded based on a voucher by which the family can pay the rent or, upon case, to provide for their daily food in order to raise the young.
- To create a group of initiative in every child protection institution where institutionalized youngsters can participate in order to represent themselves in the relationship with the sheltering institution.

- A mechanism of post-institutionalization monitoring ought to be implemented for a period of up to 3 years. Youngsters should be monitored, counseled and guided all along their being monitored. It is important that the break-up with the system is gradual, and not abrupt.
- Supply of a minimum guaranteed allowance (subsidy) for at least 2 years after the social protection system leave. This subsidy should be awarded to provide for a living - to pay the rent.
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QUIZ

Have you ever thought what might happen to you when you leave the center (the placement/residential center, social flat) when you turn 18?

"My name is Paul and up to the age of 18 I lived in fear: where will I live when I leave the center? ..., I haven't thought about it, therefore I had to suffer because I had no one to guide me, to support me, to offer me the help I would have needed to start a new life".

In order to avoid unpleasant situations like the one of Paul, we thought of making a quiz further to which we want to conceive a guide to consolidate independent life habits, that is meant to come to your help before and after you leave the social protection system.

- For starters we need a few identification data -

F1. County / Department

F2. Gender / Sex: 1. Male 2. Female

F3. Aged

F4. email: (optional)

F5. Phone number:(optional)

F6. Education: 1. Pupil - 5th to 8th grades ; 2. Pupil - 9th to 12th grades;

3. student 4. Other

NOTA BENE!: Scaling is done from 1 to 5 and it represents your degree of satisfaction -

1 - not at all, 2 - quite a little, 3 - enough, 4 - a lot, 5 - very much.

Q1. How happy are you with the way you are treated by the personnel of the placement / residential center or of the social home you live in?

1 2 3 4 5

(Tick the figure that best describes your situation)

Q2. Do you believe that the personnel in the center thinks about your future?

1 2 3 4 5

(Tick the figure that best describes your situation)

Q3. Have you been informed about the independent life habits (e.g. how to handle money, sparetime, food on a daily basis, have your own space, how to look for a job, how to address public/private authorities, how to deal with your own identity etc.)?

1 2 3 4 5

(Tick the figure that best describes your situation)

Q4. Are you concerned about what is going to happen with you when you leave the placement center, the residential or social flat you live in at present?

1 2 3 4 5

(Tick the figure that best describes your situation)

Q5. Do you feel that you are ready to deal with the responsibility of a life on your own?

1 2 3 4 5

(Tick the figure that best describes your situation)

Q6. Do you know if there is any possibility for you to extend your stay with the placement center / residential or social flat, in virtue of the art. 55, section 3 of the Act 272/2004 regarding the child rights protection and promotion?

1 2 3 4 5

(Tick the figure that best describes your situation)

NOTA BENE!: Scaling is done from 1 to 5, and it represents your degree of satisfaction -

1 - never, 2 - maybe once, 3 - sometimes, 4 - often, 5 - every time.

Q7. Has there been any situation where you were asked by the employees of the center or of the board of directors (supervisor, social assistant, psychologist, director of the center) about the decisions that were to be taken in your name?

1 2 3 4 5

(Tick the figure that best describes your situation)

Q8. Is there at least one person in your life that supports or helps you in the event of your leaving the placement center / social or residential flat?

1 2 3 4 5

(Tick the figure that best describes your situation)

Q9. What is your opinion about the circumstances you live in?

Q10. What do you know about the Act 272 / 2004?

Q11. What are you going to do when you leave the center?

Q12. What you like the child protection system to do for you?

Q13. Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years?

Q14. What do you fear the most?

Observations, suggestions and propositions:

Thank you for your kindness and for your time!

Remark: The information and the answers you provided in this quiz will remain highly confidential!

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