

Aftercare Outreach Program - Intervention for Youth Leaving Care in India

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Introduction

As the world continues to deal with the post-COVID-19 pandemic challenges, it has impacted not only health and socio-economic conditions but also pushed back in time the progress of past years on the overall well-being across vulnerable populations, primarily impacting children's well-being (Witt et al., 2020). It has exacerbated the existing challenges and pushed the vulnerable young population of Care Leavers globally and in India into facing emerging socio-economic complexities and increased need for psycho-social support due to extreme marginalization.

In India, according to the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 institutional care should be seen as a “*last resort*”; still, children living in Childcare Institutions (CCIs) are in big numbers due to the absence of robust community-based or other family-based care models (like foster care, kinship care, low adoption rates, and other supportive schemes) (Beyond 18, 2019). Aftercare for youth coming out of CCIs is mandated but guidelines and policies are yet to be formed, making it a neglected area of attention. The Annual Report 2020-2021 brought out by the Ministry of Women and Child (MWCD) states

the number of CCIs and children without parental care in them but does not estimate the number of Care Leavers exiting CCIs and entering aftercare, thus, leaving them behind in budget planning (Esponda, L. A., 2015; Modi et al., 2016; Thomas, A. A. 2022). Lack of data on youth in aftercare provisions, lack of tracking mechanisms to track Care Leavers' progress and pathways, lack of systematic research on services and their efficacy, and lack of any monitoring and evaluation system are other issues quite prevalent in India.

Care Leavers are young people who have lived in Alternative Care¹ as children and exited from these facilities post-attaining adulthood, usually 18 years. Having experienced significant trauma during childhood and growing up in a controlled, regimented environment of a Child Care Institution (CCI), there is a possibility that their childhood traumas may not be addressed adequately due to limited resources or inadequate understanding of the urgency of the same. Lack of proper exposure to communities and imparting of training in social skills, along with inconsistent education, lack of vocational training and employability skills, rendered them unprepared

¹ *Alternative Care- It is an umbrella term used for all children living out of home care or without parental support.*

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for jobs, and they thus lacked financial stability (Modi et al., 2022). All these stacked the deck against their successful transition from living in a protective childcare setting to living an independent life. The transition process poses challenges to the Care Leavers due to an absence of a pivotal, caring family-like environment, a lack of proper community integration, inconsistent education, and an adequate rehabilitation plan for their successful transition (Beyond 18, 2019). This ends up, leaving them struggling with low self-esteem issues, retraumatization at the separation from the care home, lack of essential life skills, and limited career opportunities, leaving them unprepared for the transition to adulthood and independence.

COVID-19 Impact on Care Leavers in India

Across the world, Care Leavers have been impacted by the pandemic, as stated by several research studies. The pandemic had a detrimental impact on their emotional well-being as the response of the government was found to be inadequate in mitigating the impact of the pandemic, with a need for much clearer communication, prompt decision-making, and targeted specialist mental health services (Kelly et al., 2021). There are also reports about their vulnerability to social isolation across the globe due to restricted social networks (Jones, 2019; Kelly et al., 2016; Mendes & Rogers, 2020). Limited access to digital technology, lack of career guidance, and access to education and job opportunities (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2020), alongside financial insecurity, were among the other challenges faced by Care Leavers (Lotan et al., 2020).

Care Leavers transitioning out of the care system in India have always been the forgotten lot and considered nobody's responsibility (Beyond 18, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded

their challenges, underlining their adverse situation (Modi et al., 2022). They are at an ever-increasing risk of poorer outcomes as young adults across various areas, including higher education, health, and employment (Beyond 18, 2019; Courtney et al., 2016; Voice, 2017). Care Leavers' successful transition became difficult and worrisome during the pandemic owing to a lack of outside facilities and resources. Children transitioning from CCIs faced difficulties in sustaining their livelihood due to a lack of aftercare support and guidance. They experience increased risks of stress, isolation, trauma, discontinuation or ruptured education and learning opportunities, limited livelihoods and career opportunities, and loss of employment; for those who could find a job with difficulty, reduced income, housing challenges, and food insecurity. (Modi et al., 2021). Many Care Leavers were forced to leave rented accommodation as they suffered financial losses and faced challenges in fulfilling their basic day-to-day needs. The COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions led to isolation from their peers, and lack of devices and internet connectivity restricted their possibility to stay connected remotely - this may have aggravated their stress levels and anxiety impacting their access to education and training. An international research study aimed to assess the educational successes among youth transitioning out of care states that in the long run, poor academic performance leads to adverse long-term outcomes, including unemployment or low wages, making it difficult for young people to earn a decent livelihood (Borner, 2017). Most of the existing literature available in India on the impact of the pandemic on the lives of Care Leavers have reported similar concerns about perceived and ongoing increased risk due to the pandemic, informal networks, and reduced contact with formal support services (Jindal et al., 2021). During these unprecedented times, several Care Leavers networks, including CLAN (Care Leavers Association and Network), were the only safe space and hope for them to connect during such

tough times as it helped them get out of isolation, get family-like support, information about various job opportunities, and accommodation facilities. In contrast, lack of data connectivity still restricted many from participating in these networks.

Udayan Care's Aftercare Outreach Program

Udayan Care, a non-profit NGO in India, in keeping with its vision of *“regenerating the rhythm of life of the disadvantaged children,”* has developed small group homes called Udayan Ghars (hereinafter referred to as ‘homes’) based on a unique L.I.F.E. model (Living in Family Environment), which caters to care and protection of ‘children without parental care’ (maximum of 12 children per home as a unit; there are some double-unit homes too). Children are positioned in these gender-segregated homes through orders from the statutory body, i.e., the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. Udayan Care also carries out an aftercare program which bridges the gap for its Care Leavers from the ages 18 to 21, sometimes up to 23, and provides continued rehabilitative services combined with the group, community, or scattered housing along with empowering these young adults to complete their education, vocational training, become job-ready, gain financial literacy and training in independent living skills.

Challenges and experiences of Care Leavers, and more so in COVID-19 times, encouraged Udayan Care to start an intervention for providing extended support to Care Leavers from other CCIs too, who may not have access to support and are expected to survive on their own upon reaching adulthood. Based on concerns, evidence, and years of experience as practitioners, Udayan Care started a program, the Aftercare Outreach Program (AOP), to support financially as well

as by close hand-holding and mentoring support for educational and vocational skills attainment, housing and basic needs, employability skills, leading to gainful employment. Launched in 2020, in Delhi and Vadodara, with a mission to contribute to the well-being of the Care Leavers by nurturing them, providing them with hope, confidence, and access to varied opportunities for their holistic development and evolution as responsible citizens of India, it has soon expanded its interventions in four more cities including Hyderabad, Ujjain, Indore, and Bhopal. It also aims to develop a demonstrable model of aftercare to advocate for the rights and entitlements of the Care Leavers to improve the aftercare ecosystem in India.

This project is based on the theoretical framework titled the ‘Sphere of aftercare’ (Figure 1), based on a research study on Aftercare titled, ‘Beyond 18: Leaving Child Care – A Study of Aftercare Practices’ carried out by Udayan Care, in collaboration, first with Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) in Delhi in 2017, and later expanding to four more cities, with UNICEF and Tata Trusts in 2018–19; which outlines eight domains of support required by Care Leavers during and after

Figure 1. Sphere of Aftercare



Source: Beyond 18, 2019

transition, namely; housing, emotional wellbeing, physical health, social support and interpersonal skills, independent living skills, education and vocational skills, identity and legal awareness, and financial independence and careers. These domains are required and must be supported as per the individual needs and aspirations of the Care Leavers to ensure successful reintegration into the community. This sphere aims to be the guiding principle for assessing Care Leavers' needs, developing aftercare programmes, and informing the ecosystem from which policy is to be developed (Beyond 18, 2019).

The AOP project, using this framework, provides rehabilitative and transitional support to Care Leavers reaching adulthood from different governmental and non-governmental CCI, availing financial support for their vocational training/education and skills, accommodation, and other needs, training and development in life skills and employability skills. It organises internships and placements, ensures individual mentoring support by inducting sensitised individuals from different walks of life to mentor these youth closely, and facilitates opportunities to connect with peer groups through developing and supporting Care Leavers networks. This program offers non-institutional support, with a clear objective to make the selected Care Leavers confident, self-reliant, and job-ready by providing them, additionally, with psycho-social counselling support, thereby reducing the risks of the young adults facing anxiety and depression caused by unemployment, deprivation, homelessness, and other mental health issues, which are aggravated more due to the current pandemic. Initially, a one-year programme, as Udayan Care has always believed in a continuum of care approach, this program allows its Care Leavers to come back to the program for any further guidance and support, even after they have migrated from the program. AOP intervention has also driven these youth to join the Care Leavers Association and Network

Table 1: Care Leavers Representation across 6 Districts of India under Aftercare Outreach Program (AOP)

Cities	1st Phase	2nd Phase
New Delhi	42	30
Vadodara	12	13
Hyderabad	NA	39
Indore	NA	4
Bhopal	NA	9
Ujjain	NA	7

Source: Data collected by author

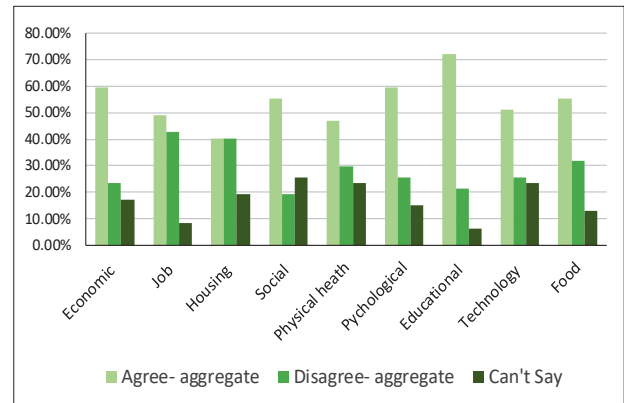
(CLAN) and other Care Leavers networks, a group of Care Leavers, by the Care Leavers, for the Care Leavers, where they support and guide each other. This serves as a family and community where they support each other and emerge as champions for their causes.

The first phase was initiated in September 2020; it was rolled out in the National Capital Territory of Delhi and Vadodara, in the state of Gujarat, where a total of 42 youth from different CCIs in Delhi and 12 youth from CCIs, and alums of sponsorship support (Palak Mata Pita scheme) in Gujarat were selected through a needs assessment framework, designed by Udayan Care, followed by an aptitude check by a professional agency—keeping the “*Sphere of Aftercare*” framework as a benchmark, this program developed and implemented an individual aftercare plan based on their individual needs and capacities, with a primary focus on life skills, education, vocational training and placements. Thus, ensuring their social reintegration and mainstreaming towards independent living. Weekly training was provided to these Care Leavers based on extensively prepared workshop modules covering the aspects of interview skills, career opportunities, CV writing, life skills, legal and financial literacy, resilience, emotional well-being, and job readiness. Skillful mentors were identified and matched with the youth, and their interactions were tracked and supported wherever needed.

COVID-19 Impact on Care Leavers before Enrolling in AOP Project

For this study, data was collected from 47 Care Leavers enrolled in the AOP project in the first phase from Delhi and Vadodara. Voices of Care Leavers regarding their experiences and critical challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic before joining the AOP project were captured. Amongst the 47 Care Leavers, most (81%) of them felt that they had insufficient knowledge about the overall pandemic situation and its exposure, which made them more terrified. The remaining 19% of the Care Leavers believed that the newspapers, news and other social media platforms created more confusion and panic about the pandemic. Most of them felt that this overall situation had impacted their mental health to a great extent, and many of the Care Leavers (78%) were not able to meet their family members, relatives, and friends. This made them feel lonely, lost, and disconnected at their residence. They faced various challenges during the pandemic under different “*Sphere of Aftercare*” domains. Figure 2 depicts the overall challenges faced

Figure 2. Challenges faced by Care Leavers amidst the Pandemic

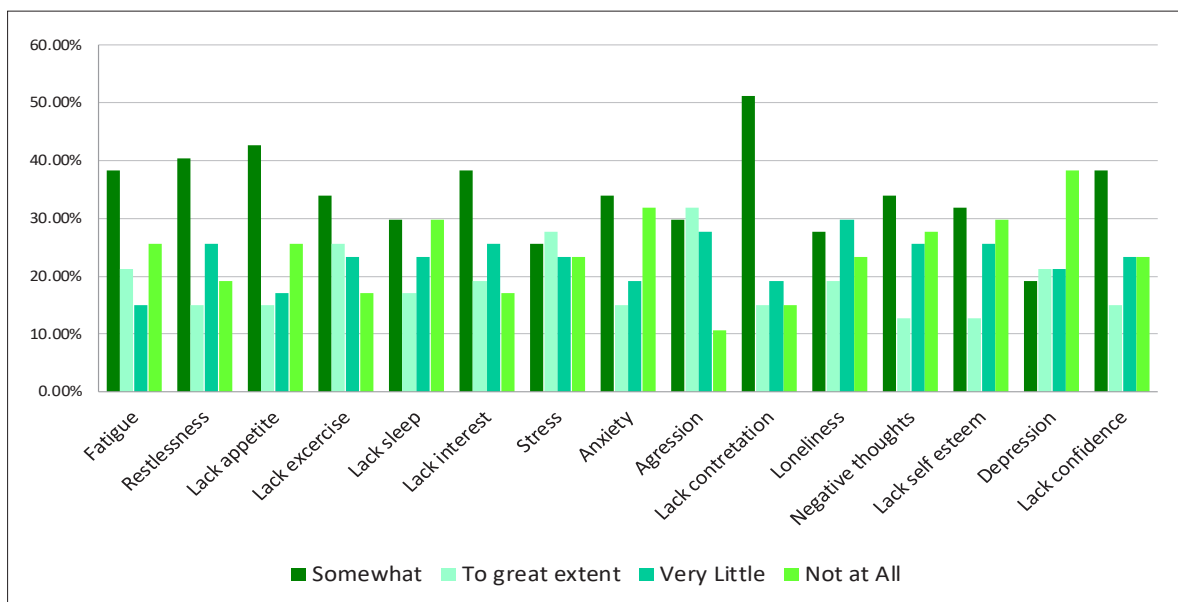


Source: Data collected by author

by Care Leavers during these times, which included lack of availability of food (53%), financial crises (60%), lack of access to education (72%), challenges at social and interpersonal levels (55%) as they were lonely, without any support and lack of bonding among others.

Apart from other domains, the pandemic also impacted the mental health of Care Leavers, as depicted in Figure 3, which represents the mental health patterns of the Care Leavers during the pandemic outbreak. The maximum shifts were

Figure 3. Changes in Mental Health patterns among Care Leavers amidst the Pandemic



Source: Data collected by author

observed with respect to lack of appetite, interest, confidence, concentration, sleep, increased anxiety, fatigue, low self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, and more negative thoughts.

Mentioned below are some of the case studies of Care Leavers depicting the impact of COVID-19 on their lives of Care Leavers. (*Names of the care leavers have been changed to protect the identity of individuals*)

Case Study- I

- Care Leaver *Ajay*, was then 19 years old and still living in a children’s home in Delhi. He had received permission to be relieved from there but could not be sent out due to the lockdown. The stress of uncertainty had increased his tendency to indulge in self-harm.

Impact:

Most young people leaving CCIs on turning 18 are not prepared to leave care. During the lockdown, most got stuck in their CCIs and their rehabilitation plans, if made, could not be implemented. Stocking advanced essential commodities was not easy for them and during the lockdown, they faced challenges in purchasing essential food items.

Case Study- II

- Care Leaver *Raju*, had been laid off from his hotel job and thereafter he has developed psychosis and became aggressive and abusive and is now admitted to a mental health hospital, not knowing when he will be out of this situation.

Impact:

Most of the Care Leavers faced disrupted education and those who had jobs, faced loss of jobs leading to reduced income, stress, housing challenges, and food insecurity. Prevention of COVID-19 called for maintaining social distancing leading to isolation and impacting social relationships and support.

Case Study- III

- Four youth, huddled together, in a small room, with no job, are constantly worried about food, and accommodation with the overarching fear of being infected, have no quarantine space available and no future that they can see for themselves. They do not have enough legal documents that can aid their access to rations or any other support.

Impact:

Sporadic support from the state government was provided for dry ration etc., and lack of identity documents prevented many of them from accessing these benefits as they lacked financial security.

Case Study- IV

- *Payal*, a 20-year-old female Care Leaver, was in a full-time job and well on her pathway to independent living. However, after a few weeks of the lockdown, she lost her job and received a warning from her landlord to pay her rent in a week’s time failing which she will be homeless. She doesn’t know who to approach for help.

Impact:

Many Care Leavers lost their accommodation, and faced difficulty paying their rent leading them to search for emergency support. Living all by themselves often led to isolation from their peers, and lack of devices and internet connectivity restricted their possibility to stay connected remotely, exacerbating their anxiety and stress levels.

Support received from AOP Intervention

The AOP intervention guided and supported these Care Leavers to independence and self-reliance. Most of them (90%) believed that this program provided them with support in several

domains of aftercare and helped them transition from their previous child care institution during the difficult pandemic times. At least 90% of the Care Leavers believed that they received support in several domains from AOP intervention; amongst these, 30% of the Care Leavers were totally reliant on this programme, while others were partially dependent. Mentioned below are a few excerpts termed as the voices of Care Leavers who received AOP intervention.

“Once I transitioned out of my CCI, my grandmother got me married as she was not able to bear my expenses due to which I had to quit my studies. I was shattered as I had my career goals and wanted to continue with my studies. Udayan Care's Aftercare Outreach Program provided me with counselling services, workshops on career development along with aiding me with completing my studies. I am also grateful to my AOP mentor who played a vital role in guiding me and making me self-reliant.” - A youth from Vadodara

“I used to feel very lonely, had no social support, and didn't know whom to turn to for support, and with whom to share my problems. I didn't have any friends and used to spend most of the time alone. Many times I used to sit alone thinking how my life would be if I had a family. AOP helped me connect with the CLAN group, where I felt a sense of belongingness and felt like a family. It helped me develop my social skills and one of the members connected me to an employer and I finally got my job.” - A youth from Delhi

“I lost my job, there was no money to purchase stationery for college. I suffered mentally as I was always stressed thinking about the future. My mobile stopped working during the pandemic, there was difficulty in getting it recharged for online classes as there was a

financial crisis. I also faced difficulty paying the room rent. Udayan Care intervened via AOP, and was provided with rent allowance along with the data recharge. They also got me enrolled in a vocational training course of my choice from a reputed International Organisation (which wasn't allowed in my previous care home), their workshops helped me develop my C.V. and now I feel confident and independent, as I am able to get hold of a reputed job, while simultaneously continuing my graduation” - A youth from Hyderabad

Encouraged by the results of phase I, where 20 youth finished their courses, 15 were employed, and five received the second year of financial support. All the youth from phase I are receiving counselling, mentoring support and career guidance even after completion of the tenure. The second phase of this program began in August 2021, with more Care Leavers from both states along with broadening the scope to other states of India as well, including Telangana (Hyderabad), and Madhya Pradesh (Ujjain, Bhopal, and Indore). A total of 30 youth from Delhi, 13 from Vadodara, 39 from Hyderabad, and 20 from Madhya Pradesh are a part of the 2nd phase, for this AOP project. This intervention involved identifying and selecting the youth from various CCIs across the respective cities, through a need assessment of the applicants via a 3-fold process; followed by their assessments and support for vocational training including financial, educational and housing support. The entire process now involves their capacity building through weekly work-life readiness virtual workshops, enrolling them into their respective courses and vocational training; and followed by placing them in internships and jobs. Almost all the youth from phase II have been enrolled in vocational courses, and most of them have been assigned mentors. Capacity building through group counselling

sessions, workshops, and enhancement of their employability skills is under process. Few of the youth have also started with part-time jobs along with their courses.

This program serves as a good practice model and also provides quarterly follow-ups even after the Care Leavers' support period is over which means that they are employed now. The Care Leavers are further embraced for any additional guidance required by means of support, mentoring, or need-based counselling services, career mapping, career progression guidance and through engaging them for peer mentorship for the next batch. Collaboration has been the key element in the success of this intervention where networking and partnerships with funders have helped us to make this theoretical framework a ground reality. CCIs have provided data and helped us connect with youths in need of this support; institutions have been a great support in providing technical courses at subsidised rates to our youths; and lastly, collaborations with various employers to place these youths at relevant jobs also helped in fulfilling the objectives of AOP.

Conclusion

It will take substantial time to recover from the pandemic, but together, we need to focus on rebuilding the social and economic frameworks keeping children and youth at the centre. Interventions for Care Leavers are required both at immediate levels to address the short-term challenges, as well as at long-term levels to facilitate their journey forward by guiding them towards becoming self-reliant and addressing their mental health concerns. The transition from being in a care home as a dependent to being independent after exiting the CCI, with little or no support from the community, as soon as attaining 18 years of age is a burdensome process (Beyond 18, 2019). Support and intervention provided

through the Aftercare Outreach Program have clearly indicated that a supported and properly planned transition can transform the lives of Care Leavers and make them self-reliant, by providing them with relevant opportunities towards living independently.

Aftercare support is crucial to ensure that the Care Leavers receive adequate support during and after transition, and their vulnerabilities are addressed to enable them to become resilient and independent. There is a need to invest in Care Leavers and support them in the best possible way. Even during times of crisis, there are opportunities to learn about the scope of work with positivity. There is a need to understand the gaps as perceived by them, thus, setting forth a set of recommendations to mitigate their risks.

Globally, many practitioners and researchers have advocated for the government to increase investment in areas such as housing facilities, infrastructure, career opportunities, and mental health services to improve the condition of Care Leavers transitioning out of care. The Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC) decided to devote its 2020 Day of General Discussion (DGD) to the issue of children in alternative care, which was scheduled to take place on 18 September 2020. Care Leavers stated that it was challenging to be on their own without financial, emotional or psychological support, and the challenges they faced searching for jobs and continuing their education (Parkes, 2021). The focus on dealing with immediate and short-term crises due to the pandemic is the need of the hour, as there are many young adults who are anxious about basic provisions, living in inappropriate accommodation, and struggling due to the absence of mental health support. There is an urgent need to prioritize care for Care Leavers' mental health provisions along with increasing opportunities for other services to further build their resilience

to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bukuluki et al., 2021). The AOP intervention clearly indicates that there is an urgent need for proper pathway planning, review, and thereby progression to enable Care Leavers, and provide them with tailored support so that their

employment, educational, relational, emotional, and financial needs are met. A uniform national extended care standard, guidelines, and programs are arguably required more than ever in order to protect the rights and well-being of Care Leavers during COVID-19, and beyond.

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