

The Intersection of Leaving Care and Homelessness: A Literature Overview in a Nordic Welfare State Context

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Abstract

Care leavers are significantly overrepresented among young homeless people, a phenomenon that can be found internationally as well as within the Nordic countries. However, we argue that leaving care and homelessness are two distinct research fields, despite overlapping target groups and challenges. While both fields are aware of the intersection of leaving care and homelessness, the issue is perceived from different perspectives. In this article, we provide an overview of the literature on homelessness and the risk of homelessness among care leavers in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) to highlight the literature gap at the intersection of leaving care and homelessness research. We particularly emphasise the transition from leaving care to an independent adult life. We reviewed the literature comprising extant research studies and grey literature in the native languages of all five aforementioned Nordic countries, as well as the literature in English, with an emphasis on the Nordic context. The objective is to present a synthesis of the Nordic literature from these perspectives while also acknowledging some differences between the countries. Our analysis indicates that homelessness is addressed in the leaving-care literature, and vice versa, from the perspectives of quantification, understanding the risk for homelessness among care leavers, and challenges in transitions between child and adult welfare services. However, the literature at the intersection is overall very scattered, and more comprehensive and nuanced analysis is needed.

Keywords

Leaving care, foster care, homelessness, transition, Nordic welfare states

Introduction

In this article, we examine the current state of understanding at the intersection of leaving care and homelessness research in the Nordic welfare states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). Leaving care and homelessness are central and current issues from societal and political perspectives, particularly in the Nordic welfare states. The recent implementation of national homelessness strategies in Denmark, Finland and Norway (Benjaminsen, 2023; Halseth et al., 2022; Juhila et al., 2022), and new developments in child protection legislation in these same three nations (Barnets Lov, 2024; Barnevernsloven, 2021; Lastensuojelulaki, 2023) have drawn attention to both fields. The need for these strategies and legislation accentuates an important paradox within the Nordic welfare states regarding the challenges of both homelessness and vulnerable children and youths across the Nordic countries, despite well-developed social democratic welfare systems.

The Nordic countries vary in approaches and research dissemination regarding the intersection of leaving care and homelessness. This article aims to provide an overview in order to synthesise the knowledge accumulated across the Nordic welfare states. Our analysis encompasses literature that addresses both leaving care and homelessness, whether focussing on the intersection of the two research fields or merely touching upon each other. We included English-language research studies contextualised within the Nordic countries, as well as so-called grey literature published in the Nordic languages. This kind of comprehensive overview of two significant and interrelated, yet distinct, research fields represent a unique perspective within the current landscape of the Nordic welfare states. Based on a Nordic context, our research question is twofold: (1) How is homelessness addressed in the leaving-care literature, and (2) how is leaving care represented in the homelessness literature?

First, as an introduction to the Nordic overview, we provide a brief summary of the international literature at the intersection of leaving care and homelessness. Second, we outline our methodological approach for conducting the literature review. Third, we present the results of the overview of literature on the five Nordic countries, focussing on the fields of leaving care and homelessness. Finally, we draw conclusions based on our findings and discuss the potential for a life-course perspective to serve as common ground between the two research fields.

An International Perspective at the Intersection of Leaving Care and Homelessness

The intersection of leaving care and homelessness has been the subject of some research attention at an international level. In particular, the Anglo-Saxon literature has a long tradition of examining the risk of homelessness among young people leaving care (Doucet et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2020; Fowler et al., 2017; Hernandez et al., 2023; Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2020).

Several quantitative studies have demonstrated that young people with care backgrounds are overrepresented among young homeless people (Bender et al., 2015; Chikwava et al., 2022; Whalen & Carter, 2015), including within the Nordic countries (Allen et al., 2020; Benjaminsen et al., 2020b; Paulsen et al., 2023). Compared with peers in the same age group, care leavers often experience a range of challenges, such as low educational achievements, unemployment, mental health issues, criminal behaviour and drug use (Stein & Dumaret, 2011; Vinnerljung & Ribe, 2001). To sum up, care leavers represent a particularly vulnerable group, including when compared with young homeless people in general (Dworsky et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the literature sheds light on so-called precarious housing conditions, in which young people may not be classified as rough sleepers, but their housing situation is precarious, resulting in couch surfing or living in shelters, thereby suffering from “homelessness without rooflessness” (McLoughlin, 2013). Thus, in international and Nordic homelessness literature, homelessness is defined in broad terms, in which people “do not have their own dwelling or room (owned or rented), but use temporary facilities, stay temporarily and without a contract with family, friends or acquaintances. People are also homeless if they have no place to stay the following night” (Benjaminsen et al., 2020a, p. 153).

Qualitative studies across various countries have found that unstable out-of-home care, marked by uncertain family ties, makes it difficult for young people leaving care to establish stable homes in adulthood (Bender et al., 2015; Natalier & Johnson, 2015). They may hold idealised notions of what a “home” is and, thus, struggle to create one for themselves, given that they never have experienced it (Natalier & Johnson, 2015; Samuels, 2009). Therefore, young people who have experienced numerous changes in their upbringing and interrupted placements are at greater risk of homelessness than those who have been in permanent care. Moreover, the literature suggests that stable relationships with adults can serve as a protective factor against homelessness (Natalier & Johnson, 2015).

The literature emphasises structural factors that affect the risk of homelessness among care leavers, such as child welfare services’ poor transition planning (Crane et al., 2014; Paulsen et al., 2020), lack of suitable housing options and lack of job opportunities to secure economic stability that enables young people to pay housing rent (Whalen & Carter, 2015). Furthermore, studies have found challenges in collaborations and commissioning between administrative systems such as child welfare services, adult welfare services and housing administrations, thereby affecting young people’s outcomes (Benjaminsen & Grønfeldt, 2022). When young people are offered a place to live, these places are often short-term and do not take a holistic approach to the fragile context of the individual young person’s life (Paulsen et al., 2020).

Data and Methods

In terms of methodology, we leaned on the typology of reviews outlined by Grant and Booth (2009) to determine the most appropriate approach for gathering and selecting the literature that informs our analysis. In this typology, an *overview* is defined as a “summary of the literature that attempts to survey the literature and describe its characteristics” (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 94). Within this scope, an overview is often narrative and employs various analytical approaches.

For this article, we conducted an overview of the transition from leaving care to an independent adult life when it intersects with homelessness in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Data collection took place in 2024, with a variety of strategies utilised to identify relevant literature, including searches in literature databases within each country, as well as in international databases, using specific search words in different combinations (Table 1). Differences in the number of search words are explained by differences in the use of language, grammar and context in the various Nordic countries. For example, the Finnish language creates compound words and bends them in such a way that many search words begin the same way; therefore, the cutting mechanism * does not require many variations for the words. Simultaneously, the research group conducted a comprehensive search of the international literature on the same topic worldwide for another analysis. In this search, we found only one article written in English that focussed on the Nordic context. This article also was found in the Nordic language search and is included in our data.

The search was supplemented with chain searches in which reference lists of the found articles were screened, as well as searches within state websites and websites from relevant civil society actors within the field. The literature included in the search was published between 2000 and 2024.

To gain an overview for comparing two distinct research fields across five Nordic welfare contexts, it was important to reach a broad understanding of the literature. This called for an exploratory approach to the literature search, rather than a systematic one. Also, when studying literature in five different languages, and focussing on five different societal contexts, search phrases and, partly, search strategies require some country-specific variations.

To fully understand the subject’s complexity, it was necessary to examine the topic via different information sources. This overview contains academic peer-reviewed articles, as well as grey literature, such as research reports and governmental documents. The variation in document types also reflects the diversity in how relevant information is disseminated, as well as which actors are producing relevant knowledge in each country. Notably, in the Icelandic context, we encountered a scarcity of relevant literature, which was not due to the issue’s irrelevance in Iceland, but rather because the intersection remains relatively underexamined in this country. In the process of examining the intersection of leaving care and homelessness research, we discovered that it unfolded differently depending on the research field from which the knowledge originated. To ensure inclusion of relevant literature in our analytical synthesis from the field of leaving care, as well as the field of homelessness in all five countries, a native-speaking researcher with relevant expertise assessed the quality and relevance of the literature prior to its inclusion or exclusion.

While our chosen method for conducting the review was well suited to this specific context in many ways, it, like any other method, also has some weaknesses. The scarcity

Table 1. Search Words and Search Engines Used in Each Country

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
<p>Search words on leaving care (all are variations of the terms <i>leaving care, child welfare, care, foster care, residential care, foster family</i> or other country-specific related terms)</p>	<p>Børnesystem Anbragt* Anbringelse* Tvangsferm* Familiepleje* Plejefamili* Tvangsanbr* Plejeb* Slægtsanbr* Institutionsanbr*</p>	<p>Jälkihuol* Lastensuojelu* Sijaishuol* Lastenko* Sijaisperhe*</p>	<p>Uppkomid fösturbarð Uppkomin fösturborð Reyndla af föstri Föstur Fösturbarð Fösturheimili Fösturjölskylda Vistheimili Vistun utan heimilis Barnavernd</p>	<p>Barnevern* Fosterhjem* Barneverninstitusjon* Barneverninstitusjon*</p>	<p>Fosterbarn* Barn placerade utanför hemmet Familjehem* Att lämna Samhällsvården Familjehemsplacerad* HVB-hem HVB Statens instituttstyrelse Institutionsplacering Placerad* Samhällsvård Dygnsvård Barnvård Barn- och ungdomsvård Stödboende</p>
<p>Search words on homelessness (all are variations of the terms <i>homeless, homelessness, Housing First, homeless shelter</i> or other country-specific related terms)</p>	<p>Hjemløst* Boligløs Hjemlig* Housing first ICM Intensive Case Management</p>	<p>Asunnot* Koditto* Kodito* Piiloasunnott* Ensisuo)*</p>	<p>Heimilislaus Heimilisleysingi Heimilisleysi Utangarðsmenn Utangarðsfólk Utigangsmáður Athvarfslaus Vegalau Hraakhólar</p>	<p>Hjemløst* Bostedsløs* Bolig* Sofasurf* Ustabil bosituasjon</p>	<p>Hemlös* Bostadslös* Bostad först Risk för hemlöshet</p>
<p>Search engine</p>	<p>Google Scholar Scopus</p>	<p>Google Scholar Finna</p>	<p>Letir Gegnir</p>	<p>Google Scholar Idunn</p>	<p>Google Scholar Swepub</p>

of existing literature may lead to some perspectives and results appearing overemphasised in the analysis, with relevant perspectives remaining hidden. The literature in only Nordic languages may have a bias towards more practice-oriented analysis, but synthesising the existing knowledge and understanding its limits are important in directing future research.

In our analytical process, we initially extracted all perspectives related to homelessness from the literature focussing on leaving care, and vice versa. Subsequently, we grouped these perspectives based on their content. The objective was to create a synthesis of state-of-the-art knowledge within the Nordic countries regarding these perspectives. Given the literature's scarcity and scattered nature, a comparative analysis focussing on the differences between the countries was not feasible. Nevertheless, we still provided some general observations regarding the differences.

Results

The following sections introduce our overview's results. Table 2 provides a synthesis of the main results or knowledge about homelessness presented in the Nordic research on leaving care with the main knowledge about associations with leaving care presented in the homelessness literature. A detailed examination of these points is presented in subsequent sections.

Table 2. Summary of Results

Content	Perspective: Leaving care literature	Perspective: Homelessness literature
Quantification	Research mainly qualitative, i.e., few quantitative studies. Observed lack of information in the administrative registers on current housing of young people in aftercare. Homelessness often mentioned as a risk for care leavers.	Mostly quantitative studies, i.e., little qualitative research. Single prevalence rates from Finland, Iceland and Denmark. While homelessness in Finland has been declining, it has not among the homeless with a history of care.
Understanding the risks	Not ready for adult life when leaving care. Lack of flexibility in support. Lack of practical knowledge on how to lead an independent life. Lack of emotional support. Lack of stable relationships with adults as protective factor. Expressed concerns about future housing.	Challenging transitions in and out of homelessness. Heightened risk of homelessness being long-term. Care leavers with the most complex situations (addiction, psychiatric illness) are at particular risk for homelessness. No difference associated with receiving aftercare, but shorter aftercare duration associated with homelessness compared with longer durations. Poor family and friendship networks.
Transition between services	Unstable living arrangements after leaving care. Need for unconditional support and secure accommodations.	Missing links between child welfare and adult welfare services. Care leavers identified as a particular risk group for homelessness in some Finnish homelessness strategies. Challenges in accessing aftercare due to being assessed as not having sufficient developmental potential.

Homelessness as a Topic in Leaving-Care Research

The number of studies with a specific focus at the intersection of leaving care and homelessness in the Nordic countries is limited. Instead, several studies mention homelessness as a potential risk factor for young care leavers (Backe-Hansen et al., 2014;

Bengtsson et al., 2022; Hedin, 2017; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014; Mølholt, 2017; Mølholt et al., 2012; Oterholm & Paulsen, 2022; Paulsen et al., 2020; Paulsen & Thoresen, 2023). These generally are studies on care leavers, which also include housing (but not homelessness) as one of many areas of research.

Nordic research on leaving care underscores that care leavers face increased risks of abrupt, poorly planned transitions into adulthood at age 18, as they often are unprepared for independent life (Fransson & Storø, 2011; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014; Paulsen, 2017). The transition from the parental home is often quite flexible in that the young person can return home for weekends or even longer periods, parents' economic, social and psychological support slowly decreasing, depending on how much support is needed. Care leavers lack this flexibility between independence and support, as well as the practical skills and emotional backing from a strong social network. These conditions intersect with an increased risk of homelessness, as the Nordic studies found that care leavers often experience unstable living arrangements and have expressed concerns about securing accommodations (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2008; Bengtsson & Mølholt, 2018; Bengtsson et al., 2022; Mølholt, 2017). For example, a Danish study based on interviews with 30 care leavers emphasises their risk of losing aftercare and experiencing periods of homelessness if they leave their educational programme or training. This due to eligibility for support in child welfare services is found to be closely linked to young care leavers' willingness and motivation for self-development, aiming for active participation in education and training (Bengtsson et al., 2022). Stable adult relationships, a supportive social network and a sense of belonging are also highlighted as crucial protective factors for a successful transition (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2008; Bengtsson et al., 2018; Hedin, 2017).

Overall, the qualitative perspective on leaving care and the intersection with homelessness in a Nordic context identified experiences of homelessness, unstable living arrangements and transitions into an independent adult life among young care leavers, as well as described concerns and anticipation regarding living arrangements and the risk of homelessness when leaving care. Therefore, it should be emphasised that young people leaving care need unconditional support and secure accommodations in aftercare, though not pointing directly at a care background as being a risk factor, particularly for homelessness (Enell & Allgurin, 2024). Furthermore, Paulsen and Thoresen (2023) argued that child welfare services, leaving-care services and aftercare services should develop targeted and systematic approaches to housing support. Understanding social risks and protective factors that young care leavers face are two sides of the same coin, and both are important to address.

When the issue of leaving care is studied using quantitative methods, homelessness often is identified as a possible aspect of care leavers' life course, aligning with the qualitative findings above. Across the Nordic countries, quantitative studies indicate how unstable living arrangements and homelessness experiences are something young care leavers are likely to experience (Freysteinsdóttir et al., 2025; Hirschovits-Gerz et al., 2022; Sjöblom & Högdin, 2009). A quantitative study analysing administrative registers, conducted by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, examined instability in out-of-home placements and discovered that information was lacking regarding where the young people moved to after leaving care (Socialstyrelsen, 2023). One Finnish study analysed the housing situations of all aftercare clients aged 18–25 on 31 December 2020. The data were collected through professionals in all municipalities, covering 3,915 of all 5,766 aftercare clients in Finland at the time. Of these care leavers, 50% lived

independently, 10% with biological parents, 20% in lightly supported housing and 6% in more strongly supported housing. Altogether, 16% were still in foster or residential care as adults, and 2.5% were homeless (Hirschovits-Gerz et al., 2022). An Icelandic study on all young adults who had been in foster care found that 22.5% had been homeless at some point (Freysteinsdóttir et al., 2025). When measuring a periodic phenomenon such as homelessness, the rates are higher when examining homelessness that occurred during a longer period of time compared with a cross-sectional analysis. By comparison, on 15 November 2020, Finland had 854 homeless residents under age 25, comprising only 0.2% of all young people ages 18–24 in Finland at the time (Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland, 2021).

To sum up, the risk of homelessness has not been addressed explicitly as a central theme in the Nordic literature on leaving care. Homelessness often is mentioned as one of several potential outcomes for care leavers but rarely is examined in isolation. The following section examines this issue further by reviewing the literature on homelessness in a Nordic context, focussing on its intersection with a care background.

Care Leavers as a Topic in Homelessness Research

The Nordic literature on homelessness included in our data predominantly employed a quantitative methodology, identifying a background in care as a demographic characteristic among the homeless population (e.g., Benjaminsen, 2016; Benjaminsen et al., 2020a; Benjaminsen & Enemark, 2017; Dyb & Zeiner, 2021; Kostiainen & Laakso, 2015; Pitkänen et al., 2019; Sabaj-Kjær & Bertelsen, 2012; Weatherall et al., 2020). Across the Nordic countries, these studies indicate that care leavers are overrepresented among the homeless population, and that they have challenging pathways in and out of homelessness, as well as in terms of education and employment.

In particular, Danish research has focussed on mapping homelessness pathways, highlighting care leavers as a particularly vulnerable group among young shelter users and the homeless population overall (Benjaminsen, 2016; Benjaminsen & Enemark, 2017). Extant studies have found that approximately one-third of the young homeless population had been in out-of-home care, with those facing complex issues like addiction or psychiatric illness particularly at risk (Benjaminsen et al., 2018a; Benjaminsen et al., 2020b). Long-term aftercare reduces homelessness rates, but no differences in homelessness rates were noted between those who received short-term aftercare and those who did not. Another study found that young homeless people often come from vulnerable family backgrounds with experience of moving between their biological families, foster families and residential institutions. This leaves them with “poor or non-existent family networks and fragile or unhealthy friendship networks” (Brandt et al., 2013, p. 20). This is consistent with a Nordic study that reported on homeless people’s characteristics, particularly in Denmark. A key finding, according to Weatherall et al. (2020), is that the risk of long-term homelessness (+12 months) is heightened if the person has a care background.

Dyb and Zeiner’s (2021) mapping of the extent and characteristics of people experiencing homelessness in Norway indicates that despite housing being identified as a challenge for care leavers, the transition between child welfare services and adult social and health services was often difficult and abrupt. In a Finnish context, a survey was conducted on individuals residing in Helsinki who previously had been without a permanent address, according to the population register. The results indicated that 4% of the respondents had lived in care immediately prior to becoming homeless (Kostiainen &

Laakso, 2015). In the evaluation report of the first three Finnish homelessness programmes (2008–2011, 2012–2015 and 2016–2019), care leavers were identified as one of the risk groups for homelessness in the programme from 2016 to 2019. The same programme sought to increase cooperation between the Social Insurance Institution of Finland and child protection, with the aim of reducing youth homelessness. The evaluation comprised a survey conducted among experts in municipalities, with a particular emphasis on financial resources. The results highlighted the need for strengthening services that prevent homelessness, and child protection was identified as one of them. The report highlighted that homelessness had been decreasing in Finland during the 2016 to 2019 programme period, but this did not apply to homeless individuals with a history in child protection (either being in care or receiving other child welfare services) (Pitkänen et al., 2019).

Extant qualitative studies on care leavers within the homelessness literature in the Nordic countries are limited, but a few Danish studies have addressed the issue. One, based on interviews with 57 homeless women, found that many had a care background (Benjaminsen et al., 2018b). Another study on housing challenges for young homeless people, based on interviews with key actors in three Danish municipalities, examined difficulties in transitioning from youth services to adult support. Some interviewees noted that municipalities often deny aftercare to the most vulnerable youths if they are not viewed as having sufficient developmental potential, in reference to provisions of the Danish Service Act that aim to make these youths self-reliant. If development potential is deemed insufficient, the young person is not offered aftercare but instead is referred to seek help in the system for vulnerable adults (Benjaminsen, 2019).

To sum up, the aforementioned studies acknowledged care leavers within homelessness research in the Nordic countries, but they treated this as a demographic aspect instead of trying to determine which care leavers are most at risk for homelessness and how to prevent this.

Concluding Discussion: The Value of a Life-Course Perspective

Our overview reveals that the Nordic literature at the intersection of leaving care and homelessness is quite scarce and scattered. However, the Nordic literature as a whole provides insight into the intersection, shedding light on prevalence rates and increasing understanding of associations and risks between the two, and the realities of the transition between two sectors of services and forms of support. While both fields recognise care leavers as a vulnerable group, they largely operate in isolation, with little cross-referencing or collaboration. The literature on leaving care, which is predominantly qualitative, focusses on personal narratives, whereas homelessness research leans towards quantitative mapping of patterns within the homeless population. This divergence results in an incomplete understanding of the specific challenges that care leavers face when homelessness becomes a reality.

These findings may be understood as merely a knowledge gap between two overlapping research fields. However, we argue that this also poses implications for a pitfall between welfare services and social policies in the Nordic welfare states in general, namely a failure to recognise the importance of providing young care leavers with support that can increase their likelihood of experiencing a positive transition from leaving care into an independent adult life.

Homelessness is often treated as just one of the negative outcomes of which care leavers are at risk when transitioning into adulthood, rather than as a central focus. Similarly,

care leavers are often discussed in homelessness literature as a subgroup of the young homeless population, but their unique needs and vulnerabilities remain underexamined. These studies acknowledge that care leavers who become homeless face a heightened risk of long-term homelessness and social difficulties. However, much of the literature fails to provide a comprehensive picture of how the life course of care leavers shapes their pathways into homelessness.

The scope and depth of research vary across the five Nordic countries, with Denmark leading in terms of established traditions in both fields. Finland's work stems largely from homelessness research, whereas the Norwegian and Swedish research at the intersection of leaving care and homelessness leans towards leaving care. The only study situated in an Icelandic context originated from the leaving-care field. This variation reflects differing societal, political and research priorities across the Nordic welfare states. One notable literature gap is the limited focus on housing and homelessness in studies of care leavers, thereby undermining our understanding of how housing insecurity contributes to the challenges these young people face after leaving care.

This disconnect between the two fields not only highlights a literature gap, but also points to a deeper issue within the Nordic welfare systems, namely that the failure to recognise the importance of a smooth transition from care to independent adulthood contributes to care leavers' continued overrepresentation in the homeless population despite increasing attention to both out-of-home care and homelessness. Bridging this gap requires adopting a life-course perspective (Elder, 1998) that views the transition into adulthood not as a series of isolated events, but rather as part of a larger, interconnected process.

A life-course perspective can offer a more nuanced understanding of the vulnerabilities that care leavers face, considering the cumulative impact of their experiences and the interconnectedness of life events, such as leaving care and becoming homeless. This could include, for example, studies that analyse how care leavers experience critical moments in their lives, retrospectively at different ages, in relation to housing, but taking into account how housing and the risk of homelessness are related to other aspects of life. This approach would help capture how the challenges care leavers encounter are shaped by their broader life contexts, allowing for a more comprehensive and less fragmented view of their transition to adulthood. By embracing this perspective, future research in the Nordic context could better address the barriers and facilitators that shape care leavers' pathways, providing insights into how welfare systems can support this vulnerable group more effectively.

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