

How to cite: Sevillano-Monje, Verónica, Ángela Martín-Gutiérrez, Olga Moreno-Fernández, and Pilar Moreno-Crespo. 2025. “Factors Affecting Care Leavers in Their Transition to Adulthood: Differences Between National and Migrant Youth in Andalusia (Spain)”. *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 92: 41-57. <https://doi.org/10.7440/res92.2025.03>

Factors Affecting Care Leavers in Their Transition to Adulthood: Differences Between National and Migrant Youth in Andalusia (Spain)*

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Received: May 23, 2024 | Accepted: December 4, 2024 | Modified: December 20, 2024
<https://doi.org/10.7440/res92.2025.03>

Abstract | Both care leavers and non-care leavers go through a transition to adulthood marked by challenges in various aspects of their lives. However, there are significant differences between young nationals and foreign youths who have exited the protection system. This qualitative and socio-biographical study is designed to identify, describe, and interpret the impact of family, educational, employment, and emancipation-related factors that shape the life paths of national and foreign care leavers in Andalusia (Spain). To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 53 young people across different provinces of Andalusia. The results showed that, unlike national youths, foreign youths view their families as a source of support and motivation in maintaining and strengthening their life projects. Additionally, foreign youths enrol in more job training courses and with greater motivation compared to their national counterparts. Nevertheless, the study found that preparation for adulthood does not help either national or foreign youths overcome the uncertainty of how to face adult life independently without professional support. It is concluded that socio-educational interventions should, on the one hand, focus on connecting young nationals with the formal support they need to develop and pursue their life projects. On the other hand, these interventions should ensure that both groups of young people receive adequate preparation for the challenges they will face upon reaching adulthood.

Keywords | transition to adulthood; care leavers; Independent living programmes; migrants; factors

* This article derives from the research project “Analysis, evaluation and improvement of intervention processes for the emancipation of young people in difficulty and/or at risk”. The project was headed by the Association for the Professional, Integral and Social Training of the Person, funded by the Consejería de Igualdad, Políticas Sociales y Conciliación de la Junta de Andalucía (Spain), and granted to the Asociación Inserta Andalucía (Code: [SSCC]542-2021-0000037-1). Informed consent was obtained for the development of the research, and it has been approved by the ethics committee of the Consejería de Igualdad, Políticas Sociales y Conciliación de la Junta de Andalucía (Spain). All guidelines on the protection of research participants contained in the Declaration of Helsinki were respected.

Authors' contributions: Verónica Sevillano-Monje: conceptualization, validation, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, visualization supervision; Ángela Martín-Gutiérrez: methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, visualization supervision; Olga Moreno-Fernández: data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft preparation; Pilar Moreno-Crespo: data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft preparation.

Factores que afectan a los jóvenes extutelados en su transición a la vida adulta: diferencias entre nacionales y migrantes en Andalucía (España)

Resumen | Los jóvenes tutelados y no tutelados viven un proceso de transición a la adultez caracterizado por presentar dificultades en diversos ámbitos. Sin embargo, existen grandes diferencias entre los nacionales y los extranjeros que han abandonado el sistema de protección. Esta investigación cualitativa y sociobiográfica pretende identificar, describir e interpretar el alcance de los factores familiares, formativos, laborales y de emancipación que influyen y configuran los itinerarios de los jóvenes nacionales y extranjeros extutelados en Andalucía (España). Para ello, se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a 53 jóvenes en las distintas provincias andaluzas. Los resultados mostraron que los extranjeros, a diferencia de los nacionales, ven en la familia una fuente de apoyo y motivación para mantener y consolidar sus proyectos de vida. Además, los extranjeros acceden a más cursos de formación para el empleo y con mayor motivación que los nacionales. No obstante, se halló que la preparación para la adultez no ayuda a los nacionales ni a los extranjeros a superar la incertidumbre de cómo afrontar esta etapa de forma autónoma, sin el acompañamiento de profesionales. Se concluye que es importante que la intervención socioeducativa se centre, por un lado, en vincular a los jóvenes nacionales con el apoyo formal que necesitan para construir y lograr sus proyectos. Por otro lado, esta intervención debe proporcionar a ambos grupos una preparación adecuada para los retos a los que se enfrentan una vez alcanzada la mayoría de edad.

Palabras clave | transición a la vida adulta; jóvenes extutelados; programas de vida independiente; migrantes; factores

Fatores que afetam os jovens ex-tutelados na transição para a vida adulta: diferenças entre cidadãos nacionais e migrantes na Andaluzia (Espanha)

Resumo | Os jovens tutelados e não tutelados passam por um processo de transição para a vida adulta caracterizado por dificuldades em várias áreas. No entanto, existem grandes diferenças entre cidadãos nacionais e estrangeiros que abandonaram o sistema de proteção. Esta pesquisa qualitativa e sociobiográfica tem como objetivo identificar, descrever e interpretar o alcance dos fatores familiares, de formação, de trabalho e emancipação que influenciam e moldam os itinerários de jovens nacionais e estrangeiros ex-tutelados na Andaluzia (Espanha). Para isso, foram realizadas entrevistas semiestructuradas com 53 jovens das diferentes províncias andaluzas. Os resultados mostraram que os estrangeiros, ao contrário dos cidadãos espanhóis, veem a família como fonte de apoio e motivação para manter e consolidar seus projetos de vida. Além disso, os estrangeiros têm acesso a mais cursos de formação para o emprego e com maior motivação do que os nacionais. No entanto, verificou-se que a preparação para a vida adulta não ajuda espanhóis nem estrangeiros a superar a incerteza de como enfrentar essa fase de forma autónoma, sem o acompanhamento de profissionais. Conclui-se que é importante que a intervenção socioeducativa se concentre, por um lado, em vincular os jovens espanhóis ao apoio formal de que necessitam para construir e concretizar seus projetos. Por outro lado, essa intervenção deve proporcionar a ambos os grupos uma preparação adequada para os desafios que enfrentarão quando atingirem a maioridade.

Palavras-chave | fatores; jovens ex-tutelados; migrantes; programas de vida independente; transição para a vida adulta

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research analysing the transition to adulthood for young people aging out-of-care. They entered the protection system as minors after experiencing abuse or neglect within their own families, often due to domestic violence, marital abuse, parental separation, aggression, abandonment, abuse, neglect, depression, or parental addiction (Gradaille, Montserrat, and Ballester 2018).

These adverse experiences lead to emotional and behavioural challenges (González-García *et al.* 2017) that need to be addressed to support their transition to adulthood (Harder *et al.* 2020). Beyond emotional and behavioural difficulties, they also face challenges related to education (Campos *et al.* 2019; Groining and Sting 2019; Kääriälä *et al.* 2019; Kumar Keshri 2021), formal and informal support networks (Gradaille, Montserrat, and Ballester 2018; Santana-Vega, García and Jiménez-Llanos 2016; Häggman-Laitila, Salohekkilä, and Karki 2018), financing (Rutman and Hubberstey 2016; Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman 2018), access to the labour market (Courtney 2009; Jurado de los Santos *et al.* 2015) and securing stable housing (Sekibo 2020; Verstraete *et al.* 2018).

As a result, upon reaching adulthood, young people in care can often find themselves in situations where they feel helpless (del Valle and Bravo 2013) and inadequately prepared for life after leaving care (Sevillano-Monje and González-Monteagudo 2022). Also, care leavers have access to assisted-living flats where their basic needs are taken care of in a holistic manner. In these flats, they live alongside peers and learn how to manage their adult lives in preparation for independence. They also receive daily support from professionals, who guide them in their personal and professional development, although these professionals do not stay overnight. However, these assisted flats are limited, typically lasting one year, extendable to two (“Acogimiento residencial en centros”, n.d.). A study by Sevillano-Monje and González-Monteagudo (2022) shows a high failure rate among young people who access these resources, as well as a shortage of available placements, leaving many without support. As a result, care leavers often feel unprotected and, lacking alternatives, may either return to problematic environments or attempt move forward without the help of services that have supported them (del Valle and Bravo 2013; Santana-Vega, García and Jiménez-Llanos 2016).

This challenging reality places young people in residential care at risk and in a vulnerable situation (Dickens and Marx 2020). However, numerous studies have highlighted differences in the transition process between foreign and national youth (Alonso-Bello, Santana-Vega, and García 2020; Gullo *et al.* 2021; Martínez Salvador, Muyor Rodríguez, and López San Luis 2021; Santana-Vega, Alonso-Bello, and García 2018).

Second, the primary goal of young foreign nationals is to secure employment, although their expectations are often unrealistic due to language barriers and difficulties accessing the labour market (Martínez Salvador, Muyor Rodríguez, and López San Luis 2021). Their families exert strong influence, encouraging them to enter the workforce as soon as possible. As a result, they tend to value education mainly as a means to gain employment and achieve social mobility (Alonso-Bello, Santana-Vega, and García 2020; Santana-Vega, García and Jiménez-Llanos 2016). Young migrants are generally clear about their objectives: acquiring vocational training to enter the labour market, starting a business for self-employment (Santana-Vega, García and Jiménez-Llanos 2016), and financially supporting their families, which is often the main motivation behind their migration (Martínez Salvador, Muyor Rodríguez, and López San Luis 2021; Rodríguez Bravo, De-Juanas Oliva, and González Olivares 2016; Santana-Vega, García and Jiménez-Llanos 2016). In this regard, employment is seen as a key tool for structuring their life project and navigating the process of emancipation (Martínez Salvador, Muyor Rodríguez, and López San Luis 2021; Rodríguez Bravo, De-Juanas Oliva, and González Olivares 2016).

In contrast, young nationals tend to show greater discouragement, inconsistency, and lower motivation when it comes to securing a job, internship, or complete training programmes. Foreign youth, on the other hand, demonstrate higher motivation and persistence, achieve greater employability rates, complete training courses to a greater extent, and have more concrete life plans (Santana-Vega, Alonso-Bello, and García 2018). However, young foreigners face an additional challenge: the need to obtain a residence and work permit access

to the labour market (Gullo *et al.* 2021). As a result, their transition to adulthood is marked by the compounded effects of social exclusion, characterising them as young, excluded, and foreign (Ruiz Mosquera, Palma García, and Vives González 2019).

In terms of education, young foreigners tend to have an even lower academic level than their national counterparts (Gullo *et al.* 2021). They also often struggle with oral and written comprehension in Spanish, have low school enrolment rates, and participate less in formal training (López Belmonte *et al.* 2019). This leads most of them to enrol in vocational training courses outside the public education system with limited expectations of entering into the labour market. They also tend to participate in programmes designed specifically for them, such as Spanish language courses or cultural adaptation programmes (Bravo Arteaga and Santos-González 2017; Gimeno-Monterde, Gómez-Quintero, and Aguerri 2021). For young nationals, by contrast, the emphasis is on obtaining a minimum qualification that allows them to access the labour market (Sevillano-Monje 2022).

Another key difference between national and foreign youth lies in their use of transition-to-adult resources. Foreign youth tend to take greater advantage of these resources, as they generally have clearer life goals (Santana-Vega, Alonso-Bello, and García 2018; Sevillano-Monje and González-Monteagudo 2022). In contrast, national youth, often experience greater emotional instability, lack clear goals to work towards, and rely more on family support (Sevillano-Monje and González-Monteagudo 2022). In addition, foreign youth place greater value on the benefits of transition programmes compared to their national counterparts (Sevillano-Monje 2022). However, they tend to receive formal and financial support for a shorter period (Gullo *et al.* 2021). Once these transitional resources expire, foreign youth continue to require additional support (Sevillano-Monje 2022), likely due to their greater need for legal assistance in obtaining residence and work permits (Gullo *et al.* 2021). This article stems from the research project “Analysis, evaluation and improvement of intervention processes for the emancipation of young people in difficulty and/or at risk” led by the Association for the Professional, Integral and Social Training of the Person (Inserta Andalucía). The project’s goal is to generate the necessary knowledge to enhance programmes and social policies targeting these at-risk groups, with a particular focus on ensuring their active participation and autonomy as rights-holders. Specifically, this article identifies, describes, and interprets the impact of family, training, employment, and emancipation-related factors that influence and shape the life trajectories of young nationals and foreign care leavers in Andalusia, Spain. The novelty of this study lies in its examination of these factors in both populations: nationals and foreigners transitioning out of care.

Methodology

A qualitative, socio-biographical methodology was used, placing special emphasis on the construction of the life stories of adolescents and young people who fit the study’s target profile. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of both the individual and social factors shaping participants’ lives from a holistic perspective (Ugalde and Balbastre Benavent 2013). The study was designed as a non-experimental cohort study, as all participants were in residential care and receiving support measures for their emancipation processes.

This article has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Consejería de Igualdad, Políticas Sociales y Conciliación de la Junta de Andalucía (Spain). All guidelines on the protection of research participants in the Declaration of Helsinki were followed.

Participants

The reference population comprises all young nationals and foreigners participating in the emancipation programmes run by the various entities associated with the aforementioned project in Andalusian. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach with structural quotas, ensuring representation of key demographic groups based on sex, age, origin, and region. Additionally, accessibility to participants, the availability of relevant information, and specific inclusion criteria were considered. These criteria included having at least six months of participation in the programmes and having transitioned out of care within the last six years).

Finally, as shown in Table 1, the sample consisted of 53 young people across Andalusia. Specifically, there were 34 men (10 nationals and 24 foreigners) and 19 women (12 nationals and 7 foreigners). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old (19,83 years, SD= 1,61). None of the participants was excluded from the sample due to their level of Spanish proficiency. However, there linguistic and vulnerability biases were present during the research, and these were taken into account by the researchers during data collection.

Table 1. Sample of cases, according to age, sex, and origin

	National		Foreign		Total
	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Under 20 years old	2	10	13	2	27
20 years or more	8	2	11	5	26
Total	10	12	24	7	53

Source: Authors, 2024.

Techniques and instruments for data collection

This research employed semi-structured interviews, which provide a pre-established script while allowing flexibility to explore participants' perspectives in depth data (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). These interviews made it possible to construct young people's life stories, enabling a deeper understanding of their experiences and circumstances, as expressed in their own words. Below are the biographical aspects considered in the interviews (Table 2):

Table 2. Semi-structured interview script

Family	Relationship with parents: relationship with father and mother. Reason for separation and access to the protection system. Family relationships from the age of 18 and at present. How do you manage money? Do you help the family and/or other people?
Work	The transition from school to work: First jobs. Access to the world of work (how, who helped you). Formal support from organisations (preparation programmes). Work apprenticeship. Work relationships (formal/informal support with bosses and colleagues).
Preparing for the transition to adulthood	Preparation for emancipation and transition support: Do you think you were prepared to live independently? What was it like to leave care? Is there anything you wish you had been taught? Who provided the most help in preparing you for the future?

Source: Authors, 2024.

Procedure and data analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between May and July, 2022. Participants were provided with an informed consent form outlining the research details and implications of their participation. Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed and analysed using inductive-deductive approach (Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado, and Baptista Lucio 2014). The data were coded into three units of analysis, each comprising two or three categories (Table 3). Coding was carried out using the NVivo 12 software.

Table 3. Definition and fragments of the units of comparison and categories of analysis

Comparison units	Categories of analysis	Definition	Extracts from the interviews
Family factors	Reason for entry into the protection system	Situations leading to placement in child protection centre	“They tested me, and when they saw that I really was the age stated in my passport, they placed me in a youth centre” (AE2002HKE-20, Almería, May 2022).
	Later family relationship	Family bonds and their influence on young people	“When I was young, I was closer to my father, but now that I’m older, I can’t stand him. You see him your way, and I’ll see him mine” (CN2001HRM-20, Córdoba, May 2022).
Training and employment factors	Training	Training received for labour market entry	“We have taken quite a few courses at the centre—food handling courses, adult school, and practical training on farms” (AE2002HKE-20, Almería, May 2022).
	Support and labour relations	Mentors and peers for labour market entry and job stability	“The manager of the establishment, knows my story [...], she sat down to talk with me and said, ‘don’t worry, if you want to work with me, you won’t be short of work’” (ZN1998MKG-23, Cádiz, May 2022).
	Current job	Sector and occupation at the moment	“I am working in a restaurant [fast-food]” (HN2000HDL-21, Huelva, May 2022).
Emancipation factors	Preparation	Strategies and actions to develop pre-maternity life skills for adulthood	“From the age of sixteen, you do your own laundry, you’re responsible for washing your clothes. They give you a budget, and you start planning your weekly meals—you manage breakfast, lunch, snacks, everything. You do your own shopping with the budget they give you and put together your meals, your dinners, your snacks, everything” (HN2004MAG-18, Huelva, May 2022).
	Support	Formal and informal mentors who supported the transition to adulthood	“Well, the headmaster helped me, he was very good to me, and I liked him a lot” (CN2004HECA-18, Córdoba, May 2022).

Source: Authors, 2024.

Results

The results obtained are dealt with by organising them according to the units of comparison analysed: (i) Family factors, (ii) Training and employment factors, and (iii) Emancipation factors.

Family factors

Regarding family relationship, differences were observed between foreign and Spanish respondents. In general, foreign youth in care who have been through the protection system maintain a good relationship with their families and come to Spain in search of a better future, as illustrated below:

Well, the truth is that we come from a family that isn't very poor, but somewhat, so I had to save up money and work. My siblings had to help me and everything. And I came by boat. It was really hard because I got seasick and everything. Yes, I spent the whole journey vomiting, but when you think about your goal, well. (AE2003HOM-18, Almería, May 2022)

Well, I left when I was very young, when I was just a child. When I left home, I didn't run away—I talked to my mother, but she never really gave me permission to leave, nothing [...] Not at all, she never wanted me to live far from the country, let alone not knowing where I was going or how I was getting there, you know? I'd say I'm the one who has put in a huge effort and really wanted to leave. (AE2002HKE-20, Almería, May 2022)

Well, I was born in Morocco, I was there with my family studying, but I couldn't finish my studies. I started working when I was eleven, twelve, around that age, and then I got the idea to go to Europe, you know? Everyone thought I had to cross the border and come here. (GE2003HSG-19, Granada, May 2022)

On the other hand, national youth in care enter the system due to the inability to live with their biological families, often as a result of internal conflicts that lead to family breakdown. For example:

Well, since I was little, I was in a basic care centre because I have many siblings, and my mother, being completely helpless, had no resources. I was born in Seville, in a centre for young mothers who had suffered abuse, and later, my mother and my whole family moved to Málaga, so I came here to Málaga. I was in the basic care centre with my two brothers, the ones I'm still with today. (MN2003TDC-19, Málaga, May 2022)

I was born in Guadalajara, and I lived with my mother and my brother. My mother was not doing well financially, and we moved houses a lot. I lived in a convent, in Albacete, and in different areas of Madrid. My mother was... well, quite an alcoholic and was never financially stable. She worked as a prostitute. My brother and I lived with her, and on weekends, we would visit my father, who lived with my other siblings. (HN2004MAG-18, Huelva, May 2022)

My parents were always... they were always addicted to drugs. There was a time when they were doing well, but then the crisis hit, and both my father and mother lost their jobs. My mother started messing around again and relapsed. My father didn't at the time, but my mother did. Then the fights started, and with all the back and forth—drugs here and there—we stopped going to school. Eventually, when my mother left, my father stayed with the two of us. We were very young, and he was alone, and he just didn't know how to. (MN2002MAL-19, Málaga, May 2022)

In this regard, it is important to note that when foreign interviewees decide to leave their home country as minors and migrate to Spain in search of a better life, they often idealise the living conditions they will encounter. Their primary focus is on securing a job with better opportunities than those available in their country of origin. Thus, their motivation for coming to Spain and preparing for employment is driven by the desire to improve both their own and their families' living conditions in back home:

[Regarding reasons for leaving home] Because I wanted to build my own life, because I wanted something better. (GE2000MFE-22, Granada, May 2022)

I've worked so much to improve myself, to be able to get residency, because there are many who don't have it. I've seen a lot of young guys get their residency by working and getting good jobs. (AE2002HEH-19, Almería, May 2022)

And I say, if you came here to improve your life, forget about going out every day, about spending money on this and that. You have to work now. As they say here, "If you want to be a civil servant, you have to forget about the protests", or something like that. Or something along those lines. (ZE1998HBM-24, Cádiz, May 2022)

The reason was that, even though I was very young, my thoughts were far ahead. I wanted to change things for my family, not just be another one of them, but someone who could contribute, you know? I left at a young age with the intention of helping. (ZE2001HMD-24, Cádiz, May 2022)

So, when I say it, look, I'm a kid, and I have to find my future. My future is ahead of me, and I have so much to do. If I stay here, I believe that God might give me an opportunity, but I have to go out and search, to help my family. (GE2001HFC-20, Granada, May 2022)

Also, foreign minors enter the system when they are intercepted by authorities or referred from health care institutions, such as hospitals, upon being identified as unaccompanied minors living on the street:

And when we arrived in Spain, when the police caught me, I never thought they would take me to a youth centre, and at that moment, it felt like a failure. You think, "Bloody hell, they've caught me". You feel like you have to go back. In the end, they take you in a police car, and when I arrived at the centre, two teachers, educators, welcomed me. I saw them wearing white coats, and I thought, "Fuck, am I in hospital again?" (ZE1998HBM-24, Cádiz, May 2022)

Well, when I was taken to the police station, the police brought me to a centre. I stayed there for two or three days, then they moved me to another centre where I stayed, I think, for four months, and then they moved me again. (JE2003MFZK, Jaén, May 2022)

When we got to Cádiz, the police came, separating the minors from the adults. No one could go back, you know? And then the Red Cross arrived too. (CE2001HAE-21, Córdoba, May 2022)

For Spanish-national interviewees, the circumstances leading to their placement in residential care varied. In some cases, it was due to an unforeseen family crisis. For example: "I was 11 or so with my father at home until he got lung cancer and I entered a centre and until I was 18, I came here, I ended up here in Córdoba" (CN2001HRM-20, Córdoba, May 2022). However, in other cases, intervention was necessary due to situations of neglect and vulnerability:

When I was twelve, my parents started drinking and smoking, and I wasn't comfortable with that situation. When I was fifteen, they took me to a youth centre, like a protection centre, to help me improve my life—something like that. (CN2004HECA-18, Córdoba, May 2022)

My life before getting to the centre, from the moment I was born, has been like something out of a film—drugs, prostitution, problems here and there. It's been complicated, I'd say. (HN2003MMC-18, Huelva, May 2022)

Shortly after, the next day or two days later, I went and told my trusted teacher at school. A report was filed, and that same day, I was placed in the immediate reception centre for five months. (HN2004MAG-18, Huelva, May 2022)

Well, they put us in the centre because my parents would go out for coffee and wouldn't take us to school. My brother was very little, and if he wet himself or got dirty, my older sister had to change him. But she was also underage—she was fourteen or fifteen—and she couldn't go to school because she had to take care of us. (JN2001MMEV-21, Jaén, May 2022)

The relationship with their families after leaving residential care upon reaching adulthood is often complex. For those who maintain contact with their families of origin, foreign youths tend to view them as an emotional and motivational anchor:

[Regarding whether they keep in touch with their family] Yes, every day. (AE2003HOM-18, Almería, May 2022)

Fine, [...]. Yes, my mum says she's feeling a bit better because I'm not with them. And that makes a big difference. We talk when we can, and that's it. But it's fine. (ZE1998HBM-24, Cádiz, May 2022)

Yes, I talk to them a lot, and this year I want to visit—this summer, God willing. But I do speak with them often. (GE2001HLB-21, Granada, May 2022)

With my family, it's normal, like before. We have a good relationship, we're getting closer, talking more. [...] Now I have more trust in my mum—more than before. (JE2003MFZK-18, Jaén, May 2022)

Well, I have been to see them in the last year. (GE2001HMEO-19, Granada, May 2022)

However, national participants often lack this kind of affective and motivational support. In some cases, they perceive that the family's interest in them is primarily driven by the financial resources they can provide:

Okay. Well, it didn't go very well, but yeah, more or less fine. (HN2001HAL-20, Huelva, May 2022)

I have no contact with my family. None at all. They all stopped talking to me—every single one of them. I mean, if I ended up on the streets right now, well..., they just stopped talking to me. (SN2002MVM-19, Sevilla, May 2022)

With my grandmother and my uncles, yes. With my brother, no, because one is working and the other is with his girlfriend. And my mum? Very, very, very little. She calls me, and that's it. (JN2022MMNS-19, Jaén, May 2022)

When I was little, I didn't realise it, but as I got older, I started noticing the whole "they only care when you have money" thing. It was kind of like that, and honestly, I didn't like those people. (CN2001HRM-20, Córdoba, May 2022)

On the other hand, the families of foreign youth encourage them to improve their circumstances and, in some cases, rely on the financial support they can provide:

[Regarding saving money] Yes, but at the same time, some of it has to go to your family—to pay rent, energy bills, electricity, water, and all that. (GE2001HME0-19, Granada, May 2022)

Yes, I've sent money to my brother and my mum a few times, sometimes to my dad. I mean, during the holidays, I send money. And since our family makes sacrifices every year, I also contribute to that. (GE2001HLB-21, Granada, May 2022)

Helping them, of course. Now that I've started working, I have a huge responsibility. I have to pay for my little brother's school fees, send money to cover school costs, to make sure they have food, you know... And every month, there's a birthday—there are eight of us, yes. (ME2000MEV-21, Málaga, May 2022)

I want to study first and then do something more, because with just studying, I won't have much money, and my family really needs it. (ME2004HKG-18, Málaga, May 2022)

Training-labour factors

The time spent in residential centres, along with concerns about reaching adulthood and losing institutional support, leads these centres to offer a wide range of training courses aimed at preparing youth for the labour market. These courses tend to be non-formal and seek to address the educational gaps that participants may have due to their background or their personal and family circumstances. In general, all interviewees expressed gratitude for the training and internships they received, as these opportunities often led to employment, enabling them to gain independence and lead autonomous lives. National interviewees, in particular, focused their efforts on obtaining a basic qualification that would allow them to enter the workforce.

Yes, later on—well, once I finished my ESO [Compulsory Secondary Education], yes, but at first, the focus was entirely on studying for the ESO. Then, once you finish, they ask whether you want to continue studying or train for work, because you never know if you'll be able to get a flat in the future. So, I thought, I'm going to study something quick, and I got my kitchen assistant qualification. (ZN1998MKG-23, Cádiz, May 2022)

Well, I've done a few short courses, but they were with the association—things like first aid or workshops run by the educators themselves, that kind of stuff. [...] The Labora programme helped me because I took some courses with them, but I never actually did the practical training. To be fair, that wasn't their fault—they did offer me the placements. The mistake was mine, because instead of doing the practicals, I decided to go back to my hometown. (SN2003MCM-19, Sevilla, May 2022)

In my first year, I failed everything—almost all my subjects. In the second year, at first, I was doing well, but then I just gave up, to be honest. I didn't do third or fourth year because I did a basic vocational training programme in Huelva instead. To be fair, my first year of that was a bit of a disaster because I struggled to ask for help and all that. (SN2002MVM-19, Sevilla, May 2022)

Foreign interviewees were more focused on enrolling in courses that would enhance their access to the labour market:

By then, I was already an adult, but without documents, so they couldn't let me go because I couldn't work or do anything. So, to avoid wasting time, I attended courses as a listener—at least that way, once I got my papers, everything would be easier. That was my plan. So, I kept going to courses, attending Red Cross language classes, and doing little things here and there until I got my documents. (ZE2001HMD-19, Cádiz, May 2022)

When I entered the youth centre, they gave me lessons there, and then when I left, I started practical training at a job when I turned eighteen. And I'm still working. (ZE2001HKG-20, Cádiz, May 2022)

When I was able to do courses with the Don Bosco Foundation and I was able to find a job. (ZE2000HME-21, Cádiz, May 2022)

Well, there are many positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, I got my Level 1 mechanics qualification, and I also got one in cooking. The second thing is that since I work with my dad, people want me to fix their motorbikes. For example, they say, "We need your son because he does a good job". (SE2003HYEM-19, Sevilla, May 2022)

The entities that manage the resources available to the interviewees have played an important role in their entry into the labour market. It has been observed that their first work experiences are typically in the service sector, particularly in hospitality and catering, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

They [Inserta Andalucía] tried to enrol me in a cooking course because they knew I really liked cooking, so I could learn and get into a restaurant. (SE2003HYEM-19, Sevilla, May 2022)

My first job was as a waiter. It was quite difficult because working with the public is very hard. (ZE1998HBM-24, Cádiz, May 2022)

One job was in Huelva, and some were at the weekends in Las Tinajas, which was great with my colleagues. I liked it, but I didn't like it at the same time because I was a waiter. Honestly, I want to get my life on track. On the other hand, I want to work in hospitality, and if not in hospitality, then in a hotel. I want to work hard to achieve that, and I have worked hard, obviously. (HN1999HMC, Huelva, May 2022)

Well, I worked at IKEA, and now I'm working as a cook in a restaurant. (ZE200HME-21, Cádiz, May 2022)

Access to the labour market has not only enabled interviewees to lead independent and autonomous lives but has also played a fundamental role in fostering workplace relationships with their colleagues. These work-based interactions have proven to be positive, providing a valuable source of informal support for young people, as they themselves highlight:

Yes, and at my current job, I honestly feel like I'm with family. (ZE1998HBM-24, Cádiz, May 2022)

It's really good—almost all my colleagues are my friends now. (SE2003HYEM-19, Sevilla, May 2022)

It's going well. They hired me with my disability CV, but they didn't actually realise they had hired someone with a disability until I told them. Then they called the manager, spoke with him, and they came up with a solution—they gave me a written guide for making burgers because I couldn't remember what they had explained to me the previous weekend. (HN2000HDL-21, Huelva, May 2022)

Yes, because if you do something the wrong way, they don't say anything—they just support you and tell you, "It's fine, don't worry, things happen". (ZE2000HME-21, Cádiz, May 2022)

Currently, the job profiles of the interviewees vary greatly. Their employment opportunities have been shaped by the training they received and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in recent years. However, in many cases, the pandemic led to job losses due to the country's health and economic crisis, particularly in the service sector—an area where many interviewees initially found jobs and gained their first work experience.

[Regarding work stoppages due to confinement measures] So, I stayed working [in a bar] doing everything, and then Covid happened, and we went into lockdown. (AE2002HEH-19, Almería, May 2022)

I worked hard at the centre, and now I'm working. I'm with a youth centre—the same one I was in before—as a social worker since I'm studying that. They gave me the opportunity to work there, and it's true that they considered me for this role and gave me a great chance. I've been doing this for a year with the Junta de Andalucía through that certification programme. (ME1999HMA-23, Málaga, May 2022)

And I've been working there ever since. [...] In the kitchen. [...] Basically, everything the cook doesn't do, I do. (GE2000MFE-22, Granada, May 2022)

I am working in a [fast-food] restaurant. (HN2000HDL-21, Huelva, May 2022)

I worked in the SAFA [Escuelas Profesionales de la Sagrada Familia], and now I'm working in a care home. (JN2022MMNS-19, Jaén, May 2022)

Emancipation factors

Regarding emancipation factors, both national and foreign youth pointed out that preparation for independent living primarily focuses on household tasks and managing everyday situations. This is reflected in the following excerpts from the interviews:

From the age of sixteen, you do your own laundry—you're responsible for washing your clothes. They give you a budget, and you start planning your weekly meals, adjusting everything—lunch, breakfast, snacks, and all that. (HN2004MAG-18, Huelva, May 2022)

[Regarding how the centre helped in preparation for independent life] Becoming an independent person, not relying on anyone. I was going to say cooking, but no—although they did teach me a bit of cooking, I just don't like it, to be honest. But the most important thing is learning to be independent and do things my own way. (CN2001HRM-20, Córdoba, May 2022)

[Regarding the most useful part of preparing for independence] I don't know. I had to manage my documents, go and get them sorted, go to the doctor, book appointments. (CN2001HRM-20, Córdoba, May 2022)

They told me, “Look, you’ve got three months left”. The cook also knows that we are the ones who will be preparing our own meals. Well, we hold a meeting and ask the educator [...] to let us cook over the weekend so we can learn how to do it. (CE2001HAE-21, Córdoba, May 2022)

The interviewees considered this preparation to be relevant and useful, but it did not help them overcome the uncertainty of facing adult life independently after having always been under the protection of the system. In some cases, this uncertainty was further exacerbated by feelings of bewilderment due to a lack of support brought about by the reduction of resources following the Covid-19 crisis:

[Regarding leaving the centre] I have no idea—I don’t know how I’m going to start or how it will end. (CE2004HAJ-18, Córdoba, May 2022)

Covid disrupted my emancipation process. The psychologists left, and new ones came in, so we didn’t go into much depth, but we did cover the basics. (HN2003MMC-18, Huelva, May 2022)

For national participants, the transition from a supervised or tutored life to adulthood can be particularly challenging. Many struggle with the absence of guidance when handling everyday responsibilities, such as attending medical appointments on their own. As expressed by HN2004MAG-18 (Huelva, May 2022): “From that age onwards, you had to go to the doctor, the dentist, and everywhere else on your own. And that was something I didn’t like”.

When asked what aspects of the emancipation process they felt were lacking or could have been more helpful, many interviewees were uncertain. This uncertainty may stem from not fully understanding how their lives will change or what their needs will be once they transition to independent adulthood: “I don’t know” (CE2001HAE-21, Córdoba, May 2022); “Right now, to be honest, no—I don’t remember. If I’m missing something at this moment, I just don’t remember it” (CN2001HRM-20, Córdoba, May 2022); “I don’t feel ready to be independent” (HN2004MAG-18, Huelva, May 2022). However, despite these challenges, the interviewees highlighted the support they received from various social agents, which played a fundamental role at key moments in their transition:

Actually, all the educators helped me—the management, the psychologist, the social workers—everyone really helped me. (CN2001HRM-20, Córdoba, May 2022)

I got a lot of support from my teachers to prepare for the future. (HN2004MAG-18, Huelva, May 2022)

[Regarding to the person who provided help]. It was an educator. (CE2001HAE-21, Córdoba, May 2022)

Discussion and Conclusions

The goal of this study was to identify, describe, and interpret the extent of family, training, employment, and emancipation factors that influence and shape the itineraries of national and foreign youths in care in Andalusia. Consistent with previous research, significant differences between the two groups have been identified.

In terms of family factors, foreign youth typically enter residential centres after being taken into care by authorities upon arriving in the country as unaccompanied minors, with the primary goal of improving their own and their families’ living conditions. In contrast, national youths enter residential centres because of a lack of protection from their own families. This means that, once they leave residential centres, foreign youths maintain their

relationships with their families (Alonso-Bello, Santana-Vega, and García 2020; Gullo *et al.* 2021), which, as previously noted (Santana-Vega, Alonso-Bello, and García 2018), serves as a source of motivation to pursue their goals. On the other hand, national youth often do not maintain family ties, and when they do, these relationships are usually marked by isolation (Courtney 2009; Diraditsile and Nyadza 2018; Frimpong-Manso 2020; Gullo *et al.* 2021; Rutman and Hubberstey 2016; Sulimani-Aidan 2019). Family factors have a great impact on young people's life trajectories. For foreign youth, family serves as a source of support and motivation in achieving their personal and professional aspirations. However, as the literature has shown, national youth often lack family support to continue their educational and employment pathways (Santana-Vega, Alonso-Bello, and García 2018). This highlights the need for socio-educational interventions to focus on providing formal support to help these young people to develop and pursue their life projects, compensating for the absence of family support. Efforts should also be made to assist those who wish to reconnect with their families, ensuring that these relationships are reestablished in a healthy, realistic, and fulfilling manner (Holden 2023; Santos González 2019).

Young foreigners also feel a strong obligation to financially support their families (Martínez Salvador *et al.* 2021; Rodríguez Bravo, De-Juanas Oliva, and González Olivares 2016; Santana-Vega, García and Jiménez-Llanos 2016). In this context, training plays a crucial role in shaping their employment pathways. For national youth, obtaining basic qualifications is a key priority. In contrast, foreign youth tend to enroll in vocational training programmes more frequently and with greater motivation, viewing them as a means to secure employment. These findings align with previous research (Bravo Arteaga and Santos-González 2017; Gimeno-Monterde, Gómez-Quintero, and Aguerri 2021; Santana-Vega, Alonso-Bello, and García 2018; Sevillano-Monje 2022). Additionally, both national and foreign youth have received significant support from their employers and colleagues during their transition to the workforce, which has proven to be highly beneficial (Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan 2020). Therefore, in terms of training and employment factors, it is important to highlight how these young people approach labour market entry and the support they receive from both resource educators and their workplace peers. In this regard, socio-educational interventions should focus on intensively supporting national youth, who often lack motivation and family support, to improve their chances of successful career integration. Moreover, given the strong workplace support networks they develop, employment should be recognized as an educational tool that helps young people build sustainable support systems as they transition into adulthood (Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan 2020).

Concerning emancipation factors, both national and foreign youth acknowledge the preparation they receive before leaving the protection system from the professionals who accompany them. This preparation focuses on domestic tasks and everyday life skills, such as using a washing machine, cooking, or managing a budget. However, it does not adequately equip them to navigate adult life independently, as they are accustomed to constant supervision and lack opportunities to solve problems on their own (Campos *et al.* 2019). Therefore, as noted by Sevillano-Monje and González-Montegudo (2022), socio-educational interventions in residential centres should provide tailored and effective preparation for the challenges these young people will face once they reach adulthood. To achieve this, overprotection should be minimized and structured programmes—such as PLANEA—should be implemented to help foster genuine autonomy (García-Alba 2021). Additionally, assisted living arrangements should be adapted to the specific needs of each young person, allowing for extended stays when necessary and offering the possibility of returning if their initial transition was unsuccessful or if they had previously left the programme.

Finally, this study has several limitations that should be considered. For instance, conducting in-depth interviews with young foreigners was challenging due to their limited proficiency in Spanish. Also, scheduling data collection proved difficult because the working hours of many young participants did not align with those of the researchers. The lack of regionally stratified sampling also represents a notable limitation. Moreover, ongoing work is examining the results from a gender perspective to highlight the additional challenges faced by girls compared to boys, regardless of nationality. Future research should incorporate stratified sampling, employ translators to facilitate interviews, and extend surveys to reach a broader population and enhance comparability by origin.

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