

# Research in Brief



Issue No 2021-15

Publication Date November 03 2021

ISSN 2092-7117

Building D, 370 Sicheong-daero, Sejong City 30147 KOREA **Korea Institute for Health & Social Affairs**

## Improving Aftercare Support for Youth in Preparation for Independent Living

**Sang-Jung Lee**

Associate Research Fellow, KIHASA

### Introduction

Every year, between 2,500 and 2,600 youth transition out of foster care as they turn 18, setting about to stand on their own as adults. “Youth in preparation for independent living” are young adults who are within 5 years after leaving foster care—residential child care facilities, group homes, or foster homes. Despite their having come of age, they have been called “children” out of foster care. The government, seeing them no longer as passive objects of protection, but as subjects of self-reliance, has decided to denominate them as “youth in preparation for independent living,” as it did in its recent “Plan for Increasing Support for Children Out of Care”.

Youth in preparation for independent living are those young adults within 5 years of having aged out of the foster care system, for whom Article 38 of the Child Welfare Act provides that the national government and local authorities provide aftercare support in housing, living, education, employment and asset building. As of December 2019, there were some 13,000 youth in preparation for independent living in Korea.

**[Table 1] Number of children aged out of foster care**

Year	Number of children aged out of foster care			
	Subtotal	Residential care facilities	Group homes	Foster homes
2015	2,677	980	140	1,557
2016	2,703	1,042	139	1,522
2017	2,593	1,034	153	1,406
2018	2,606	1,065	192	1,349
2019	2,587	992	172	1,423
<b>Total</b>	13,166	5,113	796	7,257

Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare. (2020). Health and Welfare White Book 2019; Ministry of Health and Welfare, National Center for the Rights of the Child. (2020). Statistics Report on Independent-living Support for Children

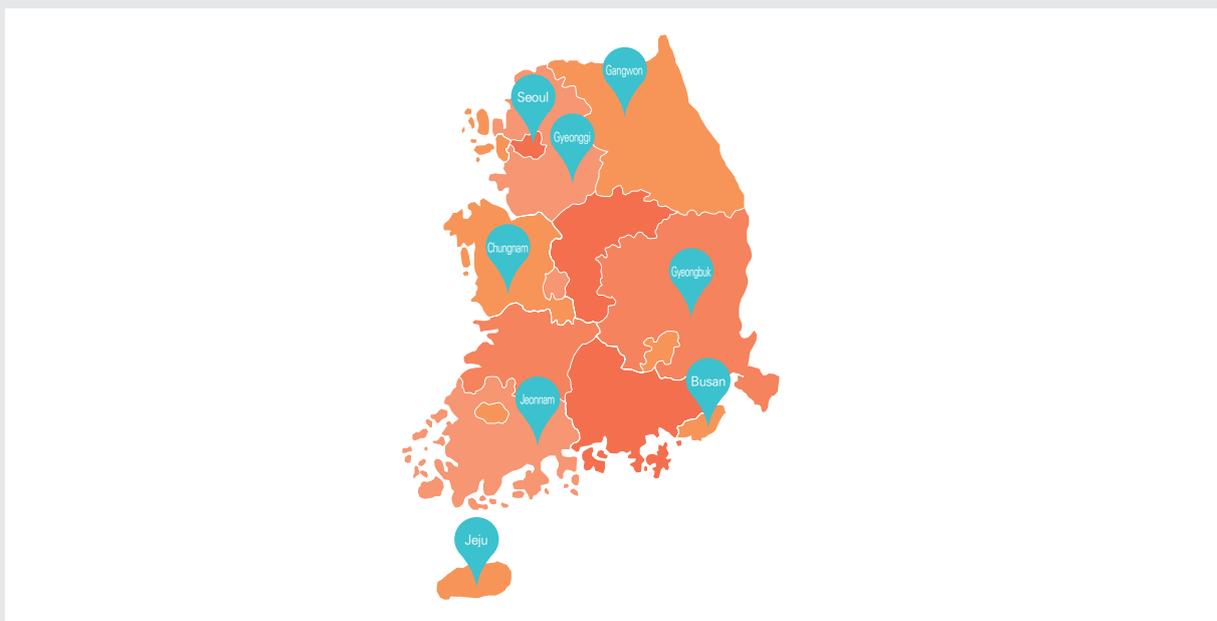
“The Needs and Independent-Living Preparedness of Children Who Have Aged Out of Foster Care”, a 2020 survey study of which this brief is a part, finds that youth in preparation for independent living need support in their psycho-emotional realm, as well as in housing, living, education, employment and asset building. To help them meet their such needs requires improvement in the aftercare system. Indicators suggest that youth in preparation for independent living, as compared to general youth or children who have yet to age out of foster care, are worse off in terms of health, psycho-emotional state, social relationship, housing, education, employment and economic conditions. Youth in preparation for independent living have lower life satisfaction scores and a higher prevalence of suicidal thoughts than the general youth population. It was in their third or fourth year out of foster care that their life satisfaction was at its lowest and their prevalence of suicidal ideation at its highest. A high percentage of these youth reported having experienced difficulties as regards housing in their fourth or fifth year after leaving the foster care system. Such economic indicators as unemployment rates, cost of living, and debt levels suggested that the situations turned for the worse for them in their third to fifth year after leaving foster care, pointing to the need for continued aftercare support for youth out of foster care.

This study finds that youth who have aged out of foster care lack psycho-emotional support and social network, both essential for them to cope with the challenges they face as they wend their way along to independent living. An estimated 61.6 percent of youth in transition to independent living are living alone, who, as they have no parents or have little contact with them, are unlikely to have support from their own family. Youth in preparation for independent living receive less social support than they did when they were in the foster care system. The relationship they have fostered with their facility guardians or foster parents tend to wane over time. All this brings to the fore the need for providing socioeconomic and psycho-emotional support for these young people, at least until they age out of eligibility for aftercare.

## The system of support for youth in preparation for independent living

Article 38 of the Child Welfare Act, which pertains to assistance for children in transition from foster care to independent living, provides that the national government and local authorities establish and manage aftercare for these young people. However, there are only 8 localities—cities and provinces—nationwide that have in place an agency tasked exclusively with providing independent-living support to youth who are within 5 years after having aged out of foster care and to children who are about to age out of the system. Article 40 of the same law provides that “the State and local governments may entrust the establishment and operation of a database related to self-reliance support, the development and dissemination of self-reliance support programs, management of cases, etc., to a corporation.” But this is a provision not so much as regards the establishment and operation of agencies tasked with supporting children and youth in preparation for independent living as it is about what those agencies may be entrusted to do. This in part explains why there are more metropolitan localities that do not have such an agency than there are those that do. It is inevitable that those 9 metropolitan localities without an independent-living support agency in place face pauses and gaps in the delivery of their aftercare services to young foster care leavers. The situation in these localities, adverse as it is especially to children who, on top of having no self-support assistance agency to turn to, live in a group home or a foster home with no officer to provide them support in their transition to independent living, adds to inter-programmatic disparities in the delivery of independent-living support.

[Figure 1] Distribution of independent-living support agencies in Korea



Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare, National Center for the Rights of the Child. (2021). Independent-living Information Book



## Improving aftercare with strengthened support for youth in transition to independent living

Earlier this year the government, in a bid to improve aftercare for youth in preparation for independent living, announced its “Plan for Enhancing Support for Children Transitioning Out of Foster Care.” The Plan includes measures to put in place independent-living support agencies nationwide and recruit an additional 120 workers to provide independent-living support to youth in transition to independent living. But what was absent were measures as to how local governments should be supported to establish and operate their independent-living support agencies, where these additional workforce resources are to be stationed. Nor is there a concrete plan afoot for linking and integrating independent-living support services that have been provided in fragmented ways by different providers. This study recommends the following to achieve effective support for youth in preparation for independent living.

Firstly, the aftercare system for youth in preparation for independent living should be considered, from a life course perspective, as an extension of the child protective service delivery system. As few as 3.3 percent of the children in foster care get returned to their family of origin or taken by relatives, with the rest remaining looked after by the state care system for an average 11.8 years until they turn 18. For these children to succeed in independent living, it is essential that they be prepared for life after foster care in a systematic manner while they are still in care. In this context, it is necessary to establish a cooperative framework and an information sharing mechanism that link various independent-living support providers: child protection officials who are responsible for official monitoring of how prepared children are for independent living while in care and how well provided they are with aftercare services after they transition out of care; facility guardians, case managers and foster parents, whose job it is to assist children to prepare for independent living while looking after them; and independent-living support officers tasked with providing assistance and aftercare services for youth who have transitioned out of care.

Secondly, there is a need to reduce regional and inter-programmatic disparities in independent-living support. To do so would require putting in place an independent-living support agency in every one of the 17 metropolitan cities and provinces across the country. The regional independent-living support agencies should be tasked with assisting children and youth in preparation for independent living and with supporting their guardians, case managers, and foster parents in the delivery of their services. Such efforts need to necessarily be accompanied by a budget allocation with a view to promoting localities to push for the establishment and operation of an independent-living support agency. To reduce regional disparities in service provision would require that these independent-living support agencies are operated in an integrated manner under the lead of the National Center for the Rights of the Child. This should involve ensuring that youth in preparation for independent living are provided with uninterrupted services even when they, for instance for schooling or employment purposes, frequently travel and shift their residence between multiple localities.

Lastly, in order for independent-living support officers to function as an official psycho-emotional support mechanism for youth in preparation for independent living, as a workforce they need to be so reinforced as to match the number youth eligible for aftercare. The current count is that, even with the planned recruitment of additional 120 workers considered, each independent-living support officer has to provide aftercare services for over 70 youth in preparation for independent living. The workforce of independent-living support officers needs to be further reinforced so that the number of youth one officer manages is reduced to 30, which is roughly the number of young people for whom each provider delivers services in the current housing support program.