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DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY

**INSTITUTIONAL TRAJECTORIES, RESILIENCE, AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION
AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM**

Doctoral Dissertation

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CLUJ-NAPOCA

2026

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Introduction and Problem Statement

This dissertation examines the social integration and resilience of young people leaving the child protection system in the Romanian, primarily Transylvanian, context. The starting point of the research is the author's several years of field experience in child protection, through which she gained direct insight into the functioning of institutional care and the everyday challenges faced by young people living in residential care institutions. Both practical experience and findings from the relevant literature indicate that institutional settings are often unable to provide stable emotional security and a predictable relational environment for these young people (Rutter, 2000; Masten, 2001). Relational instability, limited resources, low self-esteem, and social stigmatization jointly hinder the development and future life opportunities of young people living in the child protection system (Ungar, 2011; Roth et al., 2018).

Leaving the care system can be considered a particularly critical life stage, as many young people do not possess the skills, social networks, and forms of support necessary for independent living (Stein, 2008; Homoki, 2014). In this context, the transition to adulthood represents not merely an age-related transition, but also a complex structural and psychosocial challenge (Masten, 2001; Stein, 2008). International and Romanian studies consistently demonstrate that young people leaving the child protection system are particularly vulnerable to various forms of social exclusion (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Smith et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2019; Doucet, 2020; Toth & Mita, 2020).

The dissertation is based on the assumption that the life trajectories of young people leaving the child protection system cannot be interpreted as linear processes, but rather as complex systems in which individual, relational, and structural factors interact dynamically with one another

(Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Ungar, 2011). Accordingly, resilience is not approached as a static personality trait, but as a dynamic process shaped through the interaction between personal resources and the social environment (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011). Particular attention is devoted to identifying the resources young people are able to mobilize during the transition to independent adulthood, as well as the institutional and social factors that facilitate or hinder their social integration.

The study covers four Transylvanian counties—Harghita, Mureș, Cluj, and Covasna—and is based on a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data collection provides a comprehensive overview of the social situation and living conditions of young people, while qualitative interviews enable a deeper understanding of individual life trajectories and experiences. The theoretical framework is closely connected to the positive youth development approach, which emphasizes that, given adequate support, young people are capable of mobilizing their existing resources (Kőrössi, 2016). At the same time, the dissertation focuses not only on protective factors but also on structural constraints and the difficulties arising from the functioning of the system itself.

The research has a dual objective. On the one hand, it aims to identify the factors that shape the transition to independent living and the social integration of young people leaving the child protection system; on the other hand, it seeks to understand under what conditions this transition may become the starting point for the development of a stable and autonomous life. The dissertation emphasizes that leaving the care system does not inevitably lead to marginalization; rather, with adequate relational and institutional support, it may also enable positive life trajectories (Neagu, 2017). In the development of such positive trajectories, the presence of at least one supportive adult and access to community resources may play a particularly important role (Rutter, 2000; Ungar, 2011).

The novelty of the research lies in its interpretation of resilience not exclusively as an individual psychological construct, but as a phenomenon embedded within social and institutional contexts. The dissertation places particular emphasis on the role of structural inequalities, institutional functioning, and relational resources, as well as on how these factors influence young people's social integration and independent life management.

Theoretical Background of the Research

Theoretical and Institutional Frameworks of the Child Protection System

The theoretical point of departure of the dissertation is that the concept of child protection is a historically and socially constructed phenomenon that changes over time and is closely connected to the evolving social understanding of childhood. With the emergence of the modern concept of childhood, childhood became recognized as a distinct life stage (Ariès, 1962), while state responsibility for ensuring children's well-being gradually strengthened (Parton, 2014). Contemporary approaches to child protection are no longer limited solely to ensuring physical safety, but also emphasize children's rights, psychosocial development, and social integration (Gilbert et al., 2011; Parton, 2014). The Convention on the Rights of the Child represented a particularly significant turning point, as it defined the child as an autonomous rights-holder and placed the principle of the "best interests of the child" at the center of intervention (UN, 1989; Lansdown, 2005). At the same time, the functioning of child protection systems continues to be strongly influenced by different welfare state models, the logic of the risk society (Beck, 1992), and prevailing social policy priorities (Gilbert et al., 2011).

The historical overview demonstrates that forms of child care and protection have gradually evolved over time. During the medieval and early modern periods, care was primarily charitable in nature and was mainly provided by religious institutions (Boswell, 1988). At that time, child protection had not yet emerged as an independent state responsibility, but was instead linked primarily to religious and philanthropic initiatives (Deák, 2024). In the first half of the twentieth century, however, the professionalization of social care services began, including the establishment of the first Romanian school of social work (1929), while state involvement in supporting children and families gradually expanded (Preda, 2002).

The development of the Romanian child protection system is closely connected to the country's social and political transformations. During the communist period, the system operated in a highly centralized and institution-centered manner dominated by large residential institutions (Stan & Vancea, 2015). In many respects, these institutions corresponded to Goffman's (1961) concept of the "total institution," in which children's individual needs were often subordinated to institutional routines. Following the political transition, however, a gradual reform process was initiated, strongly supported by international organizations such as UNICEF, USAID, and the World Bank

through institutional and policy reforms (UNICEF, 2013). From the 2000s onward, the legal and institutional framework of the child protection system gradually stabilized: Laws 705/2001 and 292/2011 defined the basic principles governing the system, while Law 466/2004 and the establishment of the CNASR contributed to strengthening the professional foundation of the field (Buzducea, 2021).

The dissertation emphasizes that the functioning of the child protection system continues to be shaped by significant structural problems. Staff shortages, underfunding, and the limited functioning of preventive services have a direct impact on the living conditions of children and young people (Buzducea, 2021). According to Eurostat (2025), 19% of young people aged 15–29 in Romania belong to the NEET category, while more than one-third of children live in poverty or social exclusion. In the case of young people leaving the child protection system, these social disadvantages become particularly pronounced, especially during the transition to independent adulthood (Porumb, 2010; Toth & Mita, 2020). In this interpretation, the system appears not merely as a structure of care provision, but also as a social environment in which social inequalities are partially reproduced (Bourdieu, 1986).

A key concept in understanding the life situations of young people leaving the child protection system is youth as a transitional life stage. Youth represents the period between childhood and adulthood during which young people gradually attempt to establish their place in society by relying increasingly on their own resources (Porumb, 2010). For young people with a child protection background, this transition is often particularly difficult due to labor market insecurity, housing problems, and low educational attainment (Bradley & van Hoof, 2005; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Romanian studies indicate that these disadvantages frequently reinforce one another throughout young people's life trajectories (Porumb, 2010; Toth & Mita, 2020). Consequently, the effects of child protection do not end with childhood, but continue to shape the process of becoming an adult.

One of the dissertation's central findings is that the success of leaving care does not depend solely on individual abilities, but is also closely linked to the functioning of social networks, institutional support, and community resources (Stein, 2008; Ungar, 2011). The conditions under which young people live within the child protection system later directly influence their opportunities for independent living and the success of their social integration.

Foundations of Adolescent Development and Social Integration

The dissertation interprets social integration as a complex and multidimensional process that begins in adolescence and gradually develops throughout the transition to adulthood (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Stein, 2008). Social integration cannot be reduced solely to economic integration, as it also encompasses psychological, social, cultural, and institutional dimensions (Elder, 1985). In this sense, adolescence represents a transitional life stage during which identity patterns, values, and future-oriented aspirations are formed, all of which shape an individual's life trajectory in the long term (Váriné, 1987). According to Allport (1961), the psychological structures consolidated during this period have a lasting influence on the individual's developmental pathway. Developmental tasks include emotional separation, the transformation of social relationships, and the formation of decisions related to the future and career choice (Havinghurst, 1948; Vikár, 1980). At the same time, this period may also involve increased vulnerability, particularly in the absence of a supportive environment, when the likelihood of psychological difficulties and risk behaviors increases (Szabó, 2018; Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011).

The dissertation pays particular attention to the concept of “emerging adulthood,” which, according to Arnett (2000; 2004), refers to the transitional period between the ages of 18 and 25. This life stage is characterized by identity exploration, increasing independence, and unstable life circumstances. For young people leaving the child protection system, this transition often takes place with limited support, thereby increasing their social and psychological vulnerability.

One of the central areas of adolescent development is cognitive development and identity formation. According to Piaget, this period is marked by the emergence of abstract thinking, which enables future planning and the interpretation of more complex problems (Piaget & Inhelder, 2004). From the perspective of biological development, the maturation of the prefrontal cortex plays a crucial role in self-regulation and decision-making (Albert & Steinberg, 2011). Erikson's theory identifies identity formation as one of the most important developmental tasks of adolescence, referring to the integration of past experiences with present circumstances and future plans (Erikson, 2002). When this process fails to stabilize, it may lead to identity confusion and problematic adaptation patterns (Erikson, 2002; Váriné, 1987).

Social relationships also play a decisive role in adolescent development. During this period, the influence of the family partially recedes, while peer relationships gain increasing importance

(Bagdy, 2002). Peer groups provide not only a social environment, but also norms and behavioral patterns (Zsiros, 2011; Jones et al., 2014). At the same time, peer influence has a dual nature: supportive relationships may function as protective factors, particularly in the context of disadvantaged family backgrounds (Bukowski et al., 2011), whereas peer pressure may increase the likelihood of risk-taking behaviors (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005).

The dissertation strongly builds upon the positive youth development approach, which shifts the focus from problems toward individual and environmental resources (Kőrössi, 2016; Masten, 2001). Within this framework, adolescence is understood not only as a period of risk, but also as an opportunity for development, provided that the environment offers adequate support. Particular emphasis is placed on the concept of social capital, which, according to Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1990), and Putnam (2000), refers to resources accessible through social relationships. Supportive adult relationships, stable peer networks, and community participation may contribute significantly to the development of self-efficacy and resilience (Helve & Bynner, 2007).

The dissertation interprets the transition to adulthood through the life course perspective, according to which the life trajectory is not the result of a single decision, but rather a process composed of multiple interconnected transitions (Elder, 1985; Elder et al., 2003). Completing education, entering the labor market, obtaining independent housing, or starting a family are all transitional milestones that, in contemporary societies, have become increasingly unpredictable and often prolonged (Arnett, 2000; Buchmann, 1989; Gauthier, 2007a). The life course approach emphasizes that life trajectories are shaped not only by individual choices, but also by social structures, historical contexts, and available resources (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

For young people raised within the child protection system, these developmental processes unfold in a highly specific environment. Institutional experiences, the quality of social networks, and the availability of support systems jointly shape the opportunities with which young people leave care. In this context, resilience and life skills acquire particular significance, as they cannot be understood in isolation but only in interaction with environmental conditions (Ungar, 2011; Masten, 2001).

The Child Protection System as a Space of Socialization

The dissertation interprets the child protection system as a specific socialization environment that significantly influences the development of young people's self-image, value systems, and future orientation (Giddens, 1997). The development of young people raised in child protection institutions differs from the traditional framework of family socialization, as institutional environments transmit different relational and normative patterns (Stein, 2008).

The reasons for entering the child protection system are generally complex and closely connected to cumulative disadvantages. According to the Romanian literature, poverty, housing insecurity, parental neglect, abuse, and dysfunctional family environments may all contribute to placement in child protection care (Daniel, 2025). These problems typically do not appear separately, but rather accumulate and reinforce one another. In this context, the child protection system does not merely fulfill a caregiving function, but also actively shapes the socialization patterns of young people (Elder, 1985).

The dissertation emphasizes that the institutional environment significantly affects the behavioral patterns young people internalize, the ways in which they perceive their own opportunities, and the development of their self-esteem and future planning. Residential institutions and family-type homes may, in certain respects, display characteristics of total institutions (Goffman, 1961), as their operation is regulated, hierarchical, and partially separated from the broader society.

According to Gilligan (1999), the functioning of residential child care institutions is organized around four core functions: care, protection, compensation, and preparation. Care refers to the provision of basic needs; protection aims to reduce risk factors; compensation seeks to address previous deficits; while preparation focuses on developing the skills necessary for independent living.

Within the child protection system, school functions as a secondary socialization environment; however, young people frequently begin with significant educational disadvantages (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990). The lack of cultural capital—that is, the limited transmission of skills, norms, and resources that facilitate social advancement—has a long-term influence on educational and labor market trajectories (Bourdieu, 1986). Peer relationships are also particularly significant, as within institutional environments they often exert a stronger influence on young people than in the case of peers raised in families (Stein, 2008).

One of the central tasks of the child protection system is preparing young people for independent living. This involves not only the development of practical competencies, but also the acquisition of responsibility, self-regulation, and social norms. Research suggests, however, that structured institutional environments do not always adequately prepare young people for leaving care (Gonzales, 2015). In Romania, more than 2,500 young people leave the child protection system each year, and a considerable proportion begin independent life with uncertain future prospects, low self-confidence, and limited life-management skills (Dan, 2016).

At the same time, the dissertation emphasizes that despite these difficulties, resilience plays a decisive role in adaptation. Supportive relationships, positive institutional experiences, and perseverance may contribute significantly to more successful life trajectories (Mureșan, 2023). In this interpretation, resilience is not understood as a stable personality trait, but rather as a dynamic process shaped through the interaction between individual and environmental factors (Ungar, 2011; Masten, 2001).

Life Skills and the Conditions of Independent Living

The dissertation interprets life skills as one of the fundamental prerequisites for independent living. In the study of adolescence and young adulthood, a central question concerns how young people adapt to life challenges and what resources support their development and social integration (Eccles et al., 2003). The quality of adaptation affects not only current psychological and social well-being, but also long-term social and economic integration in adulthood.

Life skills refer to competencies related to the practical management of everyday life (WHO, 1994). These include career orientation, job searching, financial management, household management, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and the ability to navigate institutional systems. Such competencies are closely connected to the sense of self-efficacy—that is, the belief that individuals are capable of influencing the course of their own lives (Bandura, 1997). From the perspective of resilience, it is therefore particularly important to examine the factors that facilitate or hinder the development of these skills (Rutter, 2000).

According to the WHO definition, life skills can be interpreted as adaptive behavioral patterns that facilitate the management of everyday situations (WHO, 1994). The concept encompasses multiple dimensions, including decision-making, problem-solving, communication, self-awareness, and

emotional regulation (Sorescu, 2022). During young adulthood, these skills gradually become linked to autonomy and responsibility, while their practical applicability becomes increasingly important for successful social integration.

The dissertation emphasizes that the development of life skills is closely connected to socialization experiences and the quality of social relationships. Peer relationships play a particularly important role in this regard, as they create opportunities for practicing cooperation, conflict resolution, and responsibility-taking. Consequently, personality development and the process of social integration become closely interconnected (Bagdy, 2002; Buda, 1986; Solymosi, 2004a).

In the case of young people leaving the child protection system, the lack of life skills may directly hinder the establishment of an independent life. Since the transition to adulthood often occurs with limited resources, financial competencies, everyday organizational skills, and social competencies become especially significant. For this reason, the empirical section of the dissertation examines these areas in particular, as they directly influence the success of independent living and opportunities for social integration.

Mental Well-Being and Psychological Health in Child Protection

Mental well-being represents one of the central conceptual dimensions of the dissertation and is closely connected to resilience, preparation for independent living, and the process of social integration. In the case of young people living in or leaving the child protection system, mental health cannot be interpreted solely as an individual condition, since its development is shaped simultaneously by early life experiences, institutional experiences, and the broader social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Rutter, 1987; Masten, 2001).

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is a state in which individuals are able to cope with everyday challenges, maintain social relationships, and function actively within their environment (WHO, 2001). Mental well-being can be understood across several dimensions, including emotional balance, psychological functioning, and the quality of social relationships (Ryff, 1989; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). These factors become particularly significant during adolescence and young adulthood, when identity formation, increasing independence, and future planning come to the forefront (Eccles et al., 2003).

The mental well-being of young people in the child protection system is often more vulnerable, as multiple interconnected risk factors influence their life trajectories. Experiences such as separation from the family, neglect or abuse, disrupted attachment relationships, and difficulties adapting to institutional environments may have long-term effects on emotional functioning and self-esteem (Bowlby, 1988). For this reason, a trauma-informed approach becomes particularly important, as it takes into account the psychological consequences of early adverse experiences (SAMHSA, 2014; Bessel, 2015).

International research indicates that psychological difficulties such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness, and substance use occur more frequently among young people raised in child protection care (Stein, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011). At the same time, the dissertation emphasizes that mental well-being cannot be reduced merely to the absence of problems. Equally important are the coping strategies young people use, the supportive relationships available to them, and their access to psychological support services (Ungar, 2011; Masten, 2001).

Access to psychological support is of particular importance for young people living within the child protection system; however, services are often limited or insufficiently adapted to young people's needs (Munro, 2011). Leaving the care system constitutes an especially sensitive period, as institutional frameworks and forms of support may disappear while individual responsibility and uncertainty simultaneously increase (Stein, 2008). During this phase, mental well-being directly influences multiple areas of everyday life, including employment, housing, and the maintenance of social relationships.

Within the dissertation's theoretical framework, mental well-being appears as one of the central dimensions of resilience (Ungar, 2011). Psychological functioning, emotional regulation, and coping abilities are directly connected to adaptation processes. Empirical findings also support the assumption that self-esteem and psychological stability may represent important resources for young people living within child protection environments (Soare, 2025). For this reason, the empirical section of the dissertation examines mental well-being as part of a complex understanding of resilience, allowing for the simultaneous analysis of individual and environmental factors.

Young People with Special Needs in Child Protection

The dissertation devotes particular attention to the situation of young people with disabilities, as the difficulties associated with leaving the child protection system often accumulate in their case. International literature emphasizes that the care of children with disabilities requires specialized approaches and targeted forms of support (WHO, 2011; UNICEF, 2014). Empirical studies indicate that children with disabilities are overrepresented in residential institutions, even in more developed welfare systems (Eurochild, 2024; Lightfoot et al., 2011).

Research demonstrates that young people with disabilities are simultaneously affected by vulnerabilities related to family background, social inequalities, and limitations associated with their health condition (Jones et al., 2014). These factors not only restrict opportunities for social participation, but also influence independent decision-making and self-advocacy. According to international research, successful social integration depends on the provision of individualized support, inclusive education, access to developmental services, and mentoring opportunities (Eurofound, 2012).

Within the Romanian child protection system, the proportion of children with disabilities remains high. According to ANPDCA data from 2025, approximately 18.2% of children receiving child protection services live with disabilities. Although a shift toward deinstitutionalization can be observed—particularly through the expansion of family-type homes and small residential units—structural problems remain significant. Territorial inequalities in services, staff shortages, and the limited accessibility of developmental services substantially influence the social integration of affected young people.

The dissertation emphasizes that the life trajectories of young people with disabilities are shaped primarily not by individual deficits, but by interconnected structural factors. Limited access to inclusive education, weak labor market integration, and prevailing social attitudes jointly restrict opportunities for participation. Consequently, effective support can only be achieved through integrated and multi-level coordinated service systems.

The Multidimensional Approach to Resilience in Child Protection

Theoretical Approaches to Resilience

The dissertation interprets resilience not as a static personality trait, but as a dynamic and socially embedded process of adaptation shaped through the interaction between individual resources and

environmental conditions (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011; Rutter, 2000). The application of resilience is particularly relevant in the study of young people leaving the child protection system, as it provides an opportunity to identify the factors that contribute to successful independent living and social integration.

The dissertation emphasizes that the use of the concept of resilience is not without limitations, since certain approaches place excessive emphasis on individual adaptation while neglecting the role of structural inequalities. The research therefore adopts a critical perspective toward individualized interpretations and conceptualizes resilience as a social process shaped simultaneously by institutional environments, relational networks, and broader social conditions. Within the context of the child protection system, this perspective is particularly important, as young people's life trajectories are significantly influenced by structural constraints and social inequalities.

In the present research, resilience is understood as an adaptive process that enables positive developmental outcomes despite adverse life circumstances (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011). It becomes especially significant during the transition to adulthood, when young people simultaneously confront the demands of independence and structural uncertainties (Arnett, 2000). Adaptive coping strategies, supportive relationships, and psychological stability all contribute to successful adaptation while strengthening self-esteem and future orientation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rutter, 2000).

The dissertation distinguishes between mental well-being and resilience. While mental well-being refers to an individual's current psychological condition, resilience reflects how individuals respond to adverse situations and how effectively they adapt to changing circumstances (Masten, 2001). Nevertheless, the two dimensions are closely interconnected: greater psychological stability facilitates adaptive coping, while successful adaptation experiences contribute to maintaining psychological balance.

In the case of young people raised within the child protection system, the development of resilience constitutes a particularly complex process, as their life trajectories are often marked by cumulative disadvantages and traumatic experiences. Separation from the family, institutional placement, frequent environmental changes, and the absence of stable supportive relationships all influence psychological functioning and opportunities for social integration (Ungar, 2011; Goffman, 1963;

Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Consequently, resilience cannot be interpreted exclusively at the individual level: alongside personal resources, supportive relationships, trusted adults, and the quality of institutional environments also play decisive roles (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Masten, 2001).

The research also emphasizes the importance of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and participation in decision-making processes. Competencies necessary for independent living—such as financial management, problem-solving, and managing social relationships—can be developed through practical experience (Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Resilience therefore appears as a complex phenomenon shaped through the interaction of individual skills, relational resources, and structural conditions.

Main Approaches in International Resilience Research

International literature extensively examines the development of resilience among young people living in and leaving the child protection system. Research primarily focuses on identifying the factors that support or hinder adaptation at the levels of individual resources, relational networks, and structural conditions. Empirical findings indicate that self-esteem and supportive social relationships play a particularly important role in the development of resilience (Legault et al., 2006; Taussig, 2002).

Research also emphasizes the role of schools, which function not only as educational spaces but also as supportive social environments. Inclusive school climates and positive relationships may partially compensate for deficiencies in family backgrounds (Rutter, 1987). Contemporary approaches to resilience have gradually shifted from models centered on individual traits toward systemic and ecological interpretations (Masten & Obradovic, 2006).

Central elements of international resilience models include protective and risk factors. Protective factors refer to resources that reduce negative effects and support adaptation, whereas risk factors increase the likelihood of unfavorable life outcomes (Luthar, 2006; Fraser & Terzian, 2005). These factors simultaneously operate at individual, relational, and societal levels (Szabó, 2018).

Particular emphasis is placed on supportive adult relationships. Research on mentoring demonstrates that stable relationships function as significant protective factors, especially for young people who experience difficulties in forming trusting relationships (Whitesides et al.,

2024). Sports, community activities, and religious communities may also contribute positively to the development of resilience (Neill & Dias, 2001; Carothers et al., 2006).

At the same time, the dissertation emphasizes that these findings emerged within different welfare and institutional contexts; therefore, their direct application remains limited. The development of resilience depends significantly on local service systems, institutional functioning, and the structure of social inequalities.

Romanian Approaches to Resilience Research

Romanian research, similarly to international findings, demonstrates that the life trajectories of young people raised in the child protection system are shaped simultaneously by individual and structural factors. At the same time, many studies remain primarily descriptive in nature and provide less insight into the mechanisms that directly influence the development of resilience.

Research findings indicate that the transition to independent living is often hindered by insufficient life skills, dependency patterns, and limited crisis-management abilities (Anghel & Dima, 2008). According to Bunea (2017), successful adaptation does not depend on innate characteristics, but rather on skills and relational resources developed through socialization. Positive factors include self-efficacy, optimism, planning ability, and supportive relationships.

Romanian studies also highlight shortcomings within institutional care. According to Câmpcean and colleagues (2010), institutions primarily focus on academic achievement, while the development of practical life skills necessary for everyday functioning receives considerably less attention. The future perspectives of young people and professionals often differ: while professionals tend to perceive uncertainty, young people frequently emphasize the possibility of freedom and independence.

Psychosocial vulnerability is another recurring theme in Romanian research. Low self-esteem, unresolved trauma, and weak social skills significantly influence social integration (Porumb, 2010). Antal Imola and colleagues (2019) further point out that certain institutional experiences may themselves become additional traumatic experiences with long-term consequences for adaptation processes.

At the same time, Romanian studies also identify positive life trajectories. According to Neagu (2017), supportive adult relationships, educational opportunities, and stable institutional environments may significantly strengthen resilience and facilitate successful social integration. This perspective is consistent with Masten's (2001) interpretation of resilience as not an extraordinary individual trait, but rather a process emerging through the interaction of personal and environmental protective factors.

Methodological Framework of the Research

Research Objectives and Framework

The research examines the role of resilience in the life trajectories of young people growing up in or leaving the child protection system, with particular attention to the period following institutional exit. The dissertation's central question is not limited to identifying the difficulties these young people face, but also seeks to explore which resources prove genuinely functional during the transition to independent living and how these are connected to social integration.

The starting point of the research is that the life trajectories of young people leaving the child protection system in Romania remain largely "invisible," as there is no unified follow-up system and little empirical data is available concerning long-term outcomes. Professional reports and field experiences suggest that young people frequently encounter uncertainty regarding housing, stable supportive relationships, and access to psychological support. Literature highlights that low self-esteem, insecure attachment, and deficiencies in life-management skills form interconnected patterns that significantly shape later life circumstances (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005; Bottrell, 2009; Collins et al., 2010).

The dissertation places particular emphasis on the role of supportive relationships and education. Research suggests that young people are more likely to transition successfully into independent living when they possess at least one reliable adult relationship and have access to educational opportunities (Gilligan, 1999; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Brännström et al., 2022). Educational attainment not only improves labor market opportunities but also provides broader possibilities for social participation (Bunea, 2017). Personal resources such as self-confidence, future planning, and perseverance also play important roles in the development of resilience (Stein, 2008; Yates & Grey, 2012).

Summary of the Pilot Research

During the pilot research conducted between 2019 and 2020, I analyzed semi-structured interviews with 26 institutionalized young people aged 18–21 in child protection institutions located in Cluj and Mureș counties. The purpose of the study was to explore how institutional socialization influences young people's future orientation, attitudes toward further education, and preparation for independent living.

The results demonstrated that although most young people had plans regarding further education or vocational training, these plans often remained uncertain or lacked concrete implementation strategies. Significant gaps in support emerged in areas such as housing, financial management, and employment, which were further reinforced by limited social capital and insufficient material resources. The desire for early family formation also appeared prominently in young people's future plans, which is consistent with findings from other national and international studies (Murányi, 2000; Hüse & Nyírcsák, 2005).

Among the risk factors identified during the pilot research, the termination of protective measures proved particularly significant, as young people frequently experienced this transition as a source of stress. Stigmatization and social stereotypes associated with the child protection system also represented serious obstacles to social integration (Schofield & Beek, 2009; Oelofsen, 2015; Neagu, 2017). The findings confirmed that young people raised in institutional care face support deficits in multiple areas, thereby justifying the continuation of the research and the deeper examination of resilience mechanisms.

Applied Theoretical Model

The theoretical foundation of the research is the multidimensional approach to resilience, which conceptualizes resilience not as an innate characteristic but as a dynamic adaptation process (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011). The dissertation is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which interprets individual development through interconnected environmental levels. This framework enables resilience and life skills to be examined not as isolated phenomena, but within relational and institutional contexts.

The research perspective also incorporates the life course approach, theories of the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000), and the trauma-informed perspective (SAMHSA, 2014). In addition, the

dissertation applies the resource-oriented Positive Youth Development approach, which focuses not exclusively on deficits but also on young people's competencies and developmental opportunities (Kőrössi, 2016).

The empirical research combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The questionnaire survey focused on family background, relationships, education, mental well-being, and life-management skills, while the interviews aimed to explore individual experiences and meanings through the narratives of young people and professionals. Resilience was examined in two principal directions: through the analysis of internal coping mechanisms and external resources.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The central objective of the research is to examine how different dimensions of resilience contribute to the social integration and transition to independent living among young people raised in or leaving the child protection system. The dissertation is based on the assumption that resilience is not exclusively an individual psychological characteristic, but rather a process shaped within relational and institutional contexts. The theoretical framework is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model, the transactional approach developed by Luthar and colleagues (2000), and Ungar's (2011) contextual theory of resilience. These approaches share a common emphasis on the idea that coping processes can only be understood in conjunction with social and environmental conditions.

The qualitative phase of the research aimed to explore how young people leaving the child protection system interpret their own life trajectories and which factors they consider decisive in relation to coping and social integration. The central research question focused on identifying the factors that facilitate or hinder young people's social integration after leaving institutional care. More specific research questions addressed the meaning of coping, the role of supportive relationships, the influence of family background, institutional experiences, differences between state and civil care services, and gender-related differences. The qualitative findings also provided the foundation for the variables and hypothesis system applied in the quantitative phase of the study.

The quantitative phase of the research was based on the multidimensional resilience model and examined how individual, relational, and structural factors are associated with the development of

resilience among young people living in or leaving the child protection system. The hypothesis system was organized around seven main dimensions.

The first hypothesis assumed that more favorable psychological well-being, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are associated with higher levels of resilience. The analysis focused on factors related to self-perception, problem management, and confidence in the future. This hypothesis draws upon the theories of Bandura (1997), Baumeister and colleagues (2003), and Masten (2001), all of whom emphasize the importance of self-esteem and self-efficacy in adaptation processes.

The second hypothesis examined the role of social support, based on the assumption that the presence of supportive relationships is associated with better mental well-being and higher resilience. Social support was operationalized through trust-based relationships, emotional support, and opportunities for help-seeking. The hypothesis relies on the approaches of Bronfenbrenner (1994), Masten (2001), and Ungar (2013), according to whom the social environment plays a decisive role in the development of resilience.

The third hypothesis proposed that disadvantaged family backgrounds are associated with lower resilience and more uncertain future orientation. The research explored this relationship through the analysis of parental relationships, family stability, and the circumstances leading to placement in the child protection system. The hypothesis is grounded in ecological perspectives and approaches emphasizing structural disadvantage, according to which the family environment has long-term effects on adaptation opportunities and future orientation (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Ungar, 2011).

The fourth hypothesis investigated the relationship between educational aspirations and resilience. It assumed that higher educational goals are positively associated with resilience and future orientation. The analysis focused on variables related to educational plans, school motivation, and future goals. The theoretical background includes the works of Bandura (1997), Masten (2001), and Stein (2008), who interpret education as one of the key determinants of social integration and independent living.

The fifth hypothesis examined the role of active coping strategies. The research assumed that strategies such as communication, help-seeking, and engagement in active activities are associated with better psychological well-being and higher resilience. The hypothesis is based on the coping

theories of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), as well as Ungar's (2011) approach emphasizing the importance of active problem-solving in maintaining psychological well-being.

The sixth hypothesis proposed that cumulative disadvantages negatively affect mental well-being and resilience. The research examined the combined effects of family problems, financial difficulties, experiences of loss, and substance use. This hypothesis is linked to the vulnerability models of Rutter (1998) and Ungar (2011), according to which cumulative risk factors significantly weaken adaptation processes.

The seventh hypothesis was based on the multidimensional nature of resilience. The dissertation assumed that resilience is not the result of a single personal trait, but rather emerges through the complex interaction of individual, relational, and institutional factors. This was examined through the analysis of relationships between personal resources, supportive relationships, and institutional environments. The hypothesis is directly connected to the multidimensional resilience theories of Bronfenbrenner (1994), Luthar and colleagues (2000), and Ungar (2011).

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The research applied purposive sampling across four Romanian counties: Harghita, Mureș, Cluj, and Covasna. The study included three target groups: young people currently living in child protection care, young people who had already left the system, and professionals working in child protection and social support services.

A total of 278 young people participated in the quantitative data collection, representing a response rate of 88.8%. During the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 young people with child protection experience and 53 professionals. The sample included both state-run and civil institutions, allowing for comparisons across different institutional environments.

Research Instruments and Data Processing

The research applied a mixed-methods approach in which questionnaire-based data collection was complemented by qualitative interviews. The questionnaire was a self-developed measurement instrument based on dimensions derived from several international surveys (ACLSA, ILSA),

examining areas such as mental well-being, relational background, institutional experiences, life-management skills, and future orientation.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with professionals and young people who had already left the child protection system. The interviews focused on institutional functioning, support practices, experiences related to independent living, and coping strategies. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and Jamovi software, while qualitative interviews were processed through thematic analysis using MAXQDA software.

Results of the Questionnaire Survey

Background of the Survey and Characteristics of the Sample

The research aimed to reach, as comprehensively as possible, young people over the age of 16 living within the child protection system across the four selected Transylvanian counties (Harghita, Cluj, Covasna, and Mureş). Out of the target population of 313 individuals, 278 young people participated in the questionnaire survey, representing a response rate of nearly 89%. Data collection was conducted between December 2025 and March 2026, partly through face-to-face administration and partly online.

The gender distribution of the sample can be considered balanced: 52.5% of respondents were female and 47.5% were male. Based on age distribution, the research primarily focused on the 16–18 age group, namely young people who were still living within the child protection system or were directly approaching independent adulthood. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants were Hungarian (56.7%), although Romanian and Roma respondents were also represented in the sample.

The examination of institutional background showed that the majority of respondents lived in family-type homes (91.0%), while the proportion of large residential institutions was relatively low. Considerable variation emerged regarding the length of time spent in care: some young people had lived in child protection services for only a few years, while others had remained in the system for more than a decade. Institutional mobility also appeared as a significant phenomenon, as many respondents had previously lived in multiple institutions.

Family Background and Reasons for Placement

The findings indicate that entry into the child protection system is most frequently associated with structural and family-related problems.

Figure 4. Distribution of reasons for placement into the child protection system
(Source: author's own questionnaire survey (2026), own editing; $N = 249$).

The most common reason for placement was poverty, followed by substance abuse within the family, housing difficulties, and parental labor migration abroad. It is noteworthy that several young people were unable to identify the exact reason for their placement, which may partly reflect a lack of information and partly an attempt to avoid confronting the past.

Findings related to family background show that most young people maintained contact with family members; however, these relationships were often fragmented and unstable. The strongest emotional bonds were connected to siblings, whereas relationships with parents were in many cases weaker or disrupted. Emotional support and problem-sharing were linked primarily not to family members, but rather to educators and friends.

Parents' educational attainment was generally low, reflecting limited family resources and disadvantaged social status. The findings partially support Hypothesis 3, according to which disadvantaged family backgrounds are associated with more uncertain future orientation and lower resilience.

Relational Networks and Social Support

The analysis of relational networks revealed highly diverse patterns of social relationships among participants. Although the majority of respondents reported having friends, substantial differences emerged in both the number and quality of relationships. Nearly one-third of the young people had only one or two close friendships, whereas a smaller group possessed broader social networks.

A significant proportion of these relationships extended beyond the institutional environment: many young people maintained contact with peers living in family settings. These external relationships may represent particularly important resources during the transition to independent living, as they provide broader opportunities for social integration and community participation.

Most respondents evaluated their social situations positively: high levels of agreement appeared regarding their ability to make friends easily and the importance they attributed to friendships. At

the same time, feelings of loneliness were also present, indicating that relationships do not always provide stable emotional support. These findings confirm Hypothesis 2, according to which supportive relationships are associated with higher resilience and more favorable mental well-being.

Education and Future Orientation

Educational findings indicate that the majority of young people participated in vocational education, while continuation into upper secondary or university education appeared considerably less frequently. Educators represented the primary source of academic support, although many young people were unable to identify any specific source of assistance in their educational pathways.

Future orientation, however, did not present a uniform pattern. Slightly more than half of the respondents expressed the intention to complete the baccalaureate examination, and in several cases aspirations toward university education also appeared. Chi-square analysis revealed a significant relationship between parents' educational attainment and educational aspirations ($p < 0.01$): lower educational backgrounds were associated more frequently with vocational education plans, whereas children of more highly educated parents more often expressed intentions to pursue university studies.

The findings also indicate that several young people planned to achieve higher educational levels than their parents, a phenomenon of particular importance from the perspective of social mobility and resilience.

Leisure Activities and Community Participation

Participation in leisure and community activities proved generally low. Fewer than half of the respondents engaged regularly in sports activities, while participation in volunteer work was even less frequent. Volunteer activities were primarily connected to religious, charitable, or community-based programs.

The lack of community participation should not be interpreted merely as inactivity, but also as a factor limiting opportunities to establish new relationships, develop competencies necessary for

independent living, and strengthen social integration. In this sense, structured leisure activities emerge as important contexts for the development of resilience.

Risk Behaviors and Mental Well-Being

Substance use cannot be considered a dominant phenomenon within the examined sample; however, certain risk behaviors—particularly smoking and occasional alcohol consumption—were present. Experimentation with illicit substances appeared only within smaller groups. The findings suggest that environmental and peer influences continue to play important roles in everyday life.

The analysis of mental well-being showed that most young people reported moderate or positive psychological states; nevertheless, uncertainty and emotional burden appeared in a considerable proportion of responses. Among coping strategies, communication and seeking social support were the most common, followed by listening to music, engaging in creative activities, and spending time alone. Seeking professional psychological help appeared significantly less frequently.

The findings indicate that young people possessing a wider repertoire of coping strategies adapt more easily to unexpected situations and the challenges of independent living. In contrast, a narrower coping repertoire may increase vulnerability and the risk of psychological insecurity.

Dimensions of Resilience and Statistical Analysis

Among the internal dimensions of resilience, the highest scores were associated with problem-solving, confidence in decision-making, and the positive reinterpretation of difficulties. At the same time, coping with stressful situations emerged as a comparatively weaker area.

Regarding external dimensions, a stronger supportive pattern emerged: most young people indicated that they had at least one adult in their lives to whom they could turn in times of need, while peer relationships and community activities also played important roles.

The results of the factor analysis demonstrated that resilience was organized into two clearly distinguishable dimensions: an internal factor related to psychological resources and an external factor connected to relational and social support resources. Based on the Cronbach-alpha indicators, both the internal resilience dimension ($\alpha = 0.779$) and the external resilience dimension ($\alpha = 0.850$) demonstrated adequate internal consistency. The analysis of the relationship between

institutional mobility and resilience revealed a weak but statistically significant negative association: the greater the number of institutional changes experienced by a young person, the lower the resilience scores appeared to be. This relationship proved particularly important regarding emotional regulation, stress management, and the stability of relationships.

Examination and Evaluation of the Hypotheses

The results of the quantitative analyses confirmed the majority of the proposed hypotheses. The findings indicate that resilience does not derive from a single factor, but rather develops through the combined influence of individual resources, supportive relationships, and institutional experiences.

The hypothesis related to individual resources (H1) was confirmed: more favorable psychological well-being, self-esteem, and self-efficacy showed positive associations with resilience. The hypothesis concerning the role of social support (H2) was also supported, as the presence of supportive relationships was associated with better mental well-being and higher resilience. The regression model produced statistically significant results ($R^2 = 0.28$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that relational variables meaningfully explain the development of external resilience.

The hypothesis concerning family background (H3) was partially confirmed: lower parental educational attainment was associated with more uncertain future orientation; however, several young people demonstrated aspirations toward social mobility and divergence from family patterns.

The hypothesis related to educational aspirations (H4) was confirmed, as plans for further education and positive future orientation were associated with more developed life-management skills and higher resilience. The hypothesis concerning active coping strategies (H5) was likewise supported: relationship-based coping strategies, particularly discussing problems with others, emerged as important protective factors. The hypothesis concerning risk factors (H6) was also confirmed, as cumulative disadvantages and frequent institutional changes showed negative associations with mental well-being and resilience.

The hypothesis concerning the multidimensional nature of resilience (H7) was also validated. Factor analysis identified two interconnected resilience dimensions: an internal and an external

factor. The findings support the interpretation of resilience as a complex, multi-level phenomenon shaped simultaneously by individual experiences, social networks, and environmental conditions.

Results of the Interview-Based Research

The qualitative data collection was conducted between December 2025 and March 2026 across four Transylvanian counties (Harghita, Cluj, Covasna, and Mureş). In total, 53 semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals, including educators, social workers, psychologists, teachers, and institutional directors. The purpose of the interviews was to provide deeper insight into the situation of young people living within the child protection system, the difficulties of preparation for independent living, and the processes of resilience and social integration.

Structural Factors and Systemic Constraints

According to professionals' accounts, young people's life trajectories are strongly shaped by structural disadvantages such as poverty, unstable family backgrounds, and lack of resources. One of the most frequently recurring themes in the interviews concerned staff shortages and institutional overload. Several participants emphasized that access to psychological and therapeutic services remains extremely limited, which is particularly problematic in the case of traumatized young people or those with special needs.

Bureaucratic overload also emerged as a recurring problem. According to professionals, administrative tasks consume a substantial amount of time that could otherwise be devoted to direct helping relationships and individualized support.

The interviews further revealed that the transition to independent living constitutes an especially vulnerable period. Although the system provides certain forms of material support upon leaving care, practical guidance and accompaniment are often lacking, limiting young people's ability to use these supports effectively. The absence of preventive services and early family support also emerged prominently in professionals' narratives.

The Impact of Institutional Functioning on Young People's Life Trajectories

Institutional functioning showed substantial variation across settings. Some institutions consciously prioritize preparation for independent living, whereas in others the focus remains primarily on the maintenance of daily institutional operations. According to professionals,

institutions that place greater emphasis on skill development and individualized attention contribute more effectively to young people's later adaptation and success.

Particular importance was attributed to the presence of stable caregivers and educators. Several professionals emphasized that the consistent presence of a predictable adult provides young people with a sense of security and facilitates the development of trust. At the same time, the lack of cooperation between institutions often interrupts support processes and continuity of care.

In the area of education and career orientation, a mixed picture emerged. According to several interviewees, educational pathways are often not aligned with young people's interests; however, positive examples were also identified in which educational support significantly reduced school dropout rates.

The Emotional Burden of Professionals

Burnout and emotional overload among professionals emerged as important themes within the interviews. Several participants reported that working in child protection is extremely demanding in the long term, particularly when the results of interventions become visible only slowly or partially. Supervision and professional support were described as insufficient or irregular in several institutions.

Professionals' emotional condition directly affects their work with young people: overload reduces the quality of relationships, consistency of support, and opportunities for individualized assistance.

Relational Resources and Social Capital

One of the strongest recurring themes in the interviews concerned the importance of relationships. According to professionals, stable relationships often function as fundamental protective factors for young people living within the child protection system. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of having a "secure point" — an adult who remains available and supportive over the long term.

The role of mentors and supportive adults proved especially significant during the transition to independence. Young people who had mentors or stable supportive relationships adapted more successfully to difficulties and navigated life after leaving care more effectively.

Peer relationships played a dual role: they could function simultaneously as sources of motivation and risk. While some relationships provided support, others reinforced negative behavioral patterns and the risk of social regression.

Qualitative Findings Based on Professionals' Interviews

The qualitative findings indicate that the social integration of young people leaving the child protection system can be interpreted as a complex, multi-level process shaped simultaneously by individual resources, relational networks, and structural conditions. The interviews revealed that young people's life trajectories are already influenced, prior to entering the system, by cumulative disadvantages, poverty, unstable family backgrounds, and relational disruptions. In professionals' narratives, structural deficiencies — particularly staff shortages, administrative overload, and limited access to psychological and specialized services — directly affect young people's opportunities for support and their chances of successful independent living.

One of the strongest recurring themes in the interviews concerned the significance of relational resources. Stable and supportive relationships emerged not merely as forms of emotional support, but as fundamental protective factors of resilience. Professionals emphasized that even a single stable adult relationship — involving a mentor, caregiver, or supportive professional — may play a decisive role in stabilizing young people's life trajectories. The importance of relationships can also be interpreted through the concept of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), as relational networks provide not only emotional security but also access to information, opportunities, and support resources. The findings confirmed that the absence of relational continuity constitutes a significant vulnerability factor, whereas supportive relationships facilitate the transition to independent living and social integration.

According to most interviewees, the period of leaving care represents a critical transitional stage. Professionals reported that many young people are insufficiently prepared for the challenges of independent adulthood, particularly in areas such as financial management, housing, employment, and everyday life management. In many cases, leaving care appears not as a gradual process of transition, but rather as a sudden and uncertain rupture during which institutional support disappears simultaneously with the emergence of expectations associated with independent living. The interviews also highlighted that the lack of practical skills, short-term future orientation, and

the absence of stable relationships significantly increase the risk of social regression and marginalization.

The issue of aftercare and continuity of support also emerged as a central theme. According to professionals, one of the greatest problems is that young people often abruptly lose the relational and institutional support systems that previously surrounded them after leaving care. The findings suggest that one-time financial assistance is less decisive than the long-term availability of personal relationships and individualized guidance. In cases where relational continuity was maintained — for example through mentoring, civil society programs, or informal support relationships — young people adapted more successfully to the challenges of independent living. These qualitative findings therefore reinforce the ecological interpretation of resilience (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Ungar, 2011), according to which successful adaptation results not solely from individual characteristics, but from the interaction between environmental and relational resources.

Qualitative Findings Based on Young People's Interviews

The qualitative findings suggest that the life trajectories of young people leaving the child protection system can be interpreted as complex, multi-level adaptation processes shaped simultaneously by early trauma, relational experiences, institutional characteristics, and structural opportunities. The interviews demonstrate that resilience does not emerge as a stable personality trait, but rather as a continuously evolving process in which the interaction between individual resources and environmental factors plays a decisive role (Ungar, 2011; Masten, 2001).

Narratives repeatedly referred to experiences of early relational trauma, family instability, abuse, and neglect. For several young people, entry into the child protection system represented not only a form of care provision, but also an opportunity to escape from a threatening family environment. These traumatic experiences continue to shape self-esteem, identity formation, and approaches to social relationships in the long term. According to the interviews, unresolved trauma, stigmatization, and relational insecurity were frequently associated with anxiety, low self-esteem, addictive behaviors, or self-harm. Psychological vulnerability thus emerged not solely as an individual problem, but as a phenomenon closely linked to structural insecurity, lack of support, and experiences of social exclusion.

Questions of identity also appeared as central themes within the interviews. Several participants reported having had limited opportunities within the child protection system to practice autonomous decision-making, develop personal preferences, or strengthen their sense of self. Consequently, leaving care represented not only a practical transition, but also an identity transition. Young people frequently referred to lack of self-confidence, pressure to conform, and the internalization of social stigma. Adaptation therefore became a long-term internal process through which self-expression, autonomy, and the reinterpretation of one's own life trajectory gradually developed.

Relational resources emerged as one of the strongest protective factors within the qualitative analysis. Stable and supportive relationships — including teachers, mentors, peers, religious communities, and civil support networks — played significant roles in adaptation and the process of becoming independent. The findings confirmed that even a single stable and long-term supportive relationship may reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience. These relationships provided not only emotional support, but also concrete resources and opportunities, such as access to employment, housing, and information. These findings are consistent with the concept of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the ecological model of resilience (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Ungar, 2011).

Education and future orientation revealed ambivalent patterns. Several young people reported that their educational trajectories were shaped less by personal decisions than by institutional structures and structural constraints. School stigmatization, lack of resources, and low expectations often limited opportunities for further education. At the same time, supportive teachers and positive school relationships played motivational and identity-forming roles in several cases. Future visions simultaneously reflected the desire for stability, hopes for social mobility, and feelings of uncertainty. For many young people, education represented one of the most important pathways toward social advancement.

In the domains of labor market integration and housing, young people's life trajectories often followed unstable and fragmented patterns. Entering employment frequently appeared as a necessity shaped by survival needs rather than by conscious career planning. Access to employment and housing depended heavily on relational networks, friendships, and informal support systems. Housing instability, frequent relocation, and temporary living arrangements

created lasting uncertainty, which further complicated the establishment of independent living. The findings suggest that social integration cannot be understood solely as the outcome of individual effort, but also depends significantly on available structural and relational resources.

One of the central themes of the qualitative findings concerned leaving care and preparation for independent living. According to the interviews, the transition rarely appeared as a gradual process; instead, many young people experienced it as a sudden separation and an uncertain life situation. Although certain basic life-management skills had been introduced, many participants did not feel adequately prepared in areas such as financial awareness, administrative tasks, job searching, or decision-making. A considerable gap emerged between possessing theoretical knowledge and applying it effectively in real-life situations. For many young people, actual learning began only after leaving the system and through direct personal experience.

The lack of aftercare and continuity of support also emerged as a defining problem. Both young people and professionals emphasized that relationships and support systems which had previously provided security often disappeared after leaving care. The findings indicate that one-time financial support was less important than long-term personal relationships, mentoring opportunities, and individualized accompaniment. Young people who were able to preserve relational networks or gain access to supportive communities adapted more successfully to the challenges of independent living.

Overall, the qualitative findings demonstrate that resilience among young people leaving the child protection system can be interpreted as a multidimensional, relational, and structural process. Adaptive capacity is determined not only by internal psychological resources, but also by social relationships, institutional experiences, and access to support systems. The simultaneous presence of vulnerability and resilience is clearly visible throughout the narratives: young people's life trajectories are characterized at once by loss, uncertainty, and continuous efforts toward rebuilding their lives.

According to young people's narratives, becoming independent does not emerge as a single event, but rather as a long, uncertain, and emotionally demanding transition in which relational security and continuity of support play decisive roles.

Validation of the Research Model and Conclusions

Overall, the findings of the research confirmed the theoretical model developed throughout the study, according to which the social integration and resilience of young people leaving the child protection system can be understood as the combined outcome of multiple interconnected factors. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated that life trajectories do not evolve linearly, but are continuously shaped through the interaction of individual competencies, relational resources, and structural conditions.

The results indicate that life-management skills, mental well-being, and self-esteem play decisive roles in the process of becoming independent. Resilience showed a positive association with preparedness for independent living, while deficiencies related to financial management, administrative skills, and everyday life management directly hindered the transition to independent adulthood. Psychological factors — such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and unresolved trauma — also exerted a significant influence on coping capacities.

The relational dimension proved particularly significant. All data sources consistently indicated that stable and supportive human relationships represent key protective factors. In many cases, a reliable mentor, caregiver, or supportive peer relationship was able to partially compensate for structural disadvantages. Conversely, relational deprivation, damaged trust, and difficulties in seeking help negatively influenced life trajectories over the long term.

Comparison of State and Civil Child Protection Systems

The findings suggest that state-run and civil society institutions contribute to supporting young people through different operational logics. State institutions primarily provide stable structural frameworks, whereas civil organizations more frequently offer flexible and personalized forms of support. Differences emerged especially within the relational dimension, as civil actors often provided more direct and individualized assistance.

At the same time, the dissertation emphasizes that these differences cannot be explained solely by institutional governance or funding structures. The quality of institutional functioning, professionals' attitudes, and the availability of resources also proved to be decisive factors. Ultimately, the development of resilience depended more strongly on the quality of relational networks and supportive relationships than on institutional structures alone.

Limitations of the Research

The dissertation also discusses the methodological and interpretative limitations of the research in detail. The study was limited to four Transylvanian counties; therefore, the findings cannot be considered nationally representative. Although purposive sampling allowed for the exploration of diverse institutional experiences, the results are primarily suitable for identifying tendencies and interpreting relationships rather than for broad generalization.

Another limitation of the research is that the sample focused primarily on young people living in residential care settings; consequently, the experiences of young people raised in foster care systems were not represented. Furthermore, the questionnaire survey relied on self-report data, which entails the possibility of social desirability bias. Although the qualitative interviews provided deeper insight into life trajectories, the number of interviews did not allow for wide-scale generalization of the findings.

The author also emphasizes that due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, the identified relationships cannot be interpreted as causal. In addition, longitudinal studies capable of following the temporal development of resilience are still lacking.

Practical Implications and Development Recommendations

One of the most important practical conclusions of the research is that preparation for independent living cannot be limited to the period immediately preceding legal adulthood. Preparation should instead function as a gradual and long-term process that simultaneously develops life-management skills, mental well-being, and relational resources.

According to the findings, young people's problems rarely appear in isolation: psychological vulnerability, housing insecurity, loneliness, and labor market difficulties tend to reinforce one another. Consequently, support interventions should address psychological, relational, and structural dimensions in an integrated manner.

A particularly important development direction identified by the study is the creation of a digital support platform designed to assist young people leaving the child protection system in everyday decision-making situations. The dissertation mentions the YounGo application as an example of good practice, providing financial literacy education, career guidance, housing information, and

mental health support for young people. According to the findings, a similar platform in Romania could become a valuable complementary tool within aftercare services.

The Role of Mentoring and Aftercare

According to the research, leaving the child protection system should not be understood as a single event, but rather as a prolonged transitional process in which mentoring plays a particularly important role. Mentors provide not only practical information, but also emotional support and personal feedback. Effective mentoring must be individualized and responsive to the diverse life situations of young people.

The dissertation emphasizes that digital tools and mentoring can function as complementary forms of support: while digital platforms facilitate access to information, mentors assist young people in interpreting and managing concrete life situations.

According to professionals' accounts, the current aftercare system is in many cases incomplete or under-resourced. In several counties, aftercare services face the risk of discontinuation, despite the fact that professionals identify this transitional period as the most critical stage in young people's life trajectories.

General Conclusions and Practical Recommendations

The findings confirmed that the social integration and resilience of young people leaving the child protection system constitute complex, multi-level processes shaped simultaneously by individual resources, supportive relationships, and institutional environments. Both quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated that successful independent living depends not only on individual abilities, but also on stable relationships, psychological support, and the continuity of support systems.

Based on the research, resilience can be interpreted as a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon. More favorable psychological well-being, self-esteem, supportive relationships, and educational aspirations were positively associated with better adaptation, whereas cumulative disadvantages and frequent institutional changes increased vulnerability. Interview findings further highlighted that even a single stable relationship — involving a mentor, caregiver, or supportive person — may function as a decisive protective factor in young people's lives.

From a practical perspective, the dissertation emphasizes the necessity of long-term, relationship-based support models. Preparation for independent living should begin already during institutional care, with particular attention devoted to the development of life-management skills, psychological support, and career orientation. The research further highlights the importance of strengthening aftercare services, developing mentoring programs, and enhancing cooperation between state and civil actors.

The scientific contribution of the dissertation lies in its interpretation of resilience not exclusively as an individual psychological characteristic, but rather as a phenomenon embedded within relational and structural contexts. The mixed-methods approach made it possible to integrate statistical relationships with the personal experiences of young people and professionals, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of the social integration of young people leaving the child protection system.

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