Social support among young people in foster care as they move to independence and selected sociodemographic variables[1]

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Abstract: *Background:* Every year, about 5,000 people raised outside their family environment become independent in Poland. The time of entering adulthood may be more difficult for them than for those raised in their biological families, due to previously experienced neglect in care, as well as the lack of adequate support during the period of entering adulthood. The purpose of the research presented in this article was to learn about the variables relevant to the sense of social support of foster care alumni becoming independent, and to find an answer to the question of whether adolescents raised outside their families differ in terms of perceived support from their peers raised by their parents. *Method:* 270 people were surveyed, half of whom are alumni of various forms of foster care in the process of becoming independent. The independent variables controlled in the study were gender, age of the respondents, the type of foster care they grew up in, and their current living situation related to their place of residence, source of income, continuing education and being in a stable relationship. The tool used (WSSWS) allowed us to find out the overall score, as well as the sense of support received from three sources: from family, friends and from a significant other. *Results:* The results indicate that foster care leavers differ from their peers raised in families in terms of their sense of support received from family and a significant other, with the former rating lower and the latter higher than respondents in the control group. Among the variables relevant to perceived social support, especially from a significant other, were gender, age, type of foster care, housing situation, source of income, being in a stable relationship and the type of school where the alumni continue their education. *Conclusions:* The article contributes to the discussion on the importance of social support in the process of becoming independent, especially with regard to the role of a mentor who can help ease the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood.
Keywords: foster care, move to independence, social support, significant person, foster care leavers

Introduction

Entering an independent adult life is a difficult developmental challenge. It requires the courage to leave parental care and readiness to make changes in terms of autonomy, self-control, responsibility, self-care, setting goals and planning the way to achieve them. This challenge may be particularly difficult for foster care leavers who create their adulthood on the foundations of a difficult childhood. They are burdened with difficult life experiences related to the feeling of abandonment, severance of bonds, mourning, neglect, violence, and the need to adapt to foreign environments. The research shows that difficult experience during the stay in a dysfunctional biological family and subsequent separation from the family environment disturb the sense of security and the development of attachment and a sense of belonging (Steenbakkers, Van Der Steen, Grietens, 2018). In a group of foster care leavers, the prognosis regarding the level of education, employment, income and housing conditions is worse than in the population of people raised in full families. They are more often exposed to unemployment, homelessness or premature parenthood (Cameron et al., 2018). They are more often diagnosed with various types of mental problems, psychoactive substance abuse or criminal behaviour (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä, Karki, 2019). People who have experienced trauma in their family environment may experience post-traumatic stress or internalizing behaviours (Steenbakkers et al., 2018).

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1   Article in polish language: https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2024-1Kopr.pdf

The research conducted among young people raised in care and educational facilities in Warsaw indicates the occurrence of problems in this group, such as nicotine addiction, specific phobia, oppositional defiant disorders, and serious behavioural disorders (Pawliczuk, Kaźmierczak-Mytkowska, Wolańczyk, 2014). Moreover, similarly poor prognosis for the future is diagnosed among foster care leavers in many countries, regardless of the support systems being in force in those countries (cf. Cameron et al., 2018; Stein, 2019).

The issue of moving foster care leavers to independence is little present in the Polish scientific research. Yet, every year about 5,000 adult care leavers move to independence, so it seems that the problem can be considered as a significant one. As M. Stein's comparative research indicates (2019), in most European countries, young people leave foster care at the age of 15-21, i.e. earlier than their peers growing up in families. This means that they have to face serious life changes earlier, settling in a new place, finding a job, or early parenthood. From the Supreme Audit Office's report (2014) it turns out that, apart from the psychological burden, foster care leavers in the period of moving to independence have difficulties in dealing with various official issues, such as registering for a medical appointment, obtaining an ID card or opening a bank account. Their serious problem is securing appropriate housing conditions for themselves. Deprived of natural support from the generational family, they are aware that they have no safe haven to which they can return in the event of a false start into adulthood (Kędzierska, 2020). Personal resources, such as self-esteem or competence, treated as protective factors, do not compensate for the negative impact of the factor of experience from a dysfunctional family and stay in a care facility (Ogińska-Bulik, Kobylarczyk, 2015), which contributes to the persistence of problems in functioning even after leaving the system (Lawrence, Carlson, Egeland, 2006).

An important protective factor that can alleviate the difficult period of moving to independence is the social support, which is usually described as an element supporting a person in coping with difficult situations (Sęk, Cieślak, 2023). The aim of the research presented in this article was to analyze the sense of social support of foster care leavers during the period of moving to independence and to compare it with the support felt by people raised in a family environment.

1. The process of moving to independence in the Polish foster care system

The political, economic, social and cultural changes in Poland at the end of the last century influenced the change in the axiological assumptions of the system of care for a child separated from the family as a result of the death of his or her parents or improper care provided by them. As a result of these changes, the foster care system was reformed to move away from care focused on meeting basic social needs, towards providing help and support aimed at stimulating independence in life. The effectiveness of care and educational work understood in this way is determined, among others, by: the scope and degree of preparation of a young person to fulfil current and future social roles. According to P. Chrzanowska(2017), this effectiveness is the result of several factors: properly formulated legal provisions, development and implementation of good practices in the process of independence by care institutions and non-governmental organizations, and the approach of local government authorities to support pupils pursuing independence.

Every year about 5 thousand adult foster care leavers move to independence when they leave their current place of care (Central Statistical Office, 2021; 2023). On behalf of parents, they are provided with support and assistance by institutions established for this purpose.

The Act on family support and the foster care system of 2011 (Foster Care Act) indicates a wide range of rights related to independence: the right to financial support for continuing education and independence, material support for development, assistance from an independence guardian in preparing an individual independence program, as well as to free legal and psychological assistance. Such assistance is more often used by young people from family forms of

foster care (related, non-professional and professional foster families and family orphanages). Foster care leavers who move to independence from institutional foster care (regional care and therapeutic facilities and care and educational facilities of the following types: socialization, specialist-therapeutic and family) not only use assistance for becoming independent less often, but also leave the facilities sooner, continue their education less often, start work sooner and more often return to their family homes after reaching adulthood (Kolankiewicz, Iwański, 2021). It also turns out that such a wide scope of support provided to leavers is insufficient (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2014; Abramowicz, Strzałkowska, Tobis, 2012; Mickiewicz-Stopa, 2016) and inadequate to contemporary socio-cultural and economic conditions, thus limiting the choice and change of life paths of care leavers (Kędzierska, 2020). The financial security of further education does not cover the costs associated with it, that is why most adult care leavers[2] give it up in favour of extending the period (even until the end of the age of 25) of social security, enabling them to continue their education and postpone the moment of entering independent adulthood. Even a one-year delay in leaving foster care has a positive impact on moving to independence, among others it increases the chances of obtaining education and a place to live (Miłoń, 2015), and as a result, finding a permanent job (Abramowicz et al., 2012). Fears of independence are not only related to insufficient financial support. Leaving foster care requires facing the need to plan one's own life path, especially choosing an educational path and profession, place of residence, building new social relationships and rebuilding family relationships. This is not an easy task for young people with difficult experiences of neglect or abuse (Golczyńska-Grondas, 2012; Kolankiewicz, Iwański, 2021). The research shows that the barriers of moving to independence of foster care leavers are of a varied nature. These include:

1. economic barriers related to professional qualifications and the ability to meet housing needs, as well as returning to the family of origin;
2. lack of practical skills important for functioning in everyday life, such as cooking, shopping, managing the budget and time, dealing with official matters, paying bills, settling taxes, knowledge about institutions providing assistance (Abramowicz et al., 2012; Bieńkowska, Kitlińska-Król, 2018; Wieczorek, 2016);
3. individual characteristics of care leavers, largely related to traumatic experiences and care neglect. These are mainly: the sense of helplessness, lack of security and belief in one's own abilities, low sense of agency, sense of shame, difficulties in asking for help and making friends, loneliness, fear of rejection, lack of trust in others, demoralization, low motivation to create life plans and to implement them (Mickiewicz-Stopa, 2016), lower sense of coherence than in families, using inadequate ways of coping with stress (Kleszczewska-Albińska, Jaroń, 2019);
4. social barriers, including a sense of social stigma, incorrect relationships with parents and relatives, low perceived non-institutional and institutional support – also in the area of moving to independence[3], lower perceived quality of life in relation to young people from families, especially in the area of satisfaction with the perceived social support coming from family members (Abramowicz et al., 2012; Bieńkowska, Kitlińska-Król, 2018; Maruszczak, Brygoła, 2019; Ogińska-Bulik & Kobylarczyk, 2015).

These problems are intensified by the fear of difficulties in finding a job and a place to live, which in turn causes the care leavers to feel anxious about leaving their current place of stay in a foster care (Chrzanowska, 2017; Miłoń, 2015). Some children from care and educational institutions return to their

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2   In 2022, as many as 15 thousand adult foster care leavers (3,223 – institutional forms and 11,854 – family forms) decided to continue their education in the place of previous care, and only 4,336 left it (Central Statistical Office, 2023).
3   The audit results of the Supreme Audit Office (2014) showed that the guardians themselves have limited opportunities to provide support to their charges because they do not receive appropriate institutional support in fulfilling their role.

family home[4] and, as a result, repeat the incorrect functioning patterns of their family of origin, which results in a high level of unemployment in this group and the obligation to use social welfare (Supreme Audit Office, 2014).

2. The sense of social support and its importance for foster care leavers

Numerous studies (cf. Sęk, Cieślak, 2023) indicate that the factor that makes it easier for a person to cope with new, difficult and stressful situations is the received social support. This support is defined as the help available to an individual in difficult situations (Jaworowska-Obłój, Skuza, 1986). The scientific research on social support usually focuses on understanding the types of support – for example, emotional, instrumental or informational support (cf. Kmiecik-Baran, 1995) and the sources of support received (cf. Buszman, Przybyła-Basista, 2017). The attention is also paid to the difference between the perceived support, related to beliefs about the availability of help, and actually received support. The support received is not always positive. It may even be harmful, when its form is inadequate to actual needs or when it occurs when it is not needed (Smoktunowicz, Cieślak, Żukowska, 2013).

The results of the research on the sense of social support among young people indicate that this support is important for the well-being (Maruszczak, Brygoła, 2019), the sense of quality of life (Skowroński, Pabich, 2015), self-esteem (Oleś, 2014; Poudel, Gurung, Khanal, 2020) and mental resilience (Konaszewski, Kwadrans, 2017). The support is associated with the social adaptation of young people (Ostafińska-Molik, Wysocka, 2014), it favours a reduced sense of alienation and a lower level of aggressiveness (Ławnik, Marcinowicz, Szepeluk, 2018).

During the transition from childhood to adulthood, social support becomes particularly important. Due to the need to take up new development challenges (Piotrowski, Brzezińska, Luyckx, 2020) this time is difficult not only for people raised outside their biological family. However, young people raised in properly functioning families can count on a smooth and prolonged transition to adulthood, supported by parental support, maintained even into adulthood.

People growing up in foster care are often deprived of the natural circle of support that a family should be. Their bonds with the family environment are loosening, both due to previous difficult experiences related to neglect, as well as due to physical distance and the need to function in a different educational environment (Zinn, Palmer, Nam, 2017). Such experiences also have consequences in adult life – the research (ibid.) shows that people raised in foster care, as adults have fewer social contacts and a lower level of a sense of support. On the other hand, if foster care leavers manage to maintain relationships with their biological family that can be supportive for them, it facilitates better coping with stress and greater mental resilience (Salazar, Keller, Courtney, 2011).

However, family is not the only source of support for young people. Young people also get support from peers, teachers, mentors and other significant others. Each of these independent sources is associated with a cumulative increase in the sense of support (Zinn et al., 2017). In the Polish system, foster care leavers can count on institutional assistance, both in the form of subsidies for continuing education, as well as support from an independence guardian who helps, among others, in planning the path to independence or in dealing with various types of official matters. The research shows, among other things, how important the role of support received from teachers is in the context of motivation to learn and proper functioning in the school environment – this support can contribute to better well-being at

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4   Statistics from the Central Statistical Office indicate a decreasing percentage of care leavers moving to independence who return to their families of origin. In 2022, only 860 independent people returned to them, and 3,476 started their own households. The highest percentage of those returning to family homes was recorded among former institutional foster care leavers (Central Statistical Office, 2023). It should be noted, however, that among those who have established their own households there are people who rent rooms or apartments or use sheltered apartments (Kolankiewicz, Iwański, 2021), available only until they obtain social or municipal housing. It is difficult to predict how many of them will however return to their parents in the future.

school and help to prevent premature termination of education (McGuire et al., 2021). Stronger support networks, both from the biological families, as well as the foster environment, are associated with less severe depressive symptoms (Perry, 2006, as cited in: Salazar et al., 2011).

However, it is worth noting that in the population of youth raised in foster care environments, due to the high degree of instability and difficult experiences, social support is often experienced in a different way than in the general population. The changes experienced in the educational, peer and neighbourhood environments may result in the creation of unusual, short-lived and often unreliable circles of social support (cf. Salazar et al., 2011). This may become a potential area of threats for young people who, on the way to seek support, closeness and acceptance, may be approaching potentially destructive and threatening environments. Especially since foster care leavers still feel a lack of support, both from family, peers and professionals (Okpych, Feng, Park, Torres-Garcia, Courtney, 2018). Further research on the sense of social support of pupils in the period of independence will contribute to better identification of their needs and, consequently, the possibility of improving the offers addressed to them.

3. Research method

The aim of the research was to find out how foster care leavers moving to independence assess the social support they receive and whether they differ in this respect from their peers brought up in generational families. The research was conducted in 2021 on a sample of 270 people, half of whom were the control group. The selection of the study population was purposeful. The request to complete a set of tests was addressed to foster care leavers who had already started the process of moving to independence. They were reached through District Family Assistance Centres and Municipal Family Assistance Centres, which supervise the functioning of family care, and through institutional foster care facilities. Respondents from the control group were reached through schools and social media.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles. All respondents, as well as their legal guardians, were familiarized with the purpose of the study and informed about the possibility of withdrawal without any negative consequences. All information was collected anonymously, in a way that made it impossible to identify respondents. The respondents gave their informed consent to participate in the study, and in the case of minors, their legal guardians were also asked for a consent, who had the opportunity to familiarize themselves not only with the research procedure, but also with all the tools used. The study is a part of the project "Selected psycho-pedagogical aspects of the process of moving to independence of foster care leavers", which received a positive opinion from the University Research Ethics Committee operating at the Pomeranian University in Słupsk (opinion number: UKEBN/5/2023).

The following research problems were formulated:

1. How do foster care pupils in the period of moving to independence perceive the social support they receive?
2. What socio-demographic variables determine the sense of social support of foster care leavers moving to independence?
3. Do people raised in foster care differ in terms of their sense of social support from their peers raised in families?

The independent variables controlled in this study included: gender, age, type of foster care in which the respondents were raised and their current life situation, which includes a source of income, continuing education, being in a relationship and housing situation. The dependent variable is the perceived social support.

The following hypotheses were put forward:

1. Foster care leavers rate as the best support – the support they receive from friends, and as the worst support – the support from their family.

2a. Women report a higher level of the experienced social support than men.

2b. Age does not differentiate respondents in terms of their sense of social support.

2c. People raised in institutional care evaluate the social support they receive worse than people raised in family care.

2d. People still living in institutions or foster families rate the social support they experience better than people living on their own.

2e. Respondents who are dependent on a facility or foster family experience a higher level of social support than those who are dependent on themselves.

2f. Respondents in long-term relationships feel a higher level of social support than single people.

2g. People continuing their education in secondary schools and universities rate the social support they receive better than people who are not studying.

3. People raised in foster care differ from their peers raised in families in the assessment of the social support they receive, especially support from the family.

The following tools were used in the study:

- the socio-demographic data questionnaire in which respondents were asked to provide information on independent variables (gender, age, type of foster care, current housing situation, source of income, relationship, continuation of education).

- Wielowymiarowa Skala Spostrzeganego Wsparcia Społecznego – Polish adaptation of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (G. Zimet, N. Dahlem , S. Zimet and G. Farley, 1988, cited by: Buszman, Przybyła-Basista, 2017), developed by K. Buszman, H. Przybyła-Basista. The scale consists of 12 statements to which respondents respond by selecting one of 7 answers (from 1 – I strongly disagree, to 7 – I strongly agree). The tool consists of three subscales that allow you to assess the support you receive from your family, friends and the significant other. It also allows you to calculate the overall result –

the sum of social support received. The MSPSS has good psychometric properties: it explains 78.80% of the variance in the results, with reliability measured by the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.893 for the general scale (Buszman, Przybyła-Basista, 2017). This tool does not define a "significant other" – it can be any person important to the respondent. Also, the method of conducting the research does not require the respondents to specify who exactly they consider such an important person (example of a test item: "There is a special person who is nearby when I am in need") (ibid., p. 589).

Study population:

One hundred and thirty five foster care leavers took part in the study, including 48 men (35.56%) and 87 women (64.44%). The age of the respondents was from 17 to 25 years. Taking into account the mean (19.5) and standard deviation (SD = 2.19), for the purposes of further analyses, the respondents were divided into 3 age groups: 17 years old (32 people, 23.7%); 18-20 years old (59 people, 43.7%) and 21-25 years old (44 people, 32.6%). Institutional care leavers constituted 42.22% of the respondents. Out of the respondents raised in family care, 37 people lived in a related family, 28 – in a professional or non-professional family, and 13 – in a family children's homes. Forty people live in the countryside, 34 in a small town, 36 in a medium-sized city, and 25 are residents of large cities. Five of the surveyed foster care leavers returned to their family home, and 48 and 34 people still live in the facility or foster family, respectively. 10 people live in their own apartment, of which 6 share it with a subtenant. 16 respondents live alone in a rented apartment, and 22 – in a rented apartment shared with another person. Over 44% of respondents declared that they were in a long-term relationship lasting longer than half a year, just over 13% – they had been in a relationship for a short time, and approximately 42% – did not have a partner. In terms of a source of income, one person indicated that he or she was supported by his or her parents, and 73 people were supported by a care and educational facility or a foster family. 60 people support them-

Table 1. Characteristics of the study group and the control group

Variable	Feature	Research group		Comparison group	
		N	[%]	N	[%]
gender	women	87	64.44	87	64.44
	men	48	35.56	48	35.56
age	17	32	23.7	32	23.7
	18	22	16.3	22	16.3
	19	23	17.04	23	17.04
	20	14	10.37	14	10.37
	21	17	12.59	17	12.59
	22	8	5.93	8	5.93
	23	12	8.89	10	7.40
	24	6	4.44	8	5.93
	25	1	0.74	1	0.74
type of foster care	residential care	57	42.22	-	-
	kinship care	37	27.41	-	-
	professional and non-professional foster families	28	20.74	-	-
	family children's homes	13	9.63	-	-
housing situation	with parents	5	3.7	110	81.48
	residential	48	35.56	-	-
	foster family	34	25.19	-	-
	own apartment	10	7.41	10	7.41
	rented apartment	38	28.14	15	11.11
relationship	lasting more than half a year	60	44.45	43	31.85
	lasting less than half a year	18	13.33	5	3.70
	no close relationship	57	42.22	87	64.44
source of income	parents	1	0.74	104	77.04
	foster family/care facility	73	54.07	-	-
	regular job	20	14.81	13	9.63
	occasional job	8	5.93	10	7.40
	allowance/scholarship/alimony	32	23.7	8	5.92
	lack of data	1	0.74	-	-
education	vocational school	35	25.92	-	-
	secondary/technical school	48	35.56	67	49.63
	post-secondary school	13	9.63	1	0.74
	higher school	35	25.92	61	45.18
	not in education	4	2.96	6	4.44

selves independently, including 20 from permanent work, 8 from occasional work, and 32 from pensions, benefits, scholarships or alimony. One person did not provide information about his/her source of income. Over 93% of respondents continue their education, including 35 people in vocational/career schools, 48 in secondary schools (secondary schools, technical schools), 13 in post-secondary schools and 35 people attend higher education.

The control group was selected to be as close as possible to the study group. Fourty eight men and 87 women aged 17-25 were qualified for it.

The average age in this group was 19.53 (SD = 2.22). The vast majority of young people from the control group (over 81%) live with their parents . 77% of respondents from the control group are supported by their families. In this group, the vast majority continue their education, of which 67 people are in high school or technical school and 61 are studying. Just over 4% of respondents in this group completed their educational path.

Detailed information on the sociodemographic structure of the study population is presented in Table 1.

4. Results

Statistical analyzes were performed using the Statistica.10 program. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to assess the normality of the distribution of variables. The distribution of variables related to social support (support from friends, support from family, support from other significant people and the sum of perceived social support) turned out to be different from normal, therefore non-parametric statistics were used for further analyzes (Mann-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis test). In order to divide respondents into groups with different levels of social support, the k-means cluster analysis was used. Comparisons between clusters were made using the chi-square test.

Table 2. Sense of social support of foster care leavers – descriptive statistics of the results obtained in the MSPSS

Variable	Mean	Min.	Max.	SD
Significant other	23.582	4	28	5.512
Family	17.239	4	28	8.108
Friends	21.313	4	28	6.809
Sum of social support	62.201	13	84	14.821

4.1. The sense of social support of foster care leavers

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the MSPSS. The analysis of the data shows that foster care leavers evaluate as the best support – the support received from the significant other, and as the worse support- the support from the family.

4.2. Socio-demographic variables important for the sense of social support of foster care pupils

4.2.1. Sex

The results of the analysis indicate that women evaluate the social support they receive better than men, especially support from the significant other. The differences between women and men in terms of perceived support from the person and the amount of support are statistically significant at the level of $p < 0.05$. There were no such differences in terms of support from a family and friends (Table 3).

Table 3. Sense of social support of women and men raised in foster care – results of the Mann-Whitney U test

Variable	women		men		U	Z	p-value
	Sum of ranks	median	Sum of ranks	median			
Significant other	6470	27	2575	24	1399	3.084	0.002
Family	5996	20	3049	17	1873	0.884	0.377
Friends	6180.5	24	2864.5	21	1688.5	1.740	0.082
Sum of social support	6232	63	2813	62	1637	1.979	0.047

4.2.2. Age

The results of the analyzes indicate statistically significant differences between respondents from three age groups in the assessment of general social support and in the assessment of support from the significant other (Table 4).

The analysis of multiple comparisons showed that statistically significant differences in the perception of general social support occur between people from the middle and oldest age groups (p = 0.04), while the oldest respondents evaluate support from the significant other differently than the youngest ones (p = 0.001) and from the middle age group (p = 0.002). The comparison of medians indicates that people aged 21-25 among all respondents rate as the best support – the support received from the significant other and they rate the overall support they experience better than the youngest respondents.

4.2.3. Type of foster care

The type of foster care differentiates the respondents both in terms of perceived general social support and support from the significant other. People raised in institutional care rate this support worse, as shown in Table 5.

It also seemed interesting to check whether differences in the scope of perceived support would appear between people raised in different types of family care. For this purpose, an analysis was carried out using the Kruskal-Wallis test , the results of which are presented in Table 6.

Table 4. The sense of social support in distinguished age groups (the Kruskal-Wallis rank ANOVA)

Age	Sense of social support - sum		H	p-value
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
17	2064.5	64.516		
18-20	3491.0	60.189	6.323	0.042
21-25	3489.5	79.307		
	Sense of social support – significant other			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
17	1670.5	52.203		
18-20	3541.5	61.060	18.996	0.001
21-25	3833.0	87.114		
	Sense of social support - family			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
17	2426.0	75.812		
18-20	3565.0	61.465	2.989	0.224
21-25	3054.0	69.409		
	Sense of social support - friends			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
17	1966.5	61.453		
18-20	3761.5	64.853	2.933	0.230
21-25	3317.0	75.386		

Table 5. Sense of social support of family and institutional care leavers – results of the Mann-Whitney U test

Variable	Institutional care		Family foster care*		U	Z	p
	Sum of ranks	median	Sum of ranks	median			
Significant other	3221.5	24	5823.5	27	1625.5	-2517	0.011
Family	3444.0	17	5601.0	20	1848.0	-1.513	0.130
Friends	3368.5	20	5676.5	24	1772.5	-1.854	0.064
Sum of social support	3210.5	60.5	5834.5	65	1614.5	-2.567	0.010

* This group included residents of foster families (related, professional and non-professional) and family children's homes.

The analysis of multiple comparisons showed that people raised in institutional foster care differ from people raised in non-related families (professional and non-professional) both in the general assessment of social support (p = 0.039) and the support experienced from the significant other (p = 0.025). In both cases, this support is assessed better by people from unrelated family care. However, there were no statistically significant differences between those placed in institutional care and other forms of family care, such as kinship families and family orphanages.

4.2.4. Housing situation

The current housing situation is somewhat related to the sense of social support of people raised in foster care. This relationship was statistically significant in terms of social support from the significant other (Table 7).

Further analyzes showed that people living in a rented apartment assessed the support received from the significant other significantly better than people raised in a facility (p = 0.003). The remaining differences did not reach the required level of statistical significance.

4.2.5. Source of income

The source of income differentiates respondents in terms of the sense of social support from the significant other, although it is not important in the context of support received from other groups (Table 8).

As a result of the analysis of multiple comparisons, it was found that statistically significant differences in the perception of support from the significant other occurred between people who already support themselves with a permanent job and leavers who are still supported by the institution or foster family (0.005). People living on their own assessed better the support from the significant other.

4.2.6. Relationship

Also, remaining in a close relationship is an important variable for the perception of support received from the significant other, as presented in Table 9.

Table 6. Sense of social support of people raised in various types of foster care (the Kruskal-Wallis rank ANOVA)

Type of foster care	Sense of social support - sum		H	p-value
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Institutional	3210.5	57.330		
Kinship family	2543.5	68.743		
Non-related family*	2259.0	80.678	8.335	0.039
Family orphanage	1032.0	79.385		
	Sense of social support – significant other			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Institutional	3221.5	57.527		
Kinship family	2622.0	70.865		
Non-related family	2337.5	83.482	9.318	0.025
Family orphanage	864.0	66.461		
	Sense of social support – family			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Institutional	3444.0	61.500		
Kinship family	2515.5	67.986		
Non-related family	2055.0	73.393	3.199	0.362
Family orphanage	1030.0	79.269		
	Sense of social support – friends			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Institutional	3368.5	60.151		
Kinship family	2473.0	66.838		
Non-related family	2203.5	78.696	5.240	0.155
Family orphanage	1000.0	76.923		

*Kinship families consist of grandparents or siblings of a child staying in a foster family. For the purposes of this study, professional and non-professional foster families were combined into one group, called here "non-related families" to emphasize that this is an environment not related to the foster child by kinship ties.

Table 7. Sense of social support in groups distinguished according to housing situation (the Kruskal-Wallis rank ANOVA)

Housing situation	Sense of social support - sum		H	p-value
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
With parents	361.5	72.300		
Residential	2811.0	58.562		
Foster family	2504.5	75.894	4.407	0.354
Own apartment	689.5	68.950		
Rented apartment	2678.5	70.487		

	Sense of social support – significant other			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
With parents	265.5	53.100		
Residential	2591.0	53.979		
Foster family	2384.0	72.242	16.202	0.003
Own apartment	580.5	58.050		
Rented apartment	3224.0	84.842		

	Sense of social support – family			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
With parents	388.0	77.600		
Residential	3064.0	63.833		
Foster family	2494.0	75.576	4.424	0.352
Own apartment	797.5	79.750		
Rented apartment	2301.5	60.566		

	Sense of social support – friends			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
With parents	331.5	66.300		
Residential	3027.0	63.062		
Foster family	2452.0	74.303	2.242	0.691
Own apartment	593.5	59.350		
Rented apartment	2641.0	69.500		

Table 8. Sense of social support in groups distinguished by source of income (the Kruskal-Wallis rank ANOVA)

Source of income	Sense of social support - sum		H	p-value
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Parents	116.0	116.000		
Foster family/ care facility	4691.0	65.115		
Regular job	1530.0	76.500	3.329	0.504
Occasional job	551.0	68.875		
Allowance/ scholarship/ alimony	2023.0	63.219		

	Sense of social support – significant other			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Parents	107.0	107.0		
Foster family/ care facility	4181.5	58.076		
Regular job	1841.5	92.075	14.590	0.005
Occasional job	581.5	72.687		
Allowance/ scholarship/ alimony	2199.5	68.734		

	Sense of social support – family			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Parents	111.0	111.0		
Foster family/ care facility	5247.5	72.881		
Regular job	1395.0	69.750	7.727	0.102
Occasional job	440.5	55.062		
Allowance/ scholarship/ alimony	1717.0	53.656		

	Sense of social support – friends			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Parents	82.0	82.000		
Foster family/ care facility	4602.5	63.923		
Regular job	1545.5	77.257	2.108	0.716
Occasional job	521.5	65.187		
Allowance/ scholarship/ alimony	2159.5	67.484		

Table 9. Sense of social support in groups distinguished due to being in a close relationship (the Kruskal-Wallis rank ANOVA)

Close relationship	Sense of social support - sum		H	p-value
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Long-term	4352.5	72.542		
Short-term	944.5	55.559	2.739	0.254
Lack	3748.0	65.754		
	Sense of social support – significant other			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Long-term	5099.5	84.992		
Short-term	815.0	47.941	23.997	0.001
Lack	3130.5	54.921		
	Sense of social support – family			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Long-term	3903.5	65.058		
Short-term	1105.5	65.029	0.723	0.696
Lack	4036.0	70.807		
	Sense of social support – friends			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Long-term	4194.5	69.908		
Short-term	883.5	51.970	3.196	0.202
Lack	3967.0	69.596		

Statistically significant differences occurred between respondents in a long-term relationship, who best assess the support received from the significant other and those in a short-term relationship (p = 0.001) and those not in a relationship (p = 0.0001).

4.2.7. Continuing education

Continuing education shows a statistically significant relationship with perceived social support from the significant other, but not with support from other sources (Table 10).

Table 10. Sense of social support of people continuing and not continuing education (the Kruskal-Wallis rank ANOVA)

Continuing education	Sense of social support - sum		H	p-value
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Vocational school	1892.5	55.662		
Secondary/ technical school	4285.5	70.270	5.791	0.122
Higher school	2485.5	71.014		
Not in education	380.5	95.125		
	Sense of social support – significant other			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Vocational school	1588.0	46.706		
Secondary/ technical school	4650.5	76.229	14.303	0.001
Higher school	2504.0	71.543		
Not in education	303.0	75.750		
	Sense of social support – family			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Vocational school	2222.0	65.353		
Secondary/ technical school	4194.0	68.754	3.340	0.334
Higher school	2227.5	63.643		
Not in education	401.5	100.375		
	Sense of social support – friends			
	Sum of ranks	Average rank		
Vocational school	2026.5	59.603		
Secondary/ technical school	4209.0	69.000	2.617	0.454
Higher school	2574.5	73.557		
Not in education	235.0	58.750		

An in-depth analysis showed that people studying in secondary schools and universities perceive the support experienced from the significant other significantly better than respondents studying in vocational schools (the significance level: 0.002 and 0.004, respectively).

4.3. Comparison of the sense of social support of foster care leavers with the control group

The Mann-Whitney U test results (Table 11) indicate statistically significant differences between the study and control groups in terms of perceived support received from the family and the significant other. While people growing up in their own families rate the support from their family better, those raised in foster care rate the support from the significant other much better than their peers. However, no significant differences were found in the way both groups assessed support from friends or in the general sense of social support (Table 11).

Discussion and conclusions

As a result of the research, it turned out that foster care leavers moving to independence evaluate the support received from the significant other as the best one, and the support received from the family as the worst one. These results partially confirmed hypothesis 1 – the assumptions about the low sense

Table 11. Sense of social support of foster care pupils and people growing up in a biological family – results of the Mann-Whitney U test

Variable	Sum of ranks Foster care	Sum of ranks Family	U	Z	p
Significant other	19388	16658	7478	2.363	0.018
Family	16500.5	19545.5	7589.5	-2.187	0.029
Friends	18331	17715	8535	0.696	0.486
Sum of social support	17865	18181	8954	-0.036	0.971

of support from the family were confirmed, but the assumption about support from friends turned out to be incorrect. Perhaps the advice and tips received from friends are insufficient support for young people in such a specific situation. L. Wieczorek's research (Wieczorek, 2016) confirms that young people in the period of moving to independence point to their parents as the least helpful. Parents of young people leaving foster care often do not provide their children with appropriate support, but what is more "clip their wings", questioning their aspirations and opportunities to achieve the goals set (Sulimani-Aidan, 2017). Moreover, T. Refaeli (2017) points out that for young people moving to independence, parents may constitute an additional burden, both emotional and financial, manifested, among other things, in taking responsibility for caring for their parents and satisfying their material needs. The research by M. Kolankiewicz and J. Iwański (2021) indicates that young people leaving foster care rarely declare satisfaction with contacts with their parents, often denying the need to establish them.

Hypothesis 2, assuming that women evaluate the social support they receive better, was confirmed. The above-mentioned analyzes confirm that women moving to independence rate the social support they receive better than their male colleagues, but significant differences only concern support from the significant other. Many studies indicate that girls and women seek social support more often than boys and men, talk to others about their problems more often, invest in friendships, seek spiritual support and use coping strategies with a common action (Eschenbeck, Kohlmann, Lohaus, 2007; Hampel, Petermann, 2005; Pisula, Sikora, 2008). The results of the 2019 European Health Interview Survey (EHIS) (GUS, 2021) indicate that women also rate the social support they receive better than men.

However, the predictions regarding the relationship between age and the sense of social support were not confirmed. As a result of the analyses, it turned out that people who were classified in the oldest age group (21-25 years) perceive the social support they receive, especially support from the significant other, significantly better than other respondents. A. Juros and A. Biały (2011) emphasize that the sense of

quality of life increases with age, which they explain by the growing independence from the foster care system. Perhaps this independence also affects young adults' sense of support. They are no longer dependent on the system and dependent on the support (not always adequate to the needs) received in institutions and foster families, they can rely more on the people whom they choose themselves as significant others. This is also consistent with the research which confirms that with age increases the importance of friends and romantic partners as sources of support (cf. Zinn et al., 2017). In the studied group of foster care leavers, older people are more likely to indicate their partner as the significant other from whom they receive support.

The assumptions about the difference in perceived social support between institutional and family care leavers were confirmed. In a group of youth from foster care, the sense of social support is developed and experienced differently than in the group of youth raised in a family. This is due to both difficult experiences from the period before being placed in foster care, as well as difficulties related to being in foster care, such as breaking or loosening existing bonds, the need to adapt to a new environment, instability of relationships – especially in institutional care (cf. Salazar et al., 2011). The use of available forms of institutional support for foster care pupils moving to independence (aid for moving to independence, continuing education, extending the stay in the current living environment after reaching the age of majority in order to continue education) indicate that family forms of foster care create better conditions for the development of those under their care than institutional ones (Kolankiewicz, Iwański, 2021). The analysis of the Central Statistical Office data (2023) shows that among those leaving the care environment, the persons who most often return to their families of origin are former leavers of care and educational institutions (37% compared to 7% of those under the care of family institutions). They are mainly less educated and more often unemployed (Supreme Chamber of Control, 2014; Abramowicz et al., 2012). Moreover, in foster families that are not related to the child, there can only be three children under their care at the same time, including adult

learners (Foster Care Act), which allows guardians to be more involved in care and providing support. The stability of guardians and a small number of children mean that these forms are most similar to natural families and are therefore preferred when caring for an abandoned and rejected child (Foster Care Act). Institutional forms of care provide for the creation of groups of fourteen people (more homogeneous in age than in foster families – Foster Care Act), and the structure of the team of educators, the number of working hours and shift patterns limit the time in which the educator works individually with the care leaver. The bonds that are responsible for the durability of a (supportive) relationship are formed over time. Therefore, the family model of care facilitates the creation of close relationships in the living environment and their continuation after becoming independent (cf. Kulesza-Woroniecka, 2022). A child in a permanent care environment learns to receive and provide support, which makes it easier for him or her to function in future relationships, also in this area.

What turned out to be interesting was that statistically significant differences were found between the leavers of institutions and people raised by unrelated families, and not those who remain in their generational families – under the care of grandparents or siblings. The question arises as to why professional and non-professional families, despite the lack of kinship ties, can be perceived as more supportive. The answer to this question could be provided, among others, by a detailed analysis of the educational capacity of both types of families. Professional and non-related families, apart from being subjected to procedures for assessing their predispositions and motivation to act as a foster family, are obliged to participate in training to improve their competences, which is observed to a lesser extent in the case of grandparents taking care of their grandchildren. The educational competences of people forming professional families are confirmed, among others, by research showing that in this group a democratic style of upbringing and high cohesion of spouses regarding their views on upbringing prevailed (Basiaga, 2020). The parenting competences of related families and the related support provided to the care leaver are worth considering, especially

when the child is placed in foster care due to the parent's parenting insufficiency. In such a situation, we may be dealing with intergenerational transmission (Dryll, 2015; Majewska, 2017). E. Kozdrowicz and E. Bielecka (2011) also draw attention to the problem of inheriting patterns of helplessness, weak bonds, irresponsibility and addictions, writing about the "appearance" of foster care for families related to the child. The authors point out that many relatives take up the function of a foster family, guided by the obligation to take care of a child belonging to the family resulting from family pressure and social opinion. In such a situation, it is difficult to expect that a child who is treated as an additional problem will receive sufficient social support. Moreover, related foster families are often created by grandparents who, due to their age and health conditions, find it difficult to adequately perform this function. It happens that they are more lenient, inconsistent, unable to properly support students in their learning, and do not understand the problems of the generation growing up in different socio-cultural conditions. Evidence of a particularly difficult situation of care leavers of related foster families in the context of independence is provided by the results of the Supreme Audit Office's report from 2014. They confirm that grandparents providing care usually do not engage in the process of moving to independence and do not protect adult leavers against financial exploitation by their parents (Miłoń, 2015).

Whether the examined person still lives in a foster care environment or has already become independent turned out to be important for the perceived social support, especially in terms of support from the significant other, as expected. The research shows that extending foster care is associated with greater social support, promotes better educational achievements and a better financial situation, and at the same time reduces the phenomenon of homelessness and conflicts with the law, as well as economic difficulties and the need to use social assistance after leaving foster care (Park et al., 2020). However, in our research it turned out that statistically significant differences occurred between people still living in a care and educational facility and respondents who live in rented premises, and in the latter group the sense of

social support from the significant other turned out to be higher. When interpreting these results, it is worth noting that the condition for feeling supported by guardians is a good relationship between leavers and educators (van Breda et al., 2020). Changes of educators are part of the institutional foster care system. Moreover, the turnover of facility employees is quite high, which may be a factor disturbing the creation of relationships based on trust, and therefore the sense of support among these care leavers may be lower. It is also worth paying attention to the low sense of support from guardians in the process of moving to independence (Supreme Audit Office, 2014). The authors of the report explain this by the deficiencies in the competencies of guardians and the lack of structural support provided to them. A factor that disturbs relationships in family foster care may be the fact that approximately 40% of those under its care (in 2023 – 41.6%) change the place of care at least once – to another foster family or a care and educational facility. In institutional foster care, these care leavers concern nearly half of the changes (own calculations based on the data from the Central Statistical Office, 2023).

The source of income is also important in the context of perceived support, especially from the significant other. However, this relationship turned out to be different from our expectations. It was assumed that people who are still dependent on a foster family or institution have a better perception of social support, as they can still benefit from care without having to meet their social needs on their own. However, it turned out that people who earn their living from permanent work, rate as the best this support. These results can be supported by the conclusions drawn from the research of K. Rosa-Farej (2018) which states that work not only helps meet living needs, but it is also a source of satisfaction and self-confidence

Being in a lasting relationship is important for the perceived support from the significant other. Statistically significant differences appeared between people who assessed their relationship as lasting and those who had been in a relationship for a short time or had no relationship with anyone. Maintaining a relatively stable romantic relationship helps build

a supportive bond based on trust and it compensates for the effects of current deficiencies in support from the family of origin. Moreover, the romantic relationship itself satisfies a number of needs that are particularly important for people with experience of parental neglect and socialization in an unstable environment. To a greater or lesser extent, they did not have many important needs related to closeness met, including: the feeling of being the most important person to another person or a touch. The touch itself affects your physical and emotional well-being (Field, 2010). Such romantic relationships are not only a source of social support, but also play an important role in the development of social and emotional competencies, such as self-esteem, self-awareness and emotion regulation (Furman, Shaffer , 2003, as cited in: Zinn et al., 2017).

It was also assumed that people continuing their education in secondary schools or higher education evaluate support better than people who do not study. However, it turned out that it is not the fact of continuing education that differentiates the respondents in terms of perceived support, but the type of school in which they study. Statistically significant differences appeared between students of vocational schools and students of secondary schools and universities. M. Stein (2019) indicates the low level of education as one of the most serious obstacle to enter an independent life, which later results in difficulties in finding appropriate employment and earning money independently to meet basic needs.

The last hypothesis assumed that people raised in foster care differ, in their assessment of social support especially from their family, from peers raised in their families. This hypothesis was confirmed. Respondents raised by their parents rate the support from their family better. M. Maruszczak and E. Brygoła (2019) did not confirm such a difference, which may be related to the use of a different tool. However, the authors examined the sense of support of the care leavers during adolescence, but not during their moving to independence, and focused on the type of support experienced, not on its source. The analysis of the data from our research showed one more important difference – foster care leavers evaluate the support from the significant other better, which was visible in most of the calculations discussed above.

So who is this "significant other": a teacher, an educator at the facility, a grandmother or aunt providing foster care, or maybe a partner with whom the examined person is in a relationship? The questionnaire used in the study did not allow us to find the answer to this question, making this issue an interesting problem for further research. However, it is worth paying attention to the figure of the mentor, who appears more and more often in studies on foster care leavers.

Young people during and after the period of moving to independence expect not only instrumental but also emotional support and report the need for honest conversations with a close, friendly person (Rosa-Farej, 2018). Such needs can be met by a mentoring relationship created with an older, experienced person, which is important for a young person, promotes a sense of belonging, resilience, strengthens the sense of security and increases motivation, which contributes to practicing new life skills and formulating goals for the future (Sulimani-Aidan & Tayri-Schwartz, 2021). Such close people play an important role in opening opportunities, providing support and practical help, acting as role models and cultivating the young person's agency (Gilligan & Arnau-Sabatés, 2017). Thanks to such support, a young person can achieve success on the path to adulthood, despite previous adversities.

Most often, mentoring relationships are formed with people referred to as a "parental figure"; "role model", "promoter of independence", "supporter in learning and career" the research indicates (ibid.) that in the absence of this type of support from parents, professional and formal relationships of educators in care and educational institutions or people running professional families may become deep mentoring relationships. It is emphasized that this relationship should be based on reciprocity, trust and empathy (Lazar, Blahová, 2020), thanks to which it will support the emotional and cognitive development of care leavers, as well as shaping of their identity.

In the Polish social welfare system, the role of such a mentor is to be played by a guardian of independence, whom the student chooses from among people he or she knows at the age of 17. This person helps develop the independence plan and fulfil its individual points, and monitors how obligations are met. However, such care ceases when the young person decides to leave the facility or foster family. Moreover, the data cited earlier indicate that young people do not always evaluate this support positively.

It seems that it could be beneficial to introduce such solutions in which the independence guardian would continue to provide advice and assistance even after the end of the stay in foster care. His task, apart from ensuring the establishment and maintenance of a supportive relationship with the care leaver, would be to constantly diagnose the changing needs, help with discovering and improving resources and

competencies, kindly support in making life choices and if possible, also taking care of building a wider support network, for example, using the resources of a distant family with whom the care leaver did not have close relationships during the stay in foster care. Providing such mentoring not only during the process of leaving foster care, but also after becoming independent, could facilitate the setting of goals and aspirations adequate to the needs and possibilities, no longer burdened with concerns about their implementation and success in the future.

The practical conclusion from the analyzes performed is the need to increase support in the area of tasks performed by the guardian of the independence process (improving his/her competencies and enabling direct access to specialists, e.g. lawyers, psychologists), as well as expanding the network of sheltered apartments for people leaving foster care.

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