
This article is based on the Campbell Review:

Donkoh C, Underhill K, Montgomery P: *Independent living programs for improving outcomes for young people leaving the care system*. The Campbell Collaboration 2006. The review is also published in Cochrane Library.

*This article is written by the Nordic Campbell Centre. The article has been approved by the authors of the review.
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Independent living programmes for young people leaving the care system – training in adult life skills

Independent Living Programmes (ILPs) are designed to aid young people, who have spent time in care, in their transition into independent adulthood. This intervention is used in Denmark with inspiration from the US and Britain. A new Campbell/Cochrane review concludes that there is little evidence to show the effectiveness of ILPs and therefore recommends that more research be carried out in this area. The existing studies, however, indicate that intervention is effective in a number of areas, but inferences cannot be drawn from these due to the use of relatively weak methods of evaluation.

Difficult start to adult life for young people leaving the care system

Young people, who have spent time in care, do not generally do as well as youth in the general population. They are less likely to have received a good education, experience higher levels of unemployment, are more dependent on public assistance, face higher rates of homelessness, have poorer mental and physical health, and are more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system. In order to provide them with better opportunities when leaving the care system, in their transition into independent adulthood, local authorities offer them support and assistance, otherwise known as ILPs. But there is a great deal of uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of such intervention.

The objective and methodology of this Campbell/Cochrane Review

This Campbell/Cochrane Review has the objective of assessing the effectiveness of offering ILPs to young people leaving the care system, an organised programme upon when they leave the care system.

The authors of the review have conducted an exhaustive and systematic search for studies on the effectiveness of ILPs. Eighteen studies were found; however, reliable inferences cannot be drawn from these studies due to their weak methodology. No randomised controlled trials were found to show the effectiveness of ILPs. This type of study is normally a safer method of carrying out reliable effect measurements.

The authors cannot therefore reach any final conclusion on the effectiveness of ILPs.

Among the eighteen studies there is, however, a smaller group of eight studies which have used control groups in their study methodology. In the absence of more solid studies, they represent the best information available at this present time. The studies were subsequently assessed by the authors of the review outside the framework of the review itself. Read more about this assessment in the section '*The best information available at this time*' below.

No 100% reliable documentation of the effectiveness of ILPs

The review concludes that there is not adequate documentation of the effectiveness of ILPs. The studies available have been conducted in such a way as to rule out the possibility of reaching reliable conclusions on whether ILPs work in the areas covered by the review: Educational attainment, employment, housing, health status and “other objectives for the knowledge and behaviour of young people’

The best information available at this time

As previously mentioned the authors of the review refer, in a separate article, to eight studies which were not included in the review itself. They were all, however, carried out as control group studies and, in the article, the authors write that in the absence of more solid studies, these studies can help to provide both researchers and practitioners with information on the effectiveness of ILPs.

In a review of the eight studies, the authors take a closer look at which areas of the lives of the young people are affected by ILP intervention:

Educational qualifications: The majority of the eight studies show that the young people participating in the ILPs are more likely to successfully complete compulsory education and technical training.

Employment: Several of the studies conclude that more young people participating in ILPs than in the control groups have employment (both full-time and part-time). One study also shows that young people participating in ILPs are quicker to find full-time employment than the control groups.

Housing: All eight studies show better results for young people participating in ILPs where housing is concerned. They are more likely to live alone, they are more self-supporting, they have more stable housing and there are fewer homeless among those who have participated in ILPs.

Health status: Here the prevalence of teenage parenthood, the extent of various types of abuse and the physical health of the young people have been looked at. The eight studies do not, however, provide any clear conclusions on whether ILPs have an effect on this measurement of success.

Other objectives for the young people’s knowledge and behaviour: Here the young people's skills in money management have been measured, as has their knowledge about the opportunities and resources available in the public system. Their dependency on public assistance was assessed, as was any involvement with the criminal justice system. But here too, the eight studies fail to provide an indication of the effectiveness of ILPs.

Which young people does the review focus on?

The Campbell/Cochrane Review has opted to look at studies of young people leaving care systems at their country’s statutory age of discharge. The review has not included studies which assess ILPs aimed specifically at young people with special needs, such as young people with physical or learning disabilities, teenage parents, young offenders and those in psychiatric institutions. This is due to the fact that that there could be considerable variation in the outcome of ILPs across the various groups of young people.

The Campbell/Cochrane review is based on American and British outcome studies. Despite exhaustive information retrieval, outcome studies from other countries were not found. The 18 studies deal with the so-called 'Independent Living Programmes'.

Independent Living Programmes – training in adult life skills

Independent Living Programmes is a collective designation for an organised process with a wide range of measures designed to strengthen the personal development and social skills of young people. This might involve training in communication, conflict resolution and anger management. The programmes can also help young people to decide which educational path they wish to follow, to apply for jobs, become aware of the resources available to them in the public system, manage their household finances and to learn to cook, clean etc.