The Social Exclusion of Vulnerable Youth

Country Report: Guatemala

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Hodgkinson, K., & Pouw, N. R. M. (2017). *The Social Exclusion of Vulnerable Youth: Country Report: Guatemala*. Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, Universiteit van Amsterdam. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321082123_The_Social_Exclusion_of_Vulnerable_Youth_Country_Report_Guatemala

The Social Exclusion of Vulnerable Youth
Country Report: Guatemala

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November 2017

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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

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Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose & scope of the research

This report presents the results of a scientific research on the topic of **Social Exclusion of Vulnerable Youth**, commissioned by SOS Children's Villages Netherlands and conducted by researchers of the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research (AISSR) at the University of Amsterdam, in collaboration with local counterparts within the study countries. The purpose of the research is to identify and understand the multi-dimensional drivers of social exclusion of vulnerable youth, which concerns youth who have lost, or are at risk of losing parental care.

Specifically, the objective of this research is to answer the main question:

> **How are vulnerable youth affected by social exclusion in terms of their human wellbeing, employability and social acceptance?**

The research aligns with the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) objective to 'leave no-one behind' **[1; 2]** and responds to policymakers and practitioners' interests, whom have recognized the importance of including youth in their social and economic policies and strategic actions on the ground. The research contributes to the global debate on social exclusion of vulnerable youth and provides concrete input to adjust SOS international's existing programmes. The research was carried out in the period January 2016 until December 2017 in six countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Guatemala, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, and the Netherlands. The SOS National Offices have supported this research, but did not play a role in the research to warrant scientific independence.

1.2 Contribution to knowledge gaps

This research focuses on vulnerable youth, specifically on young people who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care. The social exclusion of vulnerable youth is a context specific problem, but its' driving mechanisms show similarities across different societies. Social exclusion of vulnerable youth can thus be a problem in poor and affluent societies alike. If youth are not faring well, this poses challenges and risks to their own and family wellbeing, and undermines societal resilience and stability. Based on a literature review **[3]**, the following knowledge gaps were identified:

(1) There is a general lack of <u>empirical evidence</u> on vulnerable youth (i) in and from an alternative/informal care settings and (ii) in vulnerable families at risk of losing parental care, being actually socially in-/excluded or marginalized
(2) Lack of in-depth understanding of <u>how</u>, <u>why</u> and <u>by whom</u> social in- and exclusion of vulnerable youth takes place, and <u>to what extent</u>
(3) Lack of knowledge on how vulnerable youth are <u>faring later on in life after leaving care</u> – in terms of their independence, human wellbeing, employment, family, and social acceptance.
(4). How do (2) and (3) differ across (1.i) and (1.ii) and according to <u>gender, ethnicity and religion</u>.

1.3 Approach & methodology

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010) follow a Human Rights-based approach **[4]**, which remains key to the mission goal of SOS Children's Villages. At the same time, a more comprehensive approach to human wellbeing, sustainability and voice and empowerment is

currently advocated under Inclusive Development **[5; 6]**. This research integrates the two approaches by taking a relational approach **[7; 9]**.

The six country case studies have taken a bottom-up and participatory approach and used mixed methods for quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The prime units of analysis were vulnerable youth themselves. In total, more than 280 youth participated; their voices, experiences and inter-relationships stand at the core of this research. In addition, their caretakers, teachers, health workers, employers and other social peers were also part of the research. Country specific secondary sources, including scientific literature and policy reports also formed part of the contextual analysis.

1.4 Report outline

The remainder of the report is organized as follows. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework and conceptual model guiding this research. Chapter 3 explains the research methodology in detail and lists the respondents' key characteristics. Chapter 4 discusses the county context in which the research took place and the SOS programme within the country. Chapter 5 presents the research findings, following the conceptual scheme in Figure 1. Recommendations for uptake and use of the research findings by the SOS organization and a variety of stakeholders are provided in Chapter 6. The literature list is included at the back.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Taking a relational approach

This research is framed within human rights **[4]** and inclusive development theory **[5; 6]** and takes a relational approach **[9]**. The research takes youth in interaction with their personal and structural environment as a key entry point **[17; 24; 25; 28; 29; 36]**. Although, this is a social economic research, it is partly inspired by psychological studies (on youth) **[e.g. 9; 27; 30]**, which have emphasized how inter-personal relations can either foster or impede relational connectedness. We consider vulnerable youth in *dynamic* inter-connection to their care environment (people and structures); the nature of these interactions changes over time **[9; 17]**. To feel relationally connected to people and structures around oneself is an important determinant of human wellbeing **[9; 11]**. However, vulnerable youth transit in and out care relationships multiple times: upon entering care, moving through care, and leaving care **[31; 32; 33]**.

2.2 Vulnerable youth & their multiple transitions

In this research, 'youth' is defined as a transition phase between childhood and adulthood **[13; 14; 15; 34]**, also described as waithood **[12]**. "Waithood represents a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood, in which young people's access to adulthood is delayed or denied" **[12, p. 1]** While their chronological age may define them as adults, for many structural and societal reasons, they have not been able to attain the traditional social markers of adulthood: earning a living in a training or job, independence, establishing a family, providing for offspring and other relatives, and becoming taxpayers. **[10; 12]**

In this research, 'vulnerable youth' are defined as youth who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care. Vulnerable youth encounter barriers, disturbances and delays in forming their social identity, whilst making multiple transitions through care. When transiting out of care, they often lack financial, social and emotional guidance and fallback mechanisms. **[13; 14, p. 4; 15, p. 3]**. As a result, care leavers run more risk than their peers to *not* achieve in education and employment, and more quickly resort to street life, alcohol and drug abuse, crime, or being exploited **[14, p. 16; 16]**.

2.3 Social exclusion & self-exclusion

Social exclusion is both a process and outcome leading to disempowerment. Beall and Piron (2005) define social exclusion as "… a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. It derives from exclusionary relationships based on power." **[17, p. 9]**.

Social exclusion creates social inequalities that are inter-generational and embedded in societal structures, institutions and policies **[19]**. Cultural oppression and marginalisation lead to further isolation, shame and humiliation – and, in turn, to self-exclusion **[23; 35]**. Those who are socially excluded share similar social, economic and political barriers and constraints, and lack security, justice and economic opportunities in life in general **[16; 27]**. This means that there are two sides to the same story; social exclusion may lead to self-exclusion and *vice versa* **[9; 20]**. Where social exclusion affects individuals in their daily life and behaviours, studies prefer to speak of discrimination **[e.g. 21, p. 3]**. There is a growing awareness that social exclusion of vulnerable youth is an emergent problem arising out of problematic relationship between broad-based societal

change, social inequality **[22, p.21; 23, p. 7]** and ideology **[24]**. The myth of meritocracy leads to self-blame and self-exclusion **[9; 25, p. 93; 26]** of young people who are in an important identity building phase of their life and on their way to independence. Early experiences in life of social exclusion affect later ones, making social acceptance more and more difficult **[27]**.

2.4 Other key concepts & conceptual scheme

Drivers of Social Exclusion - Social, cultural, political and economic factors that cause and sustain the process of social exclusion and self-exclusion.

Connectedness - Being and feeling connected to others in a social-relational environment. **[9]**

Relational images - Individual expectations of how one will be treated (self-images), based on previous treatment, and images of others as to how they will act and who is to blame for one's exclusion **[9]**.

Relational movement - Relational movement is the process of moving through connections, disconnections and back into new connections; these can be positive or negative **[9]**.

Employability - A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, community and economy **[15, p. 3; 18]**.

Social Acceptance - The acceptance of a person (or group) into a group or society as a whole.

Human Wellbeing - Feeling satisfied with what one can have, be and achieve in life.

Figure 1 - Conceptual Scheme

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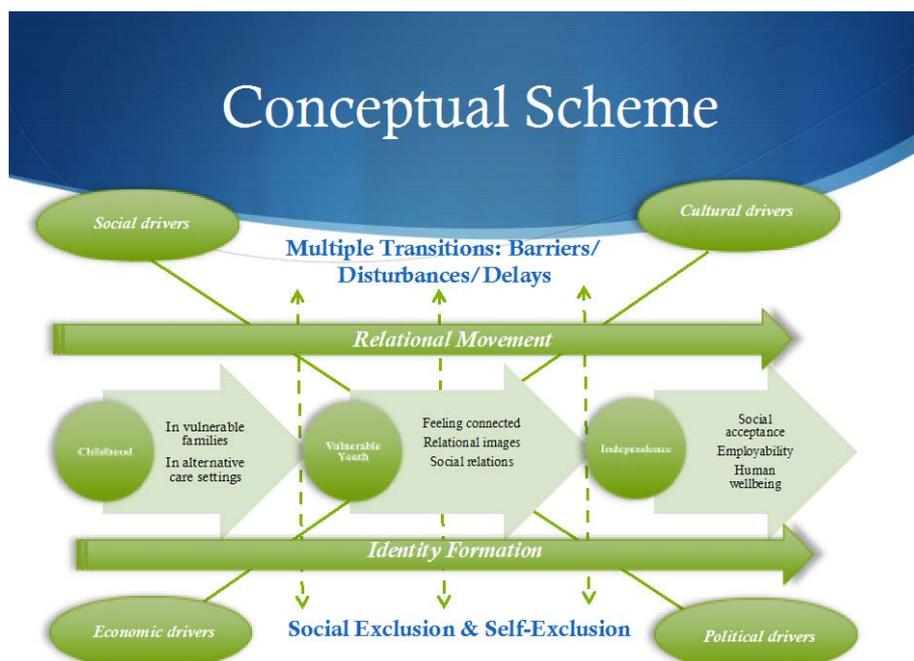
3. Research Methodology & Study Populations

3.1 Introduction
This research uses a mixed methods approach to explore the social exclusion of vulnerable youth. This section will outline the research questions, the methodologies used and describe the study populations.

3.2 Research Questions
To guide the research, the following research question and sub-questions were used:

How are vulnerable youth (youth in and from alternative care and families at risk of losing care) affected by social exclusion in terms of their human wellbeing, employability and social acceptance?

SQ1.   In what ways are vulnerable youth socially excluded, by whom and to what extent?

SQ2.   What are the drivers of social exclusion of vulnerable youth?

SQ3.   How does social exclusion lead to self-exclusion and vice-versa?

SQ4.   How do childhood experiences of exclusion effect relational movements and connectedness after care?

SQ5.   How are vulnerable youth prepared for living independently?

SQ6.   How do the above answers differ between different subgroups of youth?

3.3 Research Methodology
In order to develop an understanding of the social, cultural, political and economic drivers of social exclusion, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 21 stakeholders, including caretakers, teachers, employers, government workers and health staff. 76 youth in total participated in Guatemala; a structured survey was conducted with 54 youth and 26 youth participated in life-histories and social-relational mapping exercises which identified barriers, constraints and delays in youth's relational movement and social identity formation towards independence. 7 focus group discussions were organised with young men and women separately to explore gender specific drivers of social in- and exclusion.

3.4 Description of Study Populations
The primary group of respondents in this study were vulnerable youth. These young people came from SOS Family Based Care, two other care organisations and an organisation working on the employability of youth

Table 1 - Number of youth respondents surveyed (N=54)

	SOS	Other care organisations	Employment organisation
Number of young people	18	26	10

The gender of youth surveyed was split exactly 50/50. The ethnicity of young people varied widely across the organisations, with 11 ethnicities stated. 24.1% of youth identified as Maya, 20.4% as Indigena and 31.5% of youth choosing not to state their ethnicity, a. The vast majority of young people were Christian, with only 3.7% stating that they were not religious and 7.4% not answering the question.

The stakeholder participants consisted of 6 SOS direct caregivers (also described as SOS mothers), 5 members of SOS staff, 1 member of staff from another care organisation, 2 teachers, 3 representatives from the local government and judiciary, 3 employers and 1 health worker.

4. Country Context & SOS Programme

4.1 Introduction

In Guatemala, the research was conducted in Quetzaltenango. This specific location was chosen by the SOS Children's Villages Guatemala team. This section of the report will briefly outline the country and local context of the research. More detailed information can be found in the Fieldwork Guide for Guatemala **[37]**.

4.2 Country context & youth policies

Guatemala faced a 36-year civil war, ending in 1996, but has since become the biggest economy in Central America, with continued economic growth. However, Guatemala is also one of the few countries where rates of poverty have increased, and the country has one of the highest rates of inequality in Latin America, with some of the worst levels of poverty, malnutrition and maternal and child mortality – all of which are especially high in rural and indigenous areas **[38]**. The country also experiences very high rates of crime and violence, with young people often the victims. Indeed, an average of 46 young people are killed every month, mostly by firearms, and young people are victims of rape, disappearances, kidnappings and sexual assault **[39]**.

Approximately 5,500 children are reported to be in institutional care in Guatemala **[47]**. The country lacks a comprehensive child protection system, which has resulted in unethical inter-county adoptions and the placement of children into residential care settings as a standard response, without consideration of their best interests and family-based options **[40]**. 95% of these institutions are privately run and 33% of youth in such settings are declared permanent residents, meaning that they will not be adopted or re-integrated with their family **[41]**. It is argued that the majority of these shelters are unaware of basic minimum standards of care **[41]**. Table 2 highlights further policies relevant to youth in Guatemala.

Table 2 - Youth policies and legislation in Guatemala

Policy type	Source	Policy details
Definition of youth	National Youth Policy 2012	Different definitions of youth in legislation, but focuses on those aged 13-30 years
Voting age		18
Criminal responsibility	Childhood and Youth Protection Law 2003	Criminal responsibility in the civil code is 18, but children aged 13-18 may be held in a youth institution
Majority age	Civil Code	18
National Youth Policy	National Youth Policy 2012 – 2020	Vision to "empower youth and build an inclusive, prosperous, democratic and equitable" country
Minimum age for work	Constitution; Labour Code; Government Accord	The minimum age for work is 14 and the minimum age for hazardous work is 18, complying with international standards
Child labour	International conventions; Ministerial Accord; Penal Code; Law od Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents	Guatemala has ratified all international conventions concerning child labour and has its own laws protecting children from hazardous work, forced labour, trafficking and exploitation
Minimum wage		Minimum wage differs depending on industry. In 2017, for agricultural and non-agricultural work the minimum wage is Q. 2,893.21. For exportations or maquilas Q. 2,667.52. However, many work in the informal economy.
Education	Article 74 of Constitution	Guatemala has free public education and a compulsory education age of 15

Sources: **[48; 49; 50]**

4.3 SOS programme

SOS Children's Villages has programmes in five locations in Guatemala, running five children's villages, five youth facilities, one vocational training centre, ten social centres and, in some locations, the Family Strengthening Programme (FSP) (FSP is not running in Quetzaltenango). The children's village and youth facilities both come under the Family Based Care programme. FBC has three stages; children first live in family-type set ups, with an 'SOS mother' (direct caregiver) and 'SOS siblings'. SOS Quetzaltenango has 13 homes where 86 children and teenagers live in family-based care; the homes are mixed in terms of religion and ethnicity. The next phase is the SOS youth house, where young people move from the family houses to communal living, monitored by a designated member of staff, with a youth house for males and a youth house for females. Staff highlight that during this stage, youth are encouraged to be more and more independent; doing their own cleaning, budgeting and shopping. In Quetzaltenango, there are around 4-6 youth living in these houses, however interviews with young people suggest the youth houses are being slowly phased out of the programme, possibly due to financial reasons. Finally, when young people leave the youth

house they usually continue to be financially supported by SOS for some time, gradually becoming completely independent.[1]

SOS staff highlight that people are usually only taken into the programme as children, and so go through all three of these stages. There are some exceptions to this, such as when a teenager's younger sibling is taken into SOS care, the teenager will be too. Children are taken into care through a number of routes, most of which involve a legal process. Children may be identified by the police or by neighbours as needing care, or a family member may take the child to SOS. In some instances, parents who feel unable to take care of their children hand over the parental responsibility of their child to SOS and SOS has to legalise the situation of the child. There is no age limit to youth leaving SOS; the age at which a young person leaves depends on their level of independence. At present the oldest young person still supported by SOS is 25.

4.4 Youth issues

Through secondary literature, some issues identified initially for youth in Guatemala include a culture of violence, where 80% of victims of violent crime are youth, youth homicide, gang involvement, sexual violence, early pregnancy, substance misuse and a lack of access to opportunities and rights **[42; 43; 44; 45; 46]**

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[1] SOS directors have highlighted that since the research was conducted, this process is now changing, with additional options for youth, including a "youth community"

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction

Before fully analysing the data on the in- and exclusion of youth, it is first important to understand what youth themselves consider to be meant by the terms exclusion and inclusion. Young people primarily identified social exclusion as synonymous with, and a result of, discrimination. Specific factors were highlighted that cause exclusion, including ethnicity (coming from an indigenous background), language (not speaking Spanish), religion and politics. Many youth also discussed that people who are excluded from society are not accepted, their opinions go unheard and they are not given the same opportunities as other people.

> *"Because of the economic status or because of the social group that they belong too. They [society] don´t take in to account their opinions, no one wants to play with them."* [S10138 with female care leaver from organisation 1]

> *"I think that if a person is not accepted it is because of the groups that the society has made like religion, politics, etc. In my point of view, they criticise them, they don't listen to them, they are ignored and they don't receive any opportunity…"* [S10168 with male in care organisation 1]

Some young people also spoke about the personal affects that social exclusion can have on a person, leading to low self-esteem, depression, anguish and being made to feel different. The link was thus made between social exclusion and self-exclusion: a person who is, or who fears being, rejected from relationships in society will isolate and exclude themselves:

> *"If the person gets close to others, they are going to treat him bad, so is better to be alone"* [S10148 with female youth in SOS]

When defining inclusion, young people frequently reference the notion of respect; a person who is included is accepted and respected by society – they are given the opportunity to participate in society and their ideas and voices are heard and respected.

Interestingly, when discussing inclusion, notions of discrimination also came to the fore. Many young people discussed, for example, how a person is included if they have a good economic situation or, more frequently, are educated. This suggests that those from a poorer background and those who are uneducated are excluded from society.

5.2 Social drivers of exclusion

It was made clear by all of the participants in the study that young people in Quetzaltenango are susceptible to a number of situations that are both an effect of their social exclusion and can result in their social exclusion. Frequently highlighted as social causes and drivers of exclusion for youth were participation in gangs, drugs and criminal networks (especially for young men) and teenage pregnancy for young women; these issues will be discussed throughout this report. SOS staff highlight that a culture of not talking about sexuality and relationships was largely to blame for these issues, as well as the difficulties young people face in making choices about *"their body, their life, about their academic life".* According to youth and their caregivers, many young women enter troubled relationships when leaving care and become pregnant. Many young men find it difficult to

get a job, feel trapped in relationships and, because the same happened to them as children, abandon their families.

The government official that we spoke to highlighted how these issues were especially pertinent for young care leavers:

> *"I think that [a young person from care] has a lot of limitations. A person that is limited in education, working opportunities and in social opportunities. I see a person that is unprotected. Because as far as I know when they leave they [only] go with their biological family if they are lucky. So they can face issues like violence, drugs, prostitution or gangs. Those are the things that they have to face and that are waiting for them with open arms. So we don't have an answer on how can we protect them after they leave care."* [I5 with government representative]

The above quote highlights the lack of fall-back position and the lack of social support networks which make young people from care especially vulnerable. Interestingly, whilst highlighting the important challenges that care leavers face, the quote also to some extent reinforces the stereotypes that young people and SOS staff highlight that young people from care face, where it is assumed that they have poor educational attainment (see section 5.8.3).

In surveys, the majority of young people did not believe that being from care led to them being excluded or unaccepted. Interestingly, considerably more males (22.2%) than females (3.7%) believed that their care background had had an effect on their feelings of exclusion. Despite these low numbers, qualitative data suggests youth do experience some discrimination, if not exclusion, as a result of being from care:

> *"Like I said before, when some knows that one is from SOS sometimes is negative, because they start to make differences. They say that we are orphan, that we don't have economic resources, etc."* [S10144 with male care leaver from SOS]

> *"Always, always there are some people [who make negative comments]. I remember that during sixth grade, there was a boy from the class that knew [our situation]... He always made bad comments… He said something like 'Here comes the orphan' 'Here come the boys from the village'"* [LH10144 with male care leaver from SOS]

Youth who do not feel excluded as a result of their background, nevertheless do notice the difference in opportunities that being from care creates:

> *"Sometimes we have more opportunities but sometimes we feel excluded from some opportunities, we have to do a double effort to get what we want and that is appreciated by the people."* [S10158 with make in care organisation 1]

Finally, an element that was frequently highlighted as leading to exclusion, especially exclusion from the work place, is age; with many young people highlighting that they found it very difficult to find employment because of this (see section 5.11.2)

> **Young people do not necessarily feel excluded from society as a result of being from care, however do face discrimination based on this. Young people fare vulnerable to early pregnancy, exploitation and engagement in gangs and drugs.**

5.3 Cultural drivers of exclusion

The main cultural driver of exclusion highlighted was the discrimination of people with an indigenous background. This is an issue that affects all youth, as well as adults. Young people highlight that people with an indigenous background are primarily discriminated against because of their language and their traditional clothes. Indeed, we spoke to one employer who said that they would not hire someone who wore traditional clothing. This discrimination and stigma can lead to young people trying to hide their cultural identity due to feelings of shame. A member of staff from one of the care organisations, for example, highlighted that some indigenous youth in their care organisation identify themselves as ladino and want to learn to speak Spanish without an accent, as they feel they will have a better chance of being accepted in society. In a focus group discussion with young people from SOS, youth discussed how this discrimination is having a significant impact on indigenous communities, who are losing their culture and tradition to try and shake off the discrimination.

There is also nuance here; in one of the care organisations, female youth from an indigenous background are required to wear their traditional clothing, which many highlighted resulted in them being bullied by their peers. However, a judicial representative highlighted that when care organisations take away this traditional clothing, it can have emotional effects on the young person.

Importantly for children and youth in care, SOS direct caregivers and youth themselves highlight how these differences can lead to difficulties when children first enter care. Youth from indigenous communities often cannot speak Spanish and thus find it difficult to communicate with their caregivers, who primarily, if not exclusively, speak Spanish. SOS direct caregivers highlight that these children also have different customs and so find it more difficult to adapt to life in the village. Due to their integration into care, some young people lose their "native" language, and thus the ability to communicate with their home communities (this is explored more in section 5.8.2).

> **Youth from an indigenous background are more likely to experience discrimination and social exclusion. Due to linguistic and cultural barriers, these youth also have more obstacles during the transition into and out of care.**

5.4 Economic drivers of exclusion

The primary economic driver that young people and stakeholders discussed was a lack of meaningful employment for young people in Quetzaltenango and difficulties including exploitation in employment. As SOS staff stated:

> *"…the young people are short of job opportunities or the job opportunities have bad conditions and a job without academic formation is worthless, so I believe that is a major problem"* [I1 with SOS staff]

An employer highlighted that a lack of job opportunities in Quetzaltenango impacts young people in particular, because it results in higher entry requirements, such as extensive experience, that young people do not have. Indeed, many young people highlight that they feel discriminated against based on their age when it comes to finding employment. This, the employer argues, results in youth giving up on their education, as they don't see its benefit if they are unable to use their education to obtain a job.

Young people highlighted the difficulty in finding work when they leave care, which often results in them setting up informal businesses or working informally. However, youth are rarely able to earn enough money this way, and so struggle financially. Therefore youth can be considered to be stuck in a phase of waithood, where many also lack the fall-back position of a stable family to support them at this time. This is the major issue for care leavers; who all highlight the effect that a lack of finances has on their lives, including not being able to socialise, continue their education, and even afford food (this is discussed further in section 5.6.3). Young people further highlight that many people experience exclusion based on their (perceived) economic background, especially by their peers who consider themselves better if they have more money. Indeed, many youth discussed how young people want to fit in with their peers by having the right clothes and the latest technologies, and teachers highlighted that in some cases youth resort to theft in order to obtain these social identity markers.

> **A lack of (decent) employment opportunities means that youth are excluded from this aspect of society. This greatly impacts young people who are making the transition to independence, as many are not able to financially support themselves and so are stuck in a period of waithood.**

5.5 Political drivers of exclusion

Findings show that young people (from care) both actively avoid involvement in politics and are excluded from involvement and representation. SOS staff and teachers highlight that the recent civil war and violence mean that young people are not engaged in politics, and high levels of corruption mean that they avoid it as a career. This was also voiced by youth, with one explaining:

> *"Politics, everything is fixed and arranged"* [S10140 with male care leaver]

Young people, especially those from an organisation working to train and educate youth, also expressed that their voices and opinions went unheard by politicians:

"In politics because of the lack of experience they don't take into account my opinion."
[S10184 with female from employment organisation]

The fact that young people actively avoid participation is telling. Instead of being harnessed by society as a potential positive force for future change, young people opt out. The country, therefore, is not using the full potential of its youth, who feel separated from politics.

The lack of youth representation in politics, especially the lack of representation for vulnerable youth, is very evident in an interview with a local government representative, who discussed an office which aims to protect children and youth. In this interview it emerged that the office did not have a director for over a year, and that the former director who should have been present during that time is now under investigation. Now with a temporary director, the office remains understaffed. The budgets for additional members of staff, including a social worker, remain unapproved. The individual we spoke to discussed how the office was heavily underfunded, making it difficult to achieve its goals. Indeed it was highlighted that the limited work the office does is primarily aimed at children and not with youth. The representative was unaware as to whether the local government had any responsibility for monitoring care homes, a telling finding in itself. This lack of staffing and funding for an office with the purpose of protecting youth starkly demonstrates the lack of political attention, and lack of voice afforded to vulnerable young people, and throws into question how much citizenship young people from care, who are not represented politically, really have. The participant discussed that there was a programme in place to try and promote political participation amongst youth in a type of youth government, however this was also suspended due to the absence of a director.

Despite being very open and critical in interviews, the government representative also explained that a lack of youth participation in politics was because *"the kids don't like anything only the cell phone"*. Such a stance fails to recognise that young people are put off engaging in politics, not because of their own interests, but due to the structural factors of corruption and underrepresentation.

> **Vulnerable young people are given very little political attention and protection and lack representation and a voice in politics and their rights. Corruption and this lack of representation and voice also mean that many youth actively avoid political participation.**

5.6 Multiple transitions

A major finding to come out of this research project is the fact that young people from care experience not only shorter transitions on leaving care, as existing literature suggests, but multiple transitions throughout their pre-adult lives. This includes transitioning into care, transitions within care and transitioning out of care. These multiple transitions have a major impact on young people's lives, affecting their wellbeing and also their identity formation. This section explores the multiple transitions that young people experience, section 5.7 explores the educational experiences of young people, section 5.8 discusses the effect the transitions have on the relational movements and connectedness of youth and section 5.9 discusses the effects these transitions have on identity

formation. These sections primarily focus on youth from the three care organisations, and not youth from the employment-based organisation.

5.6.1 Transition into care

In the care organisations, most enter as a child for many reasons including poverty, death of a parent (meaning there are not enough resources to take care of the children), alcoholism, abuse and neglect. Only in one of the (non-SOS) care organisations do all young people have biological family able to support them. SOS direct caregivers highlight that this means youth are often "*psychologically damaged*" when they enter care, and are very shy and reserved. Staff highlight that these backgrounds affect young people's futures. SOS has started to also take in teenagers from marginal areas where they have been subject to crime and trafficking. They highlight that there is a noticeable difference between these young people who enter as teenagers, and those who become teenagers in SOS, with new teenagers causing more challenges as they have more "bad habits", which other youth may pick up on.

Young people discussed the emotional difficulties of entering care, especially when this meant leaving a family who did not have the capacity to care for them (often due to poverty and/or the death of one or both parents). Young people struggle significantly with the move, until they are able to adapt to their new environment. A number of youth discuss falling back a year in school because of the transition.

> "*To leave my family…because they were the people with whom I spent my time. And by leaving them things were not going to be the same. Things got difficult… it´s unexplainable. But yes that year was difficult for me.*" [LH10137 with male care leaver from organisation 2]

For youth from indigenous backgrounds, the move is even more difficult. SOS direct caregivers highlight that these youth have different customs, making the period of adaption more difficult, and both SOS direct caregivers and youth discuss the issue of language; where children and young people who do not speak Spanish are initially unable to communicate with their caregivers and peers:

> "*The truth is that it was hard for me to get used to the environment because it was totally different and there were also different people. And I think that the language was a big barrier to communicate with everyone.*" [LH10144 with male care leaver from SOS]

Despite these difficulties, many youth discuss the positive side of entering care; namely that they had more opportunities to study and find a profession, rather than working from a young age:

> "*Well, for me it was difficult, because it was difficult to leave my family and I did not know what it was like to live in another place. But in that moment I started to think about that if I stayed at home I was going to keep working and I wasn´t going to learn a profession. Because my family didn´t have the capacity to give me the studies that I desired. So I thought about my future, my family and I thought that I could do something for them. And now my life has changed completely. If I had stayed there [in home community] it would be another thing.*" [LH10142 with female care leaver from care organisation 2]

5.6.2 Transition within care

Young people were less vocal about their transitions within care, perhaps because the process is changing in SOS, and so for youth still in care there was some uncertainty about whether and when they will enter the youth house. Indeed some youth expressed not being given much information on when this step would be made. In Quetzaltenango, the youth houses are very close to the village, making it easy for youth to stay in contact with their SOS families, with many youth enjoying the new freedom of being more independent.

A number of youth did, however, discuss the effect that having multiple caregivers had on their lives, in situations where young people had to frequently change houses or had new "mothers" (direct caregivers). These moves affected the notion of a family environment, with youth highlighting that it became difficult to form connections with their new caregiver and family and that it was difficult to adapt to the new rhythms in different homes. One young person also discussed the fact that when new children are brought into care, the dynamics of the house change, which can be difficult to adapt to.

5.6.3 Transition to independence

The transition to independence was discussed a great deal by youth and their caregivers. This was highlighted as being most different from the lives of youth who live with their biological families and one of the most difficult aspects of young people's lives. SOS staff highlight the aim is to make the transition a gradual one, to ensure youth are supported and able to provide for their daily needs. However this is difficult, firstly because, according to staff, there are some youth who do not have a purpose and so find it difficult to motivate themselves towards independence and secondly because there are such few opportunities for employment, making it hard for youth to sustain themselves financially after care. Youth therefore can become stuck in a period of waithood:

> *"It is difficult because to have economic stability is one of the main things to have an equilibrated life. There are not many opportunities and in some jobs the income is not enough to sustain and that affects their development."* [I1 with SOS staff]

SOS direct caregivers highlight that young people who don't have connection with their biological family are especially scared of the transition to independence:

> *"They leave feeling scared. They ask questions to themselves like, how is everything going to turn out? What is going to happen with me? What am I going to do?"* [I2 with SOS direct caregivers]

Direct caregivers believe that the path of youths' futures change when they leave care, as they stop receiving the support they had in care and so their priorities change, with many youth finishing their studies or giving up on their ambitions in favour of earning an income. This sentiment was also echoed by youth in other care organisations:

> *"The truth is that that everything changes, because one has to worry about his things, the expenses, you have to see what are you going to do to get money because otherwise is not possible. The issue that I am having most problems with is with food, because sometimes there is enough money and sometimes not."* [LH10137 with male care leaver from organisation 2]

Indeed, although some youth do discuss the positive side of transitioning to independence; primarily having more independence and responsibility, in qualitative answers many youth focused on the more negative sides. This includes a disconnection with caregivers and friends (as discussed in section 5.8.2), fear about how they will be able to find a stable occupation and fund themselves and uncertainty about what the "outside world" is really like. The transition to independence is thus surrounded by emotional and practical difficulties and challenges for youth. The fact that these young people do not have the fall-back position that people from stable families are more likely to have is clear from their fear of life in the "outside" world, and their conception of life after care being the "outside" world demonstrates the significant lack of connection and integration they have with the broader society whilst they are in care, highlighting a key issue for youth from care:

> *"I did not have an idea of how was to live outside. I did not know the world. I only knew the world of [the care organisation]. I felt worried more than anything."* [LH10137 with male care leaver from organisation 2]

> *"I was scared, I did not know how I was going to face the people that I was going to relate with, I did not know how I was going to keep going to achieve my dreams"* [S10138 with female care leaver]

> *"I haven't been outside or I haven't spent much of the time there, I have being here for a long time so that makes me nervous and to separate from the people I have been with. But I know that is necessary to continue and to keep going"* [S10146 with female in SOS]

5.6.4 Preparation for transition to independence

In SOS, staff highlight that the preparing youth for independent living happens throughout their time at SOS, with youth learning to cook and clean in the family house and taking responsibility for these elements of their life, as well as their budget, in the youth house. Youth are also encouraged to find a job when in the youth house to prepare them for obtaining a formal job when they leave care. Staff highlight that young women are generally better prepared and tend to have more formal jobs because they are more pro-active, whereas young men need to be pushed by staff, and therefore tend to have less well-paid jobs.

The majority of young people think they will be told and should be told when they are to leave care less than one year in advance, as depicted in Table 3. However, it is telling that one third of young people do not know when they will be told they have to leave care; depicting that young people are not aware of or involved in important decisions about their care path and lives.

Table 3 - Average time youth being & think should being told that they are leaving care (N=54)

	Is being told shorter than 1 year (%)	Is being told longer than a year (%)	Think should being told shorter than a year (%)	Would like being told longer than a year (%)
Average	57.4	9.3	63	18.5

22.2% of youth from SOS and 23.1% of youth from other care organisations feel very prepared for independent living and 44% and 53.8% respectively feel somewhat prepared. Table 4 explores

whether youth feel they are receiving sufficient information and support in various aspects that will enable independence. It suggests that youth in general do feel prepared, however more so in other organisations than in SOS. In SOS over a third of young people do not feel prepared in terms of managing their personal finances, finding accommodation and finding employment related training. The majority of youth across organisations do not feel prepared for engaging in politics.

Table 4 - Young people who feel they are receiving sufficient support for different elements of independence (N=44)

	Youth from SOS (n=18) (%)		Youth from other care organisations (n=26) (%)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Looking after yourself	88.9	11.1	84.6	15.4
Managing personal finances	61.1	38.9	61.5	38.5
Finding accommodation	61.6	38.9	80.8	19.2
Continuing education	94.4	5.6	96.2	3.8
Obtaining employment related training	61.6	38.9	84.6	15.4
Obtaining employment	72.2	27.8	85.6	15.4
Engaging in politics	33.3	66.7	23.1	73.1

Qualitative information further nuances the above picture, by suggesting that young people do not feel all that prepared for living independently, especially emotionally. Many youth highlighted that they were not informed or aware of the process of becoming independent and whether or how their care organisation will support them in finding a job or continuing their studies. A trend in life history interviews appears to be that young people who are going to return to their biological family or home community feel considerably more prepared and comfortable with the transition to independence than those youth who will live on their own. As highlighted by SOS direct caregivers above, these youth feel much more uncertainty as to what their lives in the "outside world" will entail and how they will sustain themselves:

"No, the truth no. No I didn't felt prepared... I didn't see myself living on my own…Because one gets used to his family and environment. And from one day to another, being by myself didn't sound like a good idea. In that moment I was sad" [LH10144 with male care leaver from SOS]

"I think that the principal thing is to talk and explain that the life that we live here [in the care organisation] is not the same as everyone lives. Because we have a very different life. Because one here has everything. If you need something they give it to you. And when you go out you see that if you need or want something you have to search for it. You have to work to have it, if you

want money you have to work. But here we have everything. And here we didn´t need much money to live because they gave us everything we needed… Here one lives in a bubble made of crystal and you don't see needs of other or how much they sacrifice to get them." [LH10145 with female care leaver from organisation 1]

Indeed, following on from the final quote above, young people were very vocal about the further preparations they need to prepare them for living independently. These included better orientation of the "outside world", what society is, how to adapt to living alone, balancing work and leisure, managing finances, finding accommodation, finding a job, and general life lessons on topics such as drugs, sex and money.

> Strikingly, youth express a significant degree of disconnection with society beyond their care organisation, referring to it as the "outside word". This disconnection results in young people being fearful and uncertain of their transition to independence and life after care.

5.7 Education

Access to education, and the ability to focus on their studies without having to combine studies with work, is considered by youth to be one of the major benefits to their time in care. Indeed this was the reason that a number of youth were taken into care; as poverty at home meant that their parents could not afford to send them to school. A small number of youth highlight that the education they received in care put them at an advantage compared to other youth.

> *"When I was at home I worked and studied, so when I got to [the care organisation], it was something that helped me because there they don't sent us to work. We only dedicate to study and to do other things that are from our benefit. Like doing volunteering or similar things."* [LH10138 with female care leaver from organisation 2]

Young people from SOS have a further advantage here, as they are supported in the third phase of care financially, which can sometimes allow youth to continue their studies to university level. This is not always the case in the other two organisations, where young people would like to continue studying, but whether or not they can depends on their sponsor. Indeed, youth consider a lack of money to be a major barrier to obtaining a good education. This is why the education youth receive in care is considered such an advantage, however it also becomes a concern for young people transitioning out of care, who worry that they will no longer be able to finance their studies.

Education also appears to be important to the social inclusion of youth, with young people suggesting that a lack of education leads to discrimination and social exclusion. At the same time, and despite the fact that being in care gives youth access to education, young people from care experience stigma and discrimination surrounding education as a result of relational images, where people assume young people in care are uneducated, and due to discrimination in the classroom. As the government representative stated: *"There is always the problem of exclusion, even the professor didn't treat them equal and we are talking about a public school."* (This is explored further in section 5.8.3)*.

On the other hand, interviews in one of the schools suggest that in some cases schools and teachers are not aware of the background of their students and are unaware of what happens to them when they leave school. Although this will counter the issue of negative relational images, it does suggest that youth from care may not be getting the support they need from their teachers whilst in school.

5.8 Relational movement

As explored in section 2.1, all individuals are going through relational movements throughout their lives, moving from phases of connection and disconnection. However, this research has found that as a result of the multiple transitions (see section 5.6) that young people from care experience the movements in and out of connection and disconnection are accentuated and intensified.

5.8.1 Connectedness in care

As mentioned in section 5.6.1, when entering care young people struggle with the disconnection from their biological families and home communities, which requires a long period of adaptation. The issue of this disconnection does not seem to go away: young people try to maintain contact with their families if they can, however organisational policy doesn't always make this possible. In SOS, youth highlighted that there was a restriction on the amount of visits parents can have with their children, which made young people feel more disconnected, and, it could be argued, making reintegration after care more difficult. In another organisation youth discuss that a change in policy, from youth being able to visit their families to families having to visit their children, increased feelings of disconnection as families found it financially difficult to make the visit.

The concept of love came up frequently for young people in care, especially as this being something people from care were missing and seeking in life. SOS staff discuss how this leads to emotional difficulties and difficulties in forming relationships amongst youth, and youth who became pregnant early attributed this as a response to their desire for love in their life. Indeed a psychologist who participated in the research highlighted that youth in care at a general level are not emotionally satisfied. This is especially true when care organisations are over-crowded, meaning that youth do not receive the care and attention they need.

Young people across the organisations further state that whilst in care, their schedules are restricted by their care organisation making it difficult to maintain friendships outside of the organisation, as they do not have time to socialise with their peers. This results in youth being disconnected from their peers outside of the organisation. This further supports the discussion in section 5.6.3 that young people's references to the "outside" world depict a separation and disconnection from society more generally.

Youth do, however, appear to form very strong connections whilst in care. Staff highlight that youth can be bullied by their peers but that this results in youth from care forming strong friendships with each other. Many young people also express feeling very connected to their caregivers, who are often considered as their biological family. However youth feel much less connected with the offices of their organisations, who make many decisions on the life of a young person.

5.8.2 Connectedness after care

Young people experience a crucial relational movement when they leave their care organisation which, as discussed in section 5.6.3, is a difficult time both emotionally and practically for youth from care. SOS staff highlight that youth have poor relationship skills, especially communication skills, due

to the lack of love throughout their lives. The place where young people have experienced this love is in their SOS families, which makes the disconnection from them as they leave care especially difficult, as they feel they are leaving their lives behind. SOS staff and direct caregivers highlight that youth who move back with their biological homes find this relational movement difficult, as they try to (re-)connect with their families, but find that a relationship with their parents is difficult to (re-)build and their new life is difficult to adapt to. This can mean that young people lose their routine and start dropping behind in education. The move back home is made especially difficult when youth have been living in an environment with different customs and when they have been bought up with a different language. As discussed, youth sometimes lose the ability to speak their "native" language and so find communicating and connecting with their biological families very difficult after care. Nevertheless, the majority of youth in life histories state that they feel accepted when they go home, and some discuss that a benefit of leaving care is that they can visit their biological families whenever they want, with just a few state that they feel foreign and unfamiliar around their families.

Youth in all organisations discuss how the disconnection from their caregivers is difficult to process, which is made more difficult by the fact that when living independently, young people have to focus on earning an income to support themselves. This often means that care leavers experience further disconnection as they do not have the time to socialise with friends. In turn, this can leave young people feeling lonely and isolated which, as was discussed in focus group discussions, affects youth in their studies, jobs and psychological wellbeing.

 "So after being surrounded by kids, it was difficult for me to get used to the idea that I was going to be alone. The adaptation was hard on me. At first I said, "Finally I am going to be free from them". But when I left care it was hard because I never thought that it was going to be so difficult." [LH10145 with female care leaver from organisation 2]

"The priorities change, because when one was at the youth house, there was time to do other things. To hang out with my friends or to do other things. But being by myself, things change. Work becomes a priority, and also the studies if one studies. So the time that is left [to socialise] is not that much. Because if the work is full time there is not much time to spend." [LH10144 with male care leaver from SOS]

Table 5 - Who young people would turn to should they need support after leaving care (N=22)

	Young people from SOS (n=18) (%)	Young people from other care organisations (n=26) (%)
Care staff	22.2	11.5
Biological family	55.6	65.4
(Former) teachers	0	0
Friends	11.1	15.4
Employers	0	0
No-one to turn to	27.8	11.5

Table 5 starkly highlights the lack of connections and support young people from care have when they leave care. According to the figures, the majority of youth would turn to their biological family should they need support after they have left care. Unsurprisingly, this figure is much higher, at 90%, for young people from the employment organisation who are more likely to live with their biological family. It is also slightly higher for youth from other organisations, indicative of the fact that in one of these two organisations, all youth have a connection with their biological family. The figures show that few young people would turn to their friends when they need support, substantiating the qualitative findings that youth find it difficult to maintain social relations with their peers both in and after care.

What is striking is that 27.8% of young people from SOS state that when they leave care they (would) have no one to turn to for support should they need it. In SOS, this figure is slightly higher for males, at 33.3%. In the other organisations, the difference between males and females is more notable, with 23.1% of males saying they (would) have no one to turn to, compared to 0% of females. This highlights the precarious situation that young care leavers are in, and the need for them to receive continued support and guidance as they make the transition into adulthood. This is perhaps especially true in Quetzaltenango and Guatemala, where vulnerable youth are susceptible to involvement in gangs, negative relationships and exploitation.

> A substantial number of youth, especially males, say they (would) have no-one to turn to for support when they leave care, demonstrating the need for continued support and guidance as they make the transition into adulthood

5.8.3 Relational images

Relational images are a key part of the relational approach. Relational images can be images in the form of expectations about how you will be treated, based on past experiences (for example a person who was abandoned by their parents believing they could never be loved), or images others hold of you. In Guatemala, the latter seemed particularly important. Interestingly, staff and caregivers highlight these issues to a far greater degree than youth. For staff, relational images are an issue especially in education and employment, where youth are labelled and discriminated due to being part of SOS. In school, it was highlighted that youth from SOS are labelled as "thieves" by teachers and bullied by peers no matter how they behave. In employment, it is believed that because some youth from the village have behaved badly, now all young people are tarnished with a bad reputation:

> *"So they have made a generalisation out of a few. All these things damage their social environment and this affects them negatively in the society."* [I1 with SOS staff]

> *"For some* [youth doing wrong] *all are affected. Not all of them behave badly but the people think the village is full of criminals."* [I2 with SOS direct caregiver]

When asked about this, many youth did not believe being from care affected their chances of gaining employment. However, there is a noticeable difference here between youth from SOS and other organisations, where 27% of youth from SOS believe youth from care were disadvantaged in

gaining employment, compared to only 3.8% of youth in other organisations believing the same. Also suggesting that SOS may not have a very good reputation in Quetzaltenango, causing issues for young people, is the conversation one youth from SOS recalled taking place at his place of work, where someone was asked if a young man was a good person:

> *"And the man said 'No, no. He is not a good person, what can you expect from somebody from SOS?' And he said it literally, what can one expect of someone that left SOS?"* [LH10144 with male care leaver from SOS]

Youth more commonly discuss having the label and stereotype of "orphan" attached to them, with the connotations of them not having much money which lead to their discrimination or exclusion. In surveys and focus group discussions young people put this discrimination down to the fact that society didn't understand what it meant to be from care and living in a care organisation.

5.9 Identity formation

The transitions, relational movements and relational images that youth experience can have an effect on their identity formation. SOS direct caregivers believe that this effect largely depends on what age young people entered care and their experiences before care. SOS staff agree, stating that youth are victims of their past, and must live with the issues they experience as children. The most frequently stated effect this has is on self-esteem with staff and young people themselves stating that they have low self-esteem and do not socialise much with others. Staff put this down to the discrimination youth may face, and their insecurity with their pasts:

> *"I believe that an effect can be low self-esteem. They are going to develop that because some of the kids that go to school are ashamed of saying that they are from here [SOS]. Because the peers label them, that they are orphans, that they have been abandoned, so sometimes they suffer because of that discrimination. Low self-esteem, insecurity, they can think that don't have the capacity of doing something. We know that in a year a child cannot reach a normal development in all the phases. That contributes that the effort has to be bigger than a teenager that has lived with a normal family: I think that it could be that."* [I1 with SOS staff]

According to staff, this has a long term effect on young people's lives, who struggle to maintain a job and so switch work frequently and who are more susceptible to involvement in drugs, alcoholism and gangs.

5.10 Social exclusion & self-exclusion

The relationship between social exclusion and self-exclusion has been shown to be of big importance to young people in Quetzaltenango, and particularly young people from care. Participants highlighted multiple aspects of people's lives that can be affected by social exclusion, including their employment and education, their psychological wellbeing and there social environment. These aspects are all part of the vicious cycle of social- and self-exclusion, whereby social exclusion leads to self-exclusion, which, in turn, leads to further social exclusion.

Employers and teachers discuss a lack of (meaningful) employment opportunities for young people, which can lead to great frustration. This can result in youth engaging in socially "deviant" behaviour as a coping mechanism, including substance abuse and theft. The expectation of a lack of

employment may also result in young people withdrawing from education, as discussed in section 5.4. Youth discuss the issue of a lack of employment in focus group discussions, highlighting that being unable to find a job makes young people feel desperate and isolated. At the extreme, and very worryingly, two groups discuss that if a young person is unable to find work they may ultimately decide to kill themselves.

With regards to involvement in gangs, which stakeholders highlight is a big issue for young people from care, youth discuss how a person turns to gang membership because of the discrimination and exclusion they face in society, including being unable to find employment:

> *"[a young man may join a gang] because he has been threatened, he has no job. It is the easiest thing to do. Because he feels discriminated or excluded."* [FGD3 with males from SOS]

> *"He has no family, He is not accepted by the society, he is discriminated, he didn´t have the opportunity or the interest of studying, he didn´t have the chance to work."* [FGD6 with males from employment organisation]

As well as the violence and danger that gang members experience, youth highlighted that after joining a gang, young people face more discrimination and, due to others being fearful of them, lose their social and support network.

> Generally speaking, youth discuss that those who experience discrimination and social exclusion experience low self-esteem, depression and other psychological issues.

5.11 Outcomes:

5.11.1 Human wellbeing:

Social-relational wellbeing

Young people from care experience multiple transitions throughout their lives, which lead to youth experiencing more, and more intense relational movements. Young people from care in Quetzaltenango especially experience multiple phases of disconnection. Within care, young people tend to have a strong connection with their caregivers, except when they experience many different transitions within care and thus struggle to connect with their multiple caregivers. However, youth who have a biological family that are unable to take care of them find the disconnection from their family difficult to deal with, especially when organisational policies restrict the amount of time that families can spend with their children. Youth also highlight that when in care, their restrictive schedules mean that they find it difficult to maintain social relations with their peers outside of the care centre. These then are some of the benefits of leaving care; young people have more independence and are able to decide when they spend time with their peers and family. However, the transition to independence also marks a phase of disconnection for many youth, especially those who are not able to return to their biological family, and youth discuss feeling lonely and isolated, not least because they struggle to balance their need to work in order to sustain themselves and their time for leisure activities and socialising with friends. Many youth discuss feeling fearful of the

transition to what they consider as the "outside world", and indeed this conception of life after care being a different world highlights the limited interaction and integration that youth in care have with the wider community.

Material wellbeing

Financial concerns are a major issue for young people from care, especially those transitioning to independent living. According to stakeholders, many young people struggle to find employment after education and so start up their own businesses, which rarely provide enough money for a stable livelihood. This results in young people being stuck in a phase of waithood. Indeed, many care leavers discuss the difficulties they have with money, even being unable to afford food. This changes the priorities of youth as their focus is set on earning a sufficient income as opposed to perhaps following their ambitions or spending time with their friends. Many youth see financial issues as the biggest barrier to achieving their goals, often because they do not have enough money to continue their education.

5.11.2 Employability

Young people generally considered "decent" and "meaningful" employment to be professional work, such as being a doctor, lawyer accountant, or more generally "honest" work (work that does not necessitate breaking the law) that pays enough for a person to live. Employment is a difficult subject for young people from care, as well as young people in Quetzaltenango more generally. Staff highlight that the majority of youth do start employment or a business when they leave care, however often do not earn enough money to sustain themselves or a family. As the government representative stated:

> "There is not enough work, there is a high rate of unemployment. When one finishes school they think that is easy to find a job, but the reality is different. And there is generational exclusion, because there might be some job opportunities but they are under the terms of the people that hire. They pay what they want and the teenagers sometimes have to take those jobs." [I5 with government representative].

Table 6 - Youth's opinions on whether a care background is advantageous or not to gaining employment (N=44)

	Advantaged	Disadvantaged	Makes no difference
Youth from SOS (n=18) (%)	33.3	27.8	33.3
Youth from other care organisations (n=26) (%)	26.9	3.8	69.2

As Table 6 depicts, young people's opinion on whether their care background is advantageous or disadvantageous to them gaining employment is split. However, many young people discuss feeling discriminated in employment as a direct result of their age, or because that their age indicates a lack of experience:

> "In many places they have told me that I look too young. So they don´t hire me" [LH10145 with female care leaver from organisation 1]

> *"They ask for too much experience and they don't give us the opportunity to show our capacity."* [S10159 with male in care organisation 1]

This can result in youth finding it difficult to obtain a job, or results in exploitation within jobs, with young people having to work very long hours, not receiving minimum wage and having their pay withheld for no reason. Young people therefore are not able to access their employment rights, made worse by the lack of attention paid to the rights and protection of vulnerable youth more generally (as discussed in section 5.5). The long hours and lack of pay also affects the connectedness and ambitions of youth, with many care leavers discussing their struggle to balance their overly long working hours with socialising with their friends and continuing their studies.

Many youth also discuss that their geographical location makes finding work hard. This often means that young people do not return back to their home communities, as it is too difficult to find work. Instead, they stay in the cities and thus continue to be disconnected from their families. According to numerous stakeholders, this lack of work also results in a number of youth trying to migrate out of Guatemala, especially to the US.

5.11.3 Social acceptance
Young people generally feel accepted by society, although the extent to which they do varies according to their care organisation, as depicted in Figure 2. Only 50% of youth outside of SOS feel accepted in employment, and the minority of young people feel accepted in politics, as discussed further in section 5.5.

Figure 2: Youth who feel accepted in different parts of society (N=54) (%)
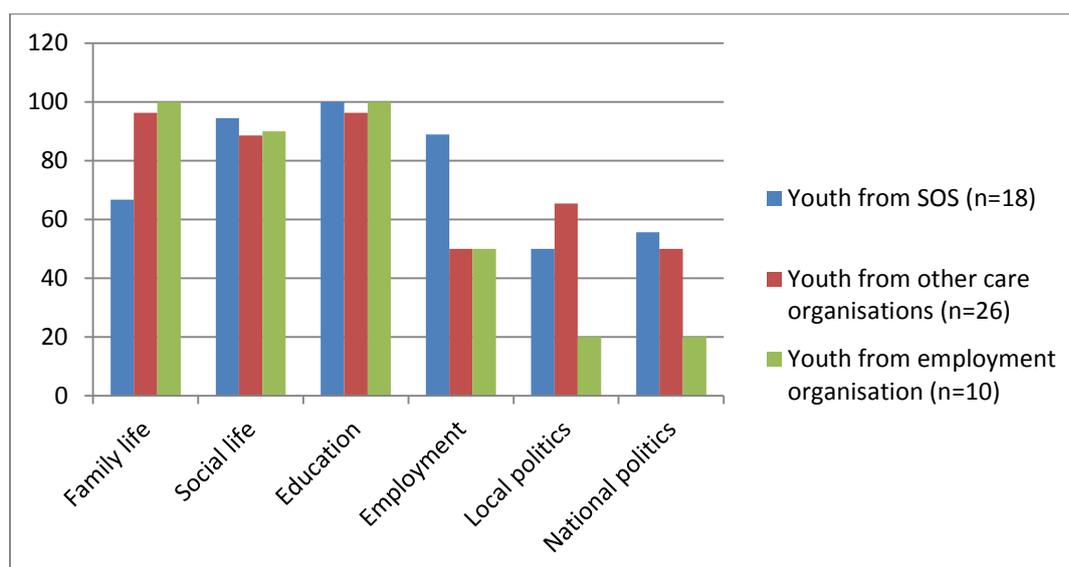
Qualitative data brings some more nuance to the figures above. Section 5.8.3, for example discusses the relational images that young people are subject to, suggesting young people experience stereotypes that may cause barriers in their future lives. Young people in care also appear to have very little connection with the "outside" world and peers outside of care, which makes them fear if and how they will integrate into society when they leave care.

6. Main Findings & Recommendations

6.1 Answering the main research question

This section will provide a brief summary in answer to the main research question: How are vulnerable youth (youth in and from alternative care and families at risk of losing care) affected by social exclusion in terms of their human wellbeing, employability and social acceptance?

Generally young people do not believe that being from care directly leads to them experiencing exclusion, however many young people had experienced discrimination due to being from care and some youth discussed having to work harder for the same opportunities afforded to other young people, suggesting exclusion from opportunities is present. Throughout the research, young people bought up issues relating to their relational movements and connectedness, as well as their opportunities, which can result in young people feeling and being excluded from society, and indeed young people excluding themselves.

The multiple transitions young people experience; into care, within care and out of care, result in young people experiencing multiple and intensified periods of disconnection. This can affect the social-relational wellbeing of youth. When young people enter care, they struggle with the disconnection from their family and home community and take time to adapt to their new environment, especially if they have come from communities with different customs and languages. Generally in care, young people form positive connections with their caregivers. However, these connections are disrupted when young people have to make the transition to independence. Some youth who are in contact with their biological families are positive about their connections after care, however for the most part the transition to independence marks another phase of disconnection, where young people can feel lonely and isolated, not least because of their new need to earn an income to sustain themselves, which can prevent youth from socialising with their peers. Tellingly, 27.8% of all youth from SOS and 23.1% of male youth from other organisations state that they (will) have no-one to turn to should they need support when they have left care. This highlights the lack of a fall-back position that young people from care have, which makes them increasingly vulnerable to social exclusion.

Perhaps the most prominent disconnection found in this research, is the disconnection from youth with the community beyond their care organisation. A large number of youth refer to this as the "outside world", which they feel they know very little about. This demonstrates a lack of integration of youth in the broader community, and results in young people being especially fearful of their transition to independence as they do not know what to expect from the world "out there". Added to this is that fact that, whilst in care, young people believe that their schedules restrict them from building connections with their peers, meaning their connections are very centralised within the care organisation, which they one day have to leave. As mentioned, when young people have left care, they find their schedules continue to restrict the time they have to spend with friends and peers. Indeed, only 11.1% and 15.4% of youth, from SOS and other care centres respectively, said that they would turn to their friends in case they needed support outside of care.

Young people had very split opinions as to whether being from care is an advantage or a disadvantage when it came to finding employment, however stakeholders in general believed that youth from care were discriminated against when it came to finding a job. What was clear from the

research was the limited number of job opportunities available to youth, and the fact that the employment available often did not pay well enough for youth to sustain themselves. This then is not only an issue of employability but also material wellbeing. Many care leavers discussed difficulties in managing their finances, in some cases including being unable to afford food. This issue is especially pertinent for vulnerable youth, due to the fact that they lack a fall-back position and may have no-one to turn to in times of financial need. Youth highlighted how this changed their priorities, as they had to focus on earning an income. Many young people in care were especially worried about the financial implications of leaving care; including the effect this would have on their ability to continue their education.

Finally, although by no means exhaustively, it is clear from the research that young people do not feel accepted, and are not represented in politics. Many youth actively exclude themselves from political participation, primarily due to corruption, but also because they do not feel that they have a voice. This latter point was made clear in interviews with government representatives who discussed that offices supposedly in place to protect youth are understaffed, underfunded and not operating as they should be.

6.2 Reflections & study limitations

There are a number of reflections and limitations that should be considered regarding this research:

- Initially another local research partner was hired by the research team at UvA to conduct the research in Quetzaltenango, on recommendation of a university contact. This researcher worked alongside the UvA research team (including in the field) for a number of weeks and stayed in frequent contact with the team. Suddenly, out of the blue, this researcher stopped contacting the team at UvA. Despite many, and varied, attempts (including going to their home and talking with their parents) to regain contact and obtain the raw data, we were unable to do this. Thankfully, due to a UvA researcher being in the field for the first week of data collection, not all data was lost, however, the data that the local researcher conducted independently was gone, including surveys and life histories with youth. The research team at UvA have found this both frustrating and upsetting, as youth put a great deal of time, energy and emotion into those discussions.

- The above point means that we had to utilise a new approach to obtaining data. As such, rather than conducting each survey verbally in a one-to-one situation, we instructed our new research partner to set aside a day where they would be in a room at the different care organisations, so that youth could fill in the surveys by hand in their own time. The purpose of this was to obtain the data quicker, but also to ensure youth, some of whom had already participated previously, only came if they were completely willing and able to do so. The approach generally worked well, and meaningful data was collected, however we lost the ability to probe on certain issues that would have been of interest to the research.

- It proved difficult to contact young people who had left care. Many organisations do not stay in contact with these young people and youth frequently change phone numbers. The care leavers interviewed were those who did stay in contact with the organisation, or who stayed in contact with their peers at the organisation and thus may not be representative of all care leavers.

- The research was conducted in a specific part of Guatemala, and thus the findings cannot be considered representative of the country as a whole.

6.3 Recommendations for care organisations programming and practice in Guatemala

- Care organisations should consider employing staff, or having people on hand, who can speak local languages to ease the transition into care for children.
- There should be as much consistency in care as possible; children and young people should not have to move around and have different caregivers as this causes disconnection.
- Young people should be more actively involved in decisions that affect their lives and futures. Staff that currently make such decisions need to have better communication with children and young people.
- Organisations should be wary of overly restrictive schedules, ensuring that youth have time to build and maintain connections with their peers outside of care.
- Youth see life after care as life in the "outside" world. This shows that young people need better connection and integration with the community surrounding the care organisation during their time in care. This will ensure youth are less fearful of the transition to independence and will make integration into the community for care leavers easier. It should also breakdown the preconceptions and negative relational images that society holds on young people from care, thus reducing the discrimination and exclusion of youth from care.
- Young people need to be better prepared emotionally and practically for life after care, as well as the point above, this should include:
  - Practical advice on issues such as managing personal finances and finding accommodation.
  - Familiarising youth with what life after care will entail, for example by engaging "successful" care leavers as mentors and role models
  - Assisting, or at least encouraging, youth to build and maintain their social contacts to ensure that youth have positive connections whilst in care
  - Care organisations communicating with young people to understand what preparations youth feel they need, and delivering on these
- Youth should be positively encouraged with regards to finding employment, as well as being sensitively made aware of the realities of the job market.
- Young people should be made aware of their rights (including employment rights), and how they can claim them.
- Young people need continuing support when they leave care, and need (to know there is) someone they can turn to during difficult periods.

6.4 National level policy and advocacy on vulnerable youth in and from care

- A comprehensive and consistent policy and legal framework protecting and supporting children and youth in care needs to be developed and implemented
- The issues of (vulnerable) youth need to be elevated on policy agendas. Local governments need to receive adequate funding to ensure they have the capacity to protect and support vulnerable youth.
- (Local) government must take responsibility for vulnerable youth, to ensure their safety, protection and rights as citizens:
- All care organisations should be registered and monitored to ensure youth are protected and are receiving the care that they need
- Support mechanisms should be developed for young people transitioning to independence
- The employment rights of young people need to be implemented and protected
- (Local) government must work to improve accessibility of quality education at all levels, so that families do not feel obliged to give up their children, and so youth can continue their education after they have left care.

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