

Summary

An uncertain future

Qualitative research into the experiences of rejected (former) UMAs and foster parents with future oriented guidance

Background of the study, goal, and methods

Background

In 2016, the Netherlands introduced a new model for the reception of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (UMAs). Distinctive features of the model are the small-scale housing facilities and the emphasis on guidance of UMAs depending on their future prospects. In contrast to the past situation, minors who have been granted an asylum permit are now housed separately from those whose asylum application has been rejected. While the future-oriented guidance of the former group focuses on integration in the Netherlands, the latter group is in principle prepared for a future in the country of origin or elsewhere. In principle, UMAs whose asylum application is definitely rejected are required to leave the country, but they qualify for reception in the Netherlands until their 18th birthday in the absence of adequate housing facilities in their country of origin. In practice, many rejected UMAs leave the housing facility and go off the radar (that is, depart from the housing facility with unknown destinations) before this moment, and voluntary return happens only seldom.

The Nidos Foundation (the national guardianship institution that fulfils the guardianship task for unaccompanied minor foreigners) assumes guardianship of all UMAs upon their arrival in the Netherlands, and provides them with a guardian who guides them until they reach 18 years of age. UMAs aged 15 or older with a rejected asylum application at the first instance are housed in small-scale housing facilities (KWV) of the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). Each facility houses a maximum of sixteen to twenty children under 24/7 supervision. Children who are considered exceptionally vulnerable (also when they are over 15) and those younger than 15 upon arrival, are housed in foster families for which Nidos has responsibility. All UMAs are entitled to education and health care, regardless of the outcome of their asylum application.

Aim and research questions

Previous research among experts showed that future oriented guidance of UMAs in KWVs focused too much on the practical issues which were required for a future in the Netherlands (Inspectie Gezondheidszorg en Jeugd and Inspectie Veiligheid en Justitie, 2018). Information about the youngsters' experiences with the guidance in the KWVs and in foster families was lacking. The Dutch Migration Policy Department requested the Dutch Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) to study this issue. The current study aimed to provide more insight into rejected UMAs' experiences about the guidance they receive under the new reception model, and how they see their future.

The research questions were:

- 1 What are the experiences of youngsters whose asylum application has been rejected with the housing facility and (future oriented) guidance?
- 2 Does the guidance meet their needs?
- 3 How do they see their future (for instance with regards to staying in the Netherlands or returning to the country of origin)?

Methods

The study adopted a qualitative approach. To answer the research questions concerning youngsters in KWVs, we interviewed 29 (former) UMAs who (ever) stayed in a KWV after the introduction of the new reception model. Respondents were selected based on language (Tigrinya, (Moroccan) Arabic, Berber, French, English, or Dari) and age (16 and older). Some of the former UMAs had (at some point) left the KWV to go off the radar.

To answer the research questions concerning youngsters living with foster families, we interviewed 15 foster parents. Given that in foster families there is no professional assistance to provide the youngsters with help in case of any potential negative psychological reactions after the interview, we decided not to interview UMAs staying with foster families.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, almost all interviews took place through video calls.

Results

Youngsters' and foster parents' experiences with (future oriented) guidance

Interviews with (former) UMAs

The interviews with (former) UMAs reveal that both COA mentors at KWVs (hereafter: mentors) and the Nidos-guardian (hereafter: the guardian) provide practical assistance and personal attention. Day-to-day practical support by mentors involves tasks like teaching children how to cook, waking them up to go to school, helping with homework, and setting up appointments. Mentors give children personal attention and provide emotional support by talking to them about everyday issues as well as their personal situation and problems. In these talks, mentors provide a sympathetic ear and comfort for the children. Several youngsters say they think of their mentor as a sibling or a parent. Practical and individual support by the guardian mostly concerns the asylum procedure, issues regarding education (such as discussing the youngster's situation in education, contacts with the school, and motivating the youngster to attend) as well as the youngster's wellbeing and health.

Most respondents have discussed their future with their mentor, guardian, or both. This is true for all former UMAs and about half of the UMAs. These conversations mostly concern the way the children see their future or their ambitions. Contrary to UMAs, many former UMAs have also had conversations about their options after their 18th birthday (such as filing a repeat asylum application (HASA) and moving to an asylum seeker reception centre for adults, leaving the Netherlands when the legal options to appeal have been exhausted, and the implications of living in the Netherlands undocumented). Developing a concrete plan for a future in the country of origin was an exception. The former UMAs indicate that these talks with their mentors about their options regarding the transition to adulthood took place shortly before, or even on their 18th birthday.

Because of uncertainty about the outcome of their asylum application, many UMAs find it hard to talk about their future. The fact that most envision their future in the Netherlands (see below) possibly plays into this as well.

Interviews with foster parents

Foster parents characterize their relationship with the children they host as affectionate, and many of them see themselves as an actual parent to the minors. A majority says the youngsters are generally doing well at home and at school, and that they show good behaviour. At the same time, many parents note that the youngsters are (always) sad and suffer (a lot) from stress and insomnia as a result of the negative outcome of their asylum application. Foster parents support the minors in several ways. Firstly, they offer everyday practical assistance (for instance by providing food and clothing and making sure the youngster attends school daily). Secondly, the foster parents see it as their responsibility to raise the youngsters well (for instance with regards to having the 'right' friends and not using drugs, and preparing them for independence) and provide emotional support after the asylum application has been rejected or when the children feel lonely. Thirdly, almost all foster parents discuss the future with the youngster, especially emphasizing the importance of education. Others also discuss the child's options after their 18th birthday. Foster parents from so-called network families (in the current study typically relatives of the child) often seem willing to take action to help the youngster obtain a residence permit after all – for instance by filing a HASA – in case the youngster has no more options to appeal against the negative decision on the asylum application, or this situation is looming.

Until the 18th birthday, the minor's legal guardian provides assistance in several formal and administrative issues to both the youngster and their foster parents. This support mostly concerns the asylum procedure, but also the child's education and health. Whereas some foster parents speak of a collaboration with the guardian (for instance when it comes to taking important decisions regarding education), others clearly distinguish between their responsibilities and the guardian's – in such cases the guardian typically focuses on the asylum procedure and other formal matters while the foster parents provide everyday care and upbringing.

(Un)met needs and desires regarding guidance

Interviews with (former) UMAs

The interviews with (former) UMAs reveal that the housing facilities and guidance by the mentor and guardian meet youngsters' needs and desires at least to some extent.

While youngsters generally prefer living in a small group at the KWV, living together with other rejected UMAs (as well as with UMAs in the extended asylum procedure who also live in the KWV) generally stresses them. They believe that the stress caused by the uncertainty surrounding the asylum procedure negatively affects the atmosphere in the group, and according to some this also leads to tension and fights. With regards to housing, needs and desires vary. A number of children prefer the current system of separate housing facilities because they feel UMAs with and without a residence permit might clash if housed together or because it can be hard to deal with the fact that others' asylum applications are granted. Instead, other children prefer a 'mixed' housing system because they believe those who have been granted asylum could support those whose applications have been rejected.

With regards to satisfaction with the mentor's guidance, the opinions of UMAs seem to differ from those of former UMAs. UMAs in particular indicate that they are satisfied with the mentor's practical support, personal attention, and approachability.

Moreover, several of them mention how they consider them as a parent figure, as mentors, for instance, create a homely atmosphere, personally wake them up in the morning, take their problems seriously, and support them emotionally. Instead, most former UMAs are unsatisfied with the guidance by their mentors during their stay in the KWV, although some express their satisfaction with the future oriented conversations they had with their mentors during that time. They especially appreciated positivity and encouragement on the part of the mentor, as well as the mentor being straightforward about a potential negative outcome of the asylum application. Many former UMAs believe the topic of the transition to 18+ was addressed too late, and that it was the mentor's responsibility to bring this up earlier on, since they struggled talking about their future themselves.

The youngsters (former UMAs in particular) mention several reasons for dissatisfaction with the assistance of mentors, among which: lack of, or negative experiences with, future oriented counselling; lack of personal attention; and negative treatment (such as lack of sympathy or empathy, for instance when the mentors put them out on the street when they turned 18, and experiences of discrimination). Furthermore, some of them believe the guidance by the mentors could be improved by providing more group activities (for instance computer, art, dancing and music lessons), increased cultural sensitivity among the mentors, not being strict and no yelling, putting the children's interests first, and not recording everything in writing (as this leads to distrust among the children).

When compared to mentors, opinions about the guidance by the guardian are less varied among the youngsters. A majority of both UMAs and former UMAs is (very) satisfied with the guidance. The youngsters appreciate the guardian's involvement with the asylum procedure and the level of personal attention. Nonetheless, the youngsters name a few points of improvement, such as increased understanding or empathy for their situation on the part of the guardian, a more active involvement in the asylum procedure, and more frequent contact. Moreover, some youngsters express needs and desires with regards to future oriented guidance, for instance working together on a plan for the future and stimulating the youngster to engage in this.

With regards to both the mentor and the guardian the youngsters indicate that they are in need of actual concrete help to obtain a residence permit.

Several youngsters find (or found) it hard to focus on school due to stress, but a number of UMAs are enthusiastic about school and learning Dutch. Some of them suggest that a different group composition in class would enhance their opportunities to learn Dutch. For instance, they propose mixing UMAs with Dutch pupils, or having a more varied composition in terms of country of origin, so that youngsters are stimulated to express themselves in Dutch to communicate with one another, rather than speaking their own language.

Interviews with foster parents

The large majority of foster parents say they are satisfied with the guardian's support, mostly because of their involvement, availability, and displayed interest in the child and the way they fare in the family. In contrast, a number of parents are dissatisfied due to infrequent contact (in some cases due to the COVID-19 pandemic or the guardian's high caseload), lack of support in practical matters (such as taking the youngster to appointments) as well as regarding the asylum procedure (such as

being absent in court at a meeting deemed crucial by the foster parent), and negative treatment of the child (such as speaking to the child about their chances to get a residence permit in a 'demoralising' manner). A number of foster parents explicitly state they would appreciate a stronger 'presence' of the guardian, by which they mean a higher frequency of contact with both the child and themselves and more frequent home visits.

Ideas about the future and contact with the youngster's family

Interviews with (former) UMAs

Despite having plans or dreams about the future (such as studying (further), starting an own business, starting a dream job, starting a family), the prospects with regards to obtaining a residence permit make that most youngsters are uncertain about what their lives will look like in one year from now. In spite of this, they envision their future in the Netherlands. In the long term, too, almost all youngsters see themselves in the Netherlands, although some UMAs qualify this by mentioning a residence permit as a condition. More often than UMAs, former UMAs express uncertainty about what their future will look like and where they will be. This is probably due to the fact that they still do not have a residence permit and due to negative experiences such as going off the radar. Importantly, none of the respondents expresses an intention to return to their country of origin. A few youngsters, mostly UMAs, are planning to travel to a third country in case they run out of options to receive a residence permit. Reasons for not considering to return to the country of origin are: the lack of opportunities to build a future there (due to the bad situation, war, and lack of freedom), having been through too much, having invested far too much money and time to come to the Netherlands, and no longer being familiar with their country of origin due to their young age at migration. UMAs and former UMAs state different reasons for wanting to remain in the Netherlands. UMAs mostly focus on the opportunities the Netherlands offers for a good or better life, or state that it is a good, beautiful country, or that they love the Netherlands. Former UMAs mostly point at the long years they have spent in the Netherlands already: they grew up in the Netherlands, built a life here, and have gotten used to the country, the language, the culture, and Dutch society.

The large majority of the youngsters are in touch with their families. In general, they indicate that their family would react mostly negatively to their potential return. As reasons for this, the youngsters mention their changed lifestyle, the bad economic situation in the country of origin, a feeling of 'failure' and their parents' hope of family reunification in the Netherlands.

Interviews with foster parents

The interviews with foster parents, too, reveal a vision of a future in the Netherlands among the children. This applies to the foster parents as well. They believe the children cannot return to their countries of origin, in part because of the unsafe situation and doubts on whether the youngster will be independent enough to survive there when they turn 18. According to the foster parents, a bit more than half of the youngsters are in touch with their family in the country of origin or elsewhere. Most foster parents are in touch with them as well; these are mostly foster parents in network families. The foster parents say that in some cases the guardian, too, is in touch with the youngster's family. As far as the data is available, according to the foster parents the youngsters' families, too, see the youngster's future in the Netherlands.

Overarching: going off the radar and turning 18

Nine of the former UMAs have (at some point) left the KWV and went off the radar. An important obstacle that is revealed by both the interviews with these youngsters and those with the foster parents, is the transition to adulthood and the termination of housing facilities and guidance and other services for UMAs when they turn 18, and their asylum application is rejected definitely. With the exception of one former UMA who was facing return to his country of origin at the age of 17, all respondents who have gone off the radar indicate that their reason for doing so was the fact that they were (or would have been) put out on the street on or shortly after their 18th birthday. The foster parents as well recount examples of youngsters who left the foster family to go off the radar when they turned 18, and went into hiding elsewhere in the Netherlands or left for another EU country. Some foster parents express their concerns about the termination of all support at the age of 18. They find it difficult to put youngsters out on the street when they turn 18, after taking care of them for many years. The foster parents believe the termination of services is the main reason to go off the radar at 18 for UMAs whose legal options for receiving a residence permit have been exhausted. In part due to their previously mentioned concerns about independence at that age, several foster parents advocate extending housing and guidance facilities for UMAs until the age of 21.

Concluding remarks

The current study focused on the experiences of (former) UMAs in KWVs with the new reception model as well as those of foster parents supporting and guiding a child whose asylum application has been rejected. The results show that, to date, future oriented guidance has not properly materialized. UMAs struggle to talk about a future without having a residence permit in the Netherlands; according to minors the KWV mentors are also reluctant to bring up this issue, and options after reaching the age of 18 are not a topic of conversation or are not addressed until very late. The fact that almost all minors whose asylum application has been rejected envision their future in the Netherlands, and that all services are terminated at the 18th birthday, causes some of them to go off the radar at that moment or shortly before that moment. Looking back at their time in the KWV, former UMAs point out that they would have preferred to have conversations about their options after turning 18 after all. This implies that it is important to start the future oriented guidance earlier. This can be realized by providing information about the asylum procedure and possible outcomes from the start in a child-friendly manner, whereby the child's developmental phase is taken into account. It is recommended to align the future oriented guidance to the child's developmental phase, by raising the age limit of housing and guidance facilities to the age of 21. During this period one could continue working on developing the youngster's concrete skills for a sustainable future perspective elsewhere than in the Netherlands.