

Adolescence and mental health in residential care: Portrait of a decade in Portugal

Adolescência e saúde mental no acolhimento residencial: Retrato de uma década em Portugal

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Received: April 7, 2021

Accepted: December 10, 2021

Background

According to Datacare project (Eurochild, 2022) Portugal has the highest prevalence of children and youth in out of home care living in residential care facilities in Europe. Very recently, legal diplomas were created that seek, on the one hand, to reinforce the needs for specialized responses moving towards to the internationally defended paradigm of residential therapeutic care, and, on the other hand, to create conditions for foster care to be more representative as a non-residual response for children/young people away from their natural contexts of life and in situations where the interest of the child/young person is superior or justified.

Aims

The main objectives of this study were (i) to undertake a comparative analysis of demographic and psychosocial adjustment indicators of adolescents (12 to 17 years of age) in Residential Care in Portugal regarding the last decade (2009-2019), and (ii) to make available a report that may inform a comprehensive approach to the current needs of children/young people who are in RC.

Method & procedures

We performed a comparative analysis across the last ten years and systematize data regarding demographic and psychosocial adjustment indicators of adolescents (12 to 17 years old) published in the Portuguese Annual Characterization of the Situation of Out-of-Home Care Reports in the last decade. The indicators in study include sociodemographic data, such as sex and age of participants, as well as the prevalence of behavioral problems and their intensity, mental health problems and psychiatric medication. To obtain meaning and understanding, as well as to develop empirical knowledge we conducted a documental analysis. This method allowed us to identify which changes occurred in the quality and consistency of the indicators over the years under analysis.

Results & discussion

Two different levels of results may prove useful in the reflection of policies for the protection of children and young people and in the development of a response to “specific problems and needs for educational and/or therapeutic intervention of children and young people”. A first result is related to the characteristics and alterations of the adolescent population in RC across the years (e.g., decrease of number of residents but higher prevalence of adolescents, higher representation of adolescents with behavior and mental health problems) and a second one refers to the complexity regarding deinstitutionalization processes, families support and human resources.

Conclusion

Monitoring the systems' responsiveness should consider the complexity of indicators, not being constrained by individualized risk or single protection measures. A comprehensive view of the pathways and contexts of vulnerability, in a synchronic, but also diachronic perspective, considering the evaluation of the effectiveness of measures, proves to be fundamental for the development of public policies that place children and young people at the center of intervention.

Keywords: adolescence, mental health, residential care

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Financial support: FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I. P., under CareMe project PTDC/PSI-ESP/28653/2017.

How to cite: Morais, F., Santos, B., Mota, C. P., Matos, P. M., Costa, M., & Carvalho, H. M. (2022). Adolescência e saúde mental no acolhimento residencial: Retrato de uma década em Portugal. *Psicoperspectivas*, 21(1). <https://dx.doi.org/10.5027/psicoperspectivas-vol21-issue1-fulltext-2286>



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