

Life After 18



The State of Care Leavers in India

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March 2026

Turning 18 is a milestone most young people celebrate the freedom, the rights, the possibilities that come with it. But for some, that same birthday marks the beginning of a very different kind of reckoning.

Every year, nearly 50,000 young adults age out of India's Child Care Institutions. For them, the transition is not a celebration. It is a cliff edge. Overnight, the state withdraws its care and they are left with no family, no savings, no home, and no roadmap for what comes next.

This is the Cliff Edge.

~50,000

young adults exit CCIs every year



67%

unaware of their legal right to aftercare



9,600

Child Care Institutions in India



63%

of female care leavers have no independent income



3rd

largest institutionalised child population globally



₹4,000

per month — state support under Mission Vatsalya



The numbers tell a stark story. Nearly half of all care leavers, 48% have not achieved financial independence after leaving care. Among those who do find work, 93% take home ₹7,500–8,500 a month, a wage that falls below subsistence level in any Indian city.

Sources:

1. bettercarenetwork.org
2. horizons.tatatrusts.org/2024
3. www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/child-labour-exploitation
4. accountabilityindia.in/publication/mission-vatsalya/

THE CLIFF EDGE

What Happens at 18



For a child growing up inside a Child Care Institution, the 18th birthday is not a milestone. It is a deadline. On that day, the only home they have ever known must be vacated. The state, which has fed, housed, and governed every aspect of their life, steps back. What follows is not independence. It is free fall.

On **Day 01** of independence, a typical care leaver has:



No housing, and often no address to register anywhere



No income, no savings, and no family to fall back on



No legal identity documents (Aadhaar, PAN, birth certificate)



No life skills, budgeting, cooking, commuting were never taught



Zero awareness of their own legal entitlements

More than 1 in 3 care leavers say they do not feel equipped to live independently after exiting care. Once they leave, the state loses sight of them entirely. India has no official database of care leavers, once a child exits a CCI, they disappear from the administrative record entirely.

Sources:

1. www.tatatrusts.org/media/press-releases/study-finds-youth-leaving-care-homes
2. horizons.tatatrusts.org/2024

THE CLIFF EDGE

The Law vs. The Ground Reality

What the Law Promises	What Care Leavers Experience
JJ Act, 2015: aftercare support mandated for all CCI exits	67% of care leavers don't even know this right exists
Individual Care Plans (ICPs): personalised roadmaps for every child	ICPs are poorly understood and inconsistently prepared by CCI staff
Mission Vatsalya: ₹4,000/month support (ages 18–21)	Money flows to organisations, not directly to the young person
Life skills training embedded in CCI programming	Vocational courses offered: candle-making, tailoring (outdated), uncertified
Budget for COVID recovery years	Scheme budget dropped 39% in FY2020–21, peak vulnerability period

A 2025 peer-reviewed analysis concluded that Mission Vatsalya is largely **'old wine in new bottles'**, a rebranding exercise that left the underlying problems of funding and accountability untouched. What has not changed is the root problem: political will.

"The constant focus on integrating and rebranding existing services undermines the real issues of better child protection: funding and implementation."

–Keshri & Mortensen, SAGE, 2025

Sources:

1. bettercarenetwork.org
2. accountabilityindia.in/publication/mission-vatsalya/
3. idronline.org/article/youth/how-indias-aftercare-programme-can-benefit-care-leavers/
4. <https://www.multisubjectjournal.com/article/728/7-6-20-440.pdf>
5. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23493003251360927>

A CRISIS WITHIN THE CRISIS

The Gender Gap

63%

of female care leavers
have no income



36%

of male care leavers
have no income



2 of 5

states studied had
aftercare homes for girls



The disadvantages facing female care leavers compound quickly. When a girl turns 18 inside a CCI, the system's default response in most states is not opportunity, it is either marriage or placement in a destitute home (Swadhar Griha). Of the five states studied, only Delhi and Maharashtra had dedicated aftercare housing for women. This is not a historical footnote. It is happening now.

As recently as 2016, only 1 in 3 girls who had left care could access any form of organised support.

Sources:

1. bettercarenetwork.org
2. www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/child-labour-exploitation

A CRISIS WITHIN THE CRISIS

The Data Black Hole

India does not officially count its care leavers.

The **~50,000** annual figure is an estimate derived from census data, not a government record.

Once a child exits a CCI, the state has no tracking mechanism, they cease to exist, administratively.

Without data, budget planning is impossible. Outcomes cannot be tracked. Accountability cannot be enforced

CLiC: a care-leaver led NGO, built Rajasthan's first verified care leaver database because no official one existed.

India has 9,600 CCIs and no system to follow what happens to children after they walk out the gate. When the Udayan Care AOP team needed to find care leavers to support, they located them through a peer network, care leavers finding other care leavers, because the state had no list to offer.

Sources:

1. bettercarenetwork.org
2. <https://yourstory.com/socialstory/2024/07/care-leavers-inner-circle-forum-children-care-homes-orphanages-support>
3. horizons.tatatrusts.org/2024

THE IDENTITY TRAP

Invisible by Law

Before a care leaver can find housing, open a bank account, access a welfare scheme, buy a SIM card, or even vote, they need documents. And this is precisely where the system fails them most fundamentally.

2/3

of care leavers lack essential identity documents – voter card, PAN card

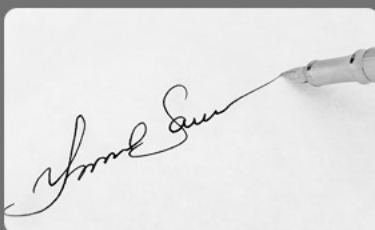
Mumbai Study, 2021



Every

office asks for a guardian's signature. Care leavers have no guardian to name.

Care Leaver Accounts



≠ Citizen

Aadhaar does NOT prove citizenship. Section 9, Aadhaar Act is explicit.

UIDAI / Aadhaar Act



A qualitative study of orphan care leavers in Mumbai found that **two-thirds had left care without essential legal identity documents**, no voter card, no PAN card. Without these, they cannot prove they exist. Not a paperwork problem, a foundational one.

The Bureaucratic Catch- 22 that traps care leavers:

To get Aadhaar → need a permanent address. To get an address → need Aadhaar.

Sources:

1. Keshri, A.K. Life After Leaving Institutional Care: Independent Living Experience of Orphan Care Leavers of Mumbai, India. Asian Social Work and Policy Review. 2021. researchgate.net/publication/353988455

To open a bank account → need Aadhaar + PAN. To receive the ₹4,000 Mission Vatsalya stipend → need a bank account.

To apply for a birth certificate → need a guardian's signature. Care leavers have no guardian.

To access caste-based reservations, welfare schemes, or vote → need documents that were never secured during their time in the CCI.

To get a passport → need a birth certificate that many CCIs never obtained for the child.

The JJ Act (Section 53) directs CCIs to help children secure identity documents before leaving. In practice, **most CCIs provide only food, shelter, and basic schooling**, document facilitation is routinely left undone.

"Every office we went to requested a guardian's signature. But who could we write about? Who would defend us and sign those forms? Without these documents, we disappear from the system."

Care Leaver, India, 2025

Researchers use the term 'effectively stateless' for people who hold citizenship in law but cannot demonstrate it in practice. Care leavers particularly those abandoned as infants, with no recorded parentage, fall squarely into this category. They are citizens on paper and invisible everywhere else.

Aadhaar does not close this gap. Section 9 of the Aadhaar Act is explicit: it is not proof of citizenship or domicile. Since January 2024, new Aadhaar cards carry that disclaimer in print. A care leaver who manages to secure Aadhaar still cannot use it for NRC verification, certain voter registrations, or a passport application

When the National Care Leavers Network published its very first Charter of Demands, the opening ask was this: ensure that every young person leaves a CCI with Aadhaar and a birth certificate in hand. Care leavers themselves named this first. It has not yet been delivered at scale.

Sources:

1. <https://idronline.org/article/youth/how-indias-aftercare-programme-can-benefit-care-leavers/>
2. Bano, Hajra. Care Leavers in India: The Invisible Struggle for Identity and Support. 2025. hajrabano.blog/2025/03/care-leavers-in-india-invisible
3. UIDAI / Drishti IAS. Aadhaar is Not a Proof of Citizenship. Government of India clarification. January 2024. drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/aadhaar-is-not-a-proof-of-citizenship

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Solutions From the Evidence

Across all ten sources, a consistent set of evidence-backed solutions emerges:

01	Begin life skills training at age 15–16, not 17–18. Financial literacy, cooking, transport, communication — these need years, not weeks.
02	Mandate Individual Aftercare Plans (IAPs), co-created with each young person, at least 6 months before exit.
03	Fast-track legal identity inside CCIs: Every child must have Aadhaar, birth certificate, PAN, caste certificate, and a bank account before turning 17. No child should exit without a complete document file.
04	Build a national digital registry of care leavers. CLiC's state-level model in Rajasthan is a replicable template.
05	Fund dedicated aftercare homes for women in every state. Prohibit marriage-as-rehabilitation in policy guidance.
06	Make financial support direct and meaningful: ₹4,000/month is sub-poverty-line. A minimum of ₹10,000, paid directly to the individual, is needed.
07	Recognise 'care leaver' as a distinct vulnerable category in national skills, employment, and housing policies.
08	Channel corporate CSR mandates under Schedule VII of the Companies Act toward care leaver housing, employment, and skilling.

Sources:

1. idronline.org, bettercarenetwork.org, accountabilityindia.in/publication/mission-vatsalya/, yourstory.com/socialstory/2024, www.multisubjectjournal.com/article/728/7-6-20-440.pdf

THE HOPE

Care Leavers Are Building the Solutions

The most promising innovations in this ecosystem are not coming from government ministries or large NGOs. They are coming from people with lived experience of the cliff edge itself.

CLiC – Care Leavers Inner Circle Forum

Provides a 'care leavers kit' at transition: essentials, a guidebook, and ₹5,500 emergency fund – addressing the state's Day 1 failure

Won the Young Global Charger 1st Prize at the Global Solutions World Policy Forum, Berlin, 2025

Founded by Mukesh Mehta, a care leaver, in Jaipur, 2021

Built Rajasthan's first verified care leaver database in partnership with UNICEF

Its advocacy led to an MoWCD order requiring states to create databases and provide identity proof – execution remains limited

Udayan Care's Aftercare Outreach Programme has reached **536 care leavers** across five states, placing over 200 in employment through a combination of mentoring, skills training, and direct employer partnerships. It works because it treats care leavers as individuals with potential, not cases to be processed

"The state takes full responsibility for a child's life until they turn 18; then, from a data perspective, they simply cease to exist."

Tata Trusts Horizons, 2024

Sources:

1. <https://horizons.tatatrusts.org/2024/august/tata-trusts-starting-afresh-udayan-care.html>

THE CLIFF EDGE IS NOT INEVITABLE. IT IS A POLICY CHOICE.

With the right investments in data, identity, housing, and skills India can build the bridge that 50,000 young people need to cross every single year.

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