

The variety of childcare trajectories of French youths having experienced placement

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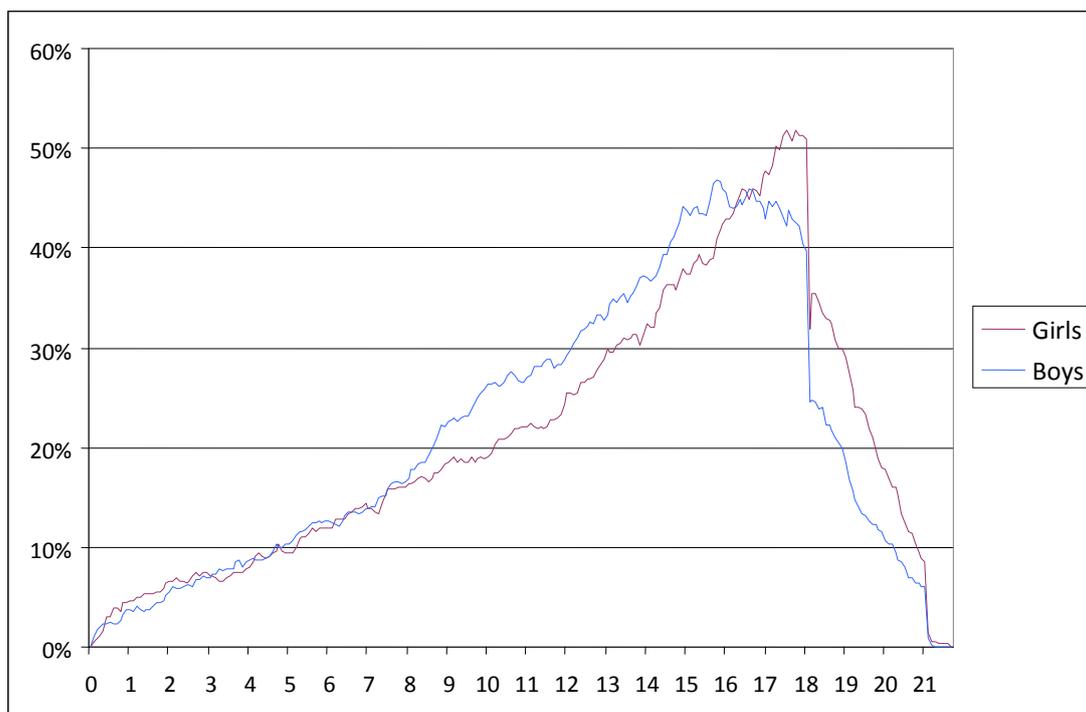
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In France, the child welfare system is bipolar. Responsibilities concerning care decisions, educative follow-up and financial issues are shared between two bodies (state-run children's protection services and juvenile justice) and often quite entangled. As a consequence of this complex organization, none of these two bodies in charge of child welfare have a comprehensive view of young people's care trajectories. In 2006-2007, we realized a retrospective study (called "Elap") based on records archived in care services and juvenile courts of two French *départements*, in order to reconstruct the complete care trajectories of a cohort of 21-year-old youths having experienced placement after 10. Using event-history calendars, 809 trajectories have been gathered, including entering and leaving care motives, types and origins of social measures, placement places, family and socio-demographic characteristics.

Taking advantage of these very rich data, we shall present a description of the children in care trajectories' main features. Then, by means of sequence analysis techniques, we shall "fish" for the typical patterns of placement histories among these youths, thus giving an account of the heterogeneity of youth care trajectories.

First insights

Figure 1 - Proportion of children in placement by age and sex

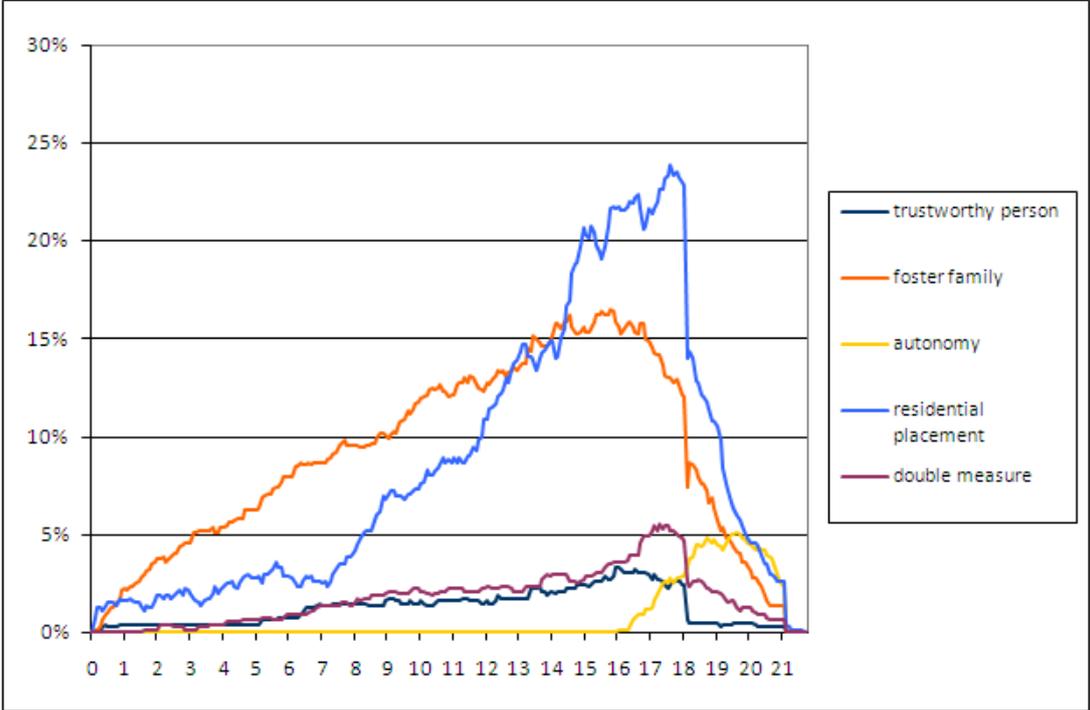


Field : 809 children of the Elap survey

By exploring the Elap data, the first result is the difference in the share of children in placement by age between boys and girls (Figure 1). During the first years of childhood, the proportions of boys and girls in placement are rather similar. But between 8 and 10, the proportion of boys raises in a more drastic way. After 10, increasing rythms are almost equivalent for boys and girls. The share of boys in placement stays about 5% higher than the one of girls up to the age of 16. However, while the proportion of boys becomes constant at 15, the one of girls keeps on growing: just before 18, more than a half girls are in placement, vs only 40% boys.

Another lesson draw by this graph is the huge reduction of placement happening exactly at the age of 18: between 15% and 20% of children exit placement during the month of this birthday. The age of majority appears as a cut-off date for youth in care. Then the share of children in placement declines quickly to the age of 21, which is the deadline of youth care. It should be added that between 18 and 21, as between 16 and 18, girls are more often in placement than boys.

Figure 2 - Proportion of children in placement by age and type of placement



Field : 809 children of the Elap survey

Foster families are the predominant type of placement for young children (Figure 2). Residential placements start increasing till the age of 7, and even raise drastically till 14: a majority of youths in placement aged 15 to 18 live in residential placement. Moreover, placement with trustworthy person and double measures (which usually implies part-time residential placement and the other part of time in the family of origin during the same period) remain scarce whatever the age, although they're a little more numerous before 18. These four types of placement drop dramatically at the age of 18, while on the contrary measures of autonomy are oftener used for the oldest youths, especially between 18 and 21.

Greatly varied patterns of childcare trajectories

In order to “fish” for patterns of childcare trajectories among the 809 children of the Elap survey, we used *Optimal Matching Analysis* (OMA) techniques. OMA was first developed in computer science (in the 50’s and 60’s) and in biology. It’s been introduced in social sciences by the sociologist Andrew Abbott during the 80’s (Abbott & Forrest, 1986). Its principle consists in measuring the dissimilarity between pairs of sequences: every trajectory is coded as a sequence of states and then the dissimilarity is measured for each pair of sequences. This leads to a distance matrix that may be used as an input for further analyses, such as clustering techniques which allow to build typologies of trajectories.

Table 1- A typology of childcare trajectories

main characteristics of the childcare trajectories		N	%
entry before 12	foster family	77	9,5%
	foster family, end of placement before 16	14	1,7%
	first placement in opened units	64	7,9%
	placement with trustworthy persons	13	1,6%
	short placement (residential or in opened units), end before 16	94	11,6%
	return to family of origin	41	5,1%
	residential placement	64	7,9%
	double measures	11	1,4%
entry after 12	foster family	40	4,9%
	short placement (from 15 to 18), residential or in opened units	119	14,7%
	very short placement (from 14 to 16), residential or in opened units	108	13,3%
	very short placement (at 18), residential or in autonomy	164	20,3%
<i>Total</i>		<i>809</i>	<i>100,0%</i>

Field : 809 children of the Elap survey

Childcare trajectories are very heterogeneous, considering the period when the children are under care and the number and types of placements experienced. A 12-cluster typology of these trajectories (Table 1) helps to enlighten the main patterns of childcare histories as well as it illustrates their heterogeneity. The next step of this paper will consist in describing precisely the 12 types of trajectories and relating them to the characteristics of the children involved (entering care motives, family and socio-demographic characteristics...).