

Life After 18



The State of Care Leavers in India

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March 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Numbers at a Glance

~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



Almost half of all care leavers — **48%** — are not financially independent after leaving care. Of those who do find employment, **93%** earn only ₹7,500–8,500/month — barely above minimum wage 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 in a Child Care Institution, the 18th birthday is not a celebration, it is an administrative deadline. On that day, they must vacate the only home they have ever known, and enter a world they had almost no preparation to navigate.

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 do not feel empowered to live independently after exiting care. And once they leave, the state loses track of them entirely. India has no official database of care leavers, once a child exits a CCI, they cease to exist from a data perspective.

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Life skills training embedded in CCI programming	Vocational courses offered: candle-making, tailoring — outdated, uncertified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 found that Mission Vatsalya is largely '**old wine in new bottles**' — a rebranding that did not substantially alter funding or accountability. The root problem — political will — remains unaddressed.

"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



Female care leavers face compounding disadvantages. In most states, the default response to a girl leaving a CCI is either **marriage or placement in a destitute home** (Swadhar Griha). Only two of the five states studied — Delhi and Maharashtra — had dedicated aftercare housing for women. This is not a historical footnote. It is current practice.

As recently as 2016, only **1 in 3 girls** post-care had access to any form of organisational 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 but no system to track what happens to children after they leave. The Udayan Care AOP team found care leavers through a peer network — **care leavers identifying other care leavers** — because no official list existed.

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 lacked essential legal identity documents** — voter cards and PAN cards — upon leaving care. This is not a paperwork inconvenience. It is a gateway to existence.

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 describe this situation using the term 'effectively stateless' — people who are citizens in principle but cannot prove it because they lack foundational documents. Care leavers, especially those abandoned as infants with no recorded parentage, sit squarely in this category.

Crucially, Aadhaar does not resolve this. **Section 9 of the Aadhaar Act explicitly states it is not proof of citizenship or domicile.** Since January 2024, new Aadhaar cards carry a printed disclaimer to this effect. A care leaver who manages to obtain Aadhaar still cannot use it for NRC verification, some voter registrations, or passport applications.

The National Care Leavers Network — in its very first Charter of Demands — listed '**ensuring possession of primary documents like Aadhaar and birth certificate before any young person leaves a CCI**' as a core ask. This demand came from care leavers themselves. It has not been met 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 (AOP) has supported **536 care leavers** and secured over 200 employment placements across five states through mentoring, skill training, and employer partnerships.

"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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