

## Examining the transition pathways for young people leaving out-of-home care



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 364: Accommodating transition: improving housing outcomes for young people leaving OHC

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### What this research is about

This research examined the housing, homelessness, mental health, alcohol and drug and juvenile justice service usage pathways for those leaving out-of-home care (OHC) in Victoria and Western Australia, using administrative linked data and interviews with care leavers and service providers.

This study responds to the questions:

1. What are the housing, homelessness, mental health, alcohol and drug, and juvenile justice service delivery pathways for young people transitioning from OHC?
2. What strategies and supports enable young people exiting OHC to obtain and maintain stable housing?
3. How do service providers coordinate and tailor support for young people exiting OHC to obtain and maintain appropriate and sustainable housing?
4. What opportunities exist for service improvement and enhanced coordination between housing and other sectors in improve transition planning for individuals leaving OHC?

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### The context of this research

In Australia, children and young people up to 17 years of age may be placed in out-of-home care (OHC) if it is unsafe for them to live with their primary caregiver(s). Types of OHC include foster, relative or kinship care; family group homes; residential care; and, for those usually over 16, supported independent living arrangements.

It is well established that care experienced children and young people face greater disadvantage and vulnerability than their non-care peers and that this is exacerbated for Indigenous care leavers. Children and young people in the OHC system usually have family backgrounds of disadvantage and many have experienced abuse, neglect, family violence or parental substance misuse before entering care.

## The key findings

A total of 44,906 Australian children and young people were in care as of 30 June 2019: Indigenous children and young people were vastly over-represented—at 11 times the rate of non-Indigenous children, and a total of 8,490 Victorian and 4,754 Western Australian children and young people were in OHC.

Nationally, 3,357 young people aged 15 to 17 years left care in the 2018–19 financial year; 871 young people (148 Indigenous and 723 non-Indigenous) in Victoria and 280 (144 Indigenous and 136 non-Indigenous) young people in Western Australia.

### Current legislation

Considerable variation is found in policy frameworks and the subsequent provision of OHC services (including services to support the transition from care) across Australia. Each jurisdiction has separate legislation, policy frameworks and programs, with the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (NFPAC) providing policy direction at a federal level.

The concept of the 'corporate parent' identifies how, in the absence of family support and guardianship, children and young people rely on child protection agencies to fulfil the role of caregiver, parent and guardian. While the notion of the corporate parent is central to UK policy, practice, governance and legislation, it is peripheral in Australian child protection policy and practice. Regardless, the statutory authority who facilitated the removal of the child from their family is legally and morally responsible for their wellbeing.

### Leaving care planning

Despite the presence of national and jurisdictional standards which require that leaving care planning start at the age of 15 and involve the young person, there is minimal or no monitoring of this practice. A recent survey in Victoria found that just 46 per cent of care leavers and 22 per cent of young people still in care reported having a transition plan. An audit undertaken by the Western Australian Auditor General reports that over 80 per cent of reviewed files did not contain a clear or updated plan and the vast majority (82%) of cases reviewed did not report planning from the age of 15.

Many research interview participants contrasted the expectation that somehow care leavers are able to live on their own, without familial support or statutory guardianship, to the growing trend for young adults to remain in the family home well past 18 years. Participants reported that it is unreasonable to apply different expectations to care and non-care leavers, particularly in light of the difficult circumstances that lead to children and young people being placed in care.

### Abrupt transitions from care

Due to limited, poorly timed, or non-existent planning, participants reported that care leavers are unprepared for independent living and rarely have budgeting, cooking, cleaning, and tenancy management skills. This was exacerbated for those placed in residential care, as these settings are characterised by formalised worker/client roles which are not conducive to the development of opportunistic living skills.

Abrupt transitions mean care leavers are emotionally unprepared to find their way in the world without a guardian or social supports to guide them through emerging adulthood. This lack of emotional readiness was intensified by the traumatic circumstances which led to being placed in care, as well as for many, multiple placements and the resulting disruption while in care. The lack of planning and readiness for leaving care mediated young people's willingness to engage with services, meaning the ability to coordinate services for the post-care period was compromised.

### Housing after leaving care

Participants reported that planning for post-care housing rarely occurred. For some young people, leaving care resulted in at least one, but in some cases, multiple, experiences of homelessness. Participants with experiences of residential care and multiple foster care placements were more likely to experience housing disruptions.

To avoid homelessness, more than half of the young people returned to their family of origin. This was not usually considered a 'safe' option, or one that would promote wellbeing; however, it was the only choice. Service providers also confirmed that in order to avoid homelessness, intimate relationships were often the only form of housing available to some young women. Housing which is reliant on intimate relationships created vulnerability: placed considerable undue pressure and uncertainty on the relationship; and, in some cases, exposed the participant to violent and unsafe situations.

It was not uncommon for homelessness services to provide the first post-care accommodation. Service provider participants said the homelessness service system inadvertently operates as a stepping stone to long-term housing, with the responsibility for long-term housing planning, referrals and securing housing shifting to the community sector and not for profit agencies, such as youth refuges and transitional housing programs.

Homelessness, including rough sleeping, was both a current and historical issue for most Indigenous participants. Some had experienced homelessness before the age of 18 years, while still in care and under the guardianship of child protection agencies.

In Victoria, the Lead Tenant Program, which places young people aged 16–18 with live-in youth mentors (known as lead tenants), was considered both a useful and limiting option. While the Program provided accommodation post care, the transitional nature of the experience added to the uncertain and fragmented experience of housing which characterised the lives of many care leavers.

The lack of planning for housing is reflected in the quantitative data with almost one third (29%) of all care leavers applying for public housing within four years of leaving care, suggesting applications were not made while the young person was in care. Further evidence of a lack of collaborative planning for housing upon leaving care is reflected in two thirds of residential care leavers and over half the foster care leavers accessing homelessness services after leaving care.

## Access to public housing

The reality of public housing in Australia is that demand far exceeds supply and there are lengthy waiting periods. During the study period, 534 care leavers (29%) made applications for public housing as the primary applicant. Of these, 158 (30%) received an independent tenancy during the period.

Nearly half the primary applicants (48% or 258) were placed on the early/priority housing waiting list, indicating urgent need for housing. An independent public housing tenancy was received by 48 per cent of those on the early housing list, while only 12 per cent of those not on the early housing list received a tenancy.

While the early housing list indicates an urgent need for housing, the results suggest many care leavers who were not placed on this priority list nevertheless had serious housing instability. For those on the priority list, 91 per cent had accessed homelessness services within the four year follow up window. However, for those on the regular 'wait-turn' list, 76 per cent had also accessed homelessness within the same four year follow up window.

## Service use

Comparison of rates of service use between care leavers and the Victorian population of the same age shows care leavers had more than twice the rate of hospital admissions compared with all Victorians aged 15–24 over the same time period (49.7 admissions per 100 person-years (PYs) compared with 18.6 admissions per 100 PYs). There are clear and significant disparities in service use in care leavers compared to the rest of the population, particularly in regard to homelessness services use and alcohol and drug treatment.

Rates of service use compared to the young Victorian population

	Comparable youth population	Out-of-home care cohort	Magnitude of increase in out-of-home care cohort
Hospital admissions (per 100 PYs)	18.6	49.7	2.7 times larger
Emergency presentations (per 100 PYs)	26.4	119.5	4.5 times larger
Alcohol/Drug Treatment (per 100 PYs)	1.8	38.4	21 times larger
SHS clients per year (%)	1.8	31.5	17.5 times larger
Youth justice clients per year (%)	0.7	6.7	9.6 times larger

Source: AHURI Final Report No. 364

Within four years of leaving care in Victoria (from 2013–14) the number and proportion of care leavers that had service records were:

		N	%
Hospital admission	Alcohol/drugs	239	13
	Self-harm	148	8
	Mental health	200	11
Emergency presentation	Alcohol/drugs	255	14
	Self-harm	376	20
	Mental health	399	22
Alcohol/Drug Treatment		512	28
Clinical mental health	Inpatient	217	12
	Outpatient	456	25
Community mental health services		106	6
Family services		122	7
Family violence		211	11
Sexual assault support services		143	8
Public housing tenancy	Had tenancy	592	32
	New independent tenancy	225	12
Homelessness	At risk of homelessness	683	37
	Currently homeless	774	42
	Any	1,000	54
Youth justice	Custodial	182	10
	Community	388	21

Source: AHURI Final Report No. 364

The high rates of homelessness service use, hospitalisations due to drug and/or alcohol use, inpatient mental health admissions and youth justice system contact suggest that many of the care leavers were not developmentally ready to live independently.

## Service coordination

Service provider representatives, particularly from the not-for-profit sector and leaving care agencies, reported that there is little coordination of services to care leavers. The usual experience was that there was no planning, it was rushed and close to the time the young person turned 18. A small number of care leavers had experienced joined-up service delivery, and noted that this usually occurred because a not-for-profit leaving care agency led the process.

## What this research means for policy makers

The research proposes seven minimum standards:

1. Permanency planning should begin well before the formal exit from state care.
2. Leaving care arrangements need to have a well-developed leaving care plan with their views and preferences at the centre. Accommodation options should be clearly articulated and a contingency plan for situations where the housing arrangements break down. There should be no exit into inappropriate housing.
3. Leaving care arrangements need to acknowledge a transition period where care leavers are supported to develop the skills, information and knowledge they identify they need to transition from care.

4. The needs of young people leaving care are assessed with reference to an agreed industry standard, such as the Looking after Children guideline as proposed in Queensland.
5. The principles and minimum standards supporting leaving care arrangements are supported by an independently monitored quality assurance framework and clearly articulated standards of best practice.
6. Any response to the needs of young people leaving care requires the development of a joined-up approach (an integrated model of leaving-care support) for care leavers, reaching across policy areas and levels of government. Particular attention should be paid to creating linkages with drug and alcohol services, health services and employment and training services.
7. The provision of post-care support, periodic follow-up and assistance until the age of 25 years.

In addition, all policies and programs need to incorporate the unique cultural, social and psychological context of the care leaver.

## Methodology

This research analysed Victorian administrative linked data of all individuals aged between 15 and 18 years who left care in 2013 or 2014 and collected qualitative data from care leavers and service providers in Victoria and Western Australia between January 2019 and April 2020.

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### To cite the AHURI research, please refer to:

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