Exiting care, entering a stable home: better supporting young people

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An analysis of the housing experiences of young people transitioning from out of home care in Victoria and Western Australia

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On behalf of;

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Background: Out of Home Care

› Australia has a federal child protection system resulting in varied transitions from care legislation, policy and services across the eight jurisdictions

› In June 2020, there were almost 46,000 children residing in OOHC nationally of whom the vast majority (92 per cent in total) were either in relative/kinship care or foster care

› Only just over six per cent lived in residential care homes supervised by rostered staff

› Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter) Indigenous children were disproportionately represented in OOHC numbers, comprising 18,862 – which was more than 11 times the rate for non-Indigenous children

Background: Leaving OOHC & Homelessness

› Care leavers are a vulnerable group globally, reflected in literature

› Their disadvantages may include limited access to further and higher education, training and employment; early pregnancy and parenting; involvement in offending and criminal justice systems; substance use and abuse; poor mental health; and long-term reliance on crisis intervention services.

› A persistent concern is that the young people struggle to attain stable and affordable housing, and may exit directly from care into homelessness

› Approximately 3,600 young people nationally aged 15 to 17 years transition from care each year. A total of 1265 or 35 per cent are estimated to be Indigenous.

› Relevant policy: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children which recommends nationally consistent leaving care policies and practices, barriers to this continue

› Recent changes (2020/2021) to policy: Extended care introduced following lobbying from Homestretch Campaign and other community groups

AIHW, 2021; Productivity Commission, 2021; Mendes, 2021

Accommodating transition: improving housing outcomes for young people leaving OHC

› Presenting today from one part of larger project

› AHURI funded research

› FINAL REPORT NO. 364

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Broad key findings from larger study: Quantitative analysis

› More than half the 1,848 Victorian care leavers in this study accessed homelessness services in the four years after leaving care, while one in three had multiple homeless experiences.

› Care leavers demonstrate high levels of service usage, both before and after leaving care. Compared to the general population of 15 to 24-year-olds, care leavers had twice the number of hospitalisations.

› Leaving care planning processes are limited and, in many cases, nonexistent, meaning care leavers are ill-prepared to live independently at the age of 18 years.

› Specialist homeless services (SHS) are commonly used as the first type of accommodation after leaving care and these services are used as a stepping stone to longer term housing.

› Given the poor leaving care planning processes, limited interagency coordination of services was found.

› The expectation that care leavers are able and ready to live independently at the age of 18 does not reflect broader community expectations of young adults

Martin et al 2021

Methods: Qualitative component of *Accommodating Transition*

› Data collected 2019 – prior to extended care policy change

› Qualitative data from young people aged 18-25 years in both Victoria and WA

› Recruitment via government and non-government leaving care agencies, homelessness support services and related programs

› A total of 34 young people aged 18-25 years participated in interviews. 16 were from Victoria and 18 from Western Australia. Two thirds identified as women, one third as men

› A mixture of residential, foster and kinship care

› Ten Indigenous care leavers participated

› Data collected by researchers with one researcher having a lived experience of OOHC

› Data analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2019) framework for thematic analysis

Findings
Theme 1: The Experience of leaving care

› Preparedness:
  › young person's degree of emotional, psychological and cognitive readiness for leaving care
  › The majority (n=28) of participants reported they were emotionally unprepared to leave care
  › Participants reported feeling stressed and anxious about having few, if any, skills for living independently
  › Reported skills needed to occur gradually and incrementally, not in the last months before leaving care

› Planning:
  › Relates to the practical activities involved in leaving care
  › The majority of participants reported they had received no or insufficient support to plan for leaving care
  › As a result of the lack of planning, participants reported being stressed and worried about where they would live

"I didn't really know how to cook anything, I didn't know cooking safety, like oil and water and fire do not mix – little things like that, like you've got to cook chicken the whole way through or you get sick, you've got to clean stuff. You know what I mean? Things like that which people just kind of go, "Oh yeah, common sense" but it's not common sense for us and we're not taught that."

Participant

Findings
Theme 2: Safety Nets

› Refers to the opportunities, resources and people that a young person can access when unexpected problems arise

› Types of safety nets included foster care, kinship care, informal kinship care and partners

› Formal service delivery was noted as a safety net, with participants valuing interventions they did receive (via financial aid, worker support, access to housing)

› However, many participants spoke of the lack of safety net, which lead to anxiety, fear and for some, homelessness

"The only good thing I think that came from it was that I had that one worker who stayed, and I think that … had absolutely nothing to do with the system…I think that was her and her dedication and her personal investment in me - I owe a lot to her. It's a weird situation – to owe someone like that because … it's like you deserve to have someone who cares about you but then it's like "But that's not their responsibility" – so where do we find who's responsible then because in a normal family, the parents are held responsible to look after them and to love them and to support them but we don't have that and then, so when we do have it, we're lucky."

Participant

Findings
Theme 3: Relationships

› Refers to the connections a young person has with the people in their life

› There was a noted disruption of relationships (both formal and informal) during their care and post care experiences

› Noted that relationships which continued after care held meaning

› Consistency and continuity important factors

› Many felt isolated and without meaningful relationships especially after care

"In terms of moving it's really hard when you don't have a stable environment, a stable home. You don't feel secure. There's a real lack of security. They say home is where the heart is but I don't know… My last resi (residential care) I would call maybe my home but it wasn't really.   I've been in Lead Tenant for about a year and seven months … it's more just a transition. It's just like there's a constant anxiety of the fact that I can't stay here forever. I have to leave, I have to find somewhere"

Participant

Findings
Theme 4: Intersecting Factors and Unmet Needs

› Refers to any issues that mediate (negatively or positively) a young person's transition to independent living:

› Stability and family relationships (especially for accommodation – protective factor)

› Mental health and distress, trauma and past experiences (of note: trauma experienced prior to removal and lasting impact this had; most reported issues with their mental health and some with diagnosed mental illnesses)

› Care experiences (including ongoing impacts)

› Absence of parental support and guidance

› Education and employment (and disruption of same including high school disruptions, postponing or missing university opportunities, difficulties obtaining and maintaining employment). This was also a protective factor.

"I was in the middle of my exams …worrying about getting into a university and stuff, and that was an important thing for me, so I was worried about those sorts of things but it was more just about the fact that I just didn't know where I was going to live"

Discussion

› Evidence of problematic transitions from care: a lack of preparedness to leave care both in terms of inadequate emotional readiness and limited ability to develop core practical living skills such as cooking, cleaning and budgeting

› For those leaving residential care, the situation was accentuated with most not ready to live independently

› Transition planning for many care leavers seemed to be poor or non-existent as noted in previous Australian studies resulting in abrupt moves from existing placements

› Young people experienced unreasonable stress, struggled to access or maintain engagement in education, training or employment, and some experienced homelessness

› Reports of poor mental health related to earlier traumatic experiences and exacerbated by stress and feelings of abandonment by system/workers

› Those with better outcomes had more stable placements (either in kinship or foster) and were able to remain in care after 18

› The need for young people to have access to safe and affordable housing

Contacts & Publications

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Report -
Martin, R., Cordier, C., Jau, J., Randall, S., Thoresen, S., Ferrante, A., Chavulak, J., Morris, S., Mendes, P., Liddiard, M., Johnson, G., and Chung, D. (2021) Accommodating transition: improving housing outcomes for young people leaving OHC, *Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, 10.18408/ahuri8121301*

Additional literature reviews –
Turnbull, L., Chavulak, J. & Mendes, P. (2021) What Does Australian Research Tell Us About Best Practice Housing Pathways for Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care? *Parity: 34(1), 12–15.*

Chavulak, J. & Mendes, P. (2021) What Does International Research Identify as the Best Practice Housing Pathways for Young People Transitioning from Out of Home Care? *Institutionalised Children Explorations and Beyond.* *https://doi.org/10.1177/23493003211064369*

Upcoming article accepted for publication –
Jau, J., Mendes, P., Chavulak, J. & Martin, R. (2022) The housing pathways and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth as they transition from out of home care in Victoria and Western Australia, *International Journal on Child Maltreatment*

Further publications to be released 2022