

Pathways from out-of-home care

YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING OUT-OF-HOME CARE FACE A HIGH RISK OF FALLING INTO HOMELESSNESS. SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES ARE LINKED TO TRANSITION PLANNING STARTING BEFORE THE AGE OF 18 COMBINED WITH READILY AVAILABLE SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE AND APPROPRIATE HOUSING OPTIONS.

KEY POINTS

- Housing pathways for care leavers can be characterised as either *volatile* or *smooth*, with their experiences of care and transition planning impacting on their post care housing outcomes.
- Those experiencing a smooth pathway reported a relatively safe and secure experience of care. They were more likely to plan ahead and achieve a successful first transition, had a positive experience of transitional housing and good on-going housing, social and employment outcomes.
- By contrast, those on a volatile pathway in this study often left care at an early age. A number had experienced physical or sexual abuse. Transition planning was rare, and they reported a lack of support during, leaving and after care.
- Many were discharged into inappropriate accommodation (such as boarding houses). Where they found transitional accommodation, it either did not provide the privacy they felt they needed, or the security or control of having their own place. Many struggled to find and maintain appropriate housing with the result that chronic housing instability and homelessness were common outcomes.
- Those moving on from these experiences were doing so with appropriate support and other social relationships that enabled them to address existing issues such as substance abuse, and securing housing and employment.
- The results of this study highlight how governments need to acknowledge an ongoing duty of care to care

*This bulletin is based on research by **Dr Guy Johnson, Dr Kristin Natalier, Associate Professor Phillip Mendes, Dr Mark Liddiard, Dr Stian Thoresen, Dr Andrew Hollows and Ms Naomi Bailey** of the AHURI RMIT Research Centre, Swinburne-Monash Research Centre and the Western Australia Research Centre with assistance from **Dr Nola Kunnen and Dr Reena Tiwari**. The research examined the housing experiences, needs and outcomes of 77 care leavers and identified issues to assist state out-of-home care leavers in successfully transitioning to independence.*

leavers and ensure effective and meaningful transition planning; facilitate or provide a range of appropriate accommodation options; and enable mentoring and ongoing support, where needed, beyond age 18.

BACKGROUND

Across the country approximately 1700 young people aged 15 to 17 years old leave the state out-of-home care system annually.

Many care leavers experience extended periods of homelessness and housing instability. Most states and territories now explicitly recognise the challenges and poor outcomes of care leavers in legislation. However, in practice there are few dedicated housing options for care leavers. This study sought to focus on the housing pathways of people leaving care and outline possible policy responses to address the problems care leavers encounter.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a multi-method approach involving surveys, interviews and focus groups with young people leaving care and with service providers. Seventy-seven young people who had lived in state care were interviewed in inner city, suburban and regional locations in Western Australia (n=35) and Victoria (n=42). The interviews explored the housing and care experiences of the participants. The states were chosen because both have introduced legislation specifying state responsibility to care leavers, and both have well developed non-government organisation services and networks.

The study conceptualises care leavers' housing using a pathways approach to understand the experiences of care leavers but also considers the way social structures, institutions and individual agencies might have a role in contributing to their housing outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS

Smooth and volatile transitions from care

To understand how to assist care leavers, it is important to understand their experiences while in and out of care. Through analysis of the experiences

of care leavers, and discussions with service providers, two distinct pathways from care became apparent: volatile and smooth pathways.

Some (18) experienced a *smooth transition* from care. Many of these people had had a stable and supported experience of care characterised by one of trust and security. They also left care at a later age, were involved in planning their transition from care and felt prepared for leaving care.

By contrast, the majority of young people in this study (59) experienced a *volatile transition* from care. These people tended to experience a high number of placements in care and physical or sexual abuse prior to or in care. They left care at a young age, often in crisis with no exit plan in place. Young people's housing and social connections were ruptured, and they struggled to build the individual skills and find and use resources that would improve their life chances post-care.

Housing experiences and outcomes

Those young people who experienced a smooth transition described housing outcomes that were largely positive: most had a successful first housing experience after they left care. They were more likely than those on a volatile pathway to say they liked transitional accommodation. According to tenants and support workers, success factors in their transition from state care included:

- High quality, well located, appropriate and affordable housing enabled the young people to build social networks and become a base from which to engage with education, training and employment opportunities.
- Meaningful, consistent and reliable supportive relationships were important in finding and keeping accommodation. They needed people who could provide material, emotional and information resources, and support if problems emerged in housing or other areas of their lives.

The housing experiences and outcomes of those young people experiencing a volatile transition were generally marked by negative experiences:

- Many were discharged into inappropriate accommodation, such as boarding houses or refuges.

- Even when they were able to secure supported or transitional accommodation, they reported a lack of privacy, safety and control in their housing and did not enjoy being required to share accommodation. Many also found the time limits on supported accommodation unrealistic and this contributed to their anxiety about what was going to happen next.
- Care leavers were also more likely to lose accommodation because of harassment, violence or relationship breakdown, and drug and mental health problems also de-stabilised their housing.
- They lacked support from service provider personnel, were mistrustful of welfare systems, and most had no relationships that offered resources for accessing or maintaining housing. Rather, their social networks were comprised largely of homeless and other marginalised young people.

The circumstances of just over half of those who experienced a volatile transition from care significantly improved over time and they appeared to be successfully navigating a route to independence. Those who were moving on had typically: addressed their substance abuse issues; developed or improved relationships with their family and or other supportive adults; found the right sort of support; and often found employment.

What will help care leavers maintain housing and successfully transition to independent living?

1. Independent living skills

The majority of care leavers reported at the time of leaving care that they had developed a suite of skills that could help them to sustain housing including shopping, cooking, cleaning and gaining access to resources and welfare assistance. However, only a small minority felt they had developed the skills to get a job or find housing. Both groups were also less confident in managing money.

2. More and better accommodation options

Care leavers are disadvantaged by the structure of the Australian housing market. Young people view public housing as a realistic and appropriate option but are often discouraged by long wait times, bureaucratic procedures to gain access and often the quality and location of the accommodation.

Care leavers struggle to enter and remain in the private rental market. In a tight rental market young care leavers face particular problems—they are often discriminated against because of their age, their lack of independent housing experience/rental history, and the fact that they often have few financial resources to draw on (see also McDowall 2008).

Even tailored housing options such as *transitional accommodation* are hard to come by, and often the program guidelines that structure transitional accommodation, such as the length of stay, are inappropriate to their needs. Much supported accommodation remains characterised by no clear exit strategies and short term stays. There are few dedicated housing options for care leavers and what options are available are often poorly configured to meet care leavers needs.

3. Social relationships as a resource for housing

Reliable and consistent social relationships are critical to housing stability. Many have not maintained a relationship with their family of origin, or find it difficult to negotiate that relationship in positive ways. Few had on-going connections with foster carers. Many had struggled to maintain friendships as a result of multiple placements in care and the emotional trauma experienced prior to or while in care. Support workers were often marginal in their lives. A lack of connection had material consequences for housing: many care leavers had no-one from whom they could borrow money, receive household goods, seek advice and emotional support and ask for accommodation when their own housing broke down—housing instability and homelessness are common outcomes

4. Effective leaving care plans

Both Western Australia and Victoria have introduced legislation requiring a transition plan for young people over 15 who are leaving care. However, only one quarter of the sample in this study could remember a plan. At their best, these plans engage young people in envisaging their independence, and offer a blueprint for finding housing, and can include detailed information on the resources and supports available. Worryingly, many reported an absence of planning, or a cursory approach completed with an eye to conforming to regulations and failing to articulate a meaningful way forward.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Through the White Paper on Homelessness (2008), the Federal Government has signalled their intent to address the particular problems facing care leavers that result in many falling into homelessness (*No exit to homelessness*).

Government, with responsibilities as a corporate parent, will need to address inadequacies in the care system to providing flexibility and on-going support during a person's time in care. There needs to be meaningful acknowledgement of a duty of care owed to young people currently or previously in state care.

Appropriate, safe and affordable housing must be only one part of a range of supports available to care leavers. Post care support will also need to address resilience of care leavers through training in hard skills (e.g. job skills training) and soft skills (e.g. communication) and provide the support that is absent for care leavers because they may not have the same support that comes from on-going parental relationships.

Some specific ideas around improving care include:

- Permanency planning, which should be instituted at a young age to identify those at risk of leaving in crisis.
- Independent living skills, developed through mentoring, training and the provision of relevant information to care leavers before leaving care.
- Post-care support, assistance and follow-up, provided for care leavers up to age 25, with a *no closed door* policy that allows young people to re-access assistance as required.

- *Joining up* support provided to care leavers across service domains (e.g. housing, health, employment).

Specific ideas around provision of housing include:

- Requiring a *no discharge* policy into inappropriate accommodation, to limit the practice of exiting care leavers into temporary and unfit accommodation.
- Specifying accommodation options in a leaving care plan, with regular review and contingency plans should initial housing arrangements break down.
- Increasing the supply of appropriate housing such as *ring fencing* some public housing or transitional accommodation for care leavers or supporting care leavers to remain with foster carers.
- Developing a *Secure Tenancy Guarantee Scheme* that offers universal coverage to care leavers to the age of 25 years old, caps at 25 per cent the proportion of income paid to housing costs, and is available regardless of tenure.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 30540, *Improving housing outcomes for young people leaving state out-of-home care*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au, or by contacting the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.

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