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Australian Research Evidence on outcomes for young people transitioning to out of home care, Associate Professor Philip Mendes, Monash University Dept of Social Work

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- **Over the past 10 years, there has been substantial local studies of the experiences of young people transitioning from out-of-home care, particularly around the efficacy of post-care supports for those aged 18-21 years.**
- **These studies emanate from three principal sources:**
- **1) Academic reports often in partnership with non-government agencies and sometimes government departments including:**

Our Research

- **Philip Mendes and colleagues from Monash University Department of Social Work have completed studies of mentoring and employment schemes for care leavers, dual order care leavers involved in both child protection and the youth justice system, care leavers with a disability, Indigenous care leavers in Victoria, and an evaluation of the Berry St Stand by Me program. Also Andrew Harvey and colleagues in Raising Expectations, Guy Johnson from RMIT, Mike Crane and colleagues in QLD, Joseph McDowall from CREATE, and Donna Chung and colleagues in WA.**

- **2) Government-commissioned reports such as the evaluation of the Springboard program in Victoria, the Beyond 18 study in Victoria by Muir and AIFS colleagues which I discuss further below, and the pending evaluation of the Commonwealth's Towards Independent Adulthood trial in WA; 3) Eight public inquiry reports mostly including public consultations prepared by governments, parliamentary committees, an Auditor General and a Commissioner for Children and Young People.**

- **Key Research Findings:**
- **Practice/Policy Problem:** Many care leavers experience poor outcomes because they are not developmentally ready at 18 years to live independently; often have limited ongoing participation in education; exit care directly into homelessness and/or endure ongoing housing instability; or spend time in the youth justice system; or for those who are Indigenous experience estrangement from culture and community. Too many programs within and beyond OHC focus on preparing for independence, rather than for ongoing support or interdependence.

- **Practice/Policy Solution: Ensuring a more gradual and flexible transition from care that reflects maturity and developmental needs rather than just chronological age. Care leavers cannot reasonably be expected without family assistance to attain instant adulthood. It is not possible for them to successfully attain independent housing, leave school, move into further education, training or employment, and in some cases become a parent, all at the same time. Rather these tasks need to be undertaken sequentially. As reflected in the 'focal model of adolescence', they need to be given the same psychological opportunity and space as all young people to progressively explore a range of interpersonal and identity issues well into their twenties. This also means being given second or third chances when necessary including the option of returning to care at 19 or even 20 years of age.**

- **Provide more specialised after-care and/or extended care supports that incorporate messages from life course theory about the diversity of transition experiences. The research evidence suggests that effective after-care interventions can facilitate ‘turning points’ that enable young people to overcome the adverse emotional impact of earlier traumatic experiences.**
- **The outcomes for care leavers reflect the connection between two key factors: one is their Individual Agency or resilience (within a social context), and the second being the availability of ongoing positive relationships via what we call Social Capital through professional and informal support networks.**



- **MOST RECENT FINDINGS: Beyond 18 Waves 2 and 3 studies published recently in mid 2019**
- **Based on a survey of 126 care leavers in Victoria, and 54 qualitative interviews completed concurrently to the survey**
- **Significant number struggling in terms of outcomes for education, employment, finances, mental health, early pregnancy and social relationships. About half were not engaged in education or employment. Some outcomes were worse for those leaving residential care.**
- **Some study participants had more positive outcomes as reflected in further or higher education, employment, stable housing, good social relationships, and psychological well-being.**
- **Barriers to improved outcomes were identified as history of trauma, relationship breakdowns, and placement instability. These factors were associated with current challenges such as low incomes, poor mental health, and limited social networks.**
- **Conversely, strong social relationships and ongoing and consistent post-care support from key leaving care workers, partners, friends and former carers contributed to life stability.**
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- Public inquiry reports related to leaving care
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- *The findings of the eight inquiry reports are summarised in the table below. Their overall findings establish a consensus that care leavers currently experience limited life chances compared to their non-care peers and that an extension of support till at least 21 years of age is desperately required to improve outcomes.*
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Table: Summary of report findings and recommendations

	Problems identified concerning young people leaving care	Proposed age of transition
Victoria (2012)	Poor transitions identified in housing, criminal justice and education	Extend placements beyond 18 years
Tasmania (2012)	Poor outcomes in housing, income support, criminal justice and limited community networks	Legal support until 25 years
Queensland (2013)	Poor life chances, homelessness and offending	Greater support until 21 years
Commonwealth of Australia (2015)	Vulnerability in a range of areas, including housing, education and employment	Post-care until 21 years
South Australia (2016)	Poor outcomes in areas such as health, education and employment, life skills and housing, relationships and social connections, and early parenting	Mandatory support until 25 years
New South Wales (2017)	Poor outcomes as reflected in homelessness, limited education, and involvement in the criminal justice system	Mandatory support until 21 years
Northern Territory (2017)	Disadvantage in housing access	Obligatory support until 25 years
Western Australia (2018)	Poor access to leaving care supports	No specific leaving care age



- (Associate Professor Philip Mendes teaches social policy and community development, and is the Director of the Social Inclusion and Social Policy Research Unit (SISPRU) in the Department of Social Work at Monash University in Victoria, Australia. He has been researching young people leaving state care for 20 years, is the Australian representative on the Transitions to Adulthood for Young People Leaving Public Care International Research Group, and has completed major studies pertaining to youth justice, employment and mentoring programs, disability, and Indigenous care leavers. He is the author or co-author of 12 books including most recently *Young people transitioning from out-of-home care: International research, policy and practice* co-edited with Pamela Snow (Palgrave Macmillan, October 2016), the third edition of *Australia's Welfare Wars* (February 2017), and *Empowerment and control in the Australian welfare state: A critical analysis of Australian social policy since 1972* (Routledge, 2018). He recently won the Monash University Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences Dean's Award for Excellence in Research Impact (Economic and Social Impact). Philip.Mendes@monash.edu, 03-9903 1132)