

## **Young people transitioning from out of home care in Australia: A policy overview**

Australian OOHC including transitions from care differs according to the specific legislation, policies and programs in each State and Territory. In June 2019, there were nearly 45,000 children in OOHC nationally of whom the majority (92 per cent in total) were either in relative/kinship care or foster care. Only about six per cent lived in residential care homes supervised by rostered staff. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter) Indigenous children were vastly over-represented in OOHC, comprising 17,979 – that is 40 per cent of the total population or 11 times the rate for non-Indigenous children (Productivity Commission, 2020).

It appears that approximately 3,160 young people nationally aged 15 to 17 years transition from care each year (ACT Community Services Directorate, 2018), although no formal figures have been released since 2016. The Commonwealth Government, via the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020, recommends but does not enforce minimum benchmarks such as the expectation for each care leaver to have a transition from care plan commencing at 15 years of age (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2010). Additionally, the latest National Child Protection Framework Action Plan for 2015-18 identifies improved outcomes for care leavers as one of the three key strategies to be implemented, and refers to upgraded housing supports as a priority in order to prevent youth homelessness (Department of Social Services, 2015a).

There is also some Commonwealth funding available to care leavers through the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) which provides one-off financial assistance up to \$1,500 for young people aged 15-25 years who have departed OOHC within the past 24 months. This payment is provided to an authorized service to purchase goods and services for young people transitioning, not to the young person directly (Department of Social Services, 2015b). They are also currently funding a three year Independent Adulthood Trial in the state of Western Australia which is intended to enhance social and economic outcomes for care leavers. The evaluation of that trial should be released during 2020.

But to date, all State or Territory legislative provisions for funding and support once young people have left the system at no later than 18 years of

age are discretionary, not mandatory (Baidawi, 2016; Campo & Commerford, 2016). In summary, Australia is a leaving care laggard compared to other jurisdictions such as the UK, USA and most recently New Zealand which offer forms of extended care beyond 18 years of age (Beauchamp, 2016; Mendes & Rogers, 2020).

Numerous Australian studies have documented that many care leavers experience poor outcomes because they are not developmentally ready at 18 years to live independently; often have limited ongoing participation in mainstream education; exit care directly into homelessness and/or endure ongoing housing instability; or spend time in the youth justice system (See summary in Mendes & McCurdy 2019).

However, four Australian States and Territories have introduced limited extended care programs in the last two years. These programs were introduced in response to the Home Stretch campaign, led by Anglicare Victoria, to urge all Australian jurisdictions to offer extended care programs till at least 21 years (Mendes, 2018a; 2018b).

Both Tasmania and South Australia are funding foster care placements till 21 years. Western Australia commenced a trial program supporting 20 young people in May 2019, and Victoria introduced a pilot program in September 2018 providing extended support to 250 young people over five years, whether transitioning from foster care, residential care or kinship care (Mendes & Rogers, 2020). Additionally, the ACT introduced a form of extended care in 2014 providing financial and casework assistance to care leavers till 25 years of age (ACT CSD, 2018). The other three jurisdictions – New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory – have not to date established extended care programs.

### **Rationale for comparing Victoria and WA**

Victoria and WA are the only two states and territories offering a trial of extended care till 21 years to young people leaving all forms of OOHC: both foster or kinship care, and residential care

## **Housing outcomes**

There are a large number of academic studies and other reports documenting unstable housing and homelessness experienced by many care leavers in Victoria (e.g. Purtell, Muir, & Carroll, 2019). **Can add to this as useful.**

### **Few studies in WA**

In WA, the Living Independently for the First Time (LIFT) Project was developed in 2015 to encourage inter-agency collaboration across child protection and housing authorities to reduce the risk of homelessness for vulnerable care leavers (Clare et al. 2017). The Western Australian Auditor General (2018) report identified concerns about limited access to leaving care supports resulting in vulnerability to homelessness and other poor outcomes. It proposed improved cross-agency collaboration to ensure that young people receive priority assistance in key areas such as housing, education and employment. A 2018 research study based on linked data compared outcomes for 2,003 children who had spent time in OOHC in WA with two other cohorts who had experienced maltreatment but no time in OOHC, and a control group with no child protection contact. The study reported adverse outcomes for the OOHC group in areas such as physical and mental health, mortality, education and involvement in criminal justice. The data set did not include outcomes in housing (Lima et al. 2018).

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## Work in progress Report

### **19/PRO/81213, Accommodating transition: improving housing outcomes for young people leaving out of home care**

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**Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute**

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## Acronyms and abbreviations used in this report

AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited
CVDL	Centre for Victorian Data Linkage
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ARC	Australian Research Council

# 1 Progress to date

## Progress against timelines

This project considers the transition from out of home care for young people aged 18 to 25 years. It uses several data sources to identify the extent and nature of coordination and integration between relevant service providers. Specifically, we are examining the experience of care leavers as they move from and between out-of-home care (OHC), housing, homelessness and related service systems. To achieve this, the project is analysing Victorian administrative linked data and has collected data from 38 care leavers and 24 service provider representatives in Victoria and Western Australia. The project aims to identify elements and examples of good practice in service coordination, as well as areas for enhancement in both practice and policy.

An application for administrative data was submitted to the Centre for Victorian Data Linkage (CVDL) on 17 December 2018 and an initial set of data was received on 8 January 2020. An updated complete set of data was received on 3 March 2020 and analysis by Associate Professor Anna Ferrante and Dr Sean Randall is underway. All qualitative data has been collected and analysis has commenced.

The research team meets monthly with ad hoc meetings between various team members to progress analysis of the various data sets.

## Research method

This Project responds to the Inquiry Program question 'What are the most effective ways of tailoring and delivering housing supports for individuals exiting institutional settings?' The project focusses on service utilisation and experiences of young people leaving OHC and will provide recommendations on policy and practice changes that promote improved housing outcomes. Table 1 outlines progress to date against the specific research questions.

**Table 1: Research Design Overview and Progress**

Research question (RQ)	Method	Progress
1. What are the housing, homelessness, mental health, alcohol and drug, and juvenile justice service user and delivery pathways for young people transitioning from OHC and care leavers?	Analysis of administrative linked pre- and post-exit data in order to investigate service use patterns in OHC, mental health, juvenile justice.	A first set of data (incomplete) was received on 08/01/2020 *An updated version of the data was received 03/03/2020. Data analysis has commenced and preliminary results are reported late in the document.
2. What pathway planning strategies are used to enable young people exiting OHC to obtain stable housing?	Interviews with 40 young people who have left out of home care. (20 x WA; 2 x Vic.) Four focus groups with service providers (2 x WA; 2 x Vic). Thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups.	Data collection completed: Interviews conducted with 38 young people (18 x WA; 20 Vic) Focus group conducted (2 x WA; 2 x Vic). Coding complete Thematic analysis underway

<p>3. How do service providers coordinate and tailor support for young people exiting OHC to obtain and maintain appropriate and sustainable housing?</p>	<p>Interviews with 40 young people who have left out of home care. (20 x WA; 2 x Vic.)</p> <p>Four focus groups with service providers (2 x WA; 2 x Vic).</p> <p>Thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups.</p>	<p>Data collection completed:</p> <p>Interviews conducted with 38 young people (18 x WA; 20 Vic)</p> <p>Focus group conducted (2 x WA; 2 x Vic).</p> <p>Coding complete</p> <p>Thematic analysis underway.</p>
<p>4. What opportunities exist for service improvement and enhanced coordination between housing and other sectors to improve transition planning for individuals leaving OHC?</p>	<p>Interviews with 40 young people who have left out of home care. (20 x WA; 2 x Vic.)</p> <p>Four focus groups with service providers (2 x WA; 2 x Vic).</p> <p>Thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups.</p>	<p>Data collection completed:</p> <p>Interviews conducted with 38 young people (18 x WA; 20 Vic)</p> <p>Focus group conducted (2 x WA; 2 x Vic).</p> <p>Coding complete</p> <p>Thematic analysis underway.</p>

\*An initial set of administrative data from the CVDL, received on 8 January 2020 was incomplete and did not include crucial data on public housing. After contact with the CVDL requesting missing data and housing information, further updated data was received on 3 March 2020 which included all necessary variables and information. Data analysis has commenced and is progressing well.

## Literature review

While a literature review is not a specified deliverable for this project, the project will provide an overview of relevant literature, theories and contemporary arguments related to the planning for the transition from OHC. This will be included in the final report. Further, the team is considering undertaking a scoping review examining published data and evidence related to the topic.

## Development of conceptual framework

We continue to explore and consider the conceptual framework guiding the project and will report on this in the final report. We continue to be guided by Mike Stein's (2012) categories of transition from OHC, and position this as a central element of our conceptual framework. Stein's (2012) framework involves three distinct cohorts of care leavers, including those who:

- 'Move on' into stability in housing, education and employment;
- Survive the transition from out of home care, yet continue to have periods of instability; or
- Struggle to maintain stability across a range of life domains, often-experiencing long periods of homelessness, substance misuse, poor mental health and disrupted relationships and attachments.

This conceptual framework will guide the qualitative component of the project, and when comparing the data linkage findings to the qualitative data findings. We are also interested to explore how these categories or typologies might overlap or change, and how service delivery practices enable or inhibit these processes.

Further, based on initial impressions of the qualitative data, the concept of ontological security (Giddens, 1990; Stonehouse, Threlkeld & Theobald, 2020) is being explored as another element of the conceptual framework. Initial reading of the interviews with young people and service providers highlights the lack of ontological security young people exiting care have, ranging from being “stressed about money” (young person) through to having no safety nets should housing and wellbeing be at risk. Where family often provide these safety nets for young people who have not been in care, the participants in this study spoke of their social and emotional isolation and disconnection, with a limited to non-existent sense that someone else had their best interests in mind. In other words, the sense of ontological security that comes from family, social connections, employment and housing are missing for most participants in this study. As we analyse the qualitative data, we will be exploring the fit of the concept of ontological security and examining how this reflects, confirms or contradicts the findings from the analysis of administrative linked data.

## Ethics approval

The project has received the following institutional HREC approvals:

1. RMIT HREC: related to the use of administrative data through the CDVL, with approval granted in March 2019, approval number 21896.
2. Curtin HREC related to data collection with young people who have left out of home care and service providers. Approval (HRE2019-0385) granted 24 June 2019.
3. Monash University reciprocal HREC, related to data collection with young people who have left out of home care and service providers. Approval granted 01/07/2019 (20907).
4. RMIT University advise reciprocal HREC not required as CI Johnson not involved in data collection (his role is consultancy and contribution to written material).
5. Edith Cowan University reciprocal HREC, related to data collection with young people who have left out of home case and service providers. Approval granted 03/12/2019 (REMS NO: 2019-00942-THORESEN)

## Research Design and Administration

The research has two areas of foci:

- Analysis of administrative data provided by the CVDL
- Interviews with up to 40 young people and relevant service providers

This project is occurring alongside a large, longitudinal Western Australian ARC funded project (Navigating through Life) which is investigating outcomes for care leavers. CI Martin is also a CI on the Navigating through Life project. The simultaneous roll out of both projects has greatly assisted recruitment in Western Australia. In Victoria, access has also been relatively straightforward, based on the reputation and standing of Associate Professor Philip Mendes. Both WA and Victoria used purposive sampling approaches to recruit young people. The same interview schedules were used in WA and Victoria for young people and service provider data collection activities (refer to appendix 1).

Linked administrative data has been provided for this project from the Centre for Victorian Data Linkage (CVDL) which holds a range of linked, state-based datasets. Three separate cohorts have been defined as part of the wider project (Panel Inquiry level). The out of home care cohort contains information for all individuals in Victoria leaving out of home care in 2013-2014 who were aged 15-18 at time of exit.

For each of these individuals, service delivery information has been provided for the two years prior to leaving care, and for four years of follow-up after leaving care. Extracts from a wide range of datasets have been provided including;

- Hospital admissions data (Victorian Admitted Episode Dataset)
- Emergency department presentations (Victorian Emergency Management Database)
- Clinical mental health service information (CMI-ODS)
- Mental health community support services (MHCSS)
- Victorian death registrations (Victorian death index)
- Child protection data (Crisis Information Referral System (CRIS))
- Public housing data, including applications and tenancies (Housing Integrated Information Platform (HIIP))
- Homelessness services
- Youth justice orders
- Family services data (Integrated Reports and Information System (IRIS))
- Family violence data (Integrated Reports and Information System (IRIS))
- Sexual assault services (Integrated Reports and Information System (IRIS))
- Alcohol and drug services (Alcohol and Drug Information System)

Preliminary analysis of the Victorian linked data has focused on the following broad research plan. Analysis is being carried out for each of the three cohorts separately.

- a. Characteristics of our cohorts
- b. Characteristics of the utilised services
- c. Service use by cohorts: What services do individuals in each cohort use in the years after exit from their institutional setting?
- d. What individual factors influence service utilisation?
- e. What are the individual risk factors for homelessness?
- f. What proportion of all young homeless people in Victoria does our cohort represent, and how representative are they?
- g. Other evidence of lack of secure housing – can data from other collections shed light?
- h. What are individuals housing trajectories after leaving care?

In addition to these questions, we expect to explore further questions using linked data drawn from the results of the qualitative component of this project.

## 2 Preliminary Findings

### 2.1 Data Linkage

The out of home care cohort used in this project was defined as those who exited the Victorian out of home care system in 2013-14, aged 15-21. Results for this cohort are shown below. These are preliminary and it is possible these numbers will change in the final report.

In total, there were 1,848 individuals in this cohort. Basic demographic information for the cohort is shown in Table 1.

**Table 2 - Characteristics of the out of home care cohort**

		Out of home care cohort	
		n	%
Total		1,848	100%
Gender	Male	841	46%
	Female	1,007	54%
Indigenous Status	Indigenous	333	18%
	Non-indigenous	1,514	82%
Age at exit	15	452	29%
	16	448	28%
	17	517	33%
	18	169	11%
Region	Major Cities	1,135	61%
	Regional/Remote Areas	655	35%

Table 2 shows the proportion of individuals in the out of home care cohort who accessed particular services in the 30 days, year and four years after exit from the out of home care system. There were some particularly striking findings. Within four years of exit from the out of home care system:

- More than half the cohort (n=1000, 54%) accessed homelessness services,
- 28% had received alcohol/drug treatment services (n=512),
- 21% (n=388) had a received a community-based sentence from a youth justice court and,
- 20% of the cohort had an emergency presentation for self-harm (n=376).

**Table 3: Post exit service needs**

		In 30 days after exit		In year after exit		In 4 years after exit	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Out of home care cohort</i>							
Hospital admission	Alcohol/drugs	6	0%	55	3%	239	13%
	Self-harm	12	1%	57	3%	148	8%
	Assault	-	-	14	1%	85	5%
	Injury	5	0%	58	3%	211	11%
	Mental health	12	1%	74	4%	200	11%
	Other	21	1%	231	13%	716	39%
	Any	52	3%	362	20%	979	53%
Emergency presentation	Alcohol/drugs	9	0%	86	5%	255	14%
	Self-harm	33	2%	157	9%	376	20%
	Assault	-	-	-	-	58	3%
	Injury	41	2%	323	17%	753	41%
	Mental health	33	2%	168	9%	399	22%
	Other	51	3%	417	23%	969	52%
	Any	139	8%	732	40%	1,297	70%
Alcohol/Drug Treatment		60	3%	263	14%	512	28%
Clinical mental health	Inpatient	27	1%	111	6%	237	13%
	Outpatient	99	5%	171	9%	301	16%
Community mental health services		NA	NA	49	3%	106	6%
Child protection		NA	NA	955	52%	962	52%
Family services		-	-	28	2%	122	7%
Family violence		-	-	46	2%	211	11%
Sexual assault support services		7	0%	57	3%	143	8%
Public housing	Application	11	1%	134	7%	534	29%
	Had tenancy	398	22%	449	24%	569	31%
Homelessness		NA	NA	NA	NA	1,000	54%
Youth justice	Custodial	42	2%	132	7%	182	10%
	Community	37	2%	291	16%	388	21%
Mortality		-	-	-	-	13	1%

Analysis of this rich data source is continuing and progressing well.

## 2.2 Qualitative Inquiry

In Western Australia 18 young people who have left out of home care were interviewed. 15 participants were recruited through the Navigating through Life project and three participants through homelessness services. Significant effort was made by the research team to recruit from homelessness services in order to represent a variety of experiences and time since leaving care. However, as noted, only three participants were recruited from homelessness agencies. In addition, two focus groups with non-statutory service providers were conducted with four and five participants respectively. These service providers represented specialist out of home care, homelessness and generalised youth support agencies and programs. The team's networks in the out of home care, housing and homelessness fields were utilised to recruit these participants.

In Victoria, 20 care leavers were interviewed. Participants were recruited from housing services, university support services, out of home care services, and government departments, who distributed the study information material to young people. The research team had existing links with some of the agencies while others were approached without having any prior connections. A number of the agencies were invited to participate in focus groups. Two focus groups were conducted with six and nine participants respectively.

The Victorian and Western Australian teams have met several times to:

- Develop a shared coding and analytic framework
- Establish shared definitions of codes and six core themes
- Create a rigorous approach to analysis

Following preliminary analysis, the team has decided that the interviews with young people from both states will be analysed as one data set. To be sure, the policy and service provision contexts vary between the states, but the issues, concerns and experiences raised by participants appear to share many similarities. Preliminary analysis revealed that the Victorian and Western Australian interviews can be analysed as one data set using six themes of planning for leaving care; safety nets; preparedness to leave care; relationships; intersecting factors and unmet needs; and interagency coordination. Analysis of these interviews has commenced.

The noted policy and service provision contextual differences between Western Australia and Victoria indicate the usefulness of analysing the service provider focus groups on a state by state basis, rather than as one data set. Analysis of these focus groups has commenced.

## **3 Next Steps**

### **3.1 Data analysis**

Data analysis for the qualitative material is underway and will be finalised by mid-May 2020.

Analysis of the Victorian linked data is progressing, following the research plan outlined above. In addition, we plan to explore any further questions using linked data which are drawn from the results of the qualitative component of this project, wherever possible. The linked analysis for this project is expected to be completed by the end of May.

### **3.2 Reports and publications**

The final report will be completed and submitted by 30 June 2020, as per contract requirements.

## References

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## Appendix 1: Interview and Focus Group Schedules

### Accommodation Transitions

#### Service User Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. The purpose of this interview is to ask you about your experiences of leaving care, housing and support from agencies. These questions are not intended to upset you, or bring up painful memories. If however, you find this happens let me know, and we can stop the interview and take a break, finish up and return to the interview another day, or you might decide to withdraw from the research.

1. Thinking about preparing to leave care, what were your most pressing needs and concerns? Prompts:
  - a. Housing
  - b. Health
  - c. Income
  - d. Wellbeing (emotional, social and mental)
  - e. Social supports and connections
  - f. Cultural connections
  - g. Sexuality, gender, identity
2. Can you tell me about the support you received in planning to leave care? Prompts:
  - a. Who provided this support?
  - b. How much support did they provide and over what time period?
  - c. Can you tell me about your readiness to have these conversations? If not ready, what needed to be in place for you to feel ready?
  - d. Can you give me some examples of what was covered in the conversation(s) about planning to leave care?
  - e. We have heard many people talk about the importance of flexible support, tailored to the unique needs of the person. Was this something you experienced? (Ask for examples to support answer.)
3. I would like to explore the support and help available to you when you left care:
  - a. Were you referred to other organisations (which ones)?
  - b. Were there organisations you planned to stay connected to (which ones)?
  - c. If you were referred, can you tell me about the referral process?
    - i. Was there discussion about the agencies (description of service, intended impact of referral, choice of agency etc.)
    - ii. Can you explain how the worker referred you to other services (i.e. warm referral, phone/email/ written referral with no service user involvement etc.)?
  - d. If you are continuing to receive the services of existing organisations, was there any communication from the care services to these agencies? (Prompt for details of this)
4. After you left care, what was your experience of the different agencies working together?
  - a. Sharing information/repeating one's story to different services
  - b. Duplication of services
  - c. Gaps in and between services
  - d. Anything else
5. Where did you live immediately before entering care?
  - a. Location
  - b. With whom
  - c. Tenure type
6. Where did you live immediately after leaving care?

- a. Location
  - b. With whom
  - c. Tenure type
7. Was this accommodation
  - a. Secure
  - b. Appropriate
  - c. Affordable?
8. Where do you live now?
  - a. Location
  - b. With whom
  - c. Tenure type
9. Is your current accommodation
  - a. Secure
  - b. Appropriate
  - c. Affordable?
10. Would you like, or are you planning, to live somewhere else?
  - a. Location
  - b. With whom
  - c. Tenure type
11. How many housing moves have you made since leaving care?
12. Thinking about your experiences of leaving care:
  - a. What worked?
  - b. What did not work or could be improved?
  - c. What could the different agencies who are supposed to support people in similar circumstances do differently?
13. Are there some key messages you would like service providers to hear about your experience of leaving care?
14. We would like to ask you some demographic information now. Can you tell me:
  - a. Your date of birth
  - b. Your gender identity
  - c. If you are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
  - d. Your cultural identity
  - e. If English is your first language
  - f. If you experience any form of disability (prompt for type)
  - g. If you are currently employed, studying or unemployed.
  - h. Your income source(s)
  - i. If you are single or partnered?
  - j. If you have children (ages, gender, parental status)

## **Accommodating Transitions**

### **Focus Group Questions: Service Providers**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. The purpose of this focus group is to explore and understand your experiences as service providers in providing support and coordinated services to people exiting out of home care.

1. Please introduce yourself, your agency and your role in supporting people leaving out of home care.
2. What is your approach to supporting someone to leaving out of home care?
  - a. Starting the conversation (timing, content, working with barriers or resistance).
  - b. Planning processes
  - c. Referral processes
  - d. Follow up/after care processes
  - e. Service coordination
3. What are some of the issues you face in providing support and coordinated services to people exiting out of home care?
4. What have you found works when supporting people to leave out of home care?
5. Are there some key messages you would like policy makers to hear about your experience of supporting people to leave out of home care?

