

A terrible way to grow up:

**The experience of institutional care and its outcomes for
care leavers in Australia**



**An overview of some findings from the CLAN
Survey 2006-7**

© CLAN November 2008

Introduction

The Survey

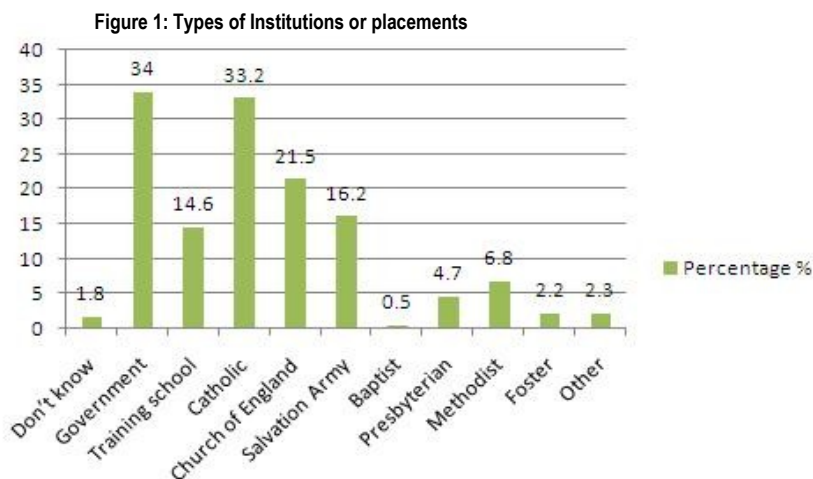
The CLAN Survey was initially conducted in the first half of 2006, yielding a sample of 291 respondents out of a possible total of 501, the number of care leavers who were members of CLAN at June 30, 2006. This was a 58% return rate, unusual for such a survey, indicating a high degree of interest, amongst members, in participating. Subsequently, in response to member interest, CLAN continued to send out the survey and the figures in this paper represent the initial sample of 291, plus a further a sample of 91 CLAN members who completed the survey in the period ending 30 September 2007.

Survey respondents were asked to answer a series of questions in a 16-page questionnaire, by ticking boxes. Many questions also had an 'other' box which gave respondents space to describe experiences or outcomes not named. The final page of the survey had a space for 'any other comments'.

The Respondents

Survey respondents had been in care in all states of Australia.

People had been in Children's Homes run by orders of the Catholic Church, the Church of England (now the Anglican Church), other Protestant churches (Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist etc), by state governments; and by charitable organisations such as the Salvation Army, the Sydney and Melbourne City Missions, Barnardos, the NSW United Protestant Association, the Red Cross, and in some cases, like that of Ballarat Orphanage, by committees charged specifically with the task of running an orphanage (fig. 1).



- 170 respondents were male and 212 were female (Fig. 2 p.3).
- 201 people (52.6%) had been state wards (Fig. 3 p.3) and
- 164 (43%) had been 'voluntary' placements (Fig. 3 p.3). This term describes people who as children were placed in institutional care through non-government intervention, usually by a parent or other family members. These people were not state wards, at least initially.
- The remainder either did not know what their status in care had been, or left the question blank.

'Don't know' reflects a relatively common experience of care leavers, many of whom have little knowledge of their own history, including why they went into 'care'. Often also there is confusion about their status:

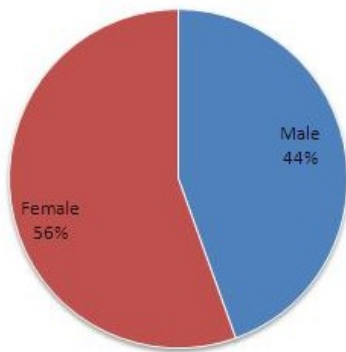


Figure 2: Gender of respondents

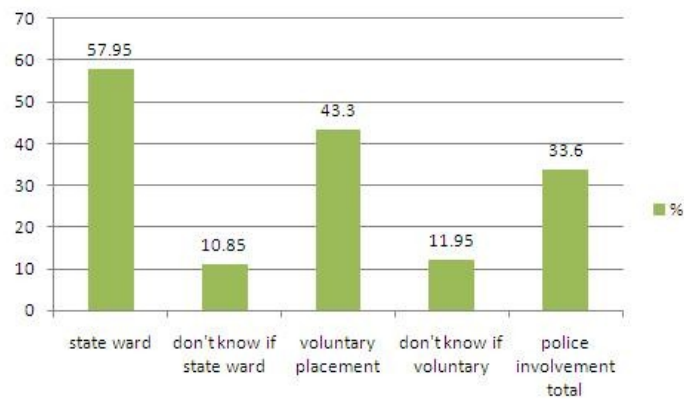


Figure 3: placement of respondents in care

some assume that since they were in a Home, they must have been a state ward. This is a common public perception also, but in fact around half of all children who were in care in the 20th century in Australia were not state wards, but had been placed by kin, including a parent or parents with no other options, or by other people associated in some way with the child's family of origin. Until the 1970s there was little state or community support for families that were in crisis, or indeed, that were experiencing any of the normal vicissitudes of life such as illness including mental illness, unemployment, desertion or death of a parent. One of the most startling findings when we look at why children entered care is that almost 15% did so as the result of their parents' separation or divorce. Institutional care was one of the few options available for any type of family crisis, whether short or long term, which partly accounts for the huge number of Children's Homes in Australia over the 20th century – at least 500, catering for at least half a million children. The majority of the respondents to the survey were in care in the decades from the 1930s to the 1960s and another telling statistic is that just over 43% were the children of parents (mostly fathers) who had served in the armed forces. These men received no support on their return from combat and some of these children could perhaps be seen as unrecognised casualties of war, bearing the brunt of their fathers' inability to return to civilian life and the consequent breakdown of family life and the inevitable entry of the children into 'care'.

The CLAN Survey collected information on family background of respondents and the reasons for entering care, the location of care, their experiences in the institutional care environment, and the outcomes and enduring effects of the care experience in their adult lives.

In this document we present initially some information on the care context and the experiences of survey respondents, and in the second half present findings on some of the outcomes of the institutional care experience. *Forgotten Australians*, in its executive summary, said that the stories they heard throughout the inquiry

outlined a litany of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and often criminal physical and sexual assault. Their stories also told of neglect, humiliation and deprivation of food, education and healthcare. Such abuse and assault was widespread across institutions, across States and across the government, religious and other care providers.

Nevertheless, outcomes have been little researched and therefore little documented and the CLAN survey is one of the first attempts to quantify the types of experiences which *Forgotten Australians* reported on, and their consequences for the adults who were the subject, as children, of institutional care policies across Australia.

Some general findings about experiences in 'care'

Era of care

Almost 67% had entered care after 1950, with the remainder entering care previous to that, most of them in the 1940s and continuing in care throughout the 1950s and often into the 1960s.

Only 10 had entered care pre-1930s, and only 21 people after 1970.

The bulk of the sample had gone into care, then, in the post-war 'baby boomer' period (Fig. 4)

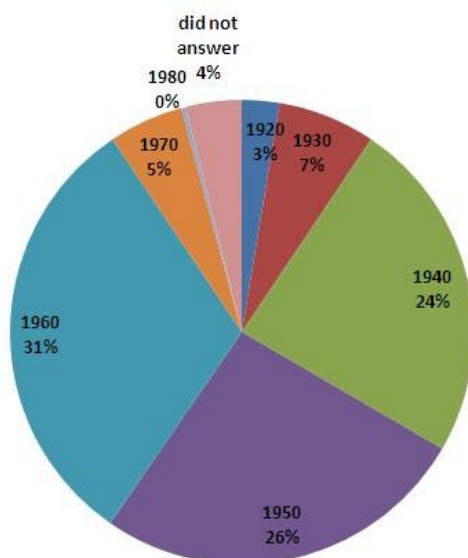
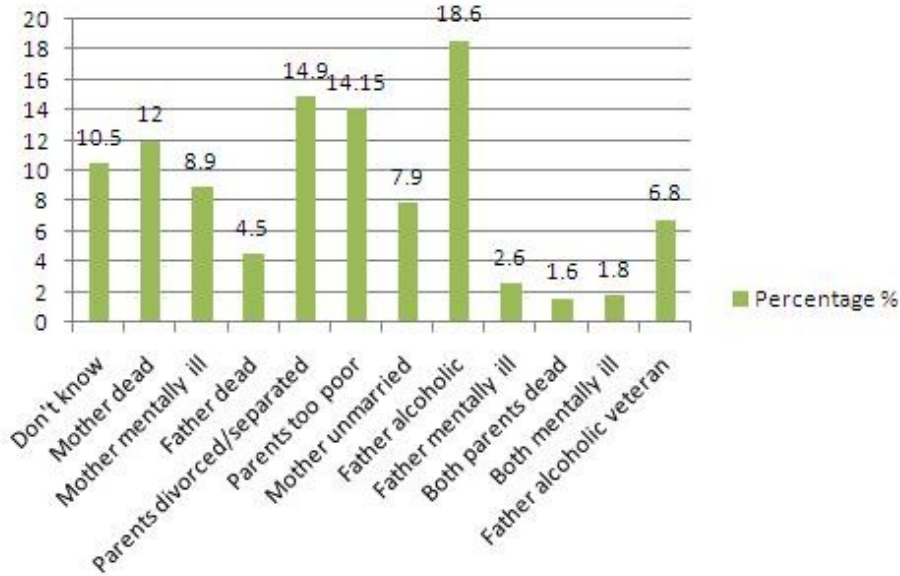


Figure 4: Decade respondents entered care

Reasons for going into care (Fig 5 p.5)

- *15% of the sample went into care simply because their parents divorced or separated.*
- Only 1.6% were actual orphans
- There are 71 reportedly alcoholic fathers, that is, over 18% of the sample had an alcoholic father. Of these 71 fathers, 26 had been in the armed forces (probably in WW2). So of the reportedly alcoholic fathers, 36.6% were war veterans – their alcoholism possibly an outcome of their traumatic war experience, for which there was no post-war support. There are a possible further 9 fathers in this category, since in 9 cases where the respondents said their father was alcoholic, they did not know whether or not he had been in the armed forces.
- Of the 34 'mentally ill' mothers, there was further information from 4 respondents saying that one had Post Natal Depression, one had depression, one had 'eventually suicided' and that one had at tempted suicide, which was the reason her child (the respondent) went into care.

Figure 5: Reasons for respondents placement in care



Police involvement in removal into care by ‘the Welfare’

For 123 people - 32% of the entire sample - the police had been involved in their removal from the family home. Most were state wards (84%): 103 of the 123 (Fig 3) .

Since there are a total of 201 state wards in this sample, this means that just over half of all state wards (51%) were removed by police – a government policy which ensured a traumatic beginning to the loss of everything familiar and entry into an institution full of strangers.

Age of entry, length of stay and age at departure from care

19.1% of the people in the sample were aged between 1 and 3 years old when they went into care, 59% were six years or under and if we raise the age to 8 or under, the figure is over 77% So most people went into care as little children (Fig 6).

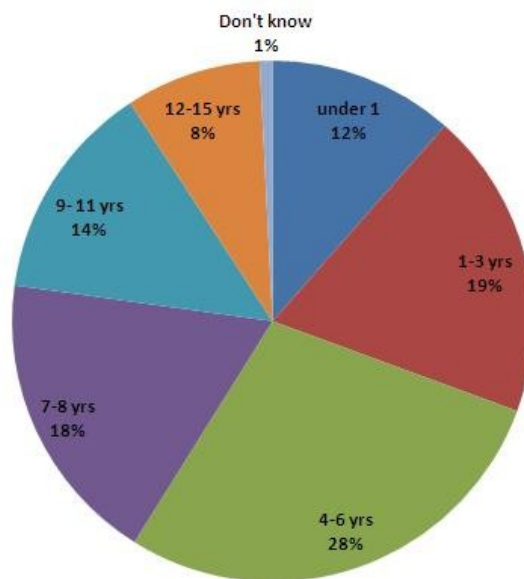


Figure 6: Age of respondents when entered care

Age on leaving care

Figure 7 shows the age at which the survey respondents left care.

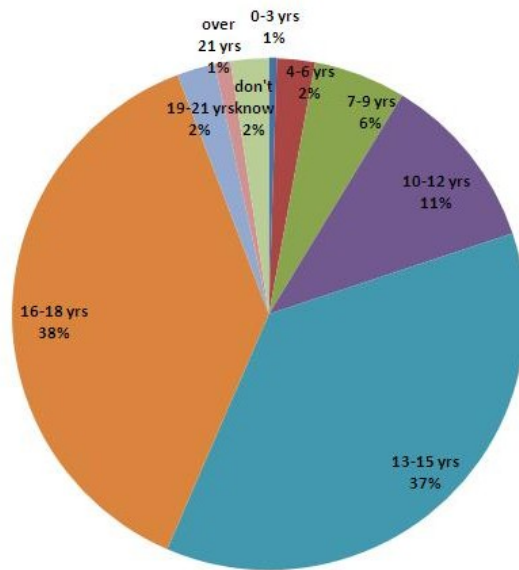


Figure 7: Age respondents left care

Family history of care (Fig. 8)

54 people had a parent who had been in 'care': 28 mothers, 3 fathers, and 3 'both'. Of the 54, one respondent whose father had been in care wrote that both of her mother's parents had been in care. In addition to the 54, 2 respondents wrote 'possibly' about their fathers, one respondent had a grandmother who'd been in a Home, and one had an 'aunt and other relatives'.

More than 14% of the sample, then, had a parental history of care.

War service of parent or parents (Fig. 9)

168 people or 43.25% of the sample had a parent who had been in the armed forces. Of these, the majority, 40.3%, were fathers, and from 'period of care' evidence, all except two fathers (who were probably WW1 veterans) would have been in the Second World War.

Figure 8: Parents of respondents who had been in care

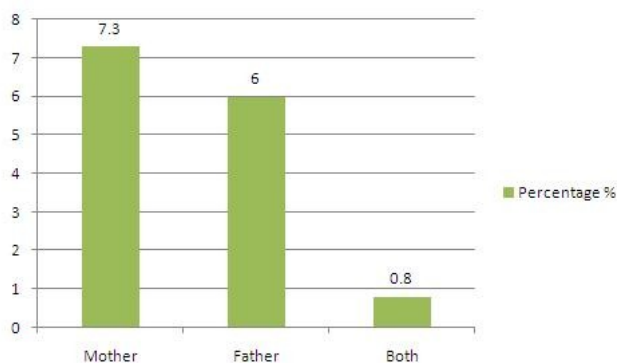
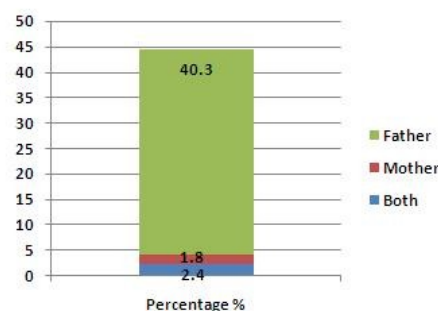


Figure 9: Parents of respondents in the armed forces



Abuse in care

When the institutional care experience is discussed, it is most commonly abuse, both physical and sexual, which is highlighted, so we include here some statistics about both these areas. The CLAN Survey listed the usual forms of punishments described in care survivors' accounts, and respondents ticked a box if they had experienced this (Fig 10).

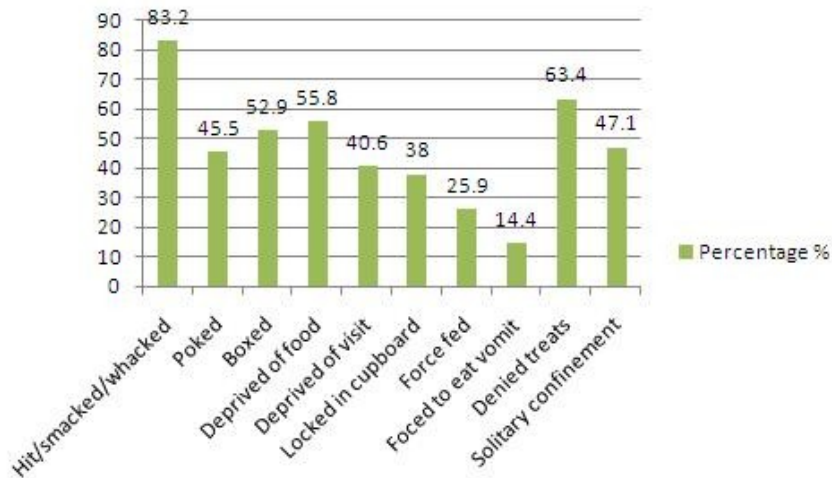


Figure 10: Punishments reported by respondents

**Note that solitary confinement could range from being locked in a cupboard or small confined space to incarceration in a specially designated cell. Periods of confinement, from answers given, ranged from 'a few hours' to 1-3 days to 1 week or several, and in one case 6 weeks.*

Sexual abuse (Fig. 11)

170 or 44.5% of all respondents said they had been sexually molested in care, by the following categories of abuser.

- 109 by a staff member: which means that nearly 28.5% of all children in institutional care were sexually molested by the staff working in or running their institution. This is close to a third of all children. 64 % of those sexually abused.
- 25 (6.5%) by religious personnel (apart from staff) associated with the Home in some way
- 53 (11.8%) another child in the Home

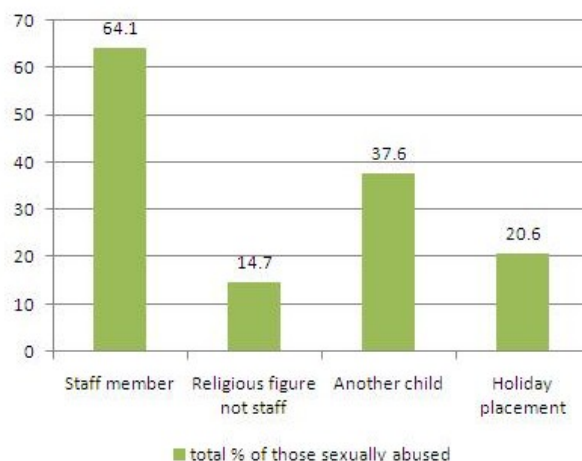


Figure 11: Perpetrators of sexual abuse

As well, 35 people, or 99.1%, were sexually molested in their holiday placement.

Work in care

Working whilst in care (Fig. 12)

One question was, 'did you do chores in the Home?' 357 respondents said 'yes', 6 said 'no', and the rest either 'don't know' or 'don't remember', or gave no answer

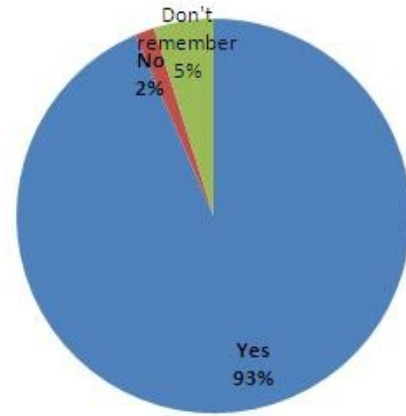


Figure 12: Percentage of respondents who did chores in care

No of hours worked doing chores (Fig. 13)

357 respondents of the 382 answered this question, giving the following estimates: hours done in chores each day:

1-2hrs = 76
2-3hrs = 83
3-4hrs = 56
4-5hrs = 104

160 or 45%, then, did between 3 and 5 hours of chores a day, besides schoolwork.

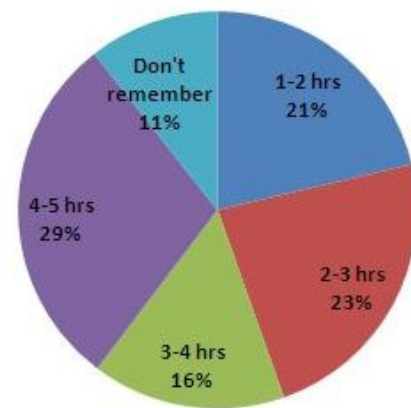


Figure 13: Number of hours respondents spent doing chores per day doing chores

Working for income for the Home (Fig. 14)

101 respondents, or 26% of the sample, answered 'yes' to 'did you do any work that the Home received money for? (e.g. in a laundry or on a farm that sold farm produce)'. They estimated the number of hours doing unpaid work as:

1-3 = 24 respondents
4-5 = 21
6 hours or more = 54

So of the 101, approximately 53% did 6 or more hours of unpaid labour a day, for which the Home received money, and 47 % did between one and five hours per day.

54 of these 101 people said that they worked like this instead of going to school, that is, 14% of the entire sample of 382 people.

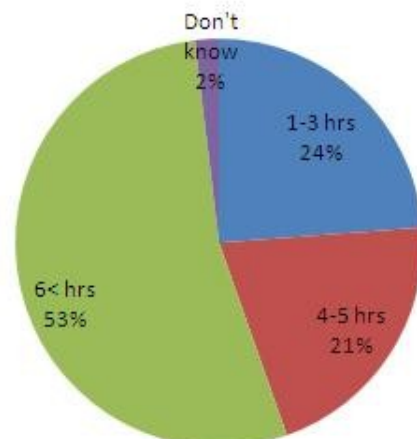


Figure 14: Number of hours spent doing unpaid work if their Home received income

Note that several people wrote that, as one expressed it, 'we did do unpaid work'. That is, that even where the Home received no money for their work, nevertheless it was work for which the Home would have had to use paid workers, had the children not supplied this labour. As one person put it, 'we cleaned etc, a lot of work that saved employing cleaners etc'. Respondents reported cutting down trees for firewood, 'working in the nuns' kitchen' and 'Saturdays in the laundry could be up to 10 hrs'. One person just wrote 'slaves' next to the question about chores.

Schooling

Another feature of institutional care is that children were often poorly educated, even in state care, with consequent effects on their employment potential and earning capacity. Figure 15 indicates the level of schooling reported in the Survey (including education obtained after leaving care).

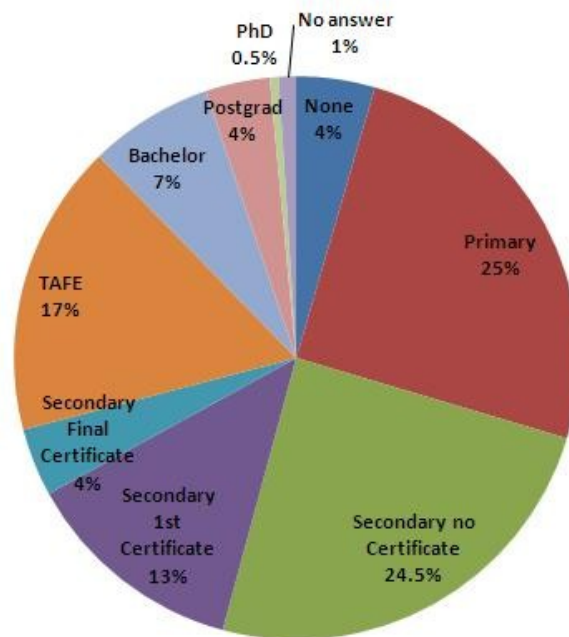


Figure 15: Highest level of schooling achieved by respondents

To summarise this: 54% of the sample left care without having achieved the first certificate level of education (what in NSW was once the Intermediate Certificate, now the School Certificate; other states had comparable standards)

Respondents who went on to TAFE or other tertiary study often noted that they had had to finish their preliminary schooling first. Others were like the woman who had left care with little schooling but said that afterwards, 'I desperately wanted an education and worked by day and learnt by night'.

Some outcomes of growing up in institutional care

Number who spent first night out of 'care' alone or with strangers

The chart on p. 6 (fig. 7) shows the age of respondents when they left 'care' and that there were 297 people in the survey who were aged from 13 and upwards.

Of these 297, 116 people (39% of the 297) spent their first night out of 'care' alone or with strangers. 23 were on the streets or in a park, and 3 were 'on a train alone'. The rest were boarding in the house of strangers (accommodation found for them by the Home), or in a room in a boarding house, or in a hostel; or with an employer, in a placement straight from the Home (Fig. 16).



Figure 16: First night out of care

These findings indicate how alone in the world people were, as a direct outcome of this childhood experience. We are talking here of young people aged between 16 and 18. Commonly they had lost family and kin ties, through separation in the Home from their siblings, the restriction of contact allowed with their parent(s) and relatives, and the fact that nobody informed them of family events, or the location of family members, or assisted them with other information which would have helped them to retain a meaningful relationship with their own family and background. This is a major component of the emotional neglect experienced by all children in institutional care.

Living on streets at some time in their life:

88 people out of the total of 382 have lived on the streets at some time in their life. This is 23% of the entire sample or over one fifth of all respondents. 52 were men and 36 were women (fig 17 p11). Since there were 170 males and 212 females in the sample, these findings mean that over 30% of all the men in the sample have been homeless at some time in their life, while the figure for women is 17%.

Used public housing

144 or 37.7% of the sample have lived in public housing at some time in their life.

Been in trouble with the law (apart from parking infringements)

135 or just over 35% i.e. more than one third of all respondents, (79 men and 55 women), have been in trouble with the law, and of these, 45 men and 29 women went on to gaol, a total of 74 or 19% of the sample – nearly one fifth (fig. 18 p11).

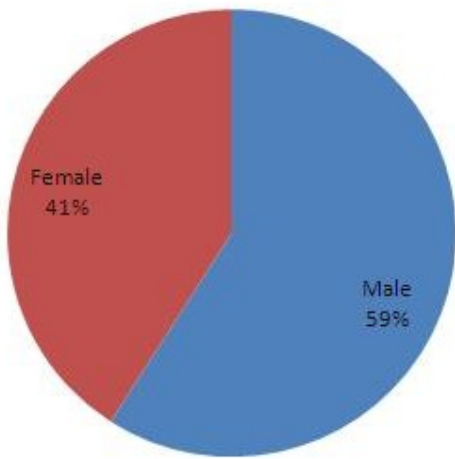


Figure 17: Gender of respondents who have been homeless

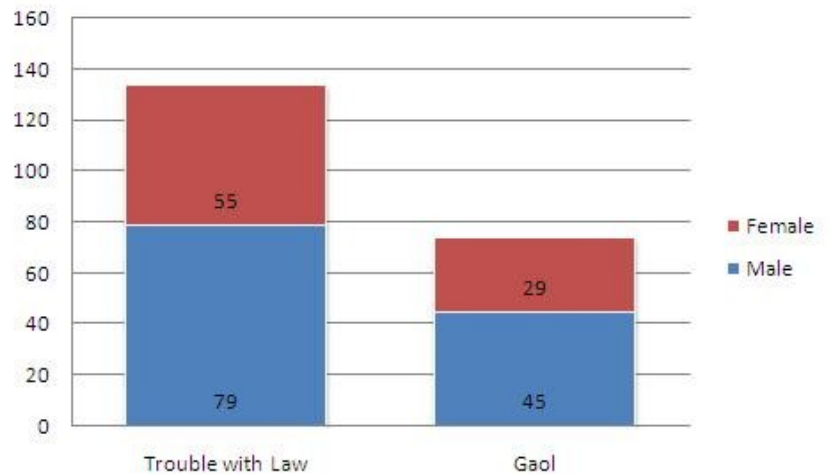


Figure 18: Gender of respondents who have been in trouble with the law

Worked in the sex industry:

27 people, or over 7%, had worked in this area, but 37 people or over 9% did not answer this question. Despite the anonymity of the Survey, there is a possibility that this could mean a reluctance to disclose, though of course not necessarily.

Difficulty working with others

170 people, or over 44% said 'Yes' to this question - whereas only 32 said they had difficulty working alone (8.4%): that is, care survivors typically find it easier not to have to relate to other people in a work environment.

Flashbacks that make working difficult

249, or 65% of people said they had this experience.

Some Mental Health Outcomes

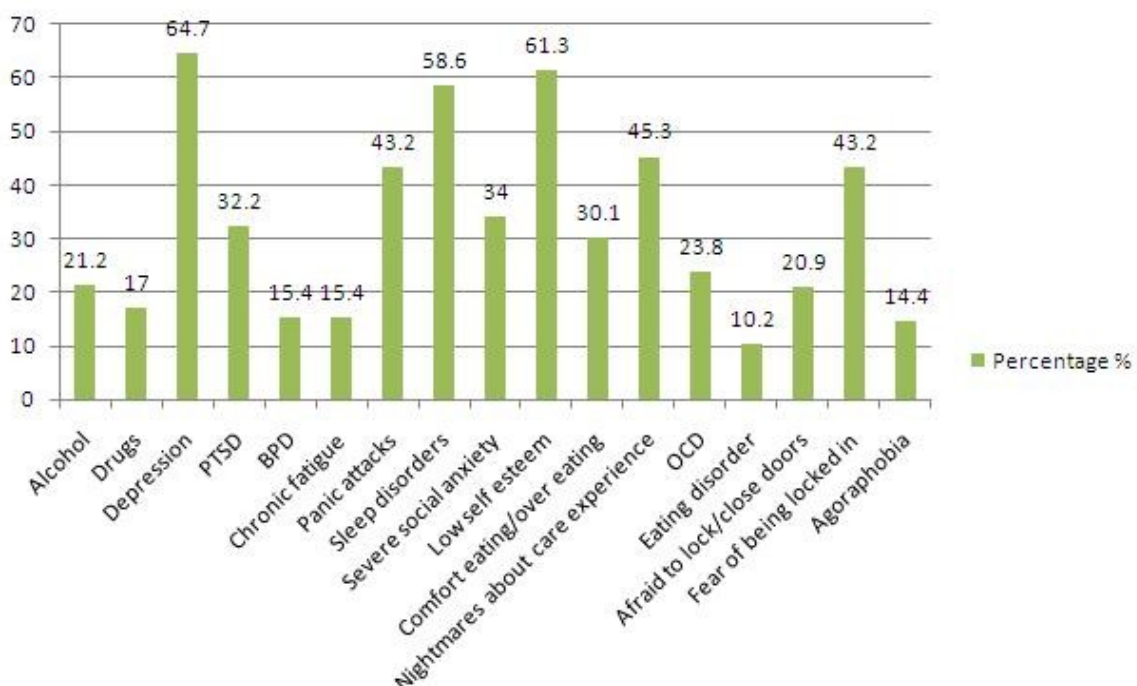


Figure 19: Mental health issues suffered by respondents

88 respondents, 23%, also said they suffered physical pain or distress from injuries received in care as a child.

Suicide figures

The findings on suicide indicate that this sample is significantly skewed/ different from that for the normal population. According to the 1997 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (ABS Cat No. 4326.0), only 0.3% of men and 0.5% of women (0.4% of the sample overall) reported that they had made a suicide attempt in the previous 12-month period. Similarly the National Survey authors estimate that 11.9% of men and 16.6% of women in the general population will think about suicide at some time in their lives. This is significantly lower than the rates of suicidal thoughts and attempted suicides reported in our survey (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Suicide figures for survey respondents and the general population

	Number	% of sample	General Population %
Suicidal thoughts	247	64.7	14.25
Attempted suicide	140	36.6	0.4*
Know of other care leavers who have attempted or committed suicide	157	41.1	N/A

* this figure shows people reporting attempted suicides in the last 12months. It may be higher if the question was asked whether they had attempted suicide at all in their lifetime.

Obviously we cannot know how many care leavers have actually committed suicide, but indications from these findings are that this figure must be high.

Note that of the 170 people who were sexually abused in care:

- 125 or 73.5% suffer depression
- 74or 43.5% report suffering from PTSD
- 35 or 20.6% suffer from BPD
- 29 or 17.1% suffer from both depression and BPD
- 27 or 15.9% suffer from depression, BPD & PTSD; *and*
- 88 or 51.8% report suicide attempt(s) (Fig. 21)

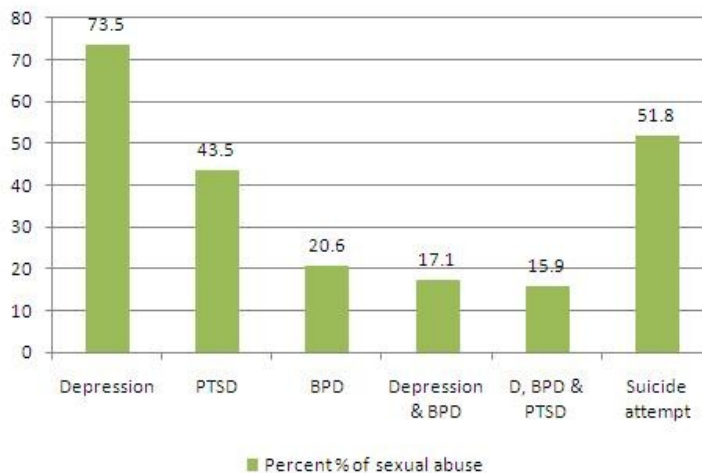


Figure 21: Mental health issues suffered by respondents who were sexually abused

Emotional and behavioural outcomes

Feelings commonly reported as an outcome of a childhood in 'care'

This section of the Survey asked for a response about feelings that are commonly expressed by CLAN members, in discussion with CLAN (Fig. 22).

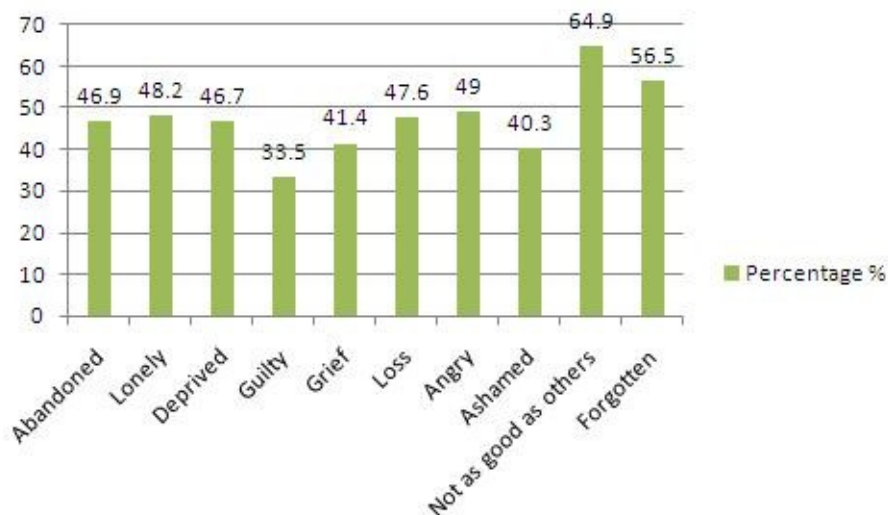


Figure 22: Types of feelings reported by respondents

Some adult behaviours

Many care leavers report behaviours, as an adult, which cause them problems in everyday life and which they believe are a consequence of their experiences in care, or their feelings about their experiences. Figure 23 shows the results from the section where we asked people to tick (or not) behaviours commonly reported to us by members.

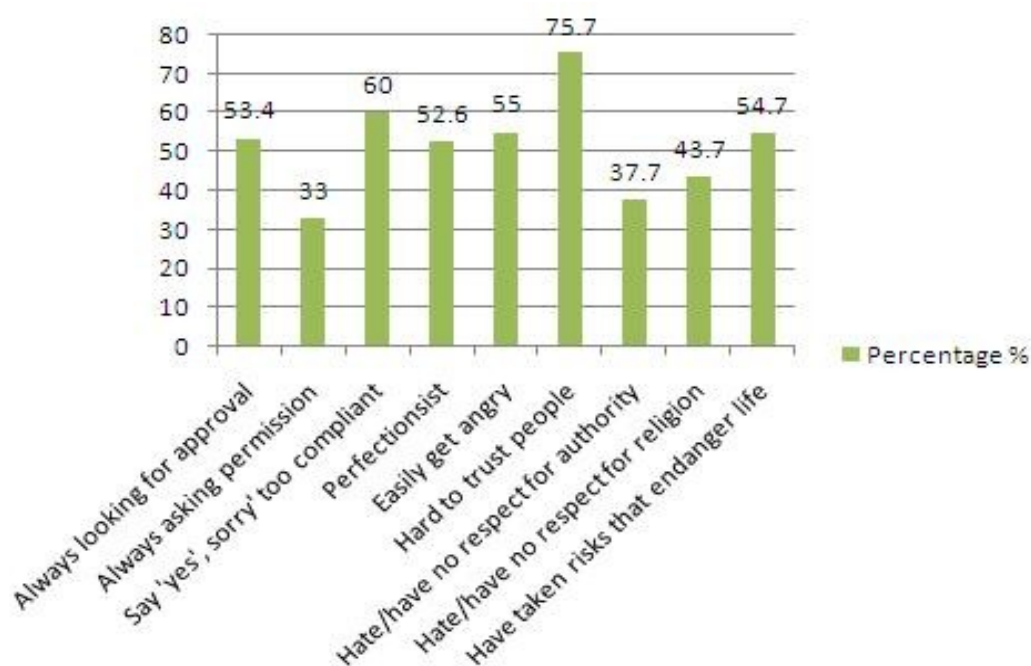


Figure 23: Behaviours reported by respondents

Relationships

The number of respondents who said they had problems with personal relationships because of their time in care was 206, or 70%. Some of these problems are as follows (Fig. 24):

- 207 or 54.2% said 'yes', to 'have you put up with abusive relationships?' - some to multiple abusive relationships
- 120 or over 31.4% said they feared one sex for sexual reasons
- 179 or 47% said they had difficulty with intimacy

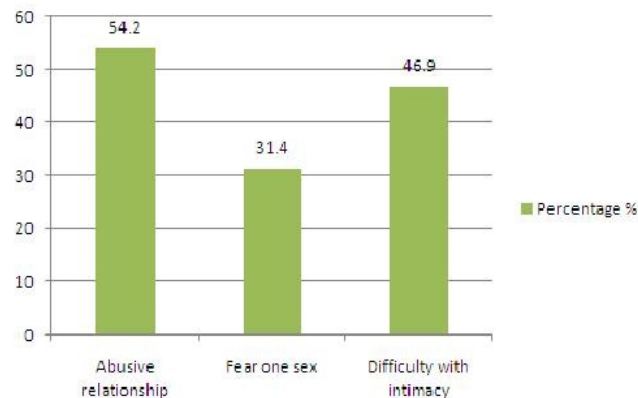


Figure 24: Relationship issues reported by respondents

Childbirth

Out of the 212 women, 22 were childless. So figures here are out of 190.

Trouble getting pregnant?

38 or 18% said 'yes' to this. This is out of 212 women – we took the whole sample of women here, because some who don't have children may have tried to). If it's out of 190, the figure is 20%.

Able to breastfeed?

66 of the 190 women who had children were not able to, or 34.7%, and 2 said 'Y and N'.

Post natal depression (PND)

99 out of 190 women said 'yes'. If we add to this figure the three women who said 'not sure', the two who said 'yes and no', and the one who said 'just very sad', we have 105 women out of 190: that is, **55%** of the sample of women who had children suffered from PND.

Early menopause

110 women or 52% of 212 said 'Yes', but we did not specify a cut-off date to define 'early' so this figure must be treated with caution. It is however a self-perception that compared to the general population, an early menopause occurred.

Children

330 out of the total sample of 382 had children, so 52 (13.6%) do not.

190 females and 140 males had children.

Adopted out a child

34 of the 382 (9 %) said they had adopted out a child. Four of these were men. Two women said they had adopted out 2 children.

Teenage pregnancy

89 or 41% of the women had had a teenage pregnancy, though of these, two were married.

Got a girl pregnant

28 men said 'yes', (16.4%), 22 said they didn't know, 111 said 'no', and the rest did not answer.

Chose not to have children

17 people, or 5.5%, said they had chosen not to have children, often with comments indicating they did not trust themselves to be a parent, or did not feel they could cope with parenthood.

Intergenerational issues

Figure 25 shows how issues stemming from a parent's time in care as a child can affect their children and in turn their grandchildren

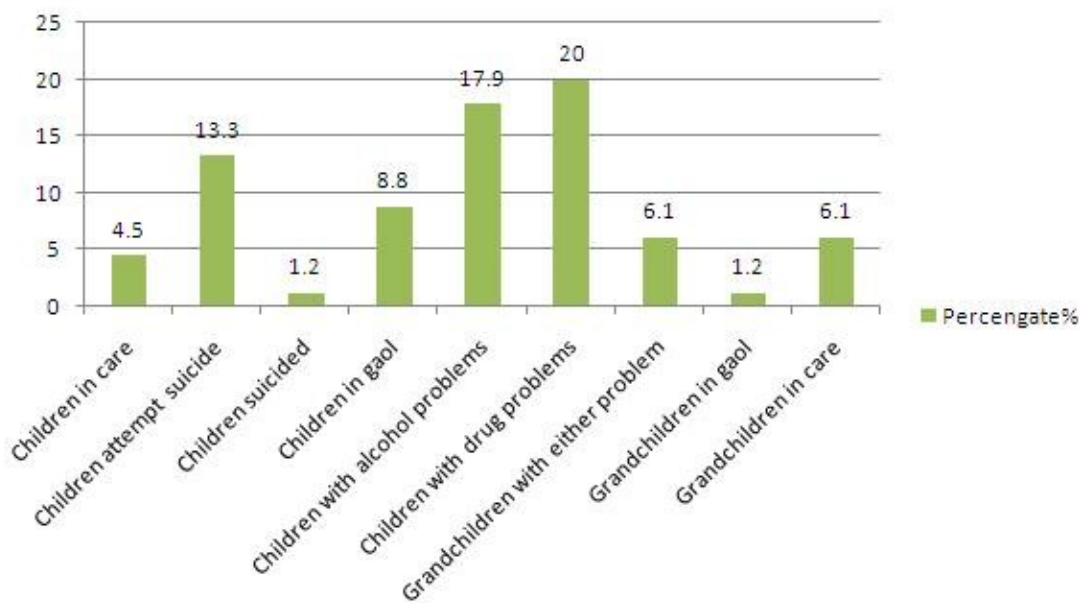


Figure 25: issues identified by respondents regarding their children and grandchildren

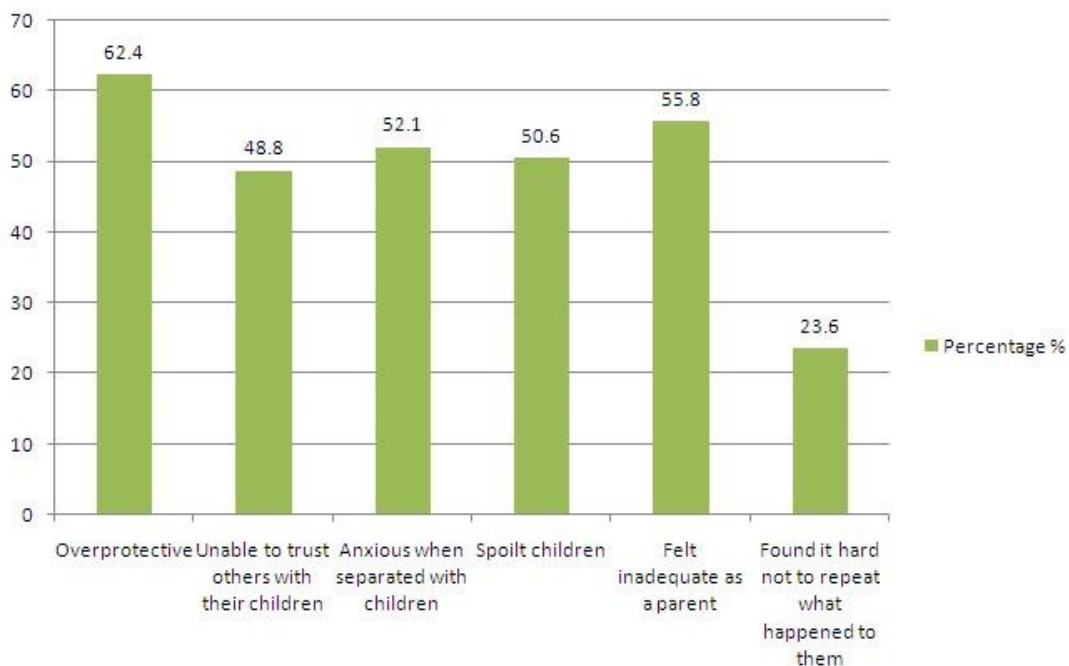


Figure 26: Difficulties in raising children

Raising children (see Fig. 26, previous page):

Questions in this section reflected comments made to CLAN by members, about the difficulties, in the absence of any childhood role models, of being a parent, including sometimes finding it hard not to repeat the verbal and physical abuse they had experienced themselves as a child in 'care'.

Dependence on government support for living

- 25.4% or 97 people in the sample of 382 are on disability pension
- 20% are on the aged pension, or 77 people
- 6.3% are on NewStart, or 'the dole', i.e. 24 people
- 1.6% are on sickness benefit, or 6 people

So 216 or 53.4% of respondents to the Survey are dependent on Federal government support to live (Fig. 27).

A further 9 are on supporting parent's pension and 3 on a parenting allowance to care for grandchildren, i.e. 12 more people, bringing the total to **56.5%**.

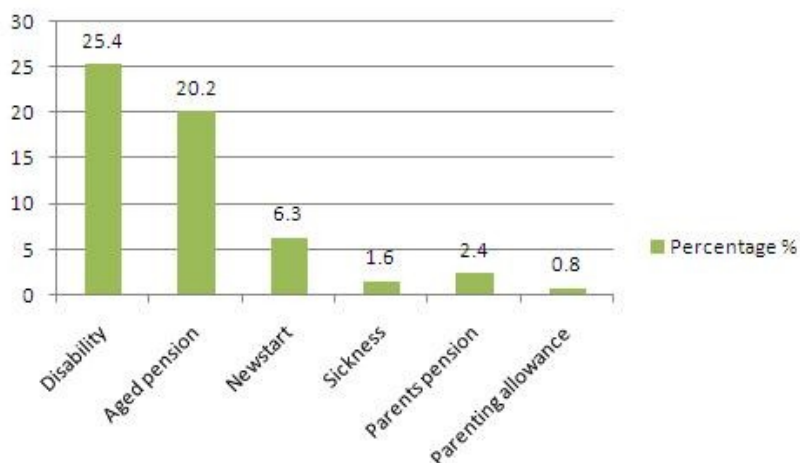


Figure 27: Respondents on Centrelink benefits

Healing

Figure 28 (p17) shows respondents feelings and beliefs towards the healing process they have gone through in relation to their time in 'care'.

- many respondents who listed counseling as a healing method also wrote things like "great while I could afford it"
- Religion was listed by a few respondents, but was negligible and was included in "other"
- Family includes partners and children.
- More than half felt CLAN has helped in their healing– this is probably due to their membership

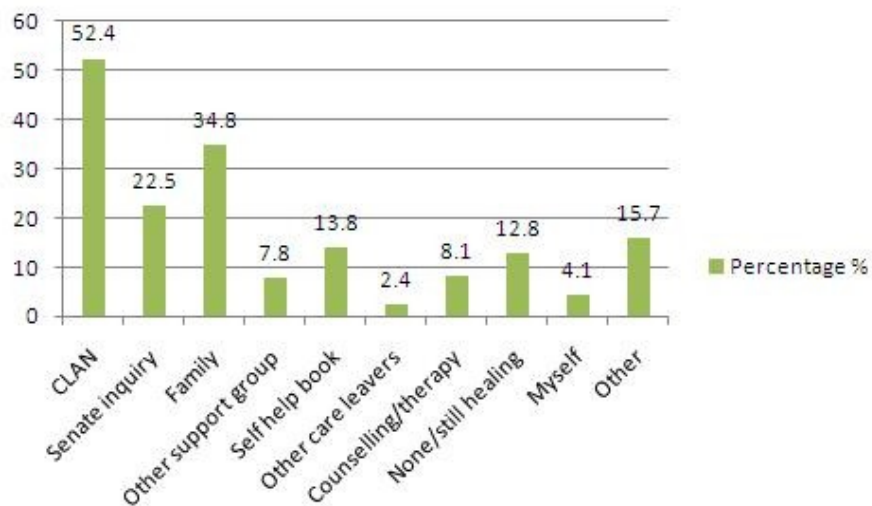


Figure 28: Respondents' response to what has helped them heal

A more extensive documentation of this still relatively little known aspect of Australia's social history can be found in the 2004 report of the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, *Forgotten Australians*, and also in a published work by one of the authors of this report, *'Orphans of the Living' Growing up in 'care' in 20th century Australia* (Penglase 2005, Curtin University Books; reprinted 2007 by Fremantle Press).

Survey analysed by Dr Joanna Penglase, co-founder of CLAN, with Lindal Sambrook, senior social worker, CLAN.