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By Philip Mendes* and Guy Johnson**

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In Australia approximately 1800 people aged 15-17 leave state care each year. They are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community (Mendes, 2005). Many have experienced multiple forms of neglect and abuse prior to entering care, in addition to instability and a lack of support during their placements. There is significant evidence that their experiences preceding, in and on leaving care impact on their transition to independent living.

Numerous studies in Australian, New Zealand, the USA, United Kingdom, Ireland and Canada have found a high correlation between state care and later housing instability, transience and homelessness. In Australia the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's report on Homeless Children (also known as the Burdekin report) was one of the first to identify that a large number of homeless young people came from state care backgrounds (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; O'Connor, 1989). Similarly, a Salvation Army survey of 200 young homeless people aged 12 to 25 in inner city Melbourne discovered a high number of current or former state wards amongst the homeless population (Hirst, 1989: 65 & 170-171). A follow-up report by the Brotherhood of St Laurence found that care leavers continued to be prone to homelessness (Taylor, 1990). The Commonwealth House of Representative Report into Homelessness (1995), the 1996 Victorian Auditor General Report, and a number of reports on youth homelessness (CACH 2001: 53; YPAPT 2001) also confirmed the link between state care and later homelessness. Cashmore and Paxman (2007:23) found that 39 per cent of those interviewed in the 4th stage of their NSW longitudinal study had been homeless at some stage. [In their administrative study of 4,291 homeless people in inner city Melbourne, Johnson and Chamberlain \(2008\) found that 1,689 people \(or 39 per cent of the sample\) had experienced homelessness before the age of 18. Of this group 42 per cent had previously been in the state care and protection system.](#)

Four recent reports – two by NGOs and two by the Australian Government - have confirmed beyond any doubt the direct link between state care experiences and poor housing outcomes. The National Youth Commission report (2008) cited a number of recent studies documenting the over-representation of care leavers in the homeless population. The report recommended the introduction of a universal needs-based leaving care entitlement up till at least the age of 24 years in order to support care leavers to maintain their accommodation and prevent homelessness. Similarly, the Create Foundation (2008) urged that priority be given to assisting the many care leavers at risk of transience and homelessness. The national child protection report (FaHCSIA 2008) urged greater individual support for care leavers to prevent homelessness including an enhancement of the existing Transition to Independent Living Allowance scheme. And the Green Paper on Homelessness (2008) acknowledged that care leavers were a particularly vulnerable group due to the lack

of support provided during their transition from care to independent living.

The evidence from overseas presents a similar picture. In the UK a 1991 study by the British Department of Health estimated that 40 per cent of homeless young people in London and other major cities were graduates of state care. A 1996 British inquiry into preventing youth homelessness estimated that two thirds of young people leaving care experienced homelessness (Parsons, Broad & Fry, 2002:105). The London charity Centrepoin found that 30 per cent of the 758 young people admitted to their housing projects between April 2000 and March 2001 had a care history. Those who leave care early at the age of 16 or 17 are particularly prone to homelessness (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Centrepoin, 2001:84-86).

In the United States researchers have also found an over-representation of people with a foster care history in the homeless population. For example, in their study of risk factors for homelessness among female headed families Bassuk, Buckner, Weinreb, Browne, Bassuk, Dawson and Perloff (1997:244) found that 19.6 per cent had been in foster care. In their study of risk factors for adult homelessness Herman, Susser, Struening and Link (1997:253) found the rate of out-of-home care 'was twice as prevalent among the homeless as among the non-homeless'. In their study of the newly homeless Caton, Dominguez, Schanzer, Hasin, Shrout, Felix, McQuiston, Opler and Hsu (2005:1755) reported that in a sample of 322 newly homeless people 22 per cent reported an out-of-home placement during their childhood. Similarly, in their course of homelessness study Koegel, Melamid and Burnam (1995:1644) found that among a sample of 1,563 homeless people one quarter 'experienced placement in either foster care, institutional settings or both'. In their longitudinal study conducted in Minneapolis Sosin, Piliavan and Westerfelt (1990:162) created two distinct samples. The first was a cross section of homelessness adults (N=322). The second sample included only those who recently became homeless (in the last 14 days). There were 200 people in the second sample. They found that 39 per cent of the cross section sample reported spending time in out-of-home care while 44 per cent of the newly homeless did.

Studies in the US have also found that homeless women are more likely to have experienced foster care than men (Winkleby, Rockhill, Jatulis & Fortmann, 1992). Other studies have identified an intergeneration cycle of foster care among homeless families (Roman & Wolfe, 1997:8 Citing another study). They found that over a quarter (27 per cent) of homeless parents with a history of foster care had children in foster care. In comparison 15 per cent of parent's with no such history had children in foster care. In their study of administrative data gathered from 21 organisations Roman and Wolfe (1997:9) found that 36 per cent of the 1,134 people who participated in the study had a foster care history.

Factors that contribute to these poor outcomes

There are three general factors that contribute to the poor housing outcomes of care leavers. First, many care leavers have experienced and are still recovering from considerable physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect prior to entering care. Second, many young people have experienced inadequacies in state care including poor quality caregivers, and constant shifts of placement, carers, schools and workers. And third, many care leavers can call on little, if any, direct family support or other community networks to ease their involvement into independent living. In addition, many young people currently experience an abrupt end at 16-18 years of age to the formal support networks of state care.

More specific factors include the high mobility of many young people whilst in care which is closely associated with instability after care, the unplanned and unprepared nature of many departures from state care, unsuccessful attempts at reunification with family of origin, the absence of sufficient personal and social skills such as shopping, cooking, and budgeting required to live independently, experiences of loneliness and social isolation, minimal education and poor employment opportunities, relationship breakdowns with partner or friends, exposure to violence or harassment, eviction, poor quality accommodation or living in an unsafe area, involvement in offending or substance abuse, mental health problems, and the lack of an option to "return home" or "backtrack" if the initial independent living arrangements do not work out (Biehal & Wade, 1999: 86-87; Biehal et al 1995: 44-53; Bonnice, 2003: 6; Cashmore & Paxman 1996: 110-21; 2007: 15-30; Horrocks, 2002: 331; Morgan Disney 2006: 30-34; Stein & Dixon 2006: 417; West 1995: 12).

In Australia, there are limited accommodation options for care leavers (Mendes & Moslehuddin 2004: 23). Specific concern has been expressed that care leavers are expected to rely on inappropriate supported accommodation and assistance programs (SAAP) that were actually designed as short-term transitional housing programs, with a significant crisis component for those who are already homeless or escaping from domestic violence (Bonnice, 2002: 8; Green & Jones, 1999: 8 & 33; Maunders et al, 1999: viii, 19 & 43). For example, the AIHW (2003) found that 200 young Victorians aged 12-17 years, who were using homelessness services, had a Guardianship Order either at the beginning or end of their support period.

Potential reforms/models that would contribute to better outcomes

Care leavers require a range of accommodation options to meet their differing needs which will vary according to care experience, ethnicity, gender, contact with their families, degree of preparedness for independence, and any forms of disability (Frost & Stein 1995).

UK authors argue that planning for better accommodation and support should include a thorough needs assessment given that some young people are not suited to living alone, offering young people a choice in the type and location of accommodation, preparing a contingency plan in case the proposed accommodation breaks down, and providing flexible financial and other supports (Broad (2005: 79; Stein & Wade 2000: 47-48; Wade & Dixon 2006: 204).

Australian authors recommend the following: making public housing available on a priority basis to care leavers; establishing separate transitional units available only for care leavers; and assistance with private rental subsidy if no public housing stock is available. The latter would include assistance with the rental bond and establishment costs for setting up including the purchase of essentials such as bed, bedding, furniture, and a refrigerator and washing machine (Cashmore & Paxman 2007: 30; CECFW 2006: 16)

Given that 95 per cent of the Australian children in care reside in home-based care - either foster care or kinship care - one available option would be to provide continuing financial support to maintain these placements (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006a, : 23; 2006b: 239). Where this is not possible, care leavers should preferably be offered specific accommodation designed to meet their needs.

A good example of such a model is provided by St Lukes Children, Youth and Family Services in Bendigo Victoria which offers care leavers access to secure and safe housing via a flexible range of housing options including subsidized rental properties and a boarder provider program (Bonnice 2005). Similar models of supported accommodation have been developed by local authorities in the UK (Department for Education and Skills, 2006: 88-89; Stein, 2004: 100-101).

The UK Children (Leaving Care) Act obliges the local authority to appoint a personal adviser to help the young person find, secure and maintain suitable accommodation through practical, emotional and financial support. The type and level of support should be agreed as part of the young person's Pathway Plan and contact maintained beyond their 18th birthday.

UK leaving care schemes provide support both with locating affordable accommodation, and maintaining stable tenancy. Particular emphasis is placed on providing a flexible range of accommodation options to meet differing needs including supported, transitional or independent accommodation in either public or private dwellings. Available forms of accommodation include: local authority and housing association tenancies, supported lodgings involving live-in support, voluntary sector schemes, private accommodation, reunification with family or relatives, extended stays in foster or residential placements, and foyer accommodation linked to training and employment.

British schemes offering ongoing practical and emotional support appear to have been effective in providing improved accommodation outcomes. But there continues to be a shortage of suitable housing options, and many care leavers feel unsafe and vulnerable due to living in rundown areas (Biehal et al 1995: 54-56; Broad 1999; 2005: 79; Murphy & Strahan 2005; Parsons et al 2002; Simon 2008; Stein 1997: 34-36; 2004: 65-66, 100; Stein & Wade 2000: 48-52).

Table 1 Summary of assistance currently provided by Australian States and Territories, and the Commonwealth

State or Territory and annual number of care leavers for 2005-06 Legislative Support for after care and Budget Housing Support

New South Wales: 539 care leavers 1998 Children and Young Persons Care and Protection Act makes provision for after care services for young people aged 15-25 years. Current funding is \$3.98 million. After Care Resource Centre assists care leavers to access housing options. Also specific agreement between Department of Housing and NSW Human Services to assist care leavers.

Victoria: 657 care leavers Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 provides a responsibility to support transition to independence up to the age of 21 years. Current overall funding is \$3.19 million, rising to \$4.638 million by 2009-10. The Office of Housing provide transitional housing for care leavers through the Youth Homelessness Action Plan. This is funded for \$843,461 per year, and includes 3 specific projects for indigenous care leavers. Evaluation of program will be available from OOH in July 2008. Some NGOs such as MacKillop Family Services and Anglicare provide lead tenant models.

Queensland: 293 care leavers Child Protection Act 1999 provides for preparation for transition from care, but not for after care support. No specific budget. Section 71 of the Child Protection Act refers specifically to housing assistance, and considerable support is provided to young people moving into independent accommodation.

South Australia: 106 care leavers Children's Protection Act 1993 provides for support

to young people who have been in care to “prepare for transition to adulthood”, but with no guidelines around age, so can be interpreted as after care support. Includes leaving care, transitioning and post care project. Funding is \$500,300. Provide independent living programs to assist care leavers with locating and maintaining stable accommodation. A specific tenancy training package has been established to assist young people to sustain tenancies, and so lower the risk of homelessness. There is a formal agreement between Families SA and Housing SA to smooth the referral and response to requests for housing assistance.

WesternAustralia: 127 care leavers Children and Community Service Act 2004 includes provision for leaving care service up to age of 25 years. Funding for four services is \$929, 922. Transitional Support Service for young people aged 16-25 years emphasizes support with accommodation needs

Tasmania: 55 care leavers Children, Young Person’s and their Families Act 1997 contains a principle of preparation for leaving care, but is ambiguous in the implications for practice. Funding is \$100,000. May provide assistance to care leavers until the age of 20 years with securing and maintaining accommodation. There is one after care support program.

Northern Territory: 8 care leavers Draft Bill currently being prepared for Parliament to replace Community Welfare Act 1983. No specific budget. No specific after care services, but some assistance provided to young people with preparation for leaving care including accommodation and rental issues.

ACT: 32 care leavers Children and Young People Act 1999 covers preparation, but not after care support. No specific budget. No formal leaving care service, but funding is provided to NGOs such as Barnardos Transition Program which offer independent living support to homeless young people including care leavers aged 15-21 years.

Commonwealth Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) provides financial assistance up to \$1000 for particularly disadvantaged care leavers to prevent later welfare dependency and homelessness.

Conclusion

For most young people the transition to adulthood is a process that takes place over time. The majority of young people are supported through this process by their family and friends. For many young people it is a time when relationships with their family start to change. Many young people seek greater independence and autonomy from their families, but families remain important nevertheless.

Research demonstrates that the age young people leave the family home has steadily increased over the last two decades. By staying in the family home young people benefit from ongoing financial and emotional support in addition to enjoying the benefits of a stable, secure home. It has been estimated that up to two thirds of young people return home at least once to save money or if things don’t work out

In contrast ‘leaving the care of the state is a ‘final event’ (Stein, 2006:274). Young people leaving care often do so in an unplanned way and this can result in a sense of abandonment. This is particularly so for those aged between 15-17 years. While many people under the age of 15 return to the family home when they leave care, for those aged between 15-17 and who are still in the out-of-home care system, there is often no family home to return to. Not only do young people leaving care often have little family support, they typically have few financial resources to draw upon (McDowall, 2008), have minimal life skills (Reid, 2007), lower educational attainment and they often suffer from low self esteem and have to deal with the emotional trauma of abuse or neglect (Tweddle, 2007).

What is a difficult period for most young people is doubly so for many care leavers. As Stein (2006: 274) notes:

Care leavers are expected to undertake the journey to adulthood, from restricted to full citizenship, far younger and in far less time than their peers

For care leavers the provision of appropriate affordable housing is critical. Without good housing, the risk of becoming homeless is high. When care leavers become homeless their situation often gets far worse and more complex and costly to resolve. Post care support systems which include housing are essential to prevent this happening.

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