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Young People Leaving State Out-of-home Care

**AUSTRALIAN POLICY
AND PRACTICE**

Philip Mendes, Guy Johnson
Badal Moslehuddin

Australian Scholarly Publishing

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Victoria Children, Youth and Families Act 2005
Western Australia Children and Community Services Act 2004

Chapter Eight

‘Out in the world with no-one’:

A qualitative study of the housing pathways of young people who have recently left state out-of-home care¹

Guy Johnson, Kristin Natalier,
Mark Liddiard, and Stian Thoresen²

Introduction

Housing is one of the most important elements in the life trajectories of young people leaving state care. The provision of safe, secure and affordable accommodation is closely associated with an enhanced sense of well-being, and educational and employment success (Wade & Dixon 2006). Yet for young people leaving care, accessing and maintaining accommodation is one of the most challenging tasks they face (McDowall 2008). In Australia, young people are severely disadvantaged by the structure of the housing market – high unemployment and their low wages relative to housing costs means that they have limited housing opportunities. The lack of accommodation

¹ The primary data for this paper were collected with the support of an AHURI grant (Project Number 30540). This paper is a revised version of ‘Pathways from out-of-home care’.

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options for care leavers has significant implications for both Federal and State governments who have made a commitment to reduce the number of young people who exit care into homelessness (FaHCSIA 2008a). This chapter examines the different housing experiences of care leavers as part of their overall transition from care.

Housing Pathways From Care

People’s housing experiences are dynamic and often change. Housing researchers have used the idea of a housing career to capture the dynamic nature of housing, but this approach often assumes a linear progression from private rental through to home ownership. Research shows that young people’s housing careers are now more varied than in the past and this limits the usefulness of a housing career approach.

Housing and homelessness researchers therefore now increasingly rely on the pathways idea (Clapham 2003; Frederick & Goddard 2006; Johnson, Gronda & Coutts 2008; Mallett, Rosenthal & Keys 2005; Weitzman, Knickman & Shinn 1990). Studies that use the pathways idea identify the importance of social structures and institutions and individual characteristics as part of a wide range of resources, barriers and risks that alternatively facilitate or undermine sustainable and appropriate housing for young people (e.g. Anderson 2001, Anderson and Christian 2003, Fitzpatrick & Clapham 1999, Mallett et al. 2005; Frederick and Goddard 2006, Morgan Disney and Associates 2006, Stein 2006). The use of the pathways approach is predicated on the view that it provides a stronger insight into the factors, both structural and individual, that influence people’s housing experiences. However, the factors that contribute to housing outcomes tend to be listed without extended analysis of how an individual’s resources (or lack of resources), their interpretive framework and structural positioning impact upon, and are shaped by, each other (c.f. May 2000, Cashmore and Paxman 2006a). In short, the literature only implicitly addresses the intersection of structure and agency.

We draw upon Clapham’s (2003, 2005) conceptualisation of housing pathways to explore these relationships in greater depth. Clapham defines a housing pathway as ‘the continually changing set of relationship and interactions that [the household] experiences over time in its consumption of housing’ (Clapham 2005:27). The approach incorporates movements through

the housing market (physical structures, location, tenure) with households' (or in this study, individuals') subjective understanding of their individual experience (e.g. emotional responses or expressive dimension of housing). The objective and subjective dimensions of housing are then analysed in the broader context of the interaction with other individuals and institutions.

The pathways approach has been used, albeit sparingly, to examine young people's trajectories after leaving care. Stein's (2008) work, referred to earlier in the book, on 'strugglers', 'survivors' and those who 'move on', is the best known example of a pathways approach in the care literature. However, as is often the case when applying typologies to dynamic conditions, we found that many of the participants who, under Stein's classification, would be classed as 'survivors' had 'moved on'. Similarly, there were cases where people appeared to have 'moved on', but had subsequently become homeless. Consequently, we adapted Stein's approach and focused more directly on their housing experiences since leaving care and the nature of their transition from care. The participants' housing experiences since leaving care were extremely varied – there were cases where people were doing well following a smooth transition from care, others who were doing well after periods of housing instability and some who were doing very poorly. We identified two pathways in our sample: the first we have termed a smooth transition from care and the second, a volatile transition.

These pathways are typifications that simplify the diversity of the participants' housing experiences in such a way that we can highlight the resources that enable some care leavers to gain a foothold on the housing ladder and the barriers that lead others to be excluded. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that these categories are broad and overlapping, as is so often the case with qualitative work, and they may change. The last point is particularly relevant. When we examined the volatile pathway it became clear that about half had overcome numerous obstacles and were moving on with their lives, while others remained deeply mired in the homeless population.

The use of pathways as a heuristic tool is also a relevant point when comparing the experiences of care leavers with the housing pathways of young people generally. Many young people, regardless of their backgrounds, experience changes in the tenure, stability, appropriateness, location and meaning of their housing; sometimes these changes are unexpected and may

potentially de-stabilise other areas of their life. However, it is important to contextualise housing pathways. As we have seen in earlier chapters, care leavers as a group are marked by social exclusion, poor life chances and disadvantaged backgrounds – many lack the resources and opportunities that are to be found in the youth population as a whole. Further, these characteristics arise in a particular context: the State is a corporate parent which is often failing in its duties to young people in and when leaving care. While elements of housing and life experiences may be common in both the state care and family care populations, the context and individual and policy implications of care leavers' poor housing outcomes mark them as qualitatively as well as quantitatively different.

Method

The research was conducted between early 2008 and late 2009 with the information being gathered between September 2008 and March 2009. Interviews were conducted with 77³ young people who had been in state out-of-home care in Western Australia (n=35) and Victoria (n=42), in inner city, suburban and regional locations. Participants had to satisfy three criteria to be included in the study: 1) they had been in care at some stage in their lives; 2) were no longer in care; and 3) were between 18–25 years of age. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were recorded with participants' consent and fully transcribed. Ethics approval for the study was received from RMIT University and Curtin University.

Despite a large amount of material documenting the poor housing (and non-housing) outcomes of care leavers surprisingly little is known about the views, beliefs, needs, processes and relationships that underpin care leavers behaviour in relation to their housing. Qualitative techniques – and in particular, in-depth, semi-structured interviews – are a particularly effective means of eliciting this type of information.

The interviews focused on young people's experiences in care and since leaving care with a particular focus on their housing. The interviews allowed us to develop a holistic approach to care leavers' housing pathways. In the interviews, young people discussed their housing and life experiences with

3 We conducted 83 interviews but five were excluded from the analysis because they did not satisfy the selection criteria, and one respondent was interviewed twice.

reference to their emotional responses and interpretations, but also in light of their interaction with broader social structures and institutions.

Throughout the chapter direct quotes from participants are used to illustrate their experiences prior to care, in care and after care, with a particular focus on their housing experiences and needs. We have changed people's names to ensure their confidentiality. We also collected a small amount of socio-demographic data such as the age participants went into care and the age they left care. We collected quantitative data through a four point scale on young people's perception of their experiences in care and their degree of preparedness for independent living at the point of leaving care. This has been used to provide a context for the themes emerging from the qualitative material. The size and nature of the sample means that when tables are presented, their purpose is descriptive only – they are not used to argue the existence or absence of statistically significant relationships between variables.

Participants

Participants were on average 20.5 years old when interviewed, most were single (72 per cent) and a small number (10 per cent) had children. Young women were slightly over-represented – 60 per cent in our sample against 49 per cent of all people in care (AIHW 2008:58). On average, participants entered care at an early age (nine) and were in care for four years. A small majority (53 per cent) were satisfied with their experiences in care, while a similar number felt safe and secure when they were in care (56 per cent). While this appears encouraging, a significant minority were not satisfied nor did they feel safe and secure.

As with other studies, we found that the educational attainment in the sample was low in comparison to young people who have not been in care. While 22 participants had progressed to Year 12 and a small number (n=3) had subsequently gone onto university, the majority (53 per cent) had not progressed beyond year 10. Studies show that educational success is a powerful determinant of 'future life success' (McDowall 2008:14). It is hardly surprising then that studies have also found higher rates of unemployment among care leavers resulting in a reliance on social security and experiences of acute and chronic poverty (Cashmore & Mendes 2008; Courtney 2008; Gilligan 2008). Among our participants most (81 per cent) were reliant on

government income and living on an average income of less than \$300 a week, and some were living on as little as \$100 a week.

The young people in our study had very diverse housing experiences since leaving care but, equally, there were many similarities. The majority (77 per cent) had experienced considerable and often chronic housing instability since leaving care and we classified them as travelling on a volatile pathway. In contrast a small minority (23 per cent) enjoyed a relatively smooth transition from care – we assigned this group to the 'smooth pathway'. In terms of understanding the factors that shape young people's pathways from care it is important to recognise that care leavers circumstances are often a

... [f]unction of the complex interactions of factors relating to their in-care experiences (and their experiences before coming into care) the timing and circumstances of their transition from care and the extent of the supportive networks they had around them in the period after leaving care (Cashmore & Paxman 2006a:22).

In recognition of these 'complex interactions', the next section examines young people experiences in care focusing first on their stability and following that with an analysis of their preparation for leaving care.

In-care and transition experiences

When the state takes on the role of parent it is responsible for providing young people with a safe and stable environment, yet placement instability is a common and concerning feature of many foster care systems. As has been noted in earlier chapters, placement instability is linked to lower self esteem and increased behavioural disturbances. In addition their health, employment and educational outcomes are often poorer in comparison to young people who have relative stability while in care.

The participants reported considerable instability during their time in care – just under half had moved between placements six or more times (Table 8.1). More striking was that among those on the volatile pathway 36 per cent had eleven or more moves, twice the rate reported among those on the smooth pathway (17 per cent). While half the sample reported only a small number of moves, some of which were planned in response to their changing needs, overall the data suggest that child protection authorities are failing to provide young people with the stability they require.

Table 8.1: Number of placements by pathway from care (per cent)

	Smooth (n=18)	Volatile (n=59)	Total (n=77)	
Single	6	17	14	
2-5	50	37	40	
6-10	27	10	14	
11-20	11	17	16	46 %
21+	6	19	16	
Total	100	100	100	

Previous research highlights the flow on effects from placement instability; in particular the difficulties it creates in terms of developing meaningful relationships and attachments to significant others. It is widely accepted that developing secure attachments with others is an important and essential ingredient in childhood development. Relationships are the key means or 'active ingredients' (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006b: 232) that engage 'young people in the process of defining who they are, what they can become and how and why they are important' (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child cited in Cashmore and Paxman, 2006b: 232). Placement instability diminishes young people's capacity to develop and maintain relationships. For example, Ryan remembers that:

I had a new worker every week so I never had constant support. ... I had one worker that was with me for quite a long time and then she got transferred to a different department and then I just didn't have contact with them at all, errm they wouldn't call me. . . it was very errm hard to go through life with no support from your technically legal guardian (WA, volatile pathway, currently in public housing)

As Stein (2005:22) notes, care leavers who experience multiple placements often feel abandoned and without on-going, reliable relationships and stable accommodation, they often end up isolated and disconnected from their local community. Ian, who had over 20 placements, told us that he felt like he:

... was out in the world with no-one (Vic, volatile pathway, currently homeless)

The lack of felt security was particularly marked in the residential care experiences of the participants. Residential care is often reserved for young people with complex needs, and research indicates that young people who have been in residential care often fare worse than those who have solely been in foster or kinship care (Department for Education and Skills 2006; Dumaret 2008)⁴. For most, this type of accommodation did not result in any lasting peer or mentoring relationships. Some remembered supportive workers and some reported very negative experiences, but most described workers as physically present but emotionally and socially absent – workers are presented as people whose primary role was one of surveillance rather than support, counselling or protection. Kelly, a 25 year old woman from Victoria, recently received her files from her time in care and noticed:

P: I've got all these workers' reports . . . Like each night while I was in care they were reporting how I was on drugs and they never spoke to me about it. Like I don't remember anyone saying to me, 'Are you on heroin right now, how do you feel about that, like what's going on?' They just used to go into their office, and write that I'm on it. Do their incident report and I'd get that years later.

I: So they didn't really engage with you?

P: Not in that level. It almost was like maybe that wasn't their role. Maybe they were there to just residentially look after me sort of thing (Kelly, Victoria, volatile pathway, currently in private rental)

The lack of meaningful relationships and the emotional resources that come with positive relationships make the transition to independence even more challenging for care leavers. Added to this young people leaving state out-of-home care have to do it in a shorter timeframe and with fewer material resources than their peers (Mendes 2005; Cashmore and Mendes 2008). The 'accelerated' (Stein 2006) transition care leavers' experience, in combination with their often complex needs, can make it difficult to manage the transition from care to independent living.

⁴ Around half (52 per cent) of participants in this study had spend time in residential care. Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2009:48) indicates that about five per cent of young people in the care of the state live in a residential unit. The higher rate in our sample may reflect a sampling bias and/or that the AIHW data is a point in time count and consequently is likely to underestimate the number of young people who have ever been in a residential unit.

Young people who experienced a smooth transition all left care at 17 or older while those whose transition experiences were more volatile were evenly divided into those who left care at 17 or older and those who left care at an earlier age (Table 8.2).

Table 8.2: Age left care by pathway from care (per cent)

	Smooth (n=18)	Volatile (n=59)	Total (n=77)
17 or older	100	49	61
16 or younger	–	51	39
Total	100	100	100

Leaving care at an early age is a major concern as ‘becoming independent’ is a complicated and emotionally challenging process, often undertaken with limited resources. Recognising this, child protection authorities around the world have started to look at ways to improve young people’s transition from care. A key aspect of this involves transition planning.

The importance of leaving care plans is highlighted in Forbes, Inder and Raman’s (2006) study of 60 care leavers. They found that having a case plan was significantly associated with stable housing on leaving care. Young people with such a plan were twice as likely to be in stable housing, three times more likely to be employed and reported that receiving a range of advice and support ‘significantly improved outcomes’ (p. 28).

Yet, despite legislation in both Victoria and Western Australia that requires all young people over 15 to have a leaving care plan only one quarter (26 per cent) could recall having a leaving care plan (Table 8.3).

Table 8.3: Had a leaving care plan by pathway from care (per cent)

	Smooth (n=18)	Volatile (n=59)	Total (n=77)
Had a leaving care plan	33.33	24	26
No leaving care plan	33.33	63	56
Unsure	33.33	13	18
Total	100*	100	100

*rounded up to the nearest whole number

While the overall number of participants who had a plan was low, there is a noticeable difference between the two pathways – those on the volatile pathways were almost twice as likely to not have a leaving care plan than those whose transition from care had been smooth. While the data supports the view that a leaving care plan can be a powerful tool in assisting young people in the transition from care to independent living, having a leaving care plan does not necessarily indicate the quality of the plan or their preparedness to live independently – the fact that one quarter of the people on the volatile pathway had a plan attests to this.

Table 8.4: Somewhat or very prepared by pathway from care (per cent)

Skills	Smooth (n=18)	Volatile (n=59)	Total (n=77)
Getting a job ^a	33	35	35
Finding housing ^b	39	28	31
Accessing resources ^a	78	53	59
Accessing welfare assistance ^b	83	70	73

^a n=75; ^b n=74.

We also examined how prepared young people felt to leave care and found that less than one third felt somewhat or very prepared to find accommodation – and this was reasonably consistent across both groups (Table 8.4). Although housing has been identified as a critical element of the transition from care, the lack of attention given to housing during the planning and preparatory stage of leaving care is a serious problem.

Similarly across both groups just over one third felt prepared or somewhat prepared to get a job. The lack of attention to work preparation is problematic as it increases the possibility care leavers will rely on social security and consequently experience periods of acute poverty. A lack of employment is also linked to unstable housing. In contrast, a much higher proportion felt prepared to find resources and welfare assistance, with those who experienced a smooth transition reporting the highest levels of preparedness.

What is apparent is that levels of planning and preparation are uneven – there appears to be little consistency (or equity for that matter) in the preparation and planning for leaving care. Nonetheless, it is equally clear that care leavers have even less opportunities than others. Young people who experienced a volatile transition often leave at a younger age, are less well prepared and are less likely to have a plan. In the following section we focus on young people's pathways from care. We start by looking at the 18 young people whose transition from care was relatively smooth and trouble free, and then we examine those whose transition was characterised by chronic instability (the volatile pathway).

Pathways from Care

A smooth transition

The 18 people who experienced a smooth transition from care had fewer placements, felt more involved in the planning process and left care at a later age. There was some variation in the amount of time they had been out of care – some had been out of care for a number of years while others had only been out of care for a short time (mean 1.8 years). This was reflected in their current housing circumstances – 10 had secured their own accommodation (primarily private or public rental), while eight were still in the same transitional accommodation they 'exited' into.

The initial transition from care is a crucial period as it often sets the scene for young people's subsequent experiences. One third moved back to their biological families or stayed with their foster families, and the remaining two thirds went directly into transitional accommodation. In this section we focus first on those whose initial placement was with their families before examining the experiences of those who left care and went directly into transitional accommodation.

Families

Those who moved back (or stayed) with their families (both biological and foster) typically enjoyed supportive relationships that provided emotional support, practical advice and advocacy and, perhaps more notably for housing, material support which included money, accommodation and references. While these relationships were marked by occasional conflict, pre-existing family tensions were less prominent for this group than others. In fact a process of re-building relationships had often started before they left care and, as relationships improved, there was a sense of optimism that returning home would work. Kelly told us:

The fact that Mum and Dad even though they were very angry, very resentful, they still were there and were still prepared for me to do like a home detox. I think well to be honest, I think that's a really big part of it because a lot of kids their parents wouldn't open their house to them again. Never again after they've done the crime. Mine did and I'm thankful for that. So yes I imagine in the next 10 years we will get closer and closer in a sense (Vic, private rental)

While returning to the family home removed the spectre of homelessness from a young person's immediate future, having a place to call home also had important emotional benefits. Charlotte explained what home meant to her:

Like home to me is like where you've got a person who really cares about you and you've got a bed that you can feel comfortable and a house you're so comfortable in and which is just a happy environment where somebody loves you. Like I'd go home with my dad and I'll go 'I'm home' (WA, living with her family)

For care leavers who had a smooth transition from care, their emotional security was often underpinned by a reassurance that if things did not work when they moved out, they still had a home to return to. This point is important for young people generally, for whom the transition to adulthood and independence is often an incremental process of leaving the family home and periodically returning (Mendes 2005; Cashmore and Mendes 2008). For young people leaving care, this is of even more importance. Bianca, who moved out of her foster mother's home into private rental, reflected on the fact that she could always return home:

She's [the foster mother] always said "If it just all falls apart and you can't pick it up and move on" she said "You can always come back home" and I said I will. I said but I will try and do this on my own, if it doesn't work I will go back home. (WA, living with her family)

Knowing they have somewhere to go and someone to turn to if things subsequently go bad can make the transition to independent living much easier for care leavers. Importantly, having a home provides the stability and security from which to pursue independent housing arrangements, but also other core activities, such as work and education, which in turn can play an important role in helping to maintain independent accommodation.

Transitional accommodation

The majority (two thirds) of those who had a 'smooth' transition from care moved directly into transitional accommodation. For most of this group moving into transitional accommodation was part of a well organised plan and knowing where they were going after they left care was important for a number of reasons. Not only did it reduce the anxiety of leaving care *per se*, but it also gave them an opportunity to focus on other aspects of their lives.

In many ways, supported and transitional housing offered the opportunity to live in a stable and secure location and further develop life skills. The role of support and advice remains central here and appears to be instrumental in delivering positive housing outcomes – these young people tended to have experienced more consistent and helpful support from workers. Bruce comments:

Yeah it [transitional housing] wasn't bad. Good support by the workers and what not. ..., they come in and see us on a regular basis, help us out with what we need help with and yeah basically try their hardest to do what they can for us (Vic, currently in public housing)

Support was also important in helping care leavers take the next step into their own housing.

Most participants indicated satisfaction with regards to the material aspects of transitional accommodation. The participants indicated the affordability of transitional accommodation (fixed at 25 per cent of their income) was crucial to them and many indicated that they could not afford alternative accommodation. In many cases affordability is the most significant constraint with respect to obtaining secure accommodation. Those who were in transitional accommodation indicated that they would have to continue relying on it until they were granted public housing, as they simply could not afford private rental. Faith told us that:

The only thing that's sort of helping me to sort of guide me that way is probably [public housing], that's the only thing I'm really looking at because that's like a permanent place. I don't really want to move into [public housing] but what can you do when you're young and no-one will give you a house? Like no-one will let you rent anywhere and it's not for long so yes. I tried to get a couple of private rentals but they won't take an 18 year old. (WA, living in transitional accommodation)

The difficulties young people face in accessing affordable housing raise important questions about broader housing policies, a particularly pertinent issue given Australia's current housing affordability crisis. Nonetheless, it is clear that transitional arrangements can play a potentially important (short term) role in addressing the problem of affordable housing options for young people leaving care. However, there are some important caveats or limitations to transitional accommodation, which may have important implications for their viability.

Some participants felt that the location of their accommodation was not where they wanted. This related mainly to having friends or family in different areas. Service providers try and match accommodation to a location the client is familiar with, but ultimately care leavers have little control regarding the areas it is located in. While it is still preferable to move to an unfamiliar or

new location rather than being homeless, moving to a new location can lead to acute isolation, which in turn can have a potentially serious impact upon future housing and non-housing outcomes.

For some of those who experienced a smooth transition from care into transitional accommodation this was their first and only accommodation after care. Consequently, it is difficult to say to what extent these arrangements are a stepping stone into independent living. This is a tricky issue, for as we show in the following section, transitional housing arrangements are not always a 'stepping stone' to independent living but a way-station between periods of marginal housing and homelessness. However, a stable first placement, such as these young people were enjoying is crucial as it often provides a foundation for longer term stability.

The central role played by housing in the successful transition to independence and financial self-sufficiency should not be under-estimated. Housing remains absolutely pivotal. The key to accessing and maintaining independent housing, however, was often the provision of meaningful support, both emotional and material, a point previously made by Biehal and Wade (1995:65) who found that those who managed their own accommodation did well if they 'received professional support'.

An obvious dilemma here is that while families and transitional accommodation provide important pathways towards independent living, this is not always the case. This poses the challenging question of why is it that a particular tenure type can work for some young people and not for others. Clearly tenure type is important, as is the quality and location of the housing, but it is the nature of the transition, and the emotional and material support they receive during and after care, that appears to make a difference. To be sure, many who had a smooth transition had encountered problems along the way, but with good support those issues had been addressed in a way that enabled them to maintain their housing. Without such support, young people leaving care are far more vulnerable to chronic housing instability and homelessness.

A 'volatile' transition from care

The second pathway describes the housing experiences of three quarters of the participants (59 out of 77 care leavers). In contrast to those who experienced a relatively smooth transition from care, the participants on this

pathway experienced more placements in care and often left at a younger age. Their poor experiences in care are also reflected in their experiences with the juvenile justice system – whereas only five per cent (one person) on the smooth pathway had been involved with juvenile justice, six times as many (30 per cent, or 18 people) on the volatile pathway had. Given these experiences it comes as little surprise that their early independence is marked by unstable housing and homelessness, with serious implications for their health, education, employment and social connectedness.

Families

Care leavers can successfully return to the family home but this is not always the case. Daniel explained that he:

... moved to my auntie's house and I stayed there for one week and I ran away because I don't like her (WA, currently homeless)

If family relationships break down the lack of support for care leavers can lead to serious problems. This is particularly evident if the breakdown takes place some time after the transition from care. Shelley, for instance, left care at age 16 to be with her grandmother. She arranged to move in with her grandmother and claimed that her child protection department 'Didn't really do much'. She lived there for two or three years, but eventually this broke down:

My Nan couldn't cope with my drug use and my temper and plus she was getting too old to look after me (Vic, living in transitional accommodation).

Shelley then began to move around, staying in youth refuges, friends and other temporary arrangements. While child protection authorities did assist with organising her initial move into the refuge, they did not provide any follow up support; they did not assign a case or support worker; and there was no attempt to address her problematic substance use. Shelley felt that the child protection authorities:

Just dropped me on me head, and left me and ever since then I've just been on and off the streets, in and out of refuges, drugs, alcohol, you name it

When family relationships collapse, which is more likely among young people who experience instability in care, young people are at acute risk of homelessness because they have so few resources to draw on.

Temporary accommodation

The use of refuges and other forms of temporary accommodation designed for homeless young people is a common and concerning exit strategy, not least because the permanency and support structures vary significantly. Youth refuges generally have a maximum stay of three months and while they provide shelter, they do not necessarily add to the long term prospect of secure housing. Mia attempted returning to her biological family upon leaving care, but this only lasted for a couple of months. She indicated that her workers tried helping in the transition following the failed reunion with her family, however:

It's like, well, hang on; you'd wanted me to stay in government places. It's like, you can only stay there up to two months, three months. It's like, as soon as I get kicked out of there, I want somewhere stable to live, so I can be stable, get a stable job, stay in that home. Actually live a life. Not me bouncing from place to place every couple of months. (WA, living in private rental)

Young people in temporary accommodation often bounce between different service providers once their time is up. This creates a great deal of uncertainty for young people, who have to go through multiple transitions; multiple assessments and re-building relationships with staff and other tenants at different places. This undermines their capacity to build and maintain relationships which further contributes to a pattern of instability. Indeed, as noted in research by MacKillop Family Services 'outcomes are dependent upon the quality of relationship that the young person has with their worker' (London 2004:14). Building personal relationships with the professional staff can be of immense importance for the young person. Brendan, for instance, had a support worker through the Salvation Army a few years ago:

Well I'm not actually still living with the Salvation Army but I still have contact with the chick who's been my worker for a few years . . . We are really close and we still catch up and go out for lunch and stuff. . . I never thought a youth worker could

be the most significant person in my life, but she kind of is . . . I kind of feel like she's my surrogate mother (Vic, living in transitional housing)

Ironically, it seems that institutional practices often mean that it is difficult to maintain these on-going relationships, despite their significance.

Many care leavers have already experienced chronic instability while they are in care, and short term accommodation often perpetuates this lack of continuity and stability. For young people being forced to move on with nowhere else to go simply reinforces a lack of trust in a system that often appears to ignore their basic needs – namely stability, safety and continuity.

Housing breakdown

Despite setbacks with their families or problems with short term accommodation, some care leavers had secured their own housing at some point since leaving care. However, most had subsequently been evicted from their accommodation, or had simply left before they could be formally evicted. We found a number of broad reasons why their tenancies were unsustainable.

First, the hard aspects of their housing (its' costs, location and quality) were often inappropriate for young people leaving care. After struggling to find a place, Kelly eventually paid 'an awful lot of money' for her private rental (\$320 a week). She could just manage, but only when someone else was contributing to the rent. When her flatmate moved out it 'completely stressed' Kelly out, and she was eventually evicted for arrears only nine months after signing the lease.

Affordability problems heavily influence the housing choices of all young people, and this is an especially pertinent issue when young people leave care. Due to a shortage of affordable accommodation, many care leavers are forced to accept poor quality housing, often sharing with others. Yet poor quality accommodation is linked to a range of negative outcomes including poor health, lower self-esteem, diminished social networks and housing instability (Biehal & Wade 1999; Walker, Hill, & Triseliotis 2002). Care leavers are also often forced to accept accommodation in areas where they have few connections and that are removed from transport, shopping and employment opportunities. While for some, moving to a new area may provide them with a 'fresh start' (Walker et al 2002:182), generally moving to a new area presents difficulties in building up support networks and, more often than not, young

people are at greater risk of isolation and housing instability when they are 'dislocated from their home area' (p. 182).

Second, even if their housing was affordable and/or appropriately located, their social relationships often had a strong influence on their capacity to maintain housing. We found evidence to show that many had lost their housing as a result of a relationship breakdown or falling out with their friends. We asked the participants about shared housing and Teresa's comments were typical. She said that:

Well if you live with friends you end up not being friends 'cause there's always a fight sometime or other where you just end up not being friends. Or if you're living with like in a share accommodation, you end up fighting with the other people in there. So more to do with the fights I guess. Too many fights always like seem to pop up with any sort of shared accommodation.

Breakdowns in shared housing happen to many young people but it is care leavers lack of material and emotional support that leaves them so vulnerable.

Third, some found managing their own housing more complicated and stressful than they had imagined because they had no support and little experience living on their own. There was a strong recognition that more support, and also better financial preparation, was necessary to assist young people to maintain their housing. Moira, for instance, lost her public housing after five months – she had fallen into arrears after struggling to make ends meet:

I could have used a lot more help . . . they should teach you how to pay bills, teach you how to pay rent, teach you how to budget and support you until you are ready (Vic, currently homeless)

Chronic instability and homelessness

When care leavers lose their accommodation they often experience periods of chronic instability and move in and out of homelessness. Once they are homeless their circumstances often get worse and finding any form of housing can be difficult, particularly if evicted from their previous accommodation. Most resorted to couch surfing at friends places but this often puts pressure on

these relationships. This can then place them in danger of social isolation if they 'wear out their welcome'. Chris points to the tensions:

You can only do it for so long and then they start to get sick of it, you know. They might be your friends but everyone has a breaking point at one stage. You know what I mean? You can only push it for so long . . . You don't want to lose friends, but you don't want to be homeless at the same time either. (Vic, living in private rental)

Over time the option of staying with friends on a temporary basis disappeared and this often led them into temporary accommodation managed by homelessness (SAAP) agencies. This sort of accommodation is often short term and also shared with other young people which created additional problems. Over half our sample had been in residential care and many yearned for independence and privacy.

This form of shared accommodation is particularly problematic when young people are mixed with others who have unresolved issues. Not only can sharing be disruptive it can also be dangerous. Prue told us that:

Shared houses are my biggest issue . . . when I was there they'd put you in a place and say you are sharing with a teenage girl whose just getting off heroin for instance. They're off it, but only just . . . they will put that person in the same house as someone who is still injecting or they would put a suicidal person in with a person who has just stopped doing that stuff, or a violent person in with someone, you know, who's scared (Vic, currently homeless)

When care leavers can no longer access accommodation with friends, family or other short term options they are often forced to rely on boarding houses which are widely recognised as violent and dangerous places. Ironically, boarding houses and other forms of temporary accommodation also provide the opportunity to mix with others in similar circumstances. Through these friendships they often 'learnt the ropes' and how to survive homelessness.

While these relationships created a sense of belonging and provided some predictability in an otherwise chaotic world, there was nonetheless always a degree of caution and wariness about these friendships. Through these relationships, for example, young people were also introduced to social practices that had a negative impact on them and their housing circumstances.

Studies consistently indicate that rates of problematic substance use among care leavers are disproportionately high (Flynn & Vincent 2008; Forbes et al. 2006). Just over half (53 per cent) of the participants reported a lifetime problem with substance abuse (Table 8.5). While some participants were introduced to drugs before they went into care and others while they were in care, the interviews revealed that for many of the participants their substance use issues got worse once they were homeless. Table 8.5 shows that among the participants whose transition from care was volatile, twice as many identified that they had substance abuse issues at some stage in their lives compared to those who had experienced a smooth transition from care. Drugs are a major influence on care leavers' life course – their access to housing and ultimately their capacity to get out of homelessness are severely compromised.

Table 8.5: Likelihood of a person on different pathways to have a (lifetime) substance abuse problem (per cent)

	Smooth (n=18)	Volatile (n=59)	Total (n=77)
Has/had substance abuse problem	28	61	53
No substance abuse problem	72	39	47
Total	100	100	100

While mixing with other homeless people can provide a sense of belonging, many friendships are opportunistic in nature and provide little emotional support. This frequently perpetuated a deep suspicion and lack of trust in others.

I've learnt as a way of being on the streets I guess is you don't trust anyone (Moira, Vic, currently homeless).

Such feelings were often deeply rooted in their experiences prior to leaving care:

... when you live under care with so many people coming in and out of your life, you get angry because you get close to people and then they move on, and then you find it

hard to trust people, and then someone really nice will be able to make you trust them, and then they move on, and you sort of get very angry at the world all over again (Prue, Vic, currently homeless)

Young people often become disillusioned when they struggle to gain access to housing and, when this happens, they are at risk of becoming deeply entrenched in the homeless population. In other words, problems accessing housing not only leaves people stuck on the streets, but also often leads to an acute sense of resignation that can trap them in a damaging cycle. After a long and unrewarding search for housing Daniel had given:

... up hope and I don't want to look for a house anymore (WA, currently homeless)

While the participants' circumstances prior to, in and on leaving care are complex, the dominant narrative that emerged from the interviews with these young people was of a life characterised by a lack of continuity and stability. From their time prior to care, their time in care and to their subsequent experiences while homeless, there was little stability or continuity in their lives. Many were extremely resourceful and developed elaborate strategies to survive on the streets. But these strategies often embed them on the streets. With little social, cultural or economic capital to draw on, these young people were struggling to find a way out.

Nonetheless, while many care leavers experience long periods of instability and social exclusion, studies have found that after a rough start many care leavers move on with their lives and successfully navigate a route to independence. In their longitudinal study Cashmore and Paxman (2006a:20) found that many care leavers were 'faring better 4–5 years out of care than they were 12 months after leaving care'. For 32 people on the volatile pathway there was evidence that their circumstances had improved and that they had started to 'move on'.

Moving On

Among the 59 people who had a volatile transition from care, 32 were securely housed when we interviewed them and many were now engaged in other activities such as work, education or training. In contrast, 27 participants remained 'stuck' in precarious and often damaging social circumstances.

Table 8.6: Moving on or 'stuck'

	n	%
Moving on	32	56
Stuck	27	44
Total	59	100

Although the circumstances of the people who were 'moving on' and those who were 'stuck' were profoundly different, there was little difference in the amount of time they had been out of care. Those who were 'moving on' had been out of care for an average of 4.5 years while those who were 'stuck' had been out of care slightly longer (5 years). There was also little difference in the average age of the two groups (21 years). This begs the question of how some care leavers managed to overcome the profound disadvantages that had accumulated in their lives, when others had not.

A notable feature of those who were moving on was the agency of young people and, more specifically, the positive focus and direction of their agency. These young people displayed incredible determination, persistence and resilience to turn their lives around, something they were often intensely proud of. John told us that he saw:

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... a lot of people just sitting back and waiting for things to happen, waiting for it to be handed to them on a silver platter. And I'm one that you've got to go out there and work for it... You throw me in any situation and I can deal with it, I think I'm just one of those types of people that okay it doesn't matter how bad it is I'll come out the other end (Public housing).

Others were simply weary and exasperated by their experiences, while some were fuelled by a deep sense of anger. Indeed, for some young people, such as Bill, this tangible sense of anger was a powerful source of personal motivation:

Strangely enough, people say anger's a useless emotion. My anger was what has driven me to get this far. Being so angry at the system, being so angry at my mother, and being so angry at public housing (Bill, post care supported accommodation).

Moving on was often connected to a strong desire for a better life. Sometimes there were pivotal moments or experiences that encouraged young people to actively seize control over their lives and their circumstances. Ultimately, however, the extent to which young people were able to exercise meaningful agency was heavily dependent upon broader circumstances, in particular the opportunity to access appropriate external resources. While there was a complex range of factors that resulted in those on the volatile pathway moving on with their lives, we focus on two specific factors that stood out among those whose housing (and other) circumstances were improving – addressing substance abuse and supportive relationships. As the subsequent sections show, these factors are often interlinked but the key point is that whatever the catalyst(s), the resulting turnaround in the participant's lives were pronounced.

Addressing problematic substance use

Addressing problematic substance use is the most instrumental factor that enables young people who experience a volatile transition from care to move on. Roughly two thirds of the people on the volatile pathway had a substance abuse problem (see Table 8.5) and substance abuse is a key factor that creates problems maintaining their housing and social relationships

While there was rarely a single defining moment that resulted in young people abstaining from drug use, it was equally clear that there was a significant shift in their attitudes towards drug use. People with substance abuse problems often have a strong focus on the here-and-now (a present orientation) and this makes it difficult to think about housing, work and education. Among those who had addressed their substance abuse issues there was a strong desire to stop using and while this occurred for a number of reasons, the most common theme was their concern about what the future might hold if they continued down their current path. For instance the big motivation for Shana to address her lifestyle of substance abuse was a fear of prison:

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I'd breached a suspended sentence at that stage so ... I thought I better get my shit together otherwise I'm going in (Vic, Public housing)

Kelly also recognised that if she did not address her drug use her life would be miserable:

Heroin makes you so sick. . . . You're just going down this path and I didn't, I don't want that for the rest of my life (Vic, Private rental).

A sense of wanting something better was a strong motivation in their decision to address their substance abuse problems, but a decision to abstain from drug use is no guarantee of successful abstinence – among people with substance abuse issues relapse is a common experience.

With respect to drug and alcohol services there are only a limited number of services available to young people leaving care and consequently access is difficult. When young people want to address their substance abuse problems and try to gain access to services but miss out, it often results in further frustration and anger at the system. When this happens their life commonly spirals out of control once more.

However, a lack of access to drug and alcohol services is only one of the issues they face – there is also the nature of the services provided. It was common to hear that the most appropriate services provided intensive, flexible, long-term support that had clear links to, and a focus upon housing. Kevin had been with his drug and alcohol worker for four years and while there had been many ups and downs, the relationship provided an important point of stability and security in his life – a cornerstone that enabled Kevin to move on. The service was flexible and Kevin could go to them for 'whatever reason' he liked. Importantly, his long term housing (public housing) was 'all organised' well in advance of his move out of transitional accommodation.

164 The link between support and housing is crucial. Addressing the physical impact of drug use is obviously important but it takes a relatively short amount of time. However, addressing the social and psychological impact of prolonged drug use is more complex and takes considerably longer. Addressing drug use in isolation from care leavers' social and economic context often results in relapse and reinforces a sense of failure. This highlights the important point that for young people who have experienced long periods of social and economic exclusion, policy makers need to explicitly recognise that 'moving on' is a process that varies significantly depending on the individuals circumstances and experiences. Further, moving on is often an arduous process where numerous obstacles and setbacks have to be overcome. One way to improve the chances of care leavers moving on is to ensure support is sensitive to individual circumstances and has the capacity to 'hang in there'.

When people address their substance abuse issues and experience continuity, stability and good support there is a noticeable improvement in their self-esteem and confidence. Kelly noted how her self-esteem had grown since she had been 'off the gear'. This gave her the confidence to tackle other issues in her life, such as trusting other people, having other people begin to trust her and trusting herself. Trust is the foundation upon which relationships are built, yet trust is often missing in care leavers lives. When care leavers begin to trust themselves and others, building positive social relationships are much easier. Kelly found that after years of using drugs:

So many people stop trusting you . . . I didn't trust myself for years . . . now I've sort of come out of that (Vic, private rental).

This gave Kelly the confidence to think and act more positively about the future. She had been in private rental for six months and her hopes were to 'remain clean and have stable housing and possibly a job'.

What was instrumental in assisting these young people to move on was the central role of support in successfully resolving their housing and substance abuse problems. Bill summed it up when he said that:

. . . the only people that I ever do see pull themselves up, have got someone pushing them, and making them do it. And it's really rare for someone to be able to do it on their own (Vic, post care supported accommodation).

Supportive relationships

The precise nature of meaningful support differed significantly between care leavers. For some it was professional support and yet for others it was signified by an improvement in family relationships. We saw at the beginning of this chapter that stable family relationships were important in assisting some care leavers to successfully navigate the route to independence. For many who had struggled since leaving care, it was notable that relationships with their families had gradually improved since they left care, which in turn had a positive impact upon their lives. Rachael reflected on the fact that, unlike the past, she could now rely on her biological mother to provide her with assistance should any problems emerge:

... I didn't want any contact with her but now my relationship with Mum is she's there for me and I'm there for her but ... when I was younger I just didn't want that added stress, because that's what it was, it wasn't support it was more stress (Vic, private rental).

Of course, this is not to say that all family problems and difficulties had necessarily been resolved. On the contrary, the background for many young people from care is one of strained and often innately difficult family relationships. Many of the respondents recognised that there were limits in how far relationships could be improved. John told us that:

I still will never forget the stuff that's gone on and I'm just still very careful in what I say and how much contact I have with them because when it gets to a point where there's a lot of contact that's where shit still continues to happen so I just take it as it comes really, take it as it comes (Vic, living with foster family).

Yet John acknowledged that relationships with his family had gradually improved, which in turn had been a positive step in moving on:

That's progressively building up ... Mum is a bit bizarre [laughter] I never understood where she comes from. But on dad's side of the family it's been a positive step. This year I'm going with them for Christmas day and things like that so it's progressively like as I've got older and we've spoken about a lot of things that happened in the past and what not.

The point is that even fairly small improvements in family relationships often had a significant impact upon young people's ability to successfully navigate their way towards independence.

Of course for a variety of reasons not all young people from care were able to enjoy improved relationships with their biological families. For some this meant a key source of meaningful support was often professional support workers, who were sometimes even seen as akin to family:

Yes, I talk to her more than I talk to my own family. She pretty much classes me as her son and I know her network of people and they're really helpful. ... it's easy because if you have the relationship then you pretty much can talk to them about anything (Ryan, public housing).

Through a combination of good luck and their own persistence and determination, many had found support that was appropriate for them. A characteristic of good support relationships was the agencies and workers willingness to 'hang in there'. Agencies that 'hang in' there, often in spite of official requirements, implicitly recognise that moving forward is rarely a smooth pathway but rather a process characterised by steps forward and the occasional step backwards. Where agencies 'hang in there' during both the good and bad times the possibility of overcoming distrust and anger and developing meaningful relationships is considerably higher.

Many of the participants who had good support noted that concrete, practical assistance was important. Kelly told us that her support worker was:

Very helpful and she's very practical ... there's none of this emotional stuff she just gets it done (Vic, private rental)

In addition, assistance to secure and maintain appropriate housing was consistently emphasised in the participant's narratives – workers who had a strong knowledge of the housing market, who knew how to provide assistance with applications and who also knew what resources were available to young people, received regular mentions. Sandra's statement illustrates the experiences of many who had moved on:

I have a great housing worker ... she helped me apply for \$1,600 rent assistance, a \$1,000 setting up expenses (WA, private rental).

Having had comprehensive and appropriate assistance to secure housing, Sandra reflected on the difference having a stable, affordable home made to her life:

It made my life better, having the house I have now has made my life better.

No matter how volatile the pathways young people travel from care, if they are given access to the right material and emotional resources there is every chance they can overcome their structural disadvantages and move on towards an independent and prosperous life.

This chapter identifies three broad patterns among young people leaving state out of home care. First, some care leavers make a relatively smooth transition from care. These young people often leave care at a later age, are engaged in the planning process and have access to appropriate housing and support resources. Among the participants in this study they are a minority. In contrast, the majority experienced a volatile transition from care. They often left at a younger age and in crisis. Many had experienced numerous placements and had little trust in the system or in other people. Most experienced chronic instability and homelessness and their social and economic circumstances deteriorated rapidly. For many, breaking the cycle of housing instability and homelessness and moving into secure housing was heavily compromised by a lack of support and the broader structure of the housing market. Nonetheless, half of those who experienced a volatile transition were 'moving on' – they had, often through their own persistence and determination, turned their circumstances around.

Ultimately, accommodation options for young people are limited. The private rental market is highly competitive and requires a relatively high and stable income, along with considerable budgeting skills. There are also limited public housing stocks. Many of the young people could use transitional housing, but there is also a limited amount available specifically for care leavers. These options reflect, in part, the dynamics of the housing market and policy and funding decisions that are outside the control of individual workers and, to a lesser extent, departmental approaches. However, the preceding accounts suggest that there are few programmatic attempts to manage young people's housing transitions within the system as it is currently constituted. Instead, young people are often left to find their own way by drawing on personal resources and relationships, rather than being offered structural and institutional support.

The interviews suggest that the difficulties faced by young people leaving care in accessing and maintaining housing are not simply the direct result of specific policies but also the outcome of organisational practice. The young people themselves often acknowledge that they were sometimes difficult to work with and support, and many openly admit that they made bad choices. But the policy and practices of leaving care systems need to acknowledge this reality; and identify ways to respond positively to the needs of young people – and, indeed, to proactively address needs rather than reactively respond to them.

Conclusion

In our introduction, we argued that care leavers experience multiple disadvantages resulting from their traumatic experiences prior to care, their often unhelpful experiences in care, the lack of assistance provided to them as they transition from care, and the non-availability of ongoing support after they leave care.

The findings from the three local research-based studies presented in chapters six to eight – which we will refer to as studies one, two and three – confirm these concerns.

The young people interviewed for the three studies tended to come from highly disadvantaged family backgrounds. Many had experienced a combination of physical or sexual abuse, chronic neglect related to parental substance abuse or mental illness, and significant family conflict including violence. These traumatic experiences often had a long-term negative impact on their emotional health. Many young people in the first study reported feelings of unresolved anger and loss and grief. These emotions often undermined their capacity to develop positive relationships with their substitute carers, and continued to adversely affect their functioning up to and following their discharge from care.

These findings suggest the importance of early intervention programs being developed to address the traumatic experiences of many children and young people that enter care. Such programs should include the provision of