

Post-Care Housing Pathways

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In Australia in 2009 more than 34,000 children were in state out of home care and the number of children aged 15–17 discharged, or *aging out*, of care exceeded 2,000 – the majority exiting into independent living. However, the poor housing outcomes of many of those who have left state care have been noted for sometime. To be sure, governments adopt a statutory duty of responsibility for children's welfare whilst in care, and State and Territory governments have recently recognised the challenges in transition into independence for care leavers. But there are nonetheless very limited suitable housing options for care leavers. Although public housing is an affordable option, entry and waiting requirements are lengthy and strenuous. The private rental market is another option, but is highly competitive and so young people with limited income who do not have guarantors often resort to entering into shared arrangements.

Without support structures or alternative accommodation options, breakdown in these arrangements often renders many care leavers homeless.

This is the background to a recent Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute research study of housing pathways following out of home state care by Johnson, Natalier, Mendes, Liddiard, Thoresen, Hollows and Bailey with assistance from Kunnen and Tiwari (the full report is available from http://www.ahuri.edu.au/publications/download/30540_fr).

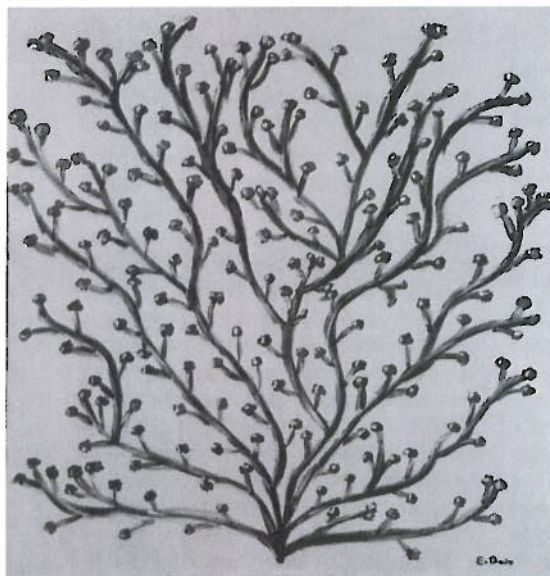
Seventy-seven care leavers from Victoria and Western Australia were interviewed as part of this study. It was identified that the majority (59 of 77) had a 'volatile transition' into independent housing, while a minority (18 of 77) had a 'smooth transition' from care.

The participants who were identified as having a smooth transition typically had a more stable in care experience with relatively fewer placements; were involved in planning their move from care; and left care at a later age. Most of these care leavers had developed meaningful relationships with their carers and were able to draw on both material and emotional support. Thus, those care leavers identified as having a smooth transition from care into independent

housing were characterised as having a positive first post-care housing experience, which in turn often fostered and further enhanced these important relationships with carers and families.

In contrast, those care leavers who experienced a volatile transition often described inadequate care arrangements; high number of placements; physical, emotional, financial and sexual abuse prior to and whilst in care; and an exit in crisis without appropriate planning and post-care accommodation arrangements. These care leavers hence relied on short term SAAP and transitional accommodation options tailored mainly to the homeless population. While these provided shelter, the lack of privacy, felt security and independence, compounded with mistrust in authorities and agencies, as well as personal challenges around drug and alcohol abuse in addition to mental health problems, heavily contributed to poor housing outcomes.

Relationships were often forged with other young people within the homeless population. While providing support and a sense of belonging, these networks usually did not provide resources or leverage towards securing sustainable housing. Rather, particularly among those participants with a street presence, these relationships consisted of learning the ropes of survival on the streets.



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It is notable, however, that some care leavers who experienced a volatile transition from care improved their circumstances over time. Just over half of the participants in the volatile pathway were moving on. An integral part of moving on typically included addressing substance abuse; improving relationships, particularly with their family; growing receptiveness to appropriate support; and success in obtaining employment.

Care leavers from both the volatile and smooth pathways indicated that they were very or somewhat prepared with regards to some independent living skills such as shopping, cooking and cleaning as well as accessing resources and welfare assistance, but were considerably less confident with regards to managing money or accessing housing. Interestingly, care leavers from the smooth pathway indicated higher levels of confidence with regards to independent living. These skills were developed both as a result of stable in care placements and despite in care adversities.

This research identified three important areas for assisting care leavers to obtain and maintain accommodation in their transition for out of home state care:

Firstly, there is an urgent need for a leaving care framework with national application, including a broad interpretation and application of responsibility by all governments; independent avenues for monitoring compliance with mechanisms for complaints; and support in developing care leavers' formal and informal skills.

Secondly, there is the need for an integrated set of minimum standards to support care leavers with permanency planning; a dedicated transition period; needs assessment in accordance to an agreed industry standard; development of quality assurance and best practice standards; linkage of services and integrated support; inclusion of accommodation options and contingency accommodation in leaving care plans; and the extension of post-care supports that allow people to re-access support.

Finally, there is a need to improve access and support in maintaining housing. Namely, a policy of no exits from care into inappropriate housing; increasing the supply of transitional accommodation options that are solely designated for care leavers; and developing a Secure Tenancy Guarantee Scheme that caps housing costs among care leavers at 25 percent of their income until they turn 25 – regardless of tenure.

Each component within each of these three areas is integral to the framework which needs to be viewed in its totality. Care leavers

face multiple challenges in their transition from care to independence, yet secure accommodation is absolutely critical, in its own right, for promoting care leavers' pathways to successful independence. Secure housing is also an important platform from which further education and training; employment; forging of meaningful relationships and personal development can be pursued. ■