

Young people leaving care

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Historically, young people leaving care and making the transition to independent living have been considered as one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups. Moreover, research has shown that the provision of accommodation by state and territory government often ceases abruptly once young people reach 18 years. Research has also shown that these young people do not have the level of support (emotional, social and financial) available to most young people in their transition to adulthood and that this transition occurs at an earlier age and in a more abrupt manner than young people of the same age in the general population (Arnett & Jones, 2000, cited in Cashmore & Paxman, 2006).

Aim

In this paper, we aim to:

- summarise what we know from Australian research about young people leaving care;
- assess the quality of the evidence base; and
- identify future research needs.

For each of the studies identified, a review was conducted describing the study's aim, methodology and key findings, and identifying any particular strengths or limitations that would affect whether the study findings could be generalised to a wider context. In this paper, the findings from this review are summarised to provide an overall picture of the Australian evidence base on the issues regarding young people leaving care. For a detailed description of each individual study review see the tables in the Appendix.

What research was reviewed?

Eight Australian research studies examining issues regarding young people leaving care that were completed between 1994 and 2006, and were publicly available, were reviewed. (For more information on how Australian research was identified, see Bromfield & Osborn, 2007. For papers on other topic areas, go to www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/menu.html#research.)

These studies have been grouped into two sub-themes:

- outcomes for young people leaving care; and
- policies, practices and legislation for young people leaving care.

Outcomes for young people leaving care

Young people leaving care have been considered as one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups, but surprisingly little research has investigated the immediate or long-term social, psychological, financial or vocational outcomes for this group of young people.

The studies

Three of the studies had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on outcomes for young people leaving care. They were:

1. Cashmore and Paxman (1996), *Wards Leaving Care: A Longitudinal Study* (see Appendix, page 1).
2. Cashmore and Paxman (2006), "Predicting After-Care Outcomes: The Importance of 'Felt' Security" (see Appendix, page 2).
3. Maunder, Liddell, Liddell, and Green (1999), *Young People Leaving Care and Protection* (see Appendix, page 3).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding the outcomes for young people leaving care?

The research findings from the three studies consistently show that young people leaving care are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups. An inherent problem of the research in this area is that legislation does differ between each state and territory in Australia and, as such, the findings from a study conducted in one state and territory may not be able to be generalised to another state or territory. Overall, even though the three studies were considered to be of a high quality, the evidence base is considered to be relatively weak, as only a small number of studies have been conducted.

What do we know about the outcomes for young people leaving care?

Cashmore and Paxman (1996), in their landmark study of care-leavers, found that just under half of the young people were unemployed after they were discharged from wardship, and that only one in four were still living where they were just before they were discharged. On average, they had moved three times during that 12-month period. The study also showed that the more placements the young people had experienced during their time in care, the more places they lived in after leaving care. Furthermore, nearly one in three of the young women had been pregnant or had a child since leaving care, compared with only 2% of under-19-year-olds in the general population.

Young people leaving care are at great risk of experiencing negative life outcomes.

Maunder, Liddell, Liddell, and Green (1999) conducted focus groups with workers across Australia who were concerned with care and protection (involving a total of almost 200 people), and also with 43 young people from five states and territories. The authors documented that half of the group in the study had experienced a period of homelessness since leaving care and almost the same number reported committing criminal offences since leaving care.

Periods of homelessness and committing offences affect close to half of young people after they leave care.

Maunder and colleagues (1999) reported that there were several factors that could assist young people transitioning to independence: the provision of a stable, positive experience in care; having resilience and belief in self; the availability of mentors or advocates, or extended support

provided by previous carers and workers, and/or after-care support workers; and, family contact while in care, at time of transition from care, or re-established after leaving care.

The study by Maunders et al. (1999) also noted factors that were found to inhibit transition to independence:

- unresolved anger towards family members, workers or the system;
- unsuitable and unstable placements and multiple changes of carers and workers;
- lack of long-term goals (e.g., education, vocation and living arrangements);
- lack of sufficient income;
- contact with the juvenile justice system and imprisonment;
- lack of preparation for leaving; and
- lack of later contact with the care system. (p. ix)

Such positive and negative factors must be acknowledged and addressed prior to the young person transitioning from care to independence.

There are a range of factors that assist or inhibit the transition of young people that need to be acknowledged and addressed prior to the young person transitioning from care to independence.

Cashmore and Paxman (1996) and Maunders et al. (1999) recommended that young people leaving care needed much more assistance and support than they were currently receiving. Cashmore and Paxman (1996) asserted that they need to develop more employment and independent living skills and more social and emotional skills before they can be expected (or are able) to live independently. Further, they suggested that after-care policies and services need to be developed as an essential part of substitute care policy and practice. Maunders et al. (1999) proposed a general model of care with three components: preparation, transition, and after-care. New South Wales is one of the only jurisdictions in Australia to have achieved many of these components. The developments in New South Wales are a direct result of research conducted by Cashmore and Paxman nearly a decade ago and demonstrate the impact research can have on practice and policy.

Young people need to develop more employment and independent living skills and more social and emotional skills before they can be expected (or are able) to live independently.

A study by Cashmore and Paxman (2006) examined the links between stability, perceived or “felt” security and later outcomes for young people four to five years after leaving care. A 4-wave longitudinal study was conducted over five years of 47 young people (29 females, 18 males) leaving care in New South Wales. The semi-structured interviews included questions about the young people’s living arrangements, family contact, financial and emotional support and their physical and emotional wellbeing. The authors found that young people “who had had one placement that lasted for at least 75% of their time in care were more positive about their time in care, were less mobile, and had better outcomes twelve months after they left care” (p. 234). The young people were also more likely to report more positive outcomes on a number of other measures, including having completed more schooling, having achieved better progress at school, and saying that their needs had been met while in care. The authors noted that felt security, continuity and social support beyond care were the most significant predictors of young people’s outcomes four to five years after leaving care. Interestingly, the authors noted that, while stability was important, other aspects of felt security, continuity and social support (e.g., from parents; grandparents, foster carers, workers and older friends/mentors; partners; siblings; and other networks such as church, sporting or other community organisations and people at work) were more significant. The paper provides important data on the predictors of after-care outcomes. The findings highlighted the importance of not only maintaining stability in care for young people, but of fostering a sense of security and belonging to ensure that young people have a network of supports after they leave care.

A sense of security, stability, continuity and social support are strong predictors of better outcomes for young people's long-term outcomes after leaving care.

Cashmore and Paxman (2006) noted that “stability in the placement is probably more easily amenable to influence by policy and practice than ‘felt’ security, and where children are not willing or ready to commit to a trusting relationship, stability and continuity are probably the best default options” (p. 238). These findings have important policy and practice implications for all children and young people in the out-of-home care system.

What future research is needed regarding outcomes for young people leaving care?

More research is needed on the immediate, intermediate and long-term outcomes for care-leavers. In addition, research is needed to evaluate care-leaving policies and their implications for the outcomes of care-leavers. Research can help to determine minimum leaving-care standards and supports for care-leavers. There is also a need to evaluate existing models of support for care-leavers and their effectiveness in assisting young people to transition from care to independent living. It is important that research involves both the young people currently in care and care-leavers so that they have the opportunity to voice their opinions, experiences and recommendations about leaving care.

Policies, practices and legislation for young people leaving care

Policies, practices and legislation for care-leavers differs in each state and territory. In some states in Australia, policies and legislation to improve the outcomes and services for care-leavers have been put into place as a result of research findings. However, there is still no consensus on the best way to proceed with this very disadvantaged group of young people.

The studies

Five of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on policies, practices and legislation for young people. They were:

1. Mendes (2005), “Graduating From the Child Welfare System: A Case Study of the Leaving Care Debate in Victoria, Australia” (see Appendix, page 4).
2. Mendes and Moslehuddin (2004a), “Graduating From the Child Welfare System: A Comparison of the UK and Australian Leaving Care Debate” (see Appendix, page 5).
3. Mendes and Moslehuddin (2004b), “Moving Out From the State Parental Home: A Comparison of Leaving Care Policies in Victoria and New South Wales” (see Appendix, page 6).
4. Mendes and Moslehuddin (2006), “From Dependence to Interdependence: Towards Better Outcomes for Young People Leaving State Care” (see Appendix, page 7).
5. Raman, Inder, and Forbes (2005), *Investing for Success: The Economics of Supporting Young People Leaving Care* (see Appendix, page 8).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding policies, practices and legislation for young people leaving care?

A relatively large number of studies have been conducted on policies, practices and legislation for care-leavers in Australia. Unfortunately, due to state and territory differences, it is very difficult to compare and contrast the outcomes for care-leavers across the country. Nevertheless, Mendes and colleagues have provided important reviews and comparisons of different state and

territory policies in Australia and around the world that can be used to contextualise findings from other studies

The research conducted has also shown the importance of cross-national research methods, as they have the potential to identify possible ideas and initiatives proven successful in other countries that could be replicated, and also enable researchers and practitioners to learn from past mistakes. In general, the research conducted by Mendes and colleagues provides an excellent point of reference for policy-makers around the country and is a sound theoretical base rather than an evidence base. Finally, the research in this area includes economic analysis of leaving-care policy. There is a significant lack of this type of research within the wider out-of-home care research evidence base, and there is a great need for cost-benefit analysis to inform policy in this area.

What do we know about policies, practices and legislation for young people leaving care?

The current policy content

In a comparison of UK and Australian out-of-home care, Mendes and Moslehuddin (2004a) noted that the UK has moved much further than Australia in terms of providing legislative and program responses for young people leaving care. They argued that at the very least the Commonwealth Government should impose minimum uniform national leaving-care standards. Furthermore, they asserted that most state and territory governments in Australia appear to view the situation in narrow economic terms rather than as a broader social and human concern that has lasting effects on the adult lives of care-leavers.

There is a need for minimum leaving-care standards.

Mendes and Moslehuddin (2004b) compared the differences between the leaving care practices of two specific Australian jurisdictions: New South Wales and Victoria. Their findings highlighted the differences between the two states and attributed them to the different relationship between government bureaucracies and non-government child welfare sectors in each state. The authors documented that New South Wales had specific programs in place and provided ongoing support, whereas Victoria had only limited programs and offered no guarantee of after-care support

New South Wales has specific programs and provides ongoing support for care-leavers.

A paper by Mendes (2005) provided a case study of the leaving care debate in Victoria, asserting that supports and services are needed to ensure improved outcomes for care-leavers. Mendes provided a specific outline of what is needed in Australia that included the following:

- the provision of stable and supportive placements with a positive attitude to education;
- maintenance of links with either family members or community supports;
- a flexible and functional process for graduating from dependence to interdependence;
- the active involvement of young people in the leaving care planning and decision-making process;
- the availability of a range of accommodation options; and
- ongoing support (p. 167).

Mendes (2005) argued that the recommendations put forward in his paper provided a specific framework for ways to improve services and supports for care-leavers in Victoria and Australia to improve outcomes for this population.

A range of support services is desperately needed for care-leavers.

The interface between policies and outcomes

More recently, Mendes and Moslehuddin (2006) have compared policies and services for care-leavers in the US, UK and Australia. The comparison of leaving-care policies identified common concerns regarding problematic outcomes for care-leavers; for example, lack of access to adequate income or resources, limited employment opportunities, and exclusion from services and social networks. Mendes and Moslehuddin recommended that a number of issues and areas be addressed by programs and services for this population. The authors asserted that establishing national collaborative networks that share information about practices, policies and service ideas is essential. Furthermore, it is important that future research based on common methodologies is conducted on a national level to improve outcomes for all care-leavers. The paper provided an important comparison of outcomes, policies and services for care-leavers across the three countries. The cross-jurisdictional review method is important, as identified by the authors, as it has the potential to identify possible ideas and initiatives proven successful in other countries that could be replicated, and also to enable those working in the field to learn from past mistakes.

Legislative changes in relation to care-leavers need to be evaluated in each state and territory.

Economic research on care-leavers was conducted by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Inc. (previously the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria) by Raman, Inder, and Forbes (2005). The report investigated the economics of supporting young people leaving care. The study aimed to establish the long-term costs of current government policies and estimate the costs of an integrated leaving care model appropriate for young people leaving care in Victoria. Two groups of 30 young people aged 18 to 25 years were interviewed for the study: those that had experienced positive outcomes and those that had experienced negative outcomes. It was found that around a fifth of the young people left care without any future plans. A third of the care-leavers interviewed left care with case plans that released them into programs for homeless people. Raman et al. (2005) reported that only a third of the young people interviewed had completed formal schooling, and around three-quarters were unemployed and dependent upon the government for income support. The mental health and general health of the participants was also found to be poor. The research clearly showed that the long-term costs of care-leavers have an enormous impact on many parts of the state's budget. For example, "unemployment, crime, health, housing and child protection costs for the intergenerational cycle of care are estimated at \$738,741 per young person leaving care, over a 42 year timeframe. This cost is over and above an estimated \$125,000 investment that the State has already made in young people while they are in statutory care" (p. 2). The authors recommended that an integrated model of leaving-care support for young people up to 25 years of age be implemented. The exemplary report clearly demonstrated the rationale behind implementing an integrated framework to support young people leaving care.

An integrated model of leaving-care support for young people up to 25 years of age is recommended.

The report by Raman et al. (2005) provided a very clear rationale for governments to invest in young people leaving care and highlighted that if governments do not provide support there are enormous political and economic costs to both the young people and society. As stated by Raman et al., "act now as a prudent economist would, spend a little now to save a lot in the future. The cost of doing nothing is detrimental to young people, society and the economy at large" (p. 2).

A prudent economist would spend a little now to save a lot in the future. The cost of doing nothing is detrimental to young people, society and the economy at large.

What future research is needed regarding policies, practices and legislation for young people leaving care?

Overall, the studies conducted so far have highlighted the need for further research to be conducted in each jurisdiction and the need to evaluate the impact of legislative change in relation to care-leavers in recent years, including cost-benefit analysis. It is important that future research provides children and young people in care and care-leavers with the opportunity to provide comment on policies, practices and legislation that ultimately affect them.

What do we know from Australian research on young people leaving care? A summary

Australian research on the outcomes for young people leaving care comprised eight studies in two areas: outcomes for young people leaving care; and policies, practices and legislation for care-leavers.

Overall, the research demonstrated that:

- Young people leaving care are at great risk of experiencing negative life outcomes.
- Periods of homelessness and committing offences affect close to half of young people after they leave care.
- There are a range of factors that assist or inhibit the transition of young people that need to be acknowledged and addressed prior to the young person transitioning from care to independence.
- Young people need to develop more employment and independent living skills and more social and emotional skills before they can be expected (or are able) to live independently.
- A sense of security, stability, continuity and social support are strong predictors of better outcomes for young people's long-term outcomes after leaving care.
- There is a need for minimum leaving-care standards.
- New South Wales has specific programs and provides ongoing support for care-leavers.
- A range of support services is desperately needed for care-leavers.
- Legislative changes in relation to care-leavers need to be evaluated in each state and territory.
- An integrated model of leaving-care support for young people up to 25 years of age is recommended.
- A prudent economist would spend a little now to save a lot in the future. The cost of doing nothing is detrimental to young people, society and the economy at large.

Australian research into young people leaving care has included some very good quality studies in an area in which policy was largely absent. Research to date has thus been able to inform the development of policy in this area. However, there have still been relatively few studies undertaken on leaving care. In addition, an inherent problem of the research in this area is that legislation does differ between each state and territory in Australia and, as such, the findings from a study conducted in one state or territory may not be able to be generalised to another state or territory. The research identified included one of the few cost-benefit studies in the Australian out-of-home care evidence base, demonstrating the potential benefits of research of this nature. As policy is being developed, there is a need to evaluate models of support implemented for care-leavers and their effectiveness in assisting young people to transition from care to independent living.

Conclusion

Overall, the research clearly highlighted that the vast majority of care-leavers suffer from, or are at a great risk of suffering, negative outcomes in their social and psychological functioning, financial status, and educational and vocational pursuits. The research findings presented here show that young people leaving care are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups. Clearly, the research highlights the need for a range of support services to be available for care-leavers.

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