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Research Briefing

Good Practice in Supporting Young People Leaving Care

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
What are some of the challenges facing young people leaving care?	3
Homelessness	4
Education.....	4
Employment.....	5
Mental Health Concerns.....	5
Contact with the Juvenile Justice system	6
Relationships	6
Early parenthood.....	6
Drugs and Alcohol.....	7
What entitlements do care leavers in Australia have?.....	7
What do Young People Leaving Care Need?	8
Gradual departure from care	8
Strong personal resources/positive outlook.....	8
Good transitional planning	9
Practical skills	9
Housing support.....	10
Social and emotional support.....	10
Case management.....	10
Tailored programs and support	11
Employment support.....	11
Post-secondary educational support	11
Parenting support.....	12
Cultural support.....	12
Mental Health programs.....	12
Summary: Messages from the Research.....	13
References.....	14

Introduction

The move to independent living is challenging for any young person, requiring the exercise of many new skills and navigation of a range of social institutions with which they may be unfamiliar. A successful transition to independence relies on a young person's possession of considerable personal, financial and social resources. Young people leaving out-of-home care often lack the economic advantages and social connectedness of their peers. They may also compare poorly to their peers in terms of their emotional or general development (Cashmore and Paxman 2007). Young people leaving residential care, need not only excellent preparation for the range of responsibilities that post-care life will bestow on them, but also a range of supports that will extend into their post-care life.

This research summary provides an overview of what young people leaving residential care need and how those working in residential care can best help young people prepare for independence. In particular, the summary looks at:

- **What are some of the challenges facing young people leaving care?**
- **What do we know about what young people need?**
- **What resources are available to young people leaving care?**
- **What are the key messages from research in this area?**

What are some of the challenges facing young people leaving care?

There is a lack of comprehensive knowledge about the outcomes for young people who have left care in Australia. Most states do not systematically retain contact with young people after they have left care (Muir and Hand 2018) and no representative longitudinal research has been conducted. Less is known about how young people leaving group care fare compared to those who 'age out' of other kinds of care (Bullard, Gaughan and Owens 2014). Longitudinal research by Johnson et al (2010) in Australia found that there was little difference in the outcomes of those who had been in residential versus other forms of care in terms of outcomes. A small amount of research, however, indicates that individuals who were in residential care have worse levels of employment and educational attainment compared to those who have grown up in foster care (Kääriälä and Hiilamo, 2017; Vernieuwe cited in Gypen et al 2017; Angela et al 2012). These differences may reflect the impact of residential care versus other forms of out-of-home care or the greater complexity of problems experienced by youth entering residential care.

The research that has been conducted in Australia and internationally indicates that care leavers as a whole have worse outcomes across a range of parameters than those who

have not been in care. The findings are similar across both the developed and 'developing' world (e.g. Van Breda and Dickens 2016; Jackson and Cameron, 2011). That stated, there are marked differences in outcomes – being more or less positive – across sub-groups of care leavers (Stein 2012; Johnson et al 2010; Yates and Grey 2012).

Care leavers' outcomes may be an effect of either their pre-care or post-care experiences. Pre-care experiences, which may have included violence, poverty and both relational and housing instability, can affect care leavers' post-care outcomes by way of impacting their emotional regulation or broader cognitive development (Mendes et al 2014), their capacity to form relationships and/or their ambitions and broader worldview, each of which their 'in care' experiences may have compounded or helped ameliorate.

'In care' experiences affecting care leavers' future outcomes relate, generally, to the stability their placement/s had offered (Cashmore and Paxman 2007); the quality and type of care they received (Cashmore and Mendes 2008); the quality and longevity of the relationships they formed with carers or peers, and the quality of preparation for independence they were offered. Many researchers have also found that the age that young people leave care is a significant determinant of their future wellbeing; being younger at the age of discharge is associated with worse outcomes (Dixon 2008).

Conditions of post-care life that also impact carers' outcomes include the formal and informal supports they have access to (Whyte 2011). The supports that young people require and in particular the risks that they face are discussed in more detail below.

Homelessness

Care leavers are at particular risk of homelessness or securing only poor quality accommodation (McDowall 2009, 2016; Cashmore and Paxman 2007). Australian research found that 34.7% (n=66) of research participants who had left care were homeless in their first year (McDowall 2009). Johnson et al (2010) found that homelessness often resulted from the low affordability of private rental and the perceived age discrimination encountered in this market as well as the complicated nature of applying for public housing. Homelessness is experienced by care leavers worldwide. In the US, for example, Courtney et al (2011) found that over 30% of a large sample of care leavers had spent time homeless or insecure accommodation since leaving care.

Education

Care leavers generally have lower levels of educational attainment compared to those who have not been in care. A Victorian longitudinal study found that only a quarter of their sample had completed Year 12 compared to 77% of school leavers amongst the wider population (Muir and Hand 2018). McDowall (2009) similarly found that around 35.3% (n=59) of those

who had been in care had Year 12 qualifications. Poor educational attainment amongst care leavers is widespread. The Midwest longitudinal study in the US found that only 11% of the care leavers who took part in their research had, at 26 years of age, a basic associate degree which compared poorly with the general population (Courtney et al 2011). A large study in the UK found that by 2015 only 12% of care leavers had entered education by 23 compared with 42% of their peers without experience of care (Harrison 2017). A study taking in five European countries including England, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary and Spain found that, on average, 8% of young people who have been in care access higher education (Jackson and Cameron 2011).

Employment

Difficulty accessing employment and remaining in low skilled jobs is a challenge for care leavers across the world. The longitudinal study focusing on former out of home care clients of the Midwest program in the US found that, at age 21, 50% of participants were not employed (Courtney et al 2011). Those care leavers who are employed were found in the US to earn 50% or less on average than their peers (Macomber et al 2008). Smaller studies that conducted in Australia are consistent with these findings, having found that between 47% and 71% of care leavers were unemployed (Mendes 2009a). Longitudinal research in NSW found that 4 to 5 years after they had left care around 25% of care leavers had found education and/or employment compared with 70% of those the same age in the broader population (Cashmore and Paxman 2007).

Reasons for the lower employment rate of those with experience of care include that care leavers often have less education and fewer skills than their peers and lack knowledge about the labour market (Rhodri 2011). Secure housing and employment are also often construed to be in a 'chicken and egg' relationship, with each often seeming to be a pre-requisite for the other.

Mental Health Concerns

Akister, Owens and Goodyer (2009) report that young people in and leaving care demonstrate enormous vulnerability with respect to their mental health. For example, recent research in the UK found that over 40% of a population of 276 were assessed by their personal advisers (key support persons) as having mental health challenges (Smith 2017). Older longitudinal research examining the outcomes for individuals who had been in out-of-home care programs run by Casey Family programs in Oregon and Washington revealed that more than 54% of (479) alumni had experienced one or more mental health disorders and, over 25%, post-traumatic stress disorder (Pecora et al 2005). In Australia, half of a group of 60 care leavers in Victoria had obtained assistance from mental health services in the six months previous to the study period, being six times the national average (Raman, Inder and Forbes in Rahamim and Mendes 2016).

Contact with the Juvenile Justice system

Care leavers are over-represented in the juvenile justice system in many parts of the world. In the UK, 24 per cent of the adult prison population have been in care (Ministry of Justice cited in The Centre for Social Justice 2014). In the USA, a study comparing a large care leaver population aged 21-22 with peers who had not experience of care found that the former group was more likely to damage property, steal something from a private residence and threaten with a weapon (Cusick et al 2011). In Australia, McDowall (2009) found that 46% of males and 22% of females who had been in care also had experience with juvenile justice. Earlier research found that 9 out of 10 young people in Queensland who both had contact with juvenile justice and experience of out-of-home care had subsequent experience in adult prisons (Lynch et al 2003).

Relationships

Care leavers experience considerable disruption to their familial relationships. Due to factors such as frequent changes in placement during care, emotional dysregulation and lack of positive role modelling, they can have trouble maintaining their relationships once they have left care (Marion, Paulsen and Goyette 2007). Avery and Freundlich (2009) refer to care leavers possessing significant deficits in social capital, a resource that is often crucial for successful entry into the job market and engagement with a range of service systems. Welch et al (2018) state that a review of the literature reveals many care leavers end up living on their own or feeling isolated. Lee, Cole and Munson (2016) state that many young people who aged out of care and return to their families end up being the main providers rather than beneficiaries of care.

Early parenthood

Another factor rendering care leavers vulnerable is early entry into parenthood (Dworsky and Courtney 2010; Mendes 2009b). The NSW Ombudsman (2013) found in a survey of care leavers, three of the seven mothers had had their own children removed prior to their own care order running out. In Australia, McDowall (2009) found that 28% of care leavers were parents themselves by a young age. Other research conducted has found that care leavers were 2 to 3 times more likely than their peers to become pregnant (Radey et al 2016).

Drugs and Alcohol

Young people leaving care in Australia, as elsewhere, also struggle with substance abuse issues which can impact their mental health (Mendes 2011). International research has also found that substance abuse is much higher amongst care leavers than the general population (Heerde, Hemphill and Scholes-Balog 2016; Gypen et al 2017; Johnson and Mendes 2014).

What entitlements do care leavers in Australia have?

All care leavers in Australia are eligible for the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA). This allowance of \$1,500 is provided so care leavers can purchase any goods or services that will facilitate their independence. Case workers applying on behalf of care leavers for this allowance must evidence the existence of a transition plan.

Standard 13 of the National Standards for Out of Home Care also indicates that all young people in care should be engaged from age 15 by service providers to develop a leaving care plan (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2011). The most recent statistics collected by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018), however, indicate that many young people still in care do not feel that they are receiving adequate support for planning several aspects of their future.

Most of what is provided to care leavers in Australia is under state jurisdiction, though there are some supports that are offered nationally. For example, CREATE foundation has a grant scheme for which all young people with statutory care experience (aged 15-25) are eligible to apply. Post-care support is subject to legislation in only half of Australia's state and territories (in New South Wales, Northern Territory, Victoria and Western Australia.)

In most states of Australia, young people are discharged from care by their 18th birthday. In both Tasmania and Victoria, however, support has been extended to the age of 21 and extension to this age is being trialled in WA. The Australian Capital Territory has extended financial support to young people leaving care until the age of 21 and extended voluntary support to the age of 25. Elsewhere, the age until which young people in care are eligible for full or partial support varies between 18 and 25 and can differ from state to state within the one country, as is the case in the US and Canada. In the UK, support provided by the state tapers off from 18 until 25.

The range of supports that states fund – in most cases, delivered by a handful through to several not-for-profit agencies – vary significantly. They can include, as in the case of Victoria, referral and information services; mentoring services; brokerage; housing support; support for education, training and employment and culturally-specific support (for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth).

What do Young People Leaving Care Need?

Much longitudinal and other research relating to care leavers has focused on geographically delimited populations (Stein and Munro, 2008). Nonetheless, the broader findings on what young people need are comparable across regions.

A consensus exists amongst researchers regarding the main things upon which good subjective and objective outcomes for care leavers are reliant. These include stable and positive (in) care experiences and early commencement of preparation for leaving care. Also important is providing care leavers the opportunity for gradual transition from care and ongoing support post-care (Stein 2012; Mendes, Johnson and Molehuddin 2011; Beauchamp 2014a; Reid 2007). Specific populations are in need of additional support. For example, Jackson et al (2013) argue that due to a range of factors including the tendency of Aboriginal young people to leave earlier than their peers and the often poor ability of mainstream services to cater to the needs of Aboriginal youth, Aboriginal care leavers may need more intensive or individualised support.

Discussed below are the range of factors that are known to be crucial to positive outcomes for care leavers.

Gradual departure from care

The pace at which young people exit care – and how ready they feel when they depart – also has significant bearing on post-care wellbeing (Dinisman, 2016). Australian and international research has consistently found that transition should be allowed to occur gradually and flexibly (Stein 2008; Stein 2012; Beauchamp 2014a; Campo and Commerford 2018). A coalition of organisations in Australia have contributed to the ‘Homestretch’ campaign which has the goal of raising the leaving care age in all states to 21. It is also the reason that several organisations in Australia and in other countries that provide residential care also provide housing and reduced but ongoing support for those who are transitioning to independence. (See, for example, the Transition to Leaving Care program in NSW.) Assumptions should not be made regarding when a young person will be ready to leave, and age itself is a poor predictor of this (Beauchamp 2014a). Whilst some care leavers may wish for considerable independence before the age of 18, others will want to remain supported for as long as possible. Care leavers with a disability, in particular, may need much longer to transition.

Strong personal resources/positive outlook

How care leavers conceptualise their challenges, available resources and future prospects can have considerable impact on their decision-making capacity, approaches to problem-solving and emotional state, and thus their future outcomes. Sulimani-Aidan (2015), for

example, found that having higher expectations for their futures positively correlated, for care leavers, with being more satisfied with their accommodation, economic status and educational achievements. Samuels and Pryce (2008) also found that having a philosophy of inter-dependence was more useful than that of total self-reliance. Dixon (2008) found in her research involving young care leavers in England that those who had an optimistic outlook prior to leaving care were more likely to feel positive a year on. Other personal resources that aid care leavers include a sense of perseverance (Frimpong-Manso 2018; Refaeli 2017).

Good transitional planning

Crucial both to young people's sense of readiness to leave care and their chances of experiencing positive outcomes once they have left care is good transition planning (Mendes and Moslehuddin 2006; Johnson et al 2010). Legislation in Australia requires that young people are given adequate preparation for independence but this does not always occur. Research by Muir and Hand (2018) indicate that only 46% of the subjects (n=202) in their longitudinal study could recall discussions of a transition plan with them. Young people were often otherwise inadequately prepared for independence.

Proper transition planning sees a young person's carer or key worker fully engaging them in preparing emotionally and practically for independence from well before they are ready to leave. Transition planning, it has been repeatedly found, should reflect young people's values and desires –in other words, be personalised – and occur in stages manageable for care leaver (Muir and Hand 2018; Beauchamp 2014a). That is, it will take into account the rate at which the young person wants to plan and is capable of taking on new information. Daly (2012) argues that successful transition planning requires that the care leaver has comprehensive input into the process.

Practical skills

Transition planning for care leavers should consider the best way for care leavers to learn 'life skills' or those necessary for independence. The importance, for care leavers, of possessing a strong suite of practical skills together with broader problem-solving skills can be inferred through the proxy measure of outcomes for care leavers provided independent living skills training compared to those of care leavers who were not. Montgomery, Donkah and Underhill (2006) found, from a review of relevant research literature, that participants of living skills programs benefitted in relation to employment, education, housing and health outcomes. Naccarato and DeLorenzo (2008) warn, however, that such programs are likely to fail where they don't properly take into consideration the specific physical or psychological challenges participant may have.

Housing support

Housing support is one of the most urgent needs of care leavers, although Muir and Hand (2018) caution that focus on accommodation should not occur at the expense of other of care leavers' needs. Having access to secure housing or housing interventions not only reduces young people's chances of encountering homelessness but has been correlated with economic and employment stability as well as a reduced chance of dropping out of school and developing substance dependency (Simon 2008; Jones 2011; Dutta 2017). Longitudinal research by Johnson et al (2010) in Australia has found that maintaining independent housing is often reliant on young people having access to emotional and material support, whether from professional or other sources.

Social and emotional support

Care leavers also benefit considerably from having a variety of social supports. Research from the last decade indicates the importance to young people's longer-term outcomes of family members maintaining involvement with them and providing some support for their goals (McLean 2018). Young people also often need help after they have left care with retaining relationships with their family members (Knorth et al 2008).

Care leavers also benefit from their relationships with mentors (Mendes, Johnson and Molehuddin 2011). Little is known about which models of mentorship work best for care leavers (Avery 2011), however the success of such relationships may rely on the existence of a warm or 'natural' connection between the young people and those guiding them (Thompson, Greeson and Brunsink 2016; Campo and Commerford 2018). Retaining a connection with care staff after leaving residential care has also been found to benefit young people's social skills, connectedness and general independence (Wade 2008; Schofield, Larsson and Ward 2017; Holt and Kirwan 2012).

Other researchers have found that peer support is amongst the most important sources of help for care leavers. Peers are often easier for young care leavers to relate to and may be more available to them than other of their social contacts (Snow 2013; Witnish 2017). Dixon (2008) found that care leavers who had a strong friendship network were more likely to be happy with their lives.

Crane, Kaur and Burton (2013) state that there is compelling evidence for both in care and post-care support to provide the means to assist young people to develop both their social networks as well as their relationship literacy.

Case management

Good case management – that which West, Warth and Scott (2013) concluded is underpinned by trust and 'promotion of choice' for young people (p.12) – is important to care

leavers' outcomes. It is that much more crucial in the case of care leavers with a disability (CREATE Foundation 2012). Milligan and Stevens (2006) state that case management should provide emotional as opposed to merely practical support throughout the transition process. Having the sense of being genuinely cared for was found by Ridley et al (2016) as the factor most important to young people in or leaving care vis-a-vis their relationships with case managers. Liabo, McKenna and Roberts 2017 found that those leaving residential and foster care found it very important that there was continuity in terms of who was providing care for them.

Tailored programs and support

A central requirement for good outcomes for care leavers is a program of support tailored to care leavers' specific needs and interests (Stein 2012). Many services provide programs that offer support across several domains where others offer singly focused programs. The range of matters in relation to which care leavers may need support include the following:

Employment support

Employment programs designed for care leavers have generally yielded positive employment outcomes (Woodgate, Morakinyo and Martin 2017) although they do not always prove to have long-term benefits (Edelstein and Lowenstein 2014). Evidence from an early evaluation of a now highly successful work training program for care leavers (Dixon 2008) highlights the need for employment programs to provide intensive personal support in addition to skills training and work experience if participants are to feel adequately prepared for the workforce. Woodgate and colleagues (2017) also suggest that 'soft skills', such as self-advocacy and conflict management skills need to be taught alongside profession specific skills. Bilson, Price and Stanley (2011), however, point out that evidence for employment programs for care leavers as a whole is still lacking.

Post-secondary educational support

Geiger and Beltran (2017) found that the most successful post-secondary educational interventions, generally speaking, draw on cross-system collaboration, emphasise participants' strengths and are culturally informed. They also provide: support for mental health; financial assistance, and both preparatory and on campus support. In considering the role for community organisations in supporting the post-secondary education of care leavers, Harvey et al (2015) state that organisations should, amongst other things, provide information to young people about state and national educational resources. They should also promote the educational aspirations of care leavers through, for example, informing them about and encouraging them to attend tertiary institution open days. They can also share the experiences of care leavers who have successfully accessed education with others.

Parenting support

Care leavers who are parents often require, in addition to financial, social and housing support, assistance with the acquisition of parenting skills (Beauchamp 2014b; Radey et al 2016). Few parenting programs for care leavers have been subject to evaluation, however, the extant research points to such programs generally being of benefit. Mendes (2009) in a review of relevant programs and literature has found that the most useful programs in Europe and UK not only impart skills but bring parents together to share their experiences. Some programs also focus on reducing the isolation of parents.

Cultural support

It can be imperative that mainstream services consult with Aboriginal organisations if Aboriginal care leavers are to retain a connection to their culture and communities. A recent report concludes that preparation of cultural support plans that make provisions for when young people in out of home care leave care can be vital to their wellbeing. (Mendes, Saunders and Baidawi 2016). Some states in Australia now require that cultural plans be prepared for all Aboriginal youth in out of home care, though adherence to this requirement due to several factors, including lack of funding, is inconsistent (Mendes, Saunders and Baidawi 2016).

Mental health programs

Across Australia there are few programs that are aimed specifically at supporting care leavers' mental health. Rahamim and Mendes (2016) state that whilst some care leavers will need to be referred to mainstream mental health services those staff already working with care leavers and imminent care leavers also need to be equipped to provide therapeutic support. This is on the basis of findings that good mental health for care leavers often depends upon their possession of warm, consistent relationships. This can necessitate relevant training for staff such as residential care workers. Rahmim and Mendes also conclude that joint planning between agencies that have involvement with the care leaver is required to ensure that care leavers can receive mental health across a range of life domains.

Summary: Messages from the Research

A key research gap pertains to trauma-informed practice as applied to preparing young people for leaving care. This is an area that could be given priority in light of the increasing interest in therapeutic approaches to the provision of care. That said, the following are a summary of key messages from the research:

- The move to independence is especially difficult for those who have been in out of home care and, particularly residential care, who are more likely than their peers to struggle to access accommodation, employment and education, and establish and maintain supportive relationships and good mental health.
- The findings regarding the needs of young people leaving care need are comparable across geographical locations and cultural groups.
- Young people ideally have a gradual departure from care reflective of the rate at which they are able to assume different types of responsibilities. This may not always be possible for young people leaving residential care, but helping the young person prepare for independence as soon as possible can mitigate some of the associated challenges.
- Good transitional planning starts early, has maximum input from the young person leaving care and considers all facets of their future life and resources needed for the realisation of their goals.
- Care leavers benefit from developing a clear and optimistic sense of their futures as perspective is an important determinant of future outcomes. As well as good emotional resources, young people require strong practical resources – ie independent living skills – which they need time to build up.
- Young people leaving care require help with developing and maintaining contacts and social networks that they are likely to be able to call on over time. Care leavers benefit from a wide range of emotional supports ranging from family members and peers through to mentors.
- Young people leaving care require case management, as provided by someone who shows genuine concern for the young person.
- A component of good case management is identification and facilitation of contact with a range of programs and supports relevant to the care leaver's needs such as educational support programs and parenting programs. Whilst evidence regarding the best program models for most programs provided for care leavers (including employment and educational support programs) are lacking, on the whole they have been found to positively impact care leavers' outcomes.
- Young people leaving residential care benefit emotionally and practically through retaining contact with their keyworkers.

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