

Chapter 2: Making Sense of Leaving Care Issues

Experiences of Homelessness by Care Leavers in Australia

**By Joseph J. McDowall,
Griffith University
and CREATE Foundation**

This paper aims to give some information regarding the size and the dimension of the problem of young people leaving state care and exiting into homelessness. The data discussed are drawn from a section of the CREATE Report Card that dealt with all aspects of Transitioning from Care in Australia (McDowall, 2009), and are presented in more detail to provide comparisons across the various states and territories.

This research documented responses from 192 young people (120 females and 72 males who recently “aged out” of the care system) to a range of questions including the following dealing with the experience of homelessness in their first year of independence:

- When your care arrangement ceased, did you have to leave your placement (if “Yes”, how much warning did you receive and did you know where you were going to live)?
- Were you homeless within the first year, i.e., without safe and adequate housing for more than five nights (if “Yes”, how many times and for what period overall)?
- Are you homeless now?
- What sort of accommodation did you live in at first?
- In what accommodation are you living now?
- How easy was it to find accommodation?
- How do you pay for your accommodation, and how easy is this to manage?
- What support, if any, do you need to find or keep your accommodation?

Samples in excess of 20 (over 40 from NSW, QLD, and VIC) were obtained from most jurisdictions (except ACT, NT, and

TAS) with representation from Indigenous young people (n = 42) and other cultures (n = 18). Overall, 37% of respondents (n = 71) reported having some form of physical or intellectual disability. Comparisons of responses to the above questions were made regarding sex, culture, disability, and location within Australia.

Overall, 50.5% of young people actually moved from their placement on exiting care; of these, 41% (n = 40) didn’t know where they would be going at the time of leaving and they were given an average of 30 days notice that they would need to relocate.

Of concern was the observation that, of the 97 young people who left their placement, 50.5% indicated they had been homeless during their first year of independence (compared with 18% of those who remained with their carer). Where numbers from the states were sufficient to allow comparison, values ranged from 48% in VIC to 68% in NSW. The most notable sex difference found was in the duration of homelessness, with males reporting a longer average total period (60 days) compared with females (41 days). Similar results were observed across all cultural groupings (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), and (more disturbingly) for those young people reporting a disability (52% homeless).

Fortunately, the number of those currently homeless was much lower, with 11.3% of those who had moved from placement indicating they were still without accommodation compared with 8.4% of those who did not leave initially. In time, most young people are able to locate suitable accommodation, but they need continuing support to reduce the likelihood of negative experiences while they are adapting to independence. However, those who continue to struggle must not be overlooked.

The current data allowed some exploration of factors within the care system that are associated with homelessness. For example, young people who experienced periods of homelessness had significantly more placements during the last five years of care than did those who were never homeless (an average of 11 compared with 5 placements). Furthermore, the possession of a leaving care plan was not the panacea for eliminating homelessness; those who left with a plan, although fewer in number (25%) were just as likely to become homeless as were those without such a document, indicating that the quality and relevance of any plan is vitally important, particularly when considering the issues surrounding accommodation.

Homelessness results from a young person’s inability to find appropriate accommodation. In this study, of the 49 who left a placement, only seven exited into homelessness directly. The others became homeless when their chosen living arrangements broke down. Most young people either chose to return home to live with their family (male preference) or selected shared accommodation (the same trend was observed for Indigenous young people and those with a disability). Interestingly, those who did not become homeless were more likely to choose either supported accommodation or to set up their own space. Not surprisingly, those who reported homelessness had significantly more attempts at finding suitable places to live than did the others (an average of 8.5 compared with 3 places each year since leaving care).

When looking at the current living arrangements of those who have been out of care for over a year, one-third of females reported living with a partner while 35% of males were living with friends (the numbers with birth parents and former carers had reduced to 13% and 10% respectively).



It is easy to see that finding accommodation could be a difficult problem, depending as it does on the suitability of both physical and social factors. To test this, young people were asked to rate how difficult they found this task using a six-point scale (1: Very Hard to 6: Very Easy). Those in Tasmania and Queensland seemed to have the most trouble (average scores of 2.2 and 2.0 respectively, with over 70% of young people who left placements in each of these states indicating that finding suitable accommodation was *Quite* or *Very Hard*).

Overall, 60% of young people in accommodation were renting, while 25% were paying board. Although 63.5% reported finding it reasonably easy to manage this commitment (scored 4 or above on the “difficulty” scale), those who chose to comment about particular support that would be helpful mostly addressed financial issues. Several just mentioned the high cost of rent (“[need] *more support paying rent. Can't sustain the payments*”; “*rent is really high so more rent assistance would help*”) while others emphasised that the competition between paying rent and other essential aspects of life created difficulties for them (“*help to get to work, cost of transport makes paying rent hard*”; “*financial support, so I can eat as well*”; “*I need help with getting food vouchers because I find it very hard for food and accommodation to be paid*”). Many referred to the need for them to find continuing employment (“*stable employment, budgeting skills and*

mentor”; “*assistance in finding employment, I'm finding it hard to find work because everything needs qualifications these days*”; “*better job and stable not casual*”). Several related issues also were raised (“*budgeting, advice on tenancy stuff*”; “*a reference, need to move into my own place*”; “*furniture is an issue, otherwise okay*”; “*getting my license*”; “*counselling to reduce stress*”).

It was clear from numerous comments that relationships with various people were important in facilitating a successful transition (“*I share a place with friends, so it is ok now*”; “*need to stay in relationship, could not support by myself*”; “*ongoing relationship with someone or a worker, that worker with me, ongoing support and mentoring over 18–25*”; “*an extra person to share the costs*”; “*...I get help from my housing worker*”).

Given the extra difficulties experienced by those young people who had to try to relocate on exiting care, it is a testament to their resilience that no differences were observed in their achievements compared with those who remained in their established placement. Comparable numbers had obtained full-time or part-time employment (relocated: 33.7%; remained: 31.7%) or were undertaking further study (relocated: 14.6%; remained: 15.8%). A similar number were unemployed (relocated: 27%; remained: 25.6%).

These data shed some light on the accommodation issues facing care leavers and make the point that many will experience

homelessness at some stage soon after exiting the system. The literature is clear that a gradual transition process is preferable to an abrupt termination (Stein, 2008) and generally a more stable base from which to tackle the difficulties of transition was available to those who were able to remain with their established carer. In the USA, the move to raise the age of foster care support to 21 years (Courtney, Dworsky, and Pollack, 2007) provides young people with a little more time to establish their own living arrangements while retaining a vital relationship from which to draw support. Young people in this study highlighted the importance of this continued connection in their own voices (“*my foster family still helps me out*”; “*raise the age limit to over 18 so that young people can transition better*”). Such a change could reduce the homelessness experienced by care leavers, as well as help alleviate many other problems within the transition process. ■

References

- Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., and Pollack, H. (2007). *When should the state cease parenting? Evidence from the Midwest study.* (Issue Brief). Chicago: Chapin Hall, University of Chicago.
- McDowall, J.J. (2009). *CREATE Report Card 2009 — Transitioning from care: Tracking progress.* Sydney: CREATE Foundation.
- Stein, M. (2008). Transitions from care to adulthood: Messages from research for policy and practice. In M. Stein and E.R. Munro (Eds.), *Young people's transitions for care to adulthood: International research and practice* (pp. 289–306). London: Jessica Kingsley.