

How Do We Identify and Address Barriers Faced by Young People Leaving Care?: Ask Them

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CREATE believes the successful transitioning to independence of young people from out-of-home care must be a priority for policy and decision-makers. This means better

coordination across all tiers of government, with support from the non-government organisation (NGO) sector, to provide necessary support and consistency in service delivery. It is encouraging to see that Strategy 2 of the Third Action Plan (2015–2018), part of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children¹ focuses on helping young people in out-of-home care to thrive in adulthood. This strategy identifies actions to break the cycle of disadvantage for these young people. CREATE supports the objective of improving priority access to support services, including ensuring that the Transition to Independent Living Allowance is available to all young people with an out-of-home care experience.

CREATE's research has found examples of not only 'systemic failure' when it comes to transition planning but lack of involvement of young people in the process.² Transitioning to independence has been an area of concern for CREATE for many years. CREATE's 2009 research on leaving care³ found that 64 per cent of young people did not have a leaving care plan. After leaving care, 35 per cent were homeless in the first year; only 35 per cent completed Year 12; 29 per cent were unemployed (compared to the national average at the time of 9.7 per cent); and 70 per cent were dependent on Centrelink for some form of income support. Housing, education, and employment are three interdependent areas of concern for young people exiting care and they are aware of the barriers:

Being on my own and being able to financially support myself. Don't want to go downhill in school

— Female, 17 years⁴

Most other kids my age have their parents to fall back on if they need some money help like with getting a house, and I don't have that. If I got a house and for some reason had to leave, like a housemate moved out and I couldn't afford it

— Female, 17 years⁵

CREATE's most recent 2013 Report Card 'Experiencing out-of-home care in Australia'⁶ in presenting the views of children and young people from within the care system revealed the concerns of a group of young people exiting the system about their uncertain future:

I like it in care and wasn't really taught how to live in the big world, and I've finally got a family. It's scary to even think about leaving them.

— Female, 15 years

I don't want to leave care because I am happy where I am.

— Male, 16 years

I don't know what is going to happen to me, and I don't feel that it is right for young adults at 18 years old to leave care. I think it is too early.

— Female, 17 years

Imagine having to look for a place to live while you're trying to finish your final year of school! During CREATE Victoria's 2015 Hour of Power,⁷ young people identified housing as one of the most pressing issues needing attention. Participants stated:

There are limited appropriate housing options for young people who are leaving care.

Young people require supported accommodation with greater independence.

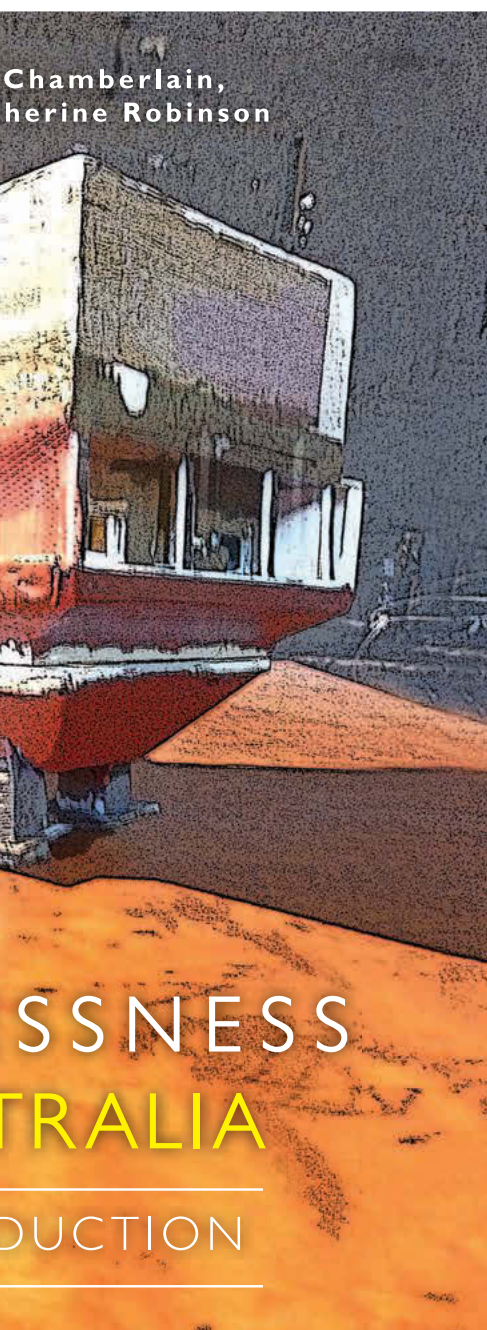




Image courtesy of Artful Dodgers Studio

We would like to have greater support to maintain housing until we are at least 21 with a variety of options available. We like the idea of being independent, however need support for this to be attainable and sustainable for us.

At this forum, young people spoke about how they wanted more people in out-of-home care to finish school and go on to higher education.

They reported getting moved around from school to school, thereby falling behind in class. They emphasised how hard it is to catch up when there is lots of other stuff going on; and drew attention to the problems of missing schooling while in care or leaving school early. In addition, because of the financial cost study, if they are solely supporting themselves, many have found that further education can be unaffordable.

Young people also referred to the stigma associated with having been in care and expressed concern about finding jobs and enrolling in courses, as well as basic life skills such as budgeting their money, paying for health costs, accessing their medical records, and knowing how to cook and clean.

Without employment, education and access to suitable and affordable housing, young people exiting care are at greater risk on homelessness.

Early intervention is essential to prevent these vulnerable young people experiencing homelessness.

CREATE's 2010 *What's the Answer?* Report⁸ found that young people believe that training for workers in all of the aspects of the transition-from-care process, from planning to after care support, would give them a greater understanding of the problems and show what actions could help to improve outcomes.

Starting the transition to independence discussion early and ensuring young people are included as part of this process, is essential to minimise the over-whelming task of fending for oneself without the security of a family support network. Clear strategies for obtaining and maintaining housing is vital for young people, with many telling CREATE that they are reliant upon unstable forms of accommodation including couch surfing and refuges.

CREATE would also like to highlight that transition plans, without the appropriate funding and resourcing to achieve the goals detailed, have limited value. For example — putting in the plan 'live independently in private rental' is unlikely unless the young person has access to additional income with knowledge of how to maintain a property and knows their rights and responsibilities as a tenant.

Recently, CREATE has been working with young people to develop strategies for overcoming some of the barriers. This work has led to the distribution of over 2200 *Go Your Own Way (GYOW) Leaving Care Information Kits* across Australia. The purpose of the kits was to provide a resource to stimulate conversation and assist the planning for young people exiting to independence and mitigate the poor outcomes experienced, including homelessness.

The kits include a workbook that was developed in consultation with young people, covering key areas such as identity, education, income, housing, health and relationships to enable those transitioning to plan for their independence. CREATE is currently undertaking an evaluation of this project, results of which will be released later in 2016.

Post-care outcomes for young people are the true measure of the child protection system. Unless the clear majority of young people are exiting out-of-home care as healthy independent adults, who are studying and/or working and living in safe, secure and affordable housing, then there is still much work to be done.

Endnotes

1. <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2015/12/09/national-framework-protecting-australia-s-children-resources-support-third-action-plan>; https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/12_2015/pdf_third_action_plan_for_protecting_australias_children.pdf
2. McDowall J J 2009, *Transitioning from care: Tracking progress*, (CREATE Report Card 2009) CREATE Foundation, Sydney. Retrieved from http://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/05.-CREATE-Report-Card_Transitioning-From-Care-Tracking-Progress_November-2009.pdf
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*, p.79.
5. *ibid.*, p.76.
6. McDowall J J 2013, *Experiencing out-of-home care in Australia: The views of children and young people* (CREATE Report Card 2013), CREATE Foundation, Sydney. Retrieved from <http://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2013-CRE065-F-CREATE-Report-Card>, p.76.
7. CREATE Victoria 2015, *Report on 'Hour of Power' consultation*. Melbourne: CREATE Foundation.
8. CREATE 2010, *'What's the answer?: Young people's solutions to improving transitioning to independence from out-of-home care*, CREATE Foundation, Sydney.