

CREATE's Position

While most young adults in the community remain with family into their mid-to-late twenties, young people in out-of-home care often have to leave their placement at 18. This transition from care is frequently associated with poorer outcomes in relation to housing, education, employment, mental health, financial security, and for First Nations young people, connection with culture and community. Young people are not always developmentally ready to live independently and many do not have the range of family and community supports typically used by young people during their passage to adulthood.

Seven States and Territories have committed to extend care to 21. New South Wales is yet to make this commitment. CREATE calls for all state and territory governments to provide guaranteed assistance to every young person in care until 21. Providing this continuing support to young people could mitigate some of the poorer outcomes experienced by many leaving care. Extending care until 21 gives young people a secure base to return to in times of stress, facilitates a more gradual transition to adulthood, and can provide consequential benefits from having more time to gain greater maturity, financial security, and practical support.

CREATE advocates that post-care support should be available across Australia and implemented consistently across jurisdictions in combination with nationally endorsed standards for extended care.

Evidence

- CREATE found that 30% of young people experienced homelessness within their first year of leaving care, 30% were unemployed, and 40% reported experiencing a significant loss of support from caseworkers, carers, and social networks (McDowall, 2020).
- These results are consistent with other research that report poorer outcomes for care leavers, including lower levels of education, employment, and income, and higher levels of financial stress and mental health concerns (e.g., Muir et al., 2019).
- First Nations young people are over-represented in out-of-home care. CREATE found that First Nations care leavers were less likely to have completed Grade 12, more likely to be involved in youth justice, and more likely to be parents; (McDowall, 2020).
- A scoping review identified key issues facing First Nations care leavers, including maintaining connection to culture, community, and country, support to reconnect with family of origin, and access to stable, affordable, and culturally appropriate housing (Mendes et al, 2021).
- Based on the successes of extending care until 21 internationally (Courtney et al., 2018), it is predicted that extending care in Australia will halve the percentage of young people who become homeless after leaving care, 39% to 19.5% (Deloitte Access Economics, 2018).
- Socioeconomic cost benefit analyses have estimated that when care is extended to 21, the probability of young people accessing higher education is increased, while the probabilities of being arrested, hospitalised, homeless, or dependent on alcohol or drugs are decreased (Deloitte Access Economics, 2018).
- International and Australian research report positive outcomes for young people related to extending care until 21 (e.g., Courtney et al., 2018; Lund & Kazim, 2021; Park et al., 2020). For example, following the WA Home Stretch trial, 70% of participants were in safe and secure housing and 60% were engaged in post-school education or training (Lund & Kazim).
- Successful transitions rely on effective support and planning. This means active involvement in decision-making, and in the development of transition plans and cultural support plans. CREATE found that participation in developing these plans is low (McDowall, 2018, 2020).

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Actions

All state and territory governments must commit to implementing options for all young people in care to remain in, and be able to leave and return to, a supported placement until they are at least 21 years of age. Ideally, extended care frameworks would be:

- Consistently implemented across Australia;
- Co-designed with Youth Advisory Groups;
- Implemented in combination with nationally endorsed standards for extended care;
- Independently monitored and evaluated over time using clear, specific, and measurable indicators reporting on the outcomes for young people. This de-identified information needs to be made publicly available to support accountability;
- Advancing strategies of self-determination for First Nations communities; and
- Fully funded (including investment in evidence-based programs and initiatives).

CREATE further advocates for:

- Young people to be meaningfully involved in comprehensive transition planning, and cultural support planning for First Nations young people. Young people should be given the opportunity to be engaged so that the plan is aligned with their needs.
- Case management support to assist in accessing services, which can involve navigating confusing, convoluted processes and forms. Young people may not have the capacity to navigate bureaucratic processes on their own, or struggle to find necessary supporting documentation.
- Longer and more comprehensive support for young people with complex needs, including coordination with adult disability services; and
- Transition support services that engage in trauma-informed practices. Services should be able to respond to trauma, provide a safe environment, and empower young people by ensuring they have real choice, autonomy, and are informed.

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