

Keep caring

Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care

Summary

About us

The Commission for Children and Young People advocates to improve how the Victorian Government and services keep children and young people safe and protect and respect their rights.

About our inquiry

Our *Keep Caring* inquiry looked at whether young people in out-of-home care get enough help to transition to adult life. The report was tabled in the Victorian Parliament on 9 December 2020.

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As part of our inquiry we spoke to over one hundred young people about their experiences leaving care and we reviewed over 160 Child Protection files to determine the quality of leaving care planning and supports they received. We also conducted an in-depth file review for 30 young people who were about to transition or had transitioned from care.¹

We found:

- The out-of-home care system is not doing enough to help young people to plan and prepare for their lives after care.
- When young people leave care, they lose a lot of help they relied on in care, leaving many homeless and disconnected from educational, social and mental health supports.

What does leaving care mean?

“You turn 18 and everything just goes, you just shit yourself. Hard transition being an adult after being in that system for so many years.”

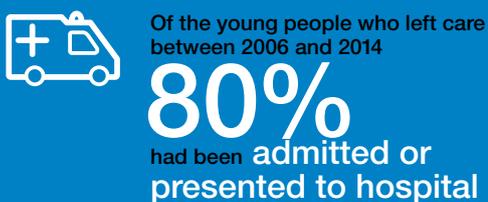
(Caroline, post-care, 19, Aboriginal)

In 2019, more than six hundred young people aged between 16 and 18 left care, and the number of young people leaving care every year has almost doubled since 2009. In 2019, about one in five young people (22 per cent) who left care were Aboriginal.

The Commission’s research suggests that about one third of young people on the verge of leaving care have a disability (most commonly an intellectual disability).

¹ These reviews examined these young people’s CRIS files but also reviewed their Homestretch and/or Better Futures files where the young person was linked to these services.

Challenges faced by care leavers:



What needs to change:

Redesign the out-of-home care system

The out-of-home care system needs to change so every young person in care gets support to:

-  **plan** for their own future
-  develop **independent living skills**
-  keep **learning** or **return to study** or **further training**
-  **heal relationships** with family when they want to or **make positive connections with the community** around them

Guarantee care leavers basic post-care supports

Every young person who leaves care should have the right to:

-  a **stable** and **safe home**
-  extra help to **keep learning** or **return to study** or **further training**
-  an **opportunity** to learn **independent living skills** if they missed out in care
-  **mental health** and **substance use supports**

What happens to young people when they leave care?

“Leaving care started at 16 – the plan was for me to move in with my dad in [another state]. I thought that would be fine. It fell through when I was about to turn 18 and there was no back-up plan ... so they told me my best option was homeless shelters.”

(Emerson, post-care, 24)

While some young people thrive in their life after care, people with an experience of care on average struggle more in adult life than other young people. This includes increased risk of poor physical and mental health, unemployment and homelessness.

Published for the first time in this inquiry, Victorian data shows that:

- At least one third of young people leaving care become homeless within three years of them leaving care.
- Young people who leave care from residential care or who experience high levels of placement instability (continuously move between different homes in care) are most likely to become homeless or to become involved in the youth justice system.
- Of the young people who left care between 2006 and 2014, 80 per cent had been admitted or presented to hospital. More than half (52 per cent) of young people also presented to acute public mental health services.

Does care set young people up for adult life?

“I signed a paper the other day about leaving care. They don’t really tell me much about it. The whole leaving care thing is the most fucked up thing about [being in care]. As soon as you’re 18, bye bye.”

(Kylie, residential care, 16)

Systemic problems in the out-of-home care system limit its ability to support young people to prepare for adult life. The Commission’s 2019 inquiry, *In our own words: Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system*, highlighted that for many children and young people, the out-of-home care system does not provide a safe or stable home where children and young people can recover from trauma.

The inquiry unearthed system-wide problems in the out-of-home care system including:

- Too many young people experience placement instability which they told us felt degrading and upsetting.
- Residential care is not therapeutic, is often unsafe and does not meet the needs of young people living with trauma.
- Over the last decade the number of Aboriginal children living in the care system tripled and many Aboriginal children in care are not supported to maintain connection with culture and community as required by law.

When young people do not feel safe, stable or cared for in out-of-home care, it is very difficult for them to focus on preparing for independence.

Independent living skills

“I need life skills. That’s what resi should do for you. I am going to move to lead tenant housing soon and I hope I learn some more skills there. There is a kitchen at my resi but the staff don’t help us learn to cook or anything. When I leave care I won’t know what the fuck to do. I have never been taught.”

(Ellie, residential care, 16)

Our inquiry found many young people in care miss out on learning independent living skills (things like learning how to cook, clean, shop for food and budget). Young people were most likely to miss out on learning these skills in residential care.

Education

“I want to become a diesel mechanic and get my truck licence. I’m going to go to TAFE. I need a pass for the years that I missed.”

(Owen, residential care, 14)

Our inquiry found that almost half (44 per cent) of young people on the verge of leaving care were no longer studying or in any kind of training.

Most of these young people had a history of placement instability or unresolved challenges with their mental health, which made staying at school hard.

Very few young people in care get enough help to get back to school or commence vocational training which contributes to poor educational outcomes and high levels of unemployment among care leavers.

Family and community

“A mentor from Whitelion really made a difference. He did not take any money to do it. He could have got reimbursed but he would always just reach into his own pocket. He really helped me out and was always introducing me to new food and new experiences.”

(Emerson, post-care, 24)

Family and community connection are critical to young people making a successful transition from care. Yet we found few young people in care get support to repair relationships with parents or siblings before leaving care or to make positive connections with the community around them (for example, with the support of a mentor).

Mental health and drug and alcohol supports

“For trauma, your brain does not process it until you feel safe which is when the mental health issues arise when you are in your own environment. The funding for mental health for children with a care experience needs to extend a lot further.”

(Jason, post-care, 20)

Young people in care sometimes need extra help with their mental health because of things that happened to them before or during care.

We found that more than two thirds (67 per cent) of young people leave care without the supports they need for their mental health.

Planning for success

“Child Protection didn’t talk to me about leaving care ... [My aunty] says that we will still have a home here with her [after we turn 18]. No workers have spoken to us other than to say that we can leave when we are 18.”

(Tyrah, kinship care, 15)

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) requires that all young people in care aged 15 and over have a plan to help guide their transition to independence.

Our inquiry found that less than half (43 per cent) of young people in care have one of these plans. Also, most young people did not have an opportunity to take part in planning about their future.

Do young people get enough support once they have left care?

Somewhere to live

“I was living with my aunty but that just didn’t work out. She went to sleep early. I don’t like to sleep early. I like to roam. So I moved out with [my friend] after I turned 18, then moved in with [another friend] but she didn’t want me there.”

(Hazel, post-care, 19)

Each year, over 600 young people aged between 16 and 18 leave care. But there are only a little over 300 housing options for these young people at any given time. This lack of housing is particularly severe for young people with a disability and young people who leave care with complex trauma. The inquiry found that the overall lack of suitable housing for care leavers has led to the high levels of homelessness among young people who have been in care.

Better Futures

“I had a good worker who was with me the whole time at [my funded agency] that made a big difference. My foster father was really good – having consistent people around you is really important. Better Futures overall made the transition into adulthood a lot easier, I would have been thrown into the deep end otherwise.”

(Sam, post-care, 19)

Young people leaving care often need and benefit from a key worker to help them get the help and services they need before and after they leave care.

Better Futures is a new service which supports young people before and after they leave care with a case worker and flexible funding. The level of support Better Futures gives is meant to depend on the young person’s needs.

While Better Futures has the potential to make sure that care leavers get the support they need to transition from care, the inquiry found that the service is not funded enough to act as an effective bridge between care and adult life for all the care leavers who need it.

Aboriginal care leavers

“Let’s give kids a few years ahead notice before having to live independently. I felt like it was really rushed. I was told, ‘What’s ya decision? What’s ya decision?’”

(Caden post-care, 19, Aboriginal)

One quarter of Aboriginal young people lack the opportunity to receive culturally safe leaving care support from an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation (ACCO) in the years before or following their exit from care.

Rising demand for ACCO-run Better Futures is also putting pressure on these services’ ability to support Aboriginal young people to transition from care in a culturally safe way.

Our recommendations

A new model of care

This inquiry recommends changing the out-of-home care system to make sure that all young people in care have the best possible chance to make a positive transition to independence. This new model of care should embed a young person's life aspirations, talents and goals into how their workers support them and their day-to-day care.

We recommend that this new model of care should include a focus on supporting young people to:

- be active participants in planning and preparing for their own future, with the support of a key worker
- develop their independent living skills
- keep learning or return to study or further training
- build or heal relationships with family and build connections in the community.

Fund the resources care leavers need

We recommend:

- increased investment in Better Futures so it can support the growing numbers of young people transitioning from care to independence every year
- proportionate investment in Better Futures delivered by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), so all Aboriginal care leavers can access culturally safe supports as they transition to independence.
- extend the Homestretch program, which provides an allowance to young people leaving out-of-home care to support their accommodation until they are 21.²

Recognise and uphold a right to post-care supports

Once young people have left care in Victoria, they no longer have an enforceable legal right to receive services and supports.

This lack of guaranteed supports for young people contributes to:

- reduced options when planning for leaving care
- the widening gap between the availability of and demand for post-care services
- the relatively poor life outcomes of care leavers.

In response, this inquiry recommends that the Victorian Government recognise an enforceable right to post-care supports through legislation.

To respect and protect this right, we recommend every young person who leaves care should have access to:

- a stable and safe home
- extra help to keep learning or return to study or further training
- an opportunity to learn independent living skills for those who missed out in care
- post-care mental health and/or substance use supports.

Homelessness among care leavers will continue to be a serious problem unless the Victorian Government invests in a range of housing options for care leavers (including social housing, step down and supported accommodation and disability housing).

Further information:

<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/upholding-childrens-rights/systemic-inquiries/keep-caring>

² Home Stretch was limited to a maximum of 50 new program participants per year, but in November 2020, between the Commission finalising and tabling our inquiry, the Victorian Government announced that it would give all young people leaving out-of-home care (16 and over) an allowance to support their accommodation until they are 21 through the Home Stretch program. This will mean that young people living in kinship or foster care can remain there if they and their carers wish, or alternatively have financial assistance to transition to independent living. This allowance is also available to young people transitioning to independence from residential care. New funding was also made available for Better Futures. This was a significant and welcome announcement that has implemented two of the inquiry's key recommendations.

