



Young people leaving out-of-home care



NSW Department of
Community Services

Introduction

This Research to Practice Note is a summary of a study of young people leaving care in NSW titled the *Longitudinal Study of Wards Leaving Care: 4-5 years After Leaving Care*.¹ The study's findings provide an uncommon insight into the longer term outcomes and experiences of these young people.

The Department of Community Services (DoCS) commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW to conduct the research. Its purpose was to find out what young peoples' experiences and needs were when they were leaving care and after leaving care to inform policy and practice.

This study focuses on the circumstances and outcomes of young people four-to-five years after leaving care. It compares their situations and experiences with those of other young people their age in the general population and with each other – the ones who do well with those who were doing less well. These are the main questions they were asked.

- What is life like for young people who leave care aged 16-18? How do their circumstances during and after leaving care compare with those of other young people their age in the general population?
- Is it possible to predict how well these young people fare four-to-five years after leaving care and to improve the chances of them faring well?
- What are the implications for policy and practice to improve the chances of them faring well?

The findings of this study are consistent with a number of studies over the last two decades in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia. They clearly demonstrate how poorly equipped young people leaving care are in their ability to cope with the transitions they have to make in a short period of time.

While some young people do better than others, the overall picture is one of mobility, poor quality accommodation, unemployment, early parenting, difficulties in 'making ends meet' and establishing and maintaining relationships, limited support and family contact, loneliness and mental health problems.

The full report is available online at www.community.nsw.gov.au under 'Research' within the 'News & Publications' section. This Research to Practice Note was prepared by Marina Paxman, who conducted the study together with Judy Cashmore.

Background

The longitudinal study followed young people who were discharged from care in NSW over a 12-month period during 1992/93. Forty-seven young people were interviewed for the first time just before they left care, and then three months and 12 months after leaving care. Forty-one of these young people were interviewed for the fourth time four-to-five years after leaving care when they were in their early 20s.

The young people who were interviewed four times during this study were representative of the overall cohort leaving care during that 12-month period in relation to their age, gender, location, Aboriginality, the age that they entered care and the types of out-of-home care placements they had experienced. However, they were different in terms of their stability in care. The study's findings therefore underestimate the adverse experiences and difficulties that face young people leaving care.

There have been legislative and policy changes since the young people in this study left care. *The Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection Act) 1998* came into effect in December 2000. It includes specific provisions for leaving and after care planning and assistance for young people between the ages of 15 and 25 years who have been in out-of-home care. The procedure 'Leaving care and providing assistance to persons who have left out-of-home care' has been revised to improve the practice when a young person is preparing to leave out-of-home care and for providing assistance to them after they have left care.

Specialist after-care services were established in the mid-to-late 1990s and departmental regions have since received additional funding to provide brokerage funds to help young people after they leave care.

Young peoples' experiences after leaving care compared with their age-mates in the general population?

Many young people leaving care have to make a number of major changes in their lives earlier and in a much shorter period of time than other young people their age. These include leaving school, leaving 'home' and setting themselves up in new accommodation, trying to find work or some other means of support, and managing financially on very limited resources. Young people in the general population are more dependent on their families for emotional, financial and practical support, often into their early 20s.

Where were the young people living after care?

The young people who had left care were less likely than those their age in the general population to be living at the same address as they were five years before (10% compared with about 50% of their age-mates). They were much more likely to have been in some form of transitional housing (22% compared with 0.6% of their age-mates). The young people had lived on average in eight places in the four-to-five years since leaving care. Those who had been in stable long-term care were more likely than other young people to stay living with or return to stay with their former foster carers after being discharged from care.

What were the young people doing in terms of work and study?

The care leavers were much less likely than their 20-to-24-year-old age-mates to have completed Year 12 at school. Forty-two percent of care leavers compared with 80% of those their age in the general population completed Year 12. Of those who completed Year 12, all except one had gone on to do some further study. Most care leavers (33 out of 41 or 82%) said they were interested in further education or training.

Four-to-five years after leaving care, 25% of care leavers were either in full-time work, full-time study or combined part-time work and study. This compares to 77% of their age-mates. Care leavers were more likely than their age-mates in the general population to be unemployed and receive government income support.

How were the young people managing financially?

As fewer were in full-time work, their overall median gross weekly income was less than that of others their age, a number had debts and few had savings. One in four reported a gross weekly income of \$400 or more compared with one in two of their age-mates in the general population. While most (two-thirds) said they could make ends meet, a significant proportion said they had to go without or cut back on various goods and services, particularly dental services, telephone and clothes.

What support could the young people call upon?

Care leavers usually do not have the emotional, social and financial support that is available to most young people their age from their families. Three in four young people could name someone (including partners and their families, foster carers, family or charities) they could call on for help if they ran into financial or other types of difficulty. However, some were not prepared to ask for assistance and others said there was no-one they could ask. A small group, mostly young men, was quite isolated, reporting that there was no-one they could call on. Although nearly all (38 out of 41) had some contact with their families since leaving care, the frequency and value of that contact varied markedly.

Partnering and parenting

A number of the young women were more likely than their age-mates to have taken the path into early parenthood. Half the young women who had left care had married or were living in de facto relationships, mostly with children. One in three were pregnant or had given birth before the age of 20 compared with only 2% in the general population; and by the age of 24 over half (57%) of care leavers, compared with 6% in the general population, had children. Unfortunately, some young women found little support or safety from their partners and instead fled violent relationships.

What were the young people feeling happy about?

Most young people were faring better four-to-five years after leaving care than 12 months after leaving care. When the young people were asked what they felt good about in their life, they referred to family, children, friends, work, being independent and having a sense of direction and purpose. For some, it was a sense of coming through despite adversity. One young person said they felt good about:

'Family and my daughter, kept good ties with my foster family, I know where I want to go with my career.'

Even those who were really 'struggling' and 'surviving' rather than thriving, were generally positive in their comments. For example:

'Myself. My family. Being independent. Being away from the past lifestyle. Feel good about the future. Feel safe.'

The main findings from the longitudinal study

The research had a number of main findings.

- Young people leaving care, as a group, fare more poorly than other young people their age in the general population. They are less likely to have completed school, to have somewhere safe, stable and secure to live, they are more likely to rely on government income support, to be in marginal employment, and to have difficulties in 'making ends meet'.
- Most cannot call upon the level of support from their families and wider networks, which is usually available to young people in the general population. Government policy assumes young people have support, in the way their entitlements to welfare benefits are framed.
- Despite their adverse circumstances, and the limited support available to them, young people leaving care have to cope with a number of major changes in their lives in a shorter period of time and at a younger age than their more advantaged peers.
- Some young people, however, were faring better than others four-to-five years after leaving care. The best predictors for those who were doing well included factors from their time in care, at the time they left care and beyond. Stability and a 'secure base' in care and social support after leaving care were highly significant factors in predicting which young people were doing better than others.

- Stability is important because it allows children to 'put down roots' and develop a network of relationships. It is also likely to be a pre-condition for continuity in schooling, friendships, health care and familiarity with the neighbourhood and local community. While both stability and sense of security were interrelated, young people's sense of security was a more significant predictor of their outcomes after leaving care than stability per se.

What predicts how well young people are faring 4-5 years after leaving care?

The findings from this study indicate that how well these young people were faring four-to-five years after leaving care is a result of what happened to them in care (as well as their experiences before coming into care), the timing and circumstances of leaving care, and the amount of support they had around them after leaving care.

The most significant in-care factors were stability and, more importantly, a sense of security in care. Young people who reported that they had felt secure with or loved by both family members and their carers had the highest overall outcome scores.

Young people did much better if they were at least 18, felt that they were ready to leave care, had already completed their secondary schooling, had support from those around them and were able to maintain some continuity in their relationships and living arrangements. If they were discharged from care earlier with little preparation or support and hadn't completed their secondary schooling, they didn't tend to fare as well.

Implications for policy and practical approaches to assist young people leaving care

This study found there are several practical approaches that could greatly assist young people leaving care. These include particular aspects of what happens in care and what happens after care.

Stability, continuity and sense of security in care

This study highlights the importance of those factors that promote stability in care and make children feel more secure.³ Stability is likely to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for feeling secure; the question then is how to translate stability into security so that young people leaving care have a safety net of supports around them that they can trust and are willing and able to access. The most

likely means to reduce the number of times placements break down and promote security in care is through:

- intervening early to manage children's behaviour problems and supporting carers in their role
- carers and workers having a great deal of sensitivity, acceptance, emotional availability, patience and skill
- carers building relationships and providing a secure base for children in their care and assisting them to make sense of their past and to cope with all the issues associated with being in care, listening to them, and treating them as one of the family, so that they feel 'normal'
- placing children together with their siblings and/or keeping children at the same school – as far as possible – allowing them to maintain their friendships, familiarity and connection with the local community
- facilitating contact with family members, in line with the child's wishes and best interests, allowing children to have some continuity in the relationships that matter a great deal to them
- having someone who cares, someone to talk to, and the normal or 'humdrum' aspects of everyday life; these are the things children and young people in care say they appreciate
- maintaining continuity which does not end on their 18th birthday.

Staggering the transitions from care

A number of factors associated with the transition from care predict how well young people fare after leaving care. These include their age and the timing of the transition in relation to the number of other changes they have to deal with, how well prepared they are, both in terms of living skills and their attitude to leaving care, and the level of support around them.

Given the number of transitions these young people face, one practical approach would be to stagger the timing of these transitions. One example in current practice is to delay the transition from care for those young people still in secondary school until after they have completed their schooling. This is likely to significantly improve the chances of these young people completing their secondary education, having better employment prospects and the possibility of going on to further education. It also provides them with some continuity of connection and relationships, together with continuing practical and emotional support.⁴

Preparation for leaving care

Another important ingredient, in improving the outcomes for young people leaving care and helping them to adjust to the demands of greater independence, is proper planning and preparation for leaving care that involves the young person.

The trend is to start preparing young people for their change of status some time before the transition. All that is done for the young person while they are in care, in terms of 'good parenting' and 'best practice', providing stability and security, and encouraging the development of social and practical skills, is good preparation for their life after care. If this preparation occurs while the young people are in care they will have the life skills to manage greater independence.

Directly addressing the specific issues associated with leaving care, however, involves another 'tricky balance' – between helping them to prepare for and adjust to the expected changes, and the risk of destabilising the placement by focusing on its ending. This might, however, be counterbalanced by including in the package of living skills those that are highly valued by young people as positive indicators of adult status. Current practice is to fund driving lessons and encourage young people to earn their own income through part-time work.

Continuity of connections and mentoring schemes

Making sure that young people have someone they can rely on, and ensuring some continuity of connections and relationships is important. The presence of at least one supportive adult can make a significant contribution to the resilience of young people in adverse circumstances. Where foster carers or a family member are not available to play this role, personal advisers or mentoring schemes could provide support.

Young people in need of extra support

The best 'early' indicators from this study of those in particular need of additional support were instability in care and lack of attachment to carers, associated with behaviour problems and rejection by family members or carers.

Another group who need support, but are generally reluctant to ask departmental or agency workers for help, are young parents. Determined to do better than their own parents did, they are likely to be very sensitive to any criticism of their parenting and tend to react to concerns about their capacity to cope and offers of help as a threat.



Interagency approach

Given the varying needs of these young people, an interagency approach is important because no one agency is able to meet all these needs. Young people leaving care need priority access to affordable and stable housing, income support, assistance with the costs of education and further training, dental treatment, physical and mental health care, access to information and their files, and guidance and support.⁵ Pinkerton’s⁶ ‘leaving care coping wheel’ is very helpful in several respects: it highlights six key areas of need and emphasises the interrelationships between them.

Listening to children and young people

It is important that those who make decisions about and work with children and young people in care take into account what they say they need and want. Listening to young people and taking their views seriously is important in helping them to feel respected and secure. Family group conferences are one method to directly involve young people, and anyone they would like to include, in a discussion of what help they will need when leaving care.

Some final messages to guide practice

A number of messages from the United Kingdom to guide practice include:

‘... the importance of being committed to, engaging with and involving young people in the decisions that were important to them; working with young people not just for them; being holistic in approach, by attaching equal importance to practical, emotional and interpersonal needs in assessment, planning and practice; identifying formal and informal social networks, including the key role of the personal adviser and leaving care workers as well as family, kinship, friends and mentors; working with other agencies in different ways – housing providers, benefit agencies, education, employment and training agencies and health organisations in meeting the core needs of care leavers; responding to diversity by recognising the needs of different groups of young people, including young men and young women, lesbian and gay young people, black and minority ethnic young people, young disabled people, as well as the wide range of individual needs ...’ (Stein, M. (2005). *Overcoming the odds: resilience and young people leaving care*. London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, p. 123).

References

- 1 The report covers the following areas: accommodation; education and employment; relationships and social support; early parenthood; mental health; happiness and future expectations; doing well and not so well; and conclusions and implications for policy and practice.
- 2 Comparative data was sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998) and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2003).
- 3 There is considerable literature that points to the factors that promote or hinder stability – a good summary is in Jackson, S., & Thomas, N. (1999). *On the Move Again? What works in creating stability for looked after children*. Ilford: Barnardos.
- 4 The practice that is emerging in both the United Kingdom and the United States is to extend support for young people until the age of 21. Research in these countries has found significantly better outcomes for the young people involved, as well as real cost-benefit savings to the state.
- 5 Care leavers aged between 19-23 years have been identified as a target group in the Accord on Social Housing being developed between the Department of Housing and NSW human service agencies.
- 6 Pickerton, J. (2005). Towards better outcomes for young people leaving state care. Keynote presentation at symposium, *Leaving Care – Thinking Systematically, Thinking Global*, Monash University, Melbourne.

The DoCS Research to Practice program aims to promote and inform evidence-based policy and practice in community services.

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