

‘MY ANGER IS WHAT HAS DRIVEN ME TO GET THIS FAR...’

SECURING POSITIVE HOUSING PATHWAYS FOR CARE

LEAVERS IN AUSTRALIA

Mark Liddiard

Curtin University, Perth WA, Australia

ABSTRACT

It has long been known that care leavers are far more likely to experience homelessness and insecure housing than other young people, although exactly why there is such a strong relationship between an experience of care and homelessness has been subject to considerable conjecture. This is the background to an AHURI-funded research study examining the housing pathways of young people who have left state care in Australia. This study interviewed 77 young care leavers and identified two broad pathways for young people from care into independent housing – a relatively unproblematic or smooth transition, compared to a much more problematic or volatile transition. Importantly, some three quarters of our respondents had experienced a problematic or volatile transition from care, involving homelessness and a range of significant housing problems. It is crucial to remember, however, that these housing pathways are not static and some young people are able to make tangible progress towards attaining and maintaining independent housing, often in the face of striking adversity. This paper focuses upon these housing pathways and specifically reflects upon what makes a difference to care leavers’ ability to successfully move on. Housing affordability is absolutely pivotal here, but is not the only influence. This paper argues that addressing substance abuse; providing appropriate professional support; developing supportive family relationships and securing employment are all instrumental in establishing successful housing pathways for care leavers.

INTRODUCTION

In Australia and internationally there has been growing concern over the past two decades about the poor housing outcomes of young people who have been in state out-of-home care. The National Inquiry into Homeless Children (Burdekin 1989) identified state care as a key factor in youth homelessness. Indeed, a previous study of youth homelessness by this author (Hutson and Liddiard 1994) interviewed 115 homeless young people in the UK and discovered that some 23% had a background of state care. Given that less than 1% of the population have had an experience of state care, this suggests a striking connection between an experience of state care and subsequent homelessness. A large body of Australian and international research into disadvantage among care leavers has similarly linked state care to poor housing outcomes (Mendes 2004; Freundlich and Avery 2005; Mendes 2005; London and Halfpenny 2006; Pinkerton 2006; Daining and DePanfilis 2007).

While it is well established that there is a strong connection between care and homelessness, what is less clear is precisely why this is the case and what can assist in promoting more positive housing pathways for care leavers. This is the background to the research project on which this paper draws, which interviewed care leavers themselves about their in-care experiences, transition from care and post-care experiences. Funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), it involved semi-structured interviews with seventy-seven care leavers in Victoria and Western Australia, aged 18-25 at the time of interview, which were carried from September 2008 to May 2009. A multi-pronged approach was adopted to reach a broad sample of care leavers. This included liaising with specialist leaving care service providers, out-reach and residential youth service providers, general homelessness service providers and media announcements.

The analysis of this empirical material suggests that many care leavers have had significant difficulties in obtaining accommodation. 61% of our 77 participants were homeless when interviewed,

while almost all - 95% - had at some point experienced homelessness. In particular, we identified amongst our respondents two broad pathways from care – those who had enjoyed a relative smooth pathway from care and those young people who had experienced a significantly more problematic or volatile transition. While we have discussed in detail elsewhere some of the key findings in relation to these care leavers (see Johnson et al, 2010; Thoresen and Liddiard 2011), it is nonetheless helpful to briefly reflect upon some of our key findings. It is certainly notable that some three-quarters (77%) of the young care leavers we interviewed can best be described as having experienced a ‘volatile’ or ‘problematic’ transition from care, often characterised by homelessness and serious housing difficulties. The fact that such a significant majority of our respondents had experienced a problematic transition from care is obviously a cause for concern and we identified a number of contributing factors.

The work of Cashmore and Paxman (2006) and others have already identified a high number of care placements as a contributing factor in poor post-care outcomes and this was also reflected in our study. We were concerned to discover that approximately a third of our respondents had experienced more than 11 care placements, and some had experienced more than 50 placements, which obviously has the potential to seriously impact upon notions of stability and security. It is perhaps unsurprising that a high number of placements did appear to be related to whether or not our respondents experienced a smooth or volatile transition (Johnson et al., 2010).

Preparation for leaving care has also been identified by others (Cashmore and Mendes 2008) as potentially pivotal in navigating a successful route to independence. It was of real concern that just 26% of our participants said that they had a leaving care plan and an additional 19% were unsure whether or not they had a leaving care plan which, in itself, is revealing. In contrast, 55% said that they had no leaving care plan. The lack of proper exit planning is a deep concern, not least because it compounds young people’s vulnerability in an already difficult housing and labour market. It is, however, important to acknowledge that there is considerable variation here and care leavers appear to be far more prepared for some challenges of independent living than others, as the following table illustrates:

Table 1: Preparedness for leaving care

	Not at all prepared	Not very well prepared	Somewhat prepared	Very prepared
How prepared were you for getting a job ^a	37.3	28.0	20.0	14.7
How prepared were you for managing money ^a	36.0	25.3	21.3	17.3
How prepared were you for getting health information ^b	25.7	14.9	18.9	40.5
How prepared were you for obtaining housing ^b	43.2	25.7	20.3	10.8
How prepared were you for obtaining transportation ^c	20.5	6.8	21.9	49.3
How prepared were you for obtaining resources ^c	15.1	26.0	35.6	23.3
How prepared were you for obtaining personal health records ^c	52.1	11.0	17.8	19.2
How prepared were you for obtaining welfare assistance ^b	13.5	13.5	32.4	40.5
How prepared were you for living on your own ^d	29.2	18.1	31.9	20.8
How prepared were you for parenting ^{b†}	24.3	13.5	14.9	12.2
How prepared were you for obtaining information on contraception ^e	11.6	8.7	18.8	60.9
How prepared were you for obtaining information on drugs and alcohol ^f	11.3	14.1	19.7	54.9
Regarding shopping ^c	20.5	12.3	20.5	46.6
Regarding cooking ^b	20.3	10.8	21.6	47.3
Regarding housekeeping ^b	13.5	4.1	27.0	55.4

Notes: All figures in percent; ^an=75; ^bn=74; ^cn=73; ^dn=72; ^en=69; ^fn=71; [†]There were some inconsistencies among the interviewers when asking this question: n/a was assigned to 35.1% of the responses in the cases where the participant was not a parent while another interviewer rephrased the question: “If you had become a parent, how prepared would you have been”.

While some young people leaving care considered themselves very prepared for some aspects of independence - such as obtaining information on contraception or drugs and alcohol – at the same time they were simultaneously very poorly prepared for others aspects of independence, such as obtaining independent housing. The relevance of these issues is obviously open to debate and conjecture. Nonetheless, some measure of significance is indicated by the fact that the young people who had experienced a volatile or problematic transition from care were twice as likely to have had no leaving care plan as those who experienced a smooth transition to independence (Johnson et al., 2010).

A number of other issues were also notable, such as the low level of educational attainment amongst our respondents. More than half of our respondents had not gone beyond year 10, and some had only completed a few years of primary school. The care leavers we interviewed were about three times more likely to have not completed year 10 and twice as likely to have not completed year 12 than the general population as measured from the 2006 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Of course, this point is important because education is closely related to employment opportunities and consequent disposable income, all of which impact upon housing options.

In short, these issues all compound the vulnerability of young care leavers in the Australian housing market. It is fair to say that many young people face considerable difficulties in accessing affordable housing in Australia. For the majority, home ownership is not financially feasible, while they are also often excluded from public or social housing by virtue of strict eligibility criteria. For most, the only viable option is the private rental sector, but this housing tenure is often prohibitively expensively. It is, in other words, a considerable challenge for most young people to both obtain and maintain independent housing and, as we discovered in this research project, these challenges are compounded for young care leavers.

While the combined effects of their pre-care, in care and post care experiences left many care leavers vulnerable to homelessness and housing instability, it is interesting to note that after a difficult start many care leavers nonetheless managed to move on with their lives and navigate a route to successful independence. In other words, whilst three quarters of our respondents had experienced a volatile or problematic transition from care, leading to serious housing problems and homelessness, it is important to recognise that these housing pathways are not static. On the contrary, they can be very fluid. Of particular interest were the 25 young people who were identified as having experienced a volatile or problematic transition from care but were nonetheless securely housed when we interviewed them. In light of the fact that these young people had moved on and their circumstances had been transformed in various ways, it is particularly interesting to consider what made a difference in moving towards successful independence. Following detailed analysis of the interviews with these young people, several key themes emerged as significant in explaining how some young people were able to respond to a difficult transition from care and then move towards successful independence: individual agency; improved family relationships; professional support and finding work.

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

There is sometimes a tendency in writing about young homeless people or care leavers to portray them almost as passive victims of structural disadvantage. Certainly, care leavers and even young people in general are often faced with significant challenges in terms of housing or labour market dynamics. Securing appropriate and affordable housing was a crucial ingredient for these young people if they were to focus upon and overcome the issues that had made their lives so challenging. Indeed, the extent to which young people were able to exercise any modicum of control over their lives was sometimes heavily dependent upon broader circumstances, in particular the opportunity to access appropriate external resources. However, it is misleading to portray young care leavers as somehow passive victims. On the contrary, they often exercise a remarkable degree of self-determination in seeking to shape their own destiny, sometimes for better or for worse. It was certainly intriguing that one key feature of those who were moving on from a problematic start was the agency of young people themselves and, more specifically, the positive focus and direction of their agency. Moving on was often connected to a strong desire for a better life. In short, for some of the care leavers we spoke to, there was a strong sense of the need to take control of their lives, fuelled by a desire for something better. These young people often displayed incredible determination,

persistence and resilience to turn their lives around, something they were intensely proud of. John told us that he saw:

'a lot of people just sitting back and waiting for things to happen, waiting for it to be handed to them on a silver platter. And I'm one that you've got to go out there and work for it... You throw me in any situation and I can deal with it, I think I'm just one of those types of people that okay it doesn't matter how bad it is I'll come out the other end' (Public housing).

Others were simply weary, exhausted and exasperated by their difficult experiences on leaving care, determined instead to see an improvement in their lives. Many of the young people we spoke to expressed varying degrees of anger about their circumstances and aspects of their support both in-care and post-care. For some, their desire for a better life was fuelled by a deep and tangible sense of anger. Indeed, for some young people, such as Bill, this anger was a powerful source of personal motivation:

'Strangely enough, people say anger's a useless emotion. My anger was what has driven me to get this far. Being so angry at the system, being so angry at my mother, and being so angry at public housing...' (Bill, post care supported accommodation).

Sometimes there were pivotal moments or experiences that encouraged young people to actively seize control over their lives and their circumstances. While there was considerable variation in the processes that resulted in those on the volatile pathway exercising a high degree of individual agency and seeking to move on with their lives, we found a number of factors that stood out among those whose housing circumstances were improving. One key issue was the impact of engaging with substance abuse.

Addressing substance abuse issues appeared to be pivotal for many of these young people, especially so given the high prevalence – 61% - of substance abuse amongst those care leavers who had experienced a volatile or problematic post-care housing pathway. The highly detrimental impact of substance abuse upon housing options has been noted before (Hutson and Liddiard 1994) and often serves to compound existing difficulties with obtaining and maintaining independent housing. Indeed, it is ironic that an identifiable substance abuse problem can sometimes exclude young homeless people from crisis or emergency accommodation, often because of the potential impact upon other clients, when they are the very client group most in need of assistance (Liddiard and Hutson 1991).

The fact that addressing issues of substance abuse appeared to be instrumental in successfully moving on is perhaps not surprising. After all, substance abuse can quickly lead to a chaotic deterioration in housing circumstance for many young people. What was perhaps more surprising was the significant influence of three other factors in successfully moving towards independence: improved family relationships; establishing meaningful relationships with professional support; and finding work.

IMPROVED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The precise nature of meaningful support differed significantly between care leavers. For some it was professional support and yet for others it was characterised simply by some modicum of improvement in family relationships, which in turn helped to instill a clear sense of stability and aided navigating the route to independence. Our findings indicate that care leavers who were able to draw upon financial or emotional support from their families upon leaving care were more likely to have a smooth transition to independent living than their counterparts who were unable to access such support (Johnson et al., 2010). In some ways, this is not a particularly surprising finding – after all, it has been long established that parental support can be pivotal in aiding the successful transition to adulthood. Indeed, most young Australians in the early 21st century continue to live with their parents until their mid-twenties (Cashmore and Mendes 2008), which is in some contrast to care leavers who are expected to successfully live independently at a younger age and with fewer support structures than their peers. What is more surprising, however, is the pivotal role that family support seemed to play for some care leavers in successfully establishing housing independence.

For many who had struggled since leaving care, it was notable that relationships with their families had gradually improved since they left care, which in turn had a positive impact upon their lives. Rachael reflected on the fact that, unlike the past, she could now rely on her family to provide her with assistance should any problems emerge:

'Mum at one stage I didn't want any contact with her but now my relationship with Mum is she's there for me and I'm there for her but ... when I was younger I just didn't want that added stress, because that's what it was, it wasn't support it was more stress' (Rachael, private rental).

Of course, this is not to say that all family problems and difficulties had necessarily been resolved. On the contrary, the background for many young people from care is one of strained and often innately difficult family relationships. Many of the respondents recognised that there were limits in how far relationships could be improved. John told us that:

'I still will never forget the stuff that's gone on and I'm just still very careful in what I say and how much contact I have with them because when it gets to a point where there's a lot of contact that's where shit still continues to happen so I just take it as it comes really, take it as it comes.'

Yet John also acknowledged that relationships with his family had gradually improved, which in turn had been a positive step in moving on:

'That's progressively building up ... Mum is a bit bizarre [laughter] I never understood where she comes from. But on dad's side of the family it's been a positive step. This year I'm going with them for Christmas day and things like that so it's progressively like as I've got older and we've spoken about a lot of things that happened in the past and what not.'

The point is that even fairly small improvements in family relationships often had a significant impact upon young people's ability to successfully move towards independence. Indeed, the importance of improved family life for offering support and instilling greater stability came through clearly, even if positive family experiences were sometimes with their partner's families:

'I had a boyfriend for a while who was really supportive and his family was really supportive and his mum sort of just took me under her wing and was really kind and she showed me like, I don't know it's the first house I've ever lived in where there wasn't yelling and arguments and hits and fights and screaming and things getting thrown, and she showed me just that life doesn't need to be like that, you know what I mean?' (Rachael, private rental).

Of course for a variety of reasons not all young people from care were able to enjoy improved relationships with their biological or step-families. For some this instead meant a key source of meaningful support was professional support workers, who were sometimes even seen as akin to family:

'Yes, I talk to her more than I talk to my own family. She pretty much classes me as her son and I know her network of people and they're really helpful.... it's easy because if you have the relationship then you pretty much can talk to them about anything' (Ryan, public housing).

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

With respect to professional support the participant's narratives were full of examples where support was inappropriate, insufficient, inflexible or judgmental. Many were angry at a system that they thought had failed them and had failed to understand why their circumstances were as they were. Kelly had a strong dislike of social workers who:

'come across like they're better than clients. It just makes me so angry because to me it's by the grace of god thing.'

Yet, through a combination of good fortune and their own persistence and determination, many had found support that was appropriate for them. A characteristic of good support relationships was the agencies and workers willingness to 'hang in there' – agencies that 'hang in there', often in spite of official requirements, implicitly recognise that moving forwards is rarely a smooth pathway but rather

one characterised by steps forward and the occasional step backwards. Where agencies 'hang in there' during both the good and bad times the possibility of overcoming distrust and anger and developing meaningful relationships is considerably higher.

Many of the participants who had good support noted that concrete, practical assistance was important. Kelly told us that her support worker was:

'Very helpful and she's very practical . . . there none of this emotional stuff she just gets it done'

While Ryan, who had maintained public housing for over seven months, said that his support worker was:

'Good support, so he helps out if I need food or if I need transport he'll pick me up. . They always want to help.'

Similarly, Sandra noted that her support worked because the worker was both 'persistent and consistent in trying to help'. In addition, assistance to both secure and maintain appropriate housing was regularly emphasised in the participant's narratives – workers who had a strong knowledge of the housing market, who knew how to provide assistance with applications and who also knew what resources were available to young people, received regular mentions. Sandra's statement illustrates the experiences of many who had moved on:

'I have a great housing worker . . . she helped me apply for \$1,600 rent assistance, a \$1,000 setting up expenses' (Sandra, private rental).

After having received comprehensive and appropriate assistance to secure housing, Sandra reflected on the difference that having a stable, affordable home made to her life:

'It made my life better, having the house I have now has made my life better.'

While stable housing is a critical element in addressing their difficulties, employment was also an important component in progressing onwards for these young people.

FINDING WORK

The relationship between homelessness and unemployment is a complex and multidimensional one – without stable housing it is difficult to even apply for a job, but without an income it is often difficult to find a place. Kelly succinctly summed up the tension between housing and employment:

'Yeah that was always when I was having trouble and growing up it was always about it, there was always a chicken in the egg like I haven't got anywhere to live, I haven't got a job and I've got all these court cases and I've got all this other stuff and you just don't know where to start. '

Kelly asserted the importance of having a place to call her own:

'Having somewhere to live has always been the most important part . . . cause then you can apply for jobs cause you've actually got an address.'

Others saw the problem differently. The nuanced links between homelessness and employment have been examined elsewhere (Wade and Dixon, 2006), and it was very clear from our interviews that unemployment was a critical constraint for some care leavers in being able to access affordable housing, especially in the face of stiff competition within the private rental sector. Amy believed that unemployment was one of two reasons why she kept missing out on properties:

'Unemployment I think that was a big one, so they were the two reasons [young age and unemployed], because I was competing with doctors, lawyers, families' (Currently in private rental).

Ironically, even for those young people who were able to secure employment in the first place, housing difficulties often detrimentally impacted upon their ability to maintain a job. Danny, who was living with his foster family, told us that after problems with his flatmates his:

'housing started getting a bit screwed up, and that's why I left the job because I was stressed about housing and I lost my temper at a worksite ... I quit and I just thought 'oh who cares', I wasn't in that frame of mind.'

The care experience itself was also identified by some respondents as undermining the necessary skills and attributes needed to obtain and maintain a job, such as self-confidence. Indeed, some argued that additional help and assistance with finding employment was crucial for young people from care:

'I think there should be like motivational helpers, like helping them with self esteem to get the job, because often people who have been fostered out have very low self esteem ... and I think it makes it harder for them to get a job because their self esteem is low' (Claire, in public housing for 12 months).

Whatever the damaging impact of the care system and poor housing upon their employment prospects, securing employment remained a key feature of moving on for some care leavers. Finding work brought not simply financial rewards, but also broader benefits, such as stability and self-esteem:

'Employment keeps you sane I reckon, like at one stage when life was getting tough the only thing that got me out of bed was work. When you work full time it keeps you out of trouble, it gives you something to do, gives you a reason to be good at night time and not go out and do certain things during the week. And it also does make your weekend more appreciable because you work so hard during the week. I suppose when you spend your money you feel better as well because it's your money, you worked for that money. So yeah employment is huge I reckon, my personal opinion' (Rachel, private rental).

Of course, the reality of life for many care leavers is that available employment is often low skilled and poorly paid. Nonetheless, for some young people moving on, it was notable that they viewed these jobs as means to an end, or as a vehicle for moving onwards, conscious that even poor jobs have the potential to lead somewhere more positive:

'As far as I am now, I am trying to work up in it (a job in a fast food takeaway)... When you're at the bottom it's really crap... but I'm trying to go up in it, so I can do part time management while I'm studying for the good management salary' (Bill, currently in accommodation supported by a post care support agency)

Coupled with increasing self confidence and an improved sense of self, many care leavers were starting to flourish. Care leavers lives can be turned around if they have access to the right resources. While each individual's motivation to change will vary, it was striking how many aspired to a normal life, a job, an education, a family, but without access to the sort of resources their peers often take for granted, they often did not know where to start.

CONCLUSION

For many care leavers, breaking the cycle of housing instability and homelessness and moving into secure housing was heavily compromised by a lack of support and the broader structure of the housing market. Nonetheless, half of those who experienced a volatile or problematic transition were 'moving on' – they had, often through their own persistence and determination, turned their circumstances around.

The policy implications are profound. There is clearly a pressing need for an increase in the supply of affordable housing for young care leavers – and young people more generally. Yet this is only part of the story. We can certainly see that some young people are able to respond to a difficult start to their independent housing careers with determination and a strong desire to improve their lives. For some, even fairly minimal improvements to their relationships with their family, had made a big difference. For others, good professional support, and a willingness to 'hang-in there' through both good and bad times, was instrumental in building trust and ensuring that practical and emotional support was still available to these young people when it was most needed. The importance of employment is often alluded to in discussions about youth homelessness, not least because it offers a source of income

that can then alleviate financial difficulties in simply being able to afford independent accommodation. However, it is also clear that the impact of employment upon young people's lives is considerably more nuanced than simply finance. Ultimately, these findings show that, far from being passive victims of structural disadvantage, young care leavers are instead often highly active in exercising individual agency and overcoming many of the additional challenges that they are presented with.

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