



Final Report

Pathways from out-of-home care

authored by

**Guy Johnson, Kristin Natalier, Phillip Mendes,
Mark Liddiard, Stian Thoresen, Andrew Hollows,
Naomi Bailey**

with assistance from Nola Kunnen and Reena Tiwari

for the

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ACRONYMS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Ltd.
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CRA	Commonwealth Rent Assistance
CSHA	Commonwealth State Housing Agreement
DCP	Department of Child Protection (WA)
DHS	Department of Human Services (Vic)
FaCSIA	Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
NAHA	National Affordable Housing Agreement
NPAH	National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness
NFPAC	National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children
NRAS	National Rental Affordability Scheme
SAAP	Supported Accommodation Assistance Program
STGS	Secure Tenancy Guarantee scheme
TILA	Transition to Independence Living Allowance
TSGS	Tenancy Security Guarantee Scheme
TTLA	Temporary or time limited accommodation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Housing is the main core of your life. It makes everything else work. (Francis, currently homeless.)

This project focuses on the housing experiences and outcomes of young people leaving state care. It is the first Australian study to specifically examine the connection between accommodation and young people's transition to independent living. The project aims to inform policy and service practice to promote positive and sustainable housing outcomes for young people ageing out of the state out-of-home care system.

The research is guided by the primary research question: Which support model(s) most effectively facilitate positive housing outcomes for young people leaving care? The project also responds to the following four linked questions:

- What are the housing experiences, needs and outcomes of care leavers?
- Do the accommodation experiences and needs of care leavers vary by the age people leave care and/or by biographical circumstances?
- What forms of housing assistance and transitional support are currently offered, and to what extent do care-leavers and service providers assess such assistance and support as effective?
- What are the minimum standards, best practices and policy options with respect to care leavers' housing needs?

The project contributes to current and future policy by:

- Identifying which accommodation options are best suited to meet the diverse needs of care leavers.
- Developing a best practice framework for integrating housing and transitional support services for care leavers.
- Identifying opportunities for integrated policy responses for care leavers, with a specific focus on appropriate housing and support programs assisting care leavers' transition to independence.
- Exploring the broader strategic housing implications that emerge from the research findings.

The research was conducted between early 2008 and late 2009 with the data being gathered between September 2008 and March 2009. Interviews were conducted with 77¹ young people who had been in state out-of-home care in Western Australia (n=35) and Victoria (n=42), in inner city, suburban and regional locations. Participants had to satisfy three criteria to be included in the study:

1. They had been in care at some stage in their lives.
2. They were no longer in care.
3. They were between 18-25 years of age. The age restriction was based on the reasoning that post-care services are a relatively new policy initiative in Australia and that care leavers over the age of 25 would not have had access to post-care support.

This project is significant in light of the poor housing outcomes experienced by young people leaving state care. It is well recognised that young people are severely

¹ We conducted 83 interviews, but five were excluded from the analysis because they did not satisfy the selection criteria.

disadvantaged by the structure of the housing market—their low wages relative to housing costs and high unemployment means that they have limited housing opportunities. For those with the least social and economic resources the consequences can be catastrophic. Care leavers are among the most vulnerable populations in our society—they have limited economic and social resources to draw on and consequently accessing and maintaining accommodation is one of the ‘most difficult tasks confronting care leavers’ (McDowall 2008, p.50).

Studies have shown that housing is a core element in the trajectories and life chances of young people leaving state care. Local and international research indicates that a lack of appropriate housing for care leavers contributes to disproportionately high rates of housing instability and homelessness among care leavers. In turn, housing instability is linked to high levels of drug and alcohol abuse (Maunder, Liddell, Liddell & Green 1999), poor mental and physical health (Cashmore & Paxman 1996) and considerable educational and employment deficits (Clare 2006). Identifying the needs of young people and responding with appropriate policies has the potential to improve the lives of young people leaving care.

The focus and findings of the project are also important from a policy perspective. Housing authorities around the country are under considerable pressure in light of the needs of vulnerable and low income households. In Australia, the Federal Government has implemented a range of programs to increase the supply of affordable housing (for example, the NAHA and NRAS), but these initiatives are unlikely to meet demand. States have also implemented and funded a range of post care support programs, but there remains limited dedicated housing available to care leavers. What accommodation there is, is often poorly configured to meet the varying needs of care leavers. The lack of accommodation and support options for care leavers has significant implications for both Federal and state governments who have agreed to increase the number of people who exit care into secure, affordable housing as part of a broader commitment to reducing homelessness and improve care leavers transition to independent living. The links between housing and the social and economic outcomes listed above remind us that housing policies will impact upon the demand for, and configuration of, a range of services. Bluntly, the life time cost due to poor outcomes among care leavers is estimated at \$738 741 per person (Forbes, Inder & Raman 2006)—costs that will be significantly reduced if care leavers had access to appropriate housing and support services.

Results

We identified two distinct pathways from care—those that had traveled a smooth pathway from care and those whose transition was volatile. The two pathways are typifications that simplify the diversity of the participants’ housing experiences in such a way that we can highlight more clearly the resources that enable some care leavers to gain a foothold on the housing ladder and the barriers that lead others to be excluded. They also highlight that while housing is a critical dimension in responding to care leavers’ needs, the presence of reliable, sustainable social relationships are equally important.

We found that those who had a smooth transition from care:

- Had few placements in care.
- Generally felt safe and secure in care.
- Felt involved in the planning process.
- Left care at a later age.

- Felt that they were better prepared for leaving care.
- Had a successful first placement, which facilitated a smoother transition from care.

The housing experiences and outcomes of those young people experiencing a smooth transition also tended to be described in positive ways:

- Spoke favourably about transitional arrangements, identifying the quality of the accommodation and support as a critical factor.
- Had important, reliable and consistent social attachments that provided resources that enabled them to access and maintain accommodation.
- Were able to use stable housing as a base from which to start engaging with employment, training and education opportunities.
- Had someone to fall back on if problems emerged.

In contrast, those whose transition from care was volatile were likely to have:

- Had a high number of placements in care.
- Experienced physical and/or sexual abuse prior to, or while they were in care.
- Rarely had an exit plan.
- Left care in crisis at a younger age.
- Been discharged into inappropriate accommodation, such as refuges or boarding houses.

The housing experiences and outcomes of those young people experiencing a volatile transition were marked by:

- Poor experiences of supported/transitional accommodation and specifically, being forced to share.
- Lack of professional support.
- Experienced a lack of privacy, safety and control over their accommodation.
- Substance abuse and mental health problems destabilising their housing.
- An absence of relationships offering resources that could be used to access and maintain housing. Their social networks were comprised of homeless and other marginalised young people, and many experienced profound difficulties in maintaining relationships. Young care leavers in this category were also mistrustful of care and other welfare systems.
- Lost accommodation because of harassment, violence and/or relationship breakdown.
- Had difficulties coping with newly found autonomy and independence.

However, we found that the circumstances of just over half of those who experienced a volatile transition from care were significantly improved and they appeared to be successfully navigating a route to independence. Addressing problematic substance abuse issues was vital. Those who were moving on typically had:

- Addressed their substance abuse issues.
- Developed improved relationships with their family.
- Found the right sort of support.
- Found work.

The different responses to leaving care reflect a complex interplay of care leavers' access to social and economic resources and their biographical experiences prior to, and while in care. However, the data indicate that their housing outcomes are fundamentally shaped by two factors—the structure of the housing market and the availability (or absence) of social relationships.

The first, the structure of the housing market, limits care leavers' access to stable, affordable and appropriate accommodation. The private rental market is seen as the natural and most common form of housing young people enter at the start of their housing careers, but young people in general are often disadvantaged in this tenure (Cobb-Clark 2008). In a tight rental market, young care leavers face particular problems—they are often discriminated against because of their age, their lack of experience, and the fact that they often have few financial resources to draw on (McDowall 2008). Young people view public housing as a realistic and appropriate option, but are often discouraged by long wait times, bureaucratic procedures to gain access, and often the quality and location of the accommodation. Supported housing options, such as transitional accommodation, are hard to come by, and often the program guidelines that structure transitional accommodation are inappropriate to their needs.

Problems maintaining accommodation are often explained due to a lack of income combined with high rents (Cobb-Clark 2008) and we certainly found this to be the case. For many young people this means that the only option is to search in areas where housing is cheaper. This comes at a price—cheaper areas are often far removed from public transport and work opportunities. As a result, young people can experience acute social isolation and many find it difficult to maintain their social networks. As a result, they do not have access to a range of resources that less disadvantaged young people are able to draw upon.

Social relationships are the second most important contributor to housing stability. Care leavers struggle to gain access and maintain accommodation because they lack economic resources and useful housing options, but they also often lack important social resources. Many have not maintained a relationship with their family of origin, or find it difficult to negotiate that relationship in positive ways. Few had on-going connections with foster carers. Many had struggled to maintain friendships in light of their moving through multiple placements and emotional trauma. Support workers were often marginal in their lives. A lack of connection had material consequences for housing: many care leavers had no-one from whom they could borrow money, receive household goods, seek advice and emotional support and ask for accommodation when their own housing broke down—housing instability and homelessness are common outcomes. In short, many of the young care leavers had no safety net when they struggled to compete in an already difficult housing market.

It is the way that the structure of the housing market intersects with care leavers' social and economic resources that produces both poor housing and non-housing outcomes.

Policy and practice recommendations

On the basis of the data and analysis we identify two key ways that improvements can be made in housing outcomes for care leavers.

Recommendation 1

Develop a leaving care framework that is specifically built upon four principles and seven minimum standards

The four key principles are:

1. A leaving care framework needs to be applied nationally.
2. Government must acknowledge their responsibility to young people as their corporate parent.
3. Any leaving care framework, including proposed legislation, must acknowledge broader Australian Government initiatives in fostering social inclusion and in enhancing and supporting human rights.
4. Leaving care arrangements must include a stronger focus on both building on care leavers' strengths and acknowledging where young people lack skills and resources.

These principles should guide the development of a set of minimum standards. The omission of any one of these standards would effectively undermine the integrity of a leaving care framework and risk generating negative housing and non-housing outcomes for young people leaving care. The seven minimum standards are:

1. Permanency planning should begin well before the formal exit from state care.
2. Leaving care arrangements need to have a well-developed leaving care plan with accommodation options clearly articulated. They should include a contingency plan should their housing arrangements break down.
3. Leaving care arrangements need to acknowledge a transition period where young people receive training in independent living skills, and are offered appropriate information and mentoring.
4. The needs of young people leaving care are assessed with reference to an agreed industry standard, such as the *Looking after Children* guideline as proposed in Queensland.
5. The principles and minimum standards supporting leaving care arrangements are supported by a quality assurance framework and clearly articulated standards of best practice.
6. Any response to the needs of young people leaving care requires the development of a joined-up approach (sometimes known as an integrated model of leaving-care support) for care leavers, reaching across policy areas and levels of government. Particular attention should be paid to creating linkages with drug and alcohol services, health services and employment and training services.
7. The provision of post-care support, periodic follow-up and assistance for young people when they leave care until a young person reaches 25 years of age.

Recommendation 2

Improving access to and maintaining housing

There is a pressing need for greater attention to the housing needs of care leavers. Care leavers have access to few housing options and they struggle to compete in the housing market as it is currently structured. The strategies listed below can address care leavers' housing difficulties and so improve both their housing and non-housing outcomes.

1. A *no discharge* policy to inappropriate accommodation should be implemented. This would put an end to the practice of *exiting* care leavers into crisis, refuge, boarding houses or other forms of temporary and inappropriate accommodation.

2. Increasing the supply of transitional accommodation specifically for care leavers. This would also include the option of converting transitional accommodation to a standard tenancy agreement once the person becomes independent.
3. Meeting the diverse needs of care leavers requires the development and funding of a continuum of housing options to supplement transitional housing. These may include:
 - Setting aside a percentage of public housing stock for direct access by care leavers.
 - Long term supported accommodation with support tailored to meet individual needs.
 - Models that allow young people to remain with foster carers when settled and redesignating placements as supported accommodation.
 - Accommodation and support models involving partnerships between leaving care services and housing associations.
 - Scattered site apartments where a young person lives on their own and rents from a landlord while receiving support services. Over time there would be a reduction in the level of supervision and support.
 - Supervised apartments located in an apartment building that may be owned or leased by the support agency. Live in staff provide supervision, counselling and support if required.

There are constraints on the amount of stock that housing authorities could set aside for care leavers, even though the number of care leavers is relatively small. Over time there is bound to be shortages in the amount of housing available to care leavers without continued growth. In recognition of this, the report proposes a demand side solution to meet the housing needs of care leavers.

Policy-makers should consider developing and implementing a Secure Tenancy Guarantee Scheme (STGS) scheme. An STGS would have the following characteristics:

- Federal funding.
- Universal coverage—all care leavers would be guaranteed access to the STGS.
- Assistance would be guaranteed to the age of 25.
- The STGS would be issued as a rent subsidy to care leavers, which ensures that care leavers pay no more than 25 per cent of their income for their housing, with the scheme making up the difference.
- The STGS would be available regardless of tenure—this would mean that some options, such as public housing, would be cost neutral.

Advantages of such a scheme include:

- Addressing the pressing issue of insufficient social housing stock. The numbers of people graduating from care is expected to increase significantly in the immediate future, at a rate that exceeds the availability of social housing stock. An STGS provides a demand-side solution to supply shortage.
- More tenure choice for care leavers. Care leavers have limited housing choices and are often forced to accept poor quality accommodation far removed from educational and employment opportunities due to affordability or availability issues. By providing care leavers with more tenure choice, they are less likely to be forced into inappropriate accommodation.

- Greater flexibility. Many care leavers experience tenure churning between the ages of 16-25 as they transition from care. Even though housing arrangements sometimes break down, once a person is 'discharged' from care they often have difficulty accessing support and resources. Being guaranteed housing income support until the age of 25 would provide care leavers the sort of financial resources they require to overcome rough periods during their transition from care.
- A more accurate reflection of the changing role parents play in their children's housing security in contemporary Australian society, where it is increasingly common for young people to live at home into their mid 20s.
- Funding and administration. As a federally-funded program, the STGS would be universal and avoid the idiosyncrasies of state-based child protection legislation. However, states have the infrastructure to administer a scheme.

Improving care leavers' housing outcomes requires the development of both supply and demand side responses. However, it is clear from the interviews that we undertook that improving care leavers housing outcomes will not be done through the provision of housing alone—certainly improving access to suitable housing is an important goal, but to assist care leavers to make a smooth transition to independent living, a broader range of housing opportunities must be augmented with improvements to the treatment of young people in care, their transition planning and their access to support once they leave care.

1 INTRODUCTION

About 1700 young people aged 15-17 years annually exit the Australian out-of-home care system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009). Some return to the family home while others move into independent living. Research consistently depicts care leavers as being particularly disadvantaged and as having significantly reduced life chances. Compared to most young people, they face considerable challenges in accessing educational, employment, housing and other opportunities. As a result, many care leavers experience periods of extended housing instability and homelessness which is linked to other negative outcomes such as drug and alcohol abuse, poor mental and physical health, involvement in the youth justice system, and educational and employment deficits (Frederick & Goddard 2006; Mendes 2005; Mendes 2009; Mendes, Moslehuddin & Goddard 2008).

In drawing this connection, we are not suggesting a simplistic causal relationship between any experiences of state care and poor later outcomes. Care leavers are a heterogeneous group and have varied backgrounds and experiences in terms of the type and extent of abuse or neglect, the age they enter care, their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, their in-care experiences, their developmental stage and needs when exiting care, and the quantity and quality of supports available to them. But it is the structural disadvantages experienced by care leavers compared to other young people that leave them more vulnerable to these outcomes (Stein 2004, p.53; Broad 2005, p.14-16).

Housing is a particularly important dimension in the experiences of care leavers and policy responses to their needs. The provision of safe, secure and affordable accommodation is a crucial component of any successful transition from care to independent living, and is closely linked to positive outcomes in health, social connections, education and employment (Cashmore & Paxman 2006b). It comes as little surprise that housing is also a critical element in young peoples' transition from care. When their housing needs are appropriately met, care leavers are more likely to experience an enhanced sense of well-being, and educational and employment success (Wade & Dixon 2006). Consequently, assisting young people with their housing needs is a crucial element in the overall process of improving a range of outcomes for care leavers and, ultimately, in assisting them to make a successful transition to independent living.

However, the structure of the housing market means that young people generally, and care leavers more specifically, have limited housing opportunities. The private rental market is expensive and vacancy rates across the country are low. Young people are often excluded because of their age and their lack of experience in the housing market. Getting into public housing is also difficult—there are long wait times and the stock that is available is often inappropriate for young people. While there is a range of current policy initiatives designed to increase the supply of affordable housing (see Chapter 2) these are likely to have little direct impact on improving care leavers' housing opportunities. The difficulties that care leavers have accessing and maintaining appropriate accommodation are further compounded by their experiences in care and the lack of social and economic resources available to them. Unlike their peers, many care leavers can call on little, if any, direct family support or other community networks to ease their involvement into independent living (Mendes 2005).

In addition to these disadvantages, many young people currently experience an abrupt end at 16-18 years of age to the formal support networks of state care (Stein 2006). Care leavers are expected to transition directly from childhood dependence to adult self-sufficiency in contrast to most young people who experience a delayed

adulthood whereby many continue to live with their parents until their mid-twenties, often after several attempts to leave the family home (ABS 2009; Vassallo et al. 2009; Cashmore & Mendes 2008; London 2004; Mendes 2005).

The difficulties that care leavers face in making the transition from care to independent living have been recognised by most states and territories which have introduced specialist leaving care and after care programs and some specific housing programs. It was also directly recognised in the Federal Labor Government's white paper on homelessness. The Road Home report specifically identifies the prevention of young people leaving custodial and statutory care exiting into homelessness as a key goal (FaHCSIA 2008, p.27). This commitment was reinforced in the COAG Child Protection Framework (Council of Australian Governments 2009, p.27).

While child protection authorities in Australia have been slow to implement transition planning and post-care support, these authorities now recognise the role of government in assisting young people leaving care to make a 'smooth transition to adulthood' (Department of Education and Skills 2006 p.84). States as corporate parents have begun to acknowledge the importance of a coordinated whole-of-government response to, and responsibility for, the needs of care leavers across a range of areas and beyond the age of 18. This coordination extends not just to health, education, finances, psychological and emotional wellbeing, but also to housing.

However, in most states and territories few discrete housing options exist for care leavers and there is only limited information on the impact of post-care housing programs on outcomes for care leavers. Feedback on services introduced in Australia (e.g. St Lukes Anglicare in Bendigo and the Victorian Leaving Care Housing and Support Initiative), the UK and the US suggest that models of supported accommodation backed by designated funding can assist care leavers to access secure and safe housing. But we still need to know more about the framework of existing housing support services in terms of how they fit with other post-care supports, which groups of care leavers qualify for support, and their effectiveness in meeting the needs of care leavers presenting with different backgrounds and needs. In short, we need a better understanding of care leavers' needs and aspirations in relation to housing, and how these needs and aspirations intersect with their current housing opportunities and the social and economic resources available to them.

1.1 Project aims

Responding to the lack of information in Australia on the effectiveness of leaving care programs generally, and the role of housing in leaving care programs more specifically, the aim of this report is to:

- Provide an understanding of the housing experiences, needs and outcomes of care leavers.
- Determine whether the accommodation experiences and needs of care leavers vary by the age people leave care and/or by biographical circumstances.
- Ascertain what forms of housing assistance and transitional support are currently offered, and to what extent care leavers and service providers assess such assistance and support as effective.
- Provide knowledge about minimum standards, best practices and policy options with respect to care leavers' housing needs.

This study is the first in Australia to look specifically at the different housing needs of care leavers as part of their overall transition experience. The study recognises that housing is not the only area where care leavers require assistance, but that it is a

crucial area nonetheless. To this end, this research conducted in-depth interviews with care leavers to gain a better understanding of the resources they require to secure safe, affordable housing, whether an improvement in housing outcomes enabled improvements in wellbeing and other areas of care leavers' lives, and finally what barriers care leavers encounter gaining and maintaining accommodation.

1.2 Structure of the report

Chapter 2 identifies the policy context in which this study sits. It also provides a review of local and international evidences of the outcomes (housing and non-housing) associated with young people leaving care. This section also summarises local and international evidence on the effectiveness of leaving care programs.

Chapter 3 outlines the methods used in this study and provides an overview of the sample's characteristics. It also identifies the pathways approach we use to frame the subsequent analysis. Two pathways from care are identified. The first is where individuals have a smooth transition from care. There are 18 people on this pathway. The second pathway is where individuals have a volatile or problematic transition from care. There were 59 people on this pathway.

Chapter 4 examines the similarities and differences of the participants' experiences on each pathway with respect to their experiences in care; their experiences of leaving care, including the planning process; the support they received; how they felt about leaving care; what housing options were available to them, and what barriers they encountered gaining access to housing. This chapter is included in recognition of the fact that in care experiences often influence post care outcomes.

In Chapter 5 we examine the pathways that people travelled from care to their current housing arrangements. While there was much diversity, people who had a smooth transition typically left care at a later age and had access to crucial social and economic resources that enabled them to gain access to, and maintain their housing. In contrast, those people whose transition from care was volatile tended to have multiple placements in care, leave care earlier with little planning, and have few social relationships. Some of those who had a volatile transition were still mired in precarious social circumstances, but for others their circumstances had improved considerably. The chapter examines the housing experiences of the participants on both pathways. It shows that access to housing is one of the biggest challenges for care leavers and that existing housing options are poorly designed to meet care leavers' needs and often contribute further to poor non-housing outcomes.

Chapter 6 outlines a leaving care framework with specific emphasis on the principles and the minimum standards that should support such a framework. Following this we identify a range of options that would increase care leavers' access to housing and assist them maintain their accommodation.

We present our concluding comments in Chapter 7.

2 BACKGROUND

Evidence of care leavers' outcomes and the effectiveness of leaving care programs were examined in detail and reported on in an AHURI positioning paper (Johnson et al. 2009). This chapter provides an update on the current Australian policy context as well as a summary of key international and local findings with respect to care leavers' housing outcomes, their non-housing outcomes, improving care leavers' outcomes and the effectiveness of leaving care programs.

2.1 Policy context

There were 31 166 young people in out of home care in Australia on 30 June 2008 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009), an increase of seven per cent from the previous year and more than double the number from a decade ago (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009, p.57,62). The estimated recurrent expenditure on child protection and out-of-home care in Australia was \$2 billion in 2007/2008, a increase of 13.5 per cent from the previous year (Council of Australian Governments 2009, p.6,fn2).

2.1.1 National policy frameworks.

Housing, homelessness and child protection policy in Australia has undergone significant reform in the last 18 months. Although child protection services are the responsibility of state governments, issues relating to care leavers' transition to independent living often involve many government departments, both state and Federal. Nonetheless, two policy frameworks are particularly important. The first is the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020* (NFPAC) and the second is the *National Affordable Housing Agreement* (NAHA).

The NFPAC was endorsed by the Council of Australian Government's (COAG) meeting on 30 April 2009. It is to be delivered through a series of three year plans. The principle focus is on prevention and early intervention. With respect to leaving care services, the NFPAC aims to:

1. Increase support through NGOs for young people leaving care to establish their independence (Council of Australian Governments 2009, p.27).
2. Continue and improve state and territory initiatives targeting young people leaving care (Council of Australian Governments 2009, p.27).

With respect to housing, the NFPAC strategy of 'expanding housing and homeless services for families and children at-risk' (p.23) is delivered through the *National Affordable Housing Agreement*. The NAHA replaced the *Commonwealth State Housing Agreement* (CSHA) in January 2009 and also the *Supported Accommodation Assistance Program* (SAAP), which was the key source of funding for those at risk of, or already experiencing, homelessness.

The objectives of the NAHA are that all Australians have access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing. The NAHA is committed to securing sustainable housing and social inclusion for those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Four national partnership agreements between the state and territories and the Commonwealth Government set out the strategies and outcomes identified in the NAHA. The four partnership agreements are:

1. Nation Building

As part of the Nation Building economic stimulus plan, an additional \$6 billion was allocated for the construction of new social housing over the next three-years with

an additional \$400 million for repairs and maintenance. This amount has subsequently been reduced by \$750 million.

2. Social Housing

This agreement provides for capital funding for the construction of up to 2100 new dwellings by 2009-10.

3. Remote Indigenous Housing

The Remote Indigenous Housing agreement provides for capital funding for the construction of up to 4200 new homes and repairs to 4800 houses.

4. National Partnership on Homelessness

With respect to reducing homelessness among care leavers, the NFPAC is delivered through the fourth partnership, the *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness* (NPAH). The *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness* outlines a joint commitment between states, territory and commonwealth governments to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness by half by 2020 and to reduce the number of people sleeping rough. With respect to leaving care, the *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness* articulates a policy goal of no exits into homelessness from statutory care. The partnership identifies a 25 per cent reduction by 2013 in the number of young people leaving care (to 3552)².

The NFPAC goal of 'expanding housing and homeless services for families and children at-risk' (Council of Australian Governments 2009, p.23) includes three additional actions that are also to be delivered through the *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness*. These are:

1. Additional services for up to 2250 families at risk through the HOME Advise Program.
2. Additional specialist support to children who are homeless, including closer links between homelessness and child protection services.
3. Early intervention and prevention services for up to an additional 9000 young people aged 12-18 years at risk of homelessness to remain connected with families (where appropriate), education, training and employment.

The NFPAC also identifies the expansion of 'models of integrated support to enable women and children experiencing domestic and family violence to remain safely at home' (Council of Australian Governments 2009:22). These services will also be delivered through the *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness*.

In addition, on 30 April 2009, the Transition to Independence Living Allowance (TILA) allowance was increased from \$1000 to \$1500 effective from 1 July 2009.

2.2 What we know

Care leavers are a heterogeneous group and not all of them experience poor outcomes. This raises the question of why there are marked differences in what happens to young people when they leave care. And, more specifically, what are the factors that enable some young people to make a smooth and successful transition to independent living, when others in similar social and economic circumstances do not.

² It is unclear where the figure comes from. Further, it appears to refer to 'support periods', not individuals, and there may be some double counting as a result. It also ignores the point that some care leavers experience homelessness well after they have left care, although they may not have exited directly into the homeless population.

In the following sections we summarise key international and local findings in four areas. These are:

1. Housing outcomes.
2. Non-housing outcomes.
3. Improving outcomes.
4. Leaving care program outcomes.

2.2.1 Housing outcomes

With respect to the housing needs and outcomes of care leavers, international and Australian studies repeatedly show that structural barriers in the housing market are fundamental to care leavers' struggle to access and maintain accommodation. The struggle to access and/or maintain accommodation is a key factor contributing to care leavers' poor outcomes.

Research also shows that the first post care placement is particularly important (Wade & Dixon 2006) yet, because of poor planning processes and the structural characteristics of the housing market, care leavers are often discharged into inappropriate accommodation such as boarding houses and refuges designed for homeless young people (McDowall 2009). When care leavers do manage to secure accommodation it is often poorly located, expensive relative to their income (Cobb-Clark 2008), and of a poor quality, which is linked to a range of negative outcomes including poor health, lower self esteem and diminished social networks (Wade & Dixon 2006).

Not only are housing options for care leavers limited in terms of their availability, but also in terms of the way they are configured—most of the housing that has been set aside for care leavers is transitional in nature and often it is shared with someone else. While these arrangements may work well for some, for others they may well be inappropriate. This emphasises the point made by Kroner that 'no one living arrangement works for all youth' (2007, p.68).

2.2.2 Non housing outcomes

International and Australian studies consistently show that poor outcomes are linked to young people's experiences prior to, and while they are in care. Particular subgroups of care leavers are more vulnerable and likely to end up without adequate housing. These include young people who have had multiple placements while in care (Cashmore & Paxman 2006b; Bromfield & Osborn 2007); those that leave care at a younger age (Wade & Dixon 2006; Cashmore & Paxman 2006a); young people who experience sexual or physical abuse and/or trauma prior to care (Department of Education and Skills 2006; Green, Brueckner & Saggars 2007); and young people who have been in residential care (Department of Education and Skills 2006; Dumaret 2008).

The financial and emotional costs of failing to assist care leavers make a smooth transition from care is significant. The lifetime cost due to poor outcomes among care leavers is estimated at \$738 741 per care leaver (Forbes, Inder, & Raman 2006). Compared to their peers, care leavers have poorer physical health and report higher rates of substance abuse problems (Mendes 2005, 2009; Mendes, Moslehuddin & Goddard 2008). Care leavers are also more likely to become involved in prostitution than their peers (Child Wise 2004; Roman & Wolfe 1997) and have lower levels of educational attainment (Daining & DePanfilis 2007; Freundlich & Avery 2005; Mendes 2005, 2009; Pinkerton 2006).

2.2.3 Improving outcomes

Research has consistently identified a number of critical areas where care leavers' needs are not being met and that need to be met if they are to make a successful transition to adult life (Stein 1997). In a series of discussions of the characteristics of successful support for care leavers in the UK, Stein (1997) argues that leaving care support services do best when they are focused on accommodation, social support, and the financial needs of young people leaving care.

Leaving care support services are also more successful when they meet care leavers' needs through a variety of means, including advice, counselling, group work and drop-in facilities. Services also work when they actively involve young people in making decisions about their lives, rather than imposing goals and programs upon them. Stein (1997) also pointed to the importance of joined-up approaches and inter-agency collaboration. Research also shows that those who have established supportive networks around them in the period after leaving care do better (Cashmore & Paxman 2006a).

2.2.4 Leaving care program outcomes

One strategy that has been developed in response to the evidence that shows care leavers often lack the social and economic resources to live independently has been to implement programs to support care leavers in their transition to independence. The basic premise of these programs is that care leavers who receive post-care support will experience a smoother transition to self-sufficiency (Montgomery et al. 2006, p.1437).

The relationship between care leavers' accommodation needs and their post care outcomes is complex. Often care leavers' outcomes are more strongly influenced by their experiences prior to, or while in care, than the type or intensity of the services they receive afterwards. Nonetheless, a review of research in this field, primarily from the US, show that participants in leaving care programs typically do better than non-participants in terms of their education (Scannapieco, Schagrin & Scannapieco 1995), their employment (Lindsey & Ahmed 1999), their housing (Harding & Luft 1993) and their health (Lemon, Hines & Merdinger 2005).

2.3 Conclusion

It is clear that, compared to their peers, care leavers' opportunities are much more limited and the chances of experiencing poor outcomes much higher. This is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon but one that affects care leavers in most developed nations (Stein 2008). While there has been a great deal of research documenting the poor outcomes of care leavers, the role and importance of housing is rarely investigated in any systematic manner. While many studies identify accommodation as one of the key issues facing care leavers, few actually examine how the varying needs of care leavers relate to different housing requirements in terms of location, cost and style (shared or group living, subsidised housing, semi-supported; a continuum of living arrangements). This sort of information, along with the ways that housing and support should be connected to meet the varying needs and experiences of care leavers is crucial if post-care programs are to achieve their aim of assisting young people to make a smooth transition to independent living.

3 STUDY DESIGN

This chapter describes the study design. It details the scope, strengths and limitations of the qualitative methods used to generate data, and the characteristics of the sample. It also introduces the analytic framework of housing pathways that highlights the resources that enable some care leavers to secure appropriate housing and the barriers that result in housing exclusion for others.

3.1 Qualitative methods

In the first part of this study we drew upon a literature review focusing on the effectiveness of leaving care programs, with a specific interest in the housing outcomes of care leavers who received post care support services (see Johnson et. al. 2009). The review highlighted that despite a large amount of material documenting the poor housing (and non-housing) outcomes of care leavers surprisingly little is known about the views, beliefs and needs that underpins care leavers' behaviour in relation to their housing. Qualitative techniques—and in particular, in-depth, semi-structured interviews—are a particularly effective means of eliciting this type of data.

Our analytic framework also determined our methodological approach. We approached young care leavers' experiences using Clapham's (2005) conceptualisation of housing pathways—this is discussed in more detail later in the chapter. Briefly, a pathways approach acknowledges the interaction of social structures and individual agency and addresses material, interpretive and interactional dimensions of housing. Clapham (2005, p.243) notes that in practice, studies will, of necessity, emphasise some dimensions at the expense of others. Thus, no one single research method is ideal for a pathways approach, although Clapham (2005) himself favours a combination of discourse analysis and biographic history, as a way of identifying 'discourse in action'.

We chose to adopt a qualitative methodology and used in-depth and semi-structured interviews that focus on housing and biographical histories and understandings of young care leavers (see also Pinkney & Ewing 2006, p.95; May 2000). We interviewed 77 young people who had previously been in care.

The interviews were guided by five themes to capture the housing experiences and needs of care leavers. The five areas were:

- Young people's housing histories (including their current housing).
- Young people's accommodation immediately after leaving care.
- Young people's experiences (both housing and non-housing) since leaving care.
- Young people's experiences in care.
- General information about key relationships, their finances and what *home* meant to them.

The five themes assisted the sharing of material and symbolic dimensions of housing and allowed us to develop a holistic approach to care leavers' housing pathways. In the interviews, young people discussed their housing and life experiences with reference to their emotional responses and interpretations. The material consequences of their interactions with structures, institutions and housing were important, but the significance of these often arose out of subjective and expressive dimensions.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews are particularly useful for this study. First, such interviews generate data that present contextualised accounts of the experiences and housing outcomes identified in the literature; the young people in the study have the opportunity to make connections between issues that might otherwise be treated in isolation. Second, interviews offer respondents a greater opportunity to discuss issues that they feel are important, but may not have been identified as significant in existing studies. Participants have the option to question the researcher's assumptions, qualify received wisdoms, and re-define conventional categories; the interviewer can refine the focus on the interview schedule in response to these challenges. Third, the size of the sample has helped to identify common and divergent housing experiences, pathways and resources and needs. Fourth, interview data facilitate the identification of processes, changing relationships and social meanings that are not easily captured using closed questionnaires or surveys.

We collected a small amount of demographic data, as well as basic information such as the age that participants went into care and the age they left care. We collected quantitative data through a four point scale on young peoples' perception of their experiences in care and their degree of preparedness for independent living at the point of leaving care.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were recorded with participants' consent and fully transcribed. Ethics approval for the study was received from RMIT University and Curtin University.

We used inductive techniques to analyse the data. We identified key themes and processes as they were evident in the data, rather than imposing pre-existing codes. Through this process, we identified commonalities in in-care and leaving care experiences and categorised participants' experiences as one of two housing pathways—these are discussed in more detail later in the chapter. Throughout the report, direct quotes from participants are used to illustrate their experiences prior to care, in care and after care, with a particular focus on their housing experiences and needs. We have changed people's names and details to ensure their confidentiality. Socio-demographic and quantitative data have been used to provide a context for the themes emerging from the qualitative data. The size and nature of the sample mean that when tables are presented, their purpose is descriptive only—they are not used in the study to argue the existence or absence of statistically significant relationships between variables.

Interviews were conducted in Western Australia (n=35) and Victoria (n=42), in inner city, suburban and regional locations. We chose Victoria and Western Australia as sites for data collection because both states have recently introduced legislation and programs and have well-established NGO leaving care networks and providers. Thus, both states offer the opportunity to explore what works in responses to the needs and poor outcomes of young people leaving care. We made a decision to treat the Western Australian and Victorian participants as part of a single sample because of the similarities between the states; where variation exists between the states (in terms of implementation, practice and outcomes), we draw attention to this in the report.

Western Australia's current approach was established following earlier recommendations in various government reports. In 2003, WA introduced state-wide services for care leavers up to 25 years of age. These services are also supported by new legislation, the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*, which obliges the government to provide young people with social supports such as accommodation, education and training, employment assistance, and health and counselling services. Annual funding for the four leaving care services is approximately \$1.012 million (McDowall 2009, p.46).

Victoria's leaving care framework has its origins in a critical report from the Victorian Auditor General. The state government introduced a Leaving Care Service Model Project in 1998 that aimed to strengthen support for young people leaving care aged 14-18 years. However, this project did not lead to any specific funding for transitional or after-care programs. Later, the Office of Housing introduced housing and support programs in all regions including an Indigenous specific initiative managed by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. In addition, a mentoring program was provided for some care leavers (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2006). Victoria legislated via the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* for the provision of leaving care and after care services for young people up to 21 years of age. The Act obliges the government to assist care leavers with:

- finances
- housing
- education and training
- employment
- legal advice
- access to health and community services
- counselling and support.

The 2008-09 Victorian state budget allocated \$3.17 million growing to \$3.65 million recurrently to support care leavers that is in addition to the existing Office of Housing program funded annually to \$1.2 million (Trombin 2008). The Act appears to oblige the government to assist care leavers with finances, housing, education and training, employment, legal advice, access to health and community services, and counselling and support depending on the assessed level of need, and to consider the specific needs of Aboriginal young people. The government is currently establishing a Post Care Support, Referral and Information Service in each region (Trombin 2008).

In addition to in-depth interviews with young people who had left care, we also conducted three focus groups. The focus groups lasted for approximately two hours and provided information about the issues agencies faced, how they thought these issues may be resolved and what they saw as good (and bad) practice in relation to improving the housing outcomes of care leavers. We draw upon this information in Chapter 6.

As with any approach there are always limitations and the subsequent chapters must be read with reference to the following issues. First, our study is not longitudinal. Given that housing circumstances are not static, our discussion is referenced to the history and current situation of the participants, but these will change over time. Second, our sample does not include key groups of care leavers. We did not talk to care leavers who largely have no contact with any welfare system. We tried to extend our recruitment strategy beyond homeless and post-care support agencies, but it is likely that our sample was skewed towards those who had struggled making the transition to independent living. Additionally, we did not speak to young people who are currently institutionalised in prisons and psychiatric institutions. However, given our interest lies in what works and what does not work, such a sample is appropriate for our purposes. Finally, qualitative sampling is never 'representative' and consequently key findings do not take the form of typical profiles. Nevertheless, the size of the sample, and its distribution across different jurisdictions, means that the findings will be indicative of the processes, barriers and opportunities that care leavers

have been subject to. Ultimately, the aim of qualitative research is to identify and describe the processes involved in a particular issue (in this case, how care leavers have experienced their transition from care and their housing circumstances), rather than their distribution in a population (Rice & Ezzy 1999, p.43).

3.2 Sample characteristics

In order to elicit a wide range of housing experiences, participants were recruited from a variety of settings including homelessness services for young people, post care support services, through newspaper advertisements and word of mouth. Participants were included in the study if they satisfied three criteria: they had been in care at some stage in their lives; they were no longer in care; and they were aged between 18-25 years old. The age restriction was based on the reasoning that post-care services are a relatively new policy initiative in Australia and that care leavers over the age of 25 would not have had access to post-care support.

The key features of the total sample were as follows.

3.2.1 Demographic and social profile

- 52 per cent were male, 44 per cent female and 4 per cent transgender.
- Mean current age 20.5 years.
- 9 per cent were indigenous (5% in Victoria and 14% in WA).
- 71 per cent were single, 20 per cent were couples, 7 per cent single parent families and 3 per cent were dual parent families.
- 81 per cent were receiving government benefits:
 - 18 per cent Disability Support Pension
 - 34 per cent Youth Allowance
 - 25 per cent New Start Allowance
 - 4 per cent Sole Parent Benefit.
- 16 per cent were working either full or part time.
- 3 per cent had no income.
- 25 per cent reported they had been involved with the youth justice system.
- 53 per cent reported a substance abuse problem in their lives (67% in Victoria and 37% in WA).
- 43 per cent reported mental health problems at some stage in their lives (55% in Victoria and 29% in WA).
- 47 per cent had experienced physical or sexual abuse prior to or while in care.

3.2.2 Care experiences

- Mean age of first entry into care was 8.4 years.
- Average time in care was four years.
- 61 per cent left care when they were 17 or older.
- 65 per cent had completed year 10 or below.
- 14 per cent had a single placement in care.
- 40 per cent had 2-5 placements in care.

- 46 per cent had six or more placements while in care.
- 52 per cent had been in residential care³ (64% in Victoria and 37% in WA).
- 26 per cent could clearly recall having a leaving care plan.

3.2.3 Post care housing

- The average length of time people had been out of care was 3.9 years.
- 73 per cent had spent time living on the streets.
- First placement:
 - 42 per cent returned to their family
 - 25 per cent moved into temporary or time limited accommodation
 - 27 per cent became homeless
 - 6 per cent moved into private or public housing.
- Currently:
 - 45 per cent were currently living in secure accommodation. Of those who were in secure housing:
 - 28 per cent were living with their family (biological or foster)
 - 23 per cent were in public housing
 - 28 per cent were sharing in private rental
 - 17 per cent were in private rental on their own
 - 2 per cent were living in a caravan
 - 2 per cent were living with their partner's family
 - 29 per cent were currently living in temporary or time limited accommodation (TTLA)
 - 26 per cent were currently homeless.
- 51 per cent had been formally evicted.

3.3 Analytical framework

The participants' housing experiences since leaving care were extremely varied—there were cases where people were doing well following a smooth transition from care, others who were doing well after periods of housing instability, and some who were doing very poorly. However, our analysis indicates systematic similarities and differences within our sample; these have formed the basis of our analytic framework of housing pathways. We identified two pathways in our sample: the first we have termed a smooth transition from care and the second, a volatile transition.

3.3.1 Housing pathways

People's housing experiences are dynamic and often change. This presents social researchers with many challenges. Housing researchers have often used the idea of a housing career to capture the dynamic nature of housing, but this approach assumes a degree of *linearity* and *inevitability* in people housing circumstances (e.g. a

³ In this study, residential care refers to accommodating a small number of young people in a single property, supported by care workers.

progression from private rental through to home ownership). For young people in particular, these assumptions limit the usefulness of a housing career approach.

Housing and homelessness researchers now increasingly rely on the pathways idea (Clapham 2003; Frederick & Goddard 2006; Johnson, Gronda & Coutts 2008; Mallett, Rosenthal & Keys 2005; Weitzman, Knickman & Shinn 1990). Authors using the pathways metaphor have developed a number of typologies that characterise housing and homelessness histories. As a body of scholarship, pathways studies identify the importance of social structures and institutions and individual characteristics as part of a wide range of resources, barriers and risks that facilitate and undermine sustainable and appropriate housing for young people (e.g. Anderson 2001; Anderson & Christian 2003; Fitzpatrick 2000; Mallett et al. 2005) or specifically young people leaving care (Frederick & Goddard 2006; Morgan Disney and Associates Pty Ltd and Applied Economics Pty Ltd 2006; Stein 2006). The use of the pathways approach is predicated on the view that it provides a stronger insight into the factors, both structural and individual, that influence people's housing experiences. However, the factors that contribute to housing outcomes tend to be listed without extended analysis of how an individual's resources (or lack of resources), their interpretive framework and their structural positioning impact upon, and are shaped by, each other (c.f. May 2000; Cashmore & Paxman 2006a). In short, the literature only implicitly addresses the intersection of structure and agency.

In this study we deepen analysis by drawing upon Clapham's (2003, 2005) conceptualisation of housing pathways to explore these relationships and the interpellation of housing and life chances of young people leaving care. He defines a housing pathway as 'the continually changing set of relationship and interactions that [the household] experiences over time in its consumption of housing' (Clapham 2005, p.27). The approach incorporates movements through the housing market (physical structures, location, tenure) with households' (or, in this study, individuals') subjective understanding of their individual experience (e.g. emotional responses or expressive dimension of housing). The objective and subjective dimensions of housing are then analysed in the broader context of the interaction with other individuals and institutions. Critically, the pathways approach provides a means of illuminating 'not just the relative importance of biographic and structural factors but also their interaction' (Pinkney & Ewing 2006, p.86). An additional strength of the pathways approach is that it can be used to emphasise the similarities in some people's housing experiences and, at the same time, as a means for distinguishing differences.

Pinkney and Ewing (2006) have summarised the premises informing a pathways approach when it is applied to homelessness and housing instability. Fundamentally, homelessness is understood as a social process—it is a dynamic, holistic approach that acknowledges the interconnection of a range of structures, institutions and individual resources and interpretations, ideally tracing these relationships over time, to 'find common causal trajectories, beyond the patterns of entrances, exits and returns' (Pinkney & Ewing 2006, p.87). Within this approach, biography and structure are both important in shaping housing and homelessness histories and futures.

When applying a pathways approach to youth homelessness, Pinkney and Ewing (2006) emphasise the dynamics of interaction between the labour and housing markets, which place individuals in a position of multiple structural disadvantage (c.f. Clapham's 2003) approach is to analyse the discourses that construct services for homeless people, and the way that clients' and service providers interaction and respond to these discourses. Johnson et al. (2008) look at the way the biographical experiences and social resources of homeless people mediate their pathways through homelessness and influence the length of time they are homeless.

The pathways approach has been used, albeit sparingly, to examine young people's trajectories after leaving care. Stein (1997) uses the pathways approach to identify three categories of care leavers: those who 'move on', the 'strugglers' and the 'survivors'. These pathways are shaped by young people's experiences prior to and while in care, as well as the resources and opportunities they have on the point of leaving care. Those who 'move on' typically had more stability and continuity in their lives while in care, and their moving on was likely to have been planned. 'Survivors' had more disruptions in care, but they generally responded positively to any support or assistance they received once leaving care. The third group, *strugglers*, have had the most 'damaging pre-care experiences, and had numerous placements. On leaving care, this group were likely to be 'unemployed, become homeless and have great difficulty maintaining their accommodation' (p.302).

A preliminary analysis of the data highlighted problems with Stein's framework. We found that many of the participants who, under Stein's classification, would be classed as *survivors* had *moved on*. Similarly, there were cases where people appeared to have 'moved on', but had subsequently become homeless. Consequently, we adapted Stein's approach and focused more directly on their housing experiences since leaving care and the nature of their transition from care. Despite the diversity in people's housing experiences since leaving care, it was possible to discern two general pathways from care to their current housing circumstances: smooth and volatile transition.

We developed the typology of volatile and smooth pathways with reference to the distinctive intersections of structures, institutions and agency. The two pathways are typifications that simplify the diversity of the participants' housing experiences in such a way that we can highlight more clearly the resources that enable some care leavers to gain a foothold on the housing ladder and the barriers that lead others to be excluded. However, it is important to bear in mind that these categories are broad and overlapping, as is so often the case with qualitative work, and they may change. This is particularly evident when we consider the moving-on sub-group within the volatile pathway.

The use of pathways as a heuristic tool is also a relevant point when comparing the experiences of care leavers with the housing pathways of young people generally. Many young people, including those from privileged or stable backgrounds, experience changes in the tenure, stability, appropriateness, location and meaning of their housing; sometimes these changes are unexpected and may potentially destabilise other areas of their life. However, it is important to contextualise housing pathways: care leavers as a group are marked by social exclusion, poor life chances and disadvantaged backgrounds—many lack the resources and opportunities that are to be found in the youth population as a whole (acknowledging that other sub-populations experience different barriers and exclusions). Further, these characteristics arise in a particular context: the State is a corporate parent which is often failing in its duties to young people in and leaving care. While elements of housing and life experiences may be common in both the state care and family care populations, the context and individual and policy implications of care leavers' poor housing outcomes mark them as qualitatively as well as quantitatively different. The dynamics underpinning the pathways associated with one group may not be relevant to those of another group, even when some experiences are shared.

The pathways are a means of developing a holistic, sequenced and contextualised understanding of housing in the lives of young care leavers. They identify key interactions within each pathway but because this is a qualitative study, we cannot identify causal relationships or the relative significance of different factors—either

structural or biographical—in predicting housing outcomes (Pinkney & Ewing 2006, p.96).

Before we discuss the pathways in detail, it is worth reiterating that these typologies refer to a point in time. A housing pathways approach explicitly acknowledges on-going transformations of people's housing situation, but the practicalities of research require us to complete a study well before the housing stories of young people end. This point is linked to a second issue: we have categorised pathways with reference to key patterns in the data that highlight the intersection of structural and biographical elements in young care leavers' lives. Their identification and naming do not represent a judgement as to the success of their transition from care and housing situations because their housing pathways are on-going. This is particularly evident in the subgroup of care leavers within the volatile transition pathway whose lives and housing circumstances are now showing indications of greater stability.

3.3.2 Pathway 1: smooth transition

The first group we identify are young people who experience a relatively smooth transition from care. There are 18 participants (23%) whose pathway from care we characterise as smooth. Young people on this pathway experienced relatively high placement stability, and gradual exit from care that typically occurred at a later age. Critically, they are likely to have a secure, reliable and consistent attachment with a worker, family member or foster carer (see also Cashmore & Paxman 2006a). A qualitative methodology cannot identify the strength or direction of any relationship between 'felt security' (Cashmore & Paxman 2006a) and the nature of their care placement, but drawing on Cashmore & Paxman's (2006a) discussion, we suggest that stability in placement is an important but not sole pre-condition for felt security, which is an interpretive or subjective rather than objective dimension of young care leavers' experiences.

Security and stability in care are individual resources, components of agency within the pathways structure. They are also the basis for interactions with institutions. Jackson and Thomas (1999) note the importance of stability for continuing connections to schooling, health care and social relationships; Andersson (2005) identifies an on-going relationship with a parental figure as an important determinant of better outcomes for those in care. In this study we note that placements that are stable and feel secure have additional significance to the ending of state care. They offer a less fraught context for transition planning, one that may incorporate more meaningful strategies for post-care life, including identifying and securing housing—and continued support from workers and/or family beyond the period of state care. Wade and Dixon (2006) have noted the importance of planning and supported and delayed transitions in creating positive employment outcomes.

Our study indicates that these supports provide critical social and economic resources young people draw on to access housing and resolve problems that emerge during their transition from care. Their subsequent housing experiences were characterised by little housing instability, planned transitions between housing and no evidence of homelessness (although many had experienced homelessness while they were in care).

This is not to argue that the resources of care leavers' experiencing a smooth transition neutralise the disadvantages they face in the housing market and other related structures. The high costs of entering into and continuing in, and competition within, the private rental market, the discrimination against young people, and the potential instability of tenure may mean that housing is insecure; nor do personal, social and material resources counteract limited public housing or inappropriate

transitional accommodation. However, these biographical and structural elements create a different basis for engagement with housing that is very different to those experiencing the pathway we discuss next.

3.3.3 *Pathway 2: problematic transition*

The transition from care was problematic for a majority of the young people in our sample (n=59, or 77%). Their experiences in care and since leaving care are often chaotic, characterised by extreme instability and restricted housing opportunities.

Young people on this pathway typically have little stability in care and left care at a younger age, often in an abrupt manner with no planning. A small majority of the sub-sample felt safe in care, but the levels of satisfaction were much lower than those associated with secure pathways. The young people in this pathway typically did not develop trusting and on-going relationships with support workers or foster or biological families.

In-care experiences can undermine these young people's opportunities to develop resilience, life skills, social relationships and knowledge of how to engage with institutions that might help them get a job, find a house and, to a lesser extent, access resources. These young people also had attained lower levels of education, comparative to those who experienced a smooth transition, and so stood at a disadvantage: McDowall (2008, p.14) notes the importance of education as a determinant of *future life success*, and those with lower education levels are at a disadvantage when competing for employment. Their experiences are also the background to younger ages at which they leave care, which in turn reinforces the failures of transition planning. Thus, at the end of their care experiences, the young people experiencing a problematic transition have struggled to develop their individual resources and have not experienced useful interactions with institutions that may facilitate better housing outcomes.

Against this background, their first housing placement was often inappropriate (e.g. a youth refuge) and regularly broke down or was non-existent so that they exited straight into the homeless population. Some had managed to secure housing after leaving care, but all had been unable to sustain it because of affordability, quality, and relationship problems.

The disadvantages of insecure housing are compounded by few social and emotional resources to draw on, and limited economic resources—like the young people in other studies, those in volatile pathways relied on social security and experienced acute and chronic poverty (Cashmore & Mendes 2008; Courtney 2008; Gilligan 2008). Many experience prolonged bouts of homelessness and this often results in them becoming immersed in the homeless subculture where they develop social networks that hinder rather than assist them to regain housing.

Among the young people on this pathway, substance abuse and mental health problems are common and there is a high level of involvement in the criminal justice system relative to those who had a smooth transition—all factors associated with housing difficulties (Biehal & Wade 1999; Mendes & Moslehuddin 2007, p.8).

Our study does not aim to identify statistical relationships between the factors discussed in the previous paragraphs and the poor housing outcomes of young people in volatile pathways. Rather, we argue that the biographical histories and related individual resources (or lack thereof), compound the barriers to housing stability—young people's housing needs to be contextualised within intersecting disadvantages—and strengths—so that possible and appropriate supports may be developed.

Possibilities for intervention and policy change are perhaps more easily identified through a consideration of a sub-group of the volatile pathways: those who are experiencing a change in their housing and life circumstances and are now 'moving on'. About half of those on the volatile pathway (n=32) were now successfully navigating a route to independence. Often 'moving on' was underpinned by a strong motivation for a better future, but for this to happen access to housing and support was crucial. Many care leavers who had a volatile transition had substance abuse issues and this was often the most significant barrier they faced to moving on. When young people addressed their substance abuse issues, they had the opportunity to re-build meaningful social relationships with their families, friends or even professional supports. Not only had their housing circumstances improved, there were notable improvements in their involvement in work, training and education.

3.3.4 Current housing

Because we were interested in the participants' housing experiences and needs we also classified the participant's current housing as either secure, temporary and time limited accommodation (TTLA) or homeless (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Housing classification

<i>Housing classification</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Secure	Currently residing in public, social or private rental, or living with their family (biological or foster carers) or friends (share housing) on a permanent basis.
Temporary and Time Limited Accommodation (TTLA)	Currently residing in accommodation with a time and/or age limited lease. Accommodation that fits this criterion includes transitional accommodation; refuges and crisis accommodation.
Homeless	Currently sleeping rough, in a squat, couch surfing, living in a boarding house or any other form of overnight temporary accommodation (such as a hotel or a backpackers).

People may be living in the same or similar forms of housing, but they may have travelled different pathways to get there. For instance, as Table 1 shows, care leavers in both secure housing and TTLA are present in each pathway. This is a critical point as it clearly shows that among people who have experienced a volatile transition from care, their housing circumstances can improve if given the right support and assistance. This serves to remind us that the pathways idea is a heuristic device that helps to simplify complex realities, but that people's lives and housing circumstances are dynamic and they often move onto different pathways.

Table 1: Pathways from care by housing classification (%)

<i>Pathways</i>	<i>Smooth (n=18)</i>	<i>Volatile (n=59)</i>	<i>Total (N=77)</i>
Secure	56	42	45
TTLA	44	24	29
Homeless	-	34	26
TOTAL	100	100	100

Finally, because these housing classifications were gathered at a point-in-time they hide the fact that approximately three-quarters of the sample (76%) reported difficulties, often involving the loss of housing and periods of homelessness. In

comparison to their peers, care leavers' transition to independent living is notably tougher.

Finally, a note about the definition of homelessness we use. Although disagreement exists about the most appropriate way to define homelessness, policy-makers, advocates and researchers generally opt for the cultural definition of homelessness. This approach is based on the theoretical arguments of Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1992). The core idea underpinning the cultural definition is that there are shared community standards about the minimum accommodation that people can expect to achieve in contemporary society (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992). The minimum for a single person (or couple) is a small rental flat with a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom, and an element of security of tenure provided by a lease. This has led to the identification of primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness.

Primary homelessness includes all people without conventional accommodation, such as people living on the streets, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter.

Secondary homelessness includes people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another, including emergency accommodation.

Tertiary homelessness refers to people staying in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis, defined as 13 weeks or longer. They are homeless because their accommodation does not have the characteristics identified in the minimum community standard

However, if we had used the cultural definition, a small majority of the sample would currently be homeless (52%) and the vast majority (88%) would have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. While this underscores the poor housing circumstances of care leavers, it would have created difficulties analysing and interpreting the data. Most people in temporary or time limited accommodation (equivalent to secondary homeless) did not define themselves as homeless and recognised that their circumstances were much better than those who did identify themselves as homeless who typically were homeless in the most literal sense—e.g. they were sleeping rough, couch surfing or in temporary overnight accommodation.

3.4 Concluding comments

The qualitative methods used in this study have facilitated an inductive approach to analysing and conceptualising the experiences of young people leaving care. Specifically, the interviews highlight key differences in young people's post-care housing pathways. The discussion in the following chapters uses the typology of smooth and volatile pathways to highlight young people's housing experiences, needs and resources.

4 IN-CARE AND TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

In this chapter we report on the participants' experiences in care and at the point of leaving care. The chapter highlights the ways in which in-care experiences directly and indirectly influence post-care housing outcomes. The interviews indicate that strong social relationships developed in care are rare, but important for the emotional security and material resources they can provide. Those who experienced a smooth transition from care had higher rates of satisfaction with their placements and generally reported higher levels of preparedness on a range of dimensions of independent living. In contrast, many of the sample report unsettled and, at times, traumatic care placements. They have struggled to develop sustainable relationships and have not been able to develop or access important resources.

We also focus on the participants' experiences of leaving care, including the planning process, the support they received, how they felt about leaving care, what housing options were available to them, and what barriers they encountered gaining access to housing. This discussion highlights the ways in which planning for transition out of care has not systematically and effectively countered the housing barriers young people face.

Overall, the chapter indicates that for most young people in this study their time in state out-of-home care offered few opportunities to develop necessary relationships and the associated resources that would facilitate a smooth transition to independent living.

4.1 Safety, security and satisfaction in care

When the state takes on the role of parent the primary goal is to remove young people from unsafe and unsupportive environments and to provide them with a safe, secure and stable environment to enable them to reach their full potential. When foster care environments are not appropriate, young people are more likely to face poorer outcomes in their employment, training and education and housing (McDowall 2008, 2009).

Table 2 below shows the level of satisfaction with experiences in care. A small majority of people on both the smooth (54%) and volatile (58%) pathways felt safe and secure during their care experiences. Around two-thirds of young people who experienced a smooth transition were satisfied with their experiences in care, but this declines to half among those on the volatile pathway.

Table 2: Experiences of care by pathway from care (%)

	<i>Smooth</i> <i>(n=18)</i>	<i>Volatile</i> <i>(n=59)</i>	<i>TOTAL</i> <i>(N=77)</i>
Safe and secure ^a	53	58	57
Satisfied and very satisfied ^b	67	50	54

^a N = 74; ^b N=76;

In common with other studies, we found considerable variation in the stability and safety of participants' out-of-home care placements.

Table 3: Number of placements by pathway from care (%)

	<i>Smooth</i> <i>(n=18)</i>	<i>Volatile</i> <i>(n=59)</i>	<i>Total</i> <i>(N=77)</i>
Single	6	17	14
2-5	50	37	40
6-10	28	10	14
11-20	11	17	16
21 plus	6	19	16
TOTAL	100	100	100

The higher proportion of eleven or more placements among young people experiencing a volatile transition reflects previous work by Cashmore and Paxman (2006b) and Osborn and Bromfeild (2007). The data suggest that the State is often unable to provide a stable environment for young people. Even if we acknowledge that some of these moves were planned and in response to the needs of young people, overall, the data suggest 'that those in loco parentis are failing to provide the basic stability required by young people to promote their resilience' (Stein 2005, p.6).

Previous research has highlighted the flow on effects from unstable or unsafe care placements. Young people in this study suffered from the absence of felt security. Many of the young people in the study described a lack of connection with their carers. For some, this was a question of poor fit in their foster home, others were abused in either foster care or residential care, still others found themselves caught in eddies of family resentments, which made them feel uncomfortable and worthless. Jack remembers angrily:

We were just a fucking burden on the fucking family, and they let us know it too, we were that young and going through that, split us up and everything ... just left mate and never hung around. (Jack, Victoria, volatile pathway, currently homeless.)

Many also reported no real support from or connection with their workers. Young people described the alienating experience of multiple workers or workers whom they rarely saw. For example, Ryan remembers that:

I had a new worker every week so I never had constant support. ... I had one worker that was with me for quite a long time and then she got transferred to a different department and then I just didn't have contact with them at all, ... they wouldn't call me, if I needed anything I'd have to call them, ... it was very ... hard to go through life with no support from your technically legal guardian. (Ryan, WA, volatile pathway, currently in public housing.)

Ryan's experiences point to a number of issues. First, there is a lack of continuity in support. Second, young people often need to approach support workers for assistance, rather than have workers following up on their needs. Third, young people can be lost in the system. This last point means that young people are required to tell their stories multiple times, with no assurance of any follow up by workers. It is also likely that workers themselves struggle to meet the needs of the young people they are supporting.

Young people also feel betrayed when they are placed inappropriately, and this can lead to a lack of trust 'in people and in systems' (Elsley, Backett-Milburn & Jamieson 2007, p.18). Some young people found themselves in abusive or neglectful placements: experiences included sexual and physical abuse, drug use by foster

family, offering no money for transport, clothing or personal spending and limiting or ending a young person's social contacts. The people in this study eventually left or were removed from these placements, but in the process felt betrayed and mistrustful of the system. Bianca, a 19-year-old from Western Australia reported physical abuse before finally running away from the placement. Her complaints took four months to follow up on and led to her conclusion that:

... another problem DCP has is they tend to, they don't believe the children. They don't keep the children's confidentiality. ... They don't keep it. You're supposed, like every case, I've had so many case managers for the seven years I've been in care, so many of them. I think I've gone through about six or seven. And every single one of them never once kept my confidentiality. (Bianca, WA, smooth pathway, living with her family.)

The lack of felt security was particularly marked in the residential care experiences of the participants. Residential care is often reserved for the more complex cases and research indicates that young people who have been in residential care often fare worse than those who have solely been in foster or kinship care (Department of Education and Skills 2006; Dumaret 2008).⁴ For most, this type of accommodation did not result in any lasting peer or mentoring relationships. Some remembered supportive workers and some reported very negative experiences, but most described workers as physically present but emotionally and socially absent—workers are presented as people whose primary role was one of surveillance rather than support, counselling or protection. Kelly, a 25-year-old woman from Victoria who was in secure accommodation when we interviewed her, recently received her files from her time in care and noticed:

P: I've got all these workers' reports . . . Like each night while I was in care they were reporting how I was on drugs and they never spoke to me about it. Like I don't remember anyone saying to me, 'Are you on heroin right now, how do you feel about that, like what's going on?' They just used to go into their office write that I'm on it. Do their incident report and I'd get that years later.

I: So they didn't really engage with you?

P: Not in that level. It almost was like maybe that wasn't their role. Maybe they were there to just residentially look after me sort of thing. (Kelly, Victoria, volatile pathway, currently in private rental.)

No one reported an on-going relationship with residential care workers. A lack of felt security meant that, ontologically, young people did not feel at home in their world. It also meant that they felt uncomfortable about asking for assistance and consequently could not draw upon any material or emotional resources that might have been available.

You can't utilise all of the services in the areas 'cause if you start using the service and then you're going to move in six weeks, you got to go and fill out all the paperwork again. (Ian, Victoria, volatile pathway, currently homeless.)

High placement mobility also shapes education experiences and outcomes. Young people must negotiate new peer groups and curriculum changes, both of which are

⁴ Around half (52 per cent) of participants in this study had spend time in residential care. Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2009:48) indicates that about five per cent of young people in the care of the state live in a residential unit. The higher rate in our sample may reflect a sampling bias and/or that the AIHW data is a point-in-time count and consequently is likely to underestimate the number of young people who have *ever* been in a residential unit.

implicated in unfavourable attitudes towards school. It is hardly surprising that the education attainment of the participants was low, with only 40 per cent going beyond year 10 (Table 4). Those who had experienced smooth transitions to independent living attained higher educational achievements.

Table 4: Highest level of education by pathway from care (%)

	<i>Smooth</i> <i>(n=18)</i>	<i>Volatile</i> <i>(n=59)</i>	<i>TOTAL</i> <i>(N=77)</i>
Year 10 or below	39	58	53
Year 11 or above	50	37	40
Unsure	11	5	7
Total	100	100	100

Low educational attainment is associated with exclusion from the labour market and low income, both of which are associated with exclusion from housing markets.

The disruptions listed above are associated with poorer housing outcomes. As discussed below, connections with workers at the point of leaving care can assist young people in accessing and maintaining housing. Additionally, those who developed or maintained relationships with their family of origin or foster family can draw upon family resources for housing.

4.2 Preparing to leave care

The transition to adulthood is a difficult and challenging experience for all young people, but young people leaving state out-of-home care often have to do it in a shorter timeframe and with fewer resources than their peers (Mendes 2005; Cashmore & Mendes 2008). Stein calls this an ‘accelerated and compressed’ transition to adulthood (2006). The accelerated transition care leavers’ experience, in combination with their often complex needs, can make it difficult to manage the transition from care to independent living. Further, young people leaving state care have to manage multiple transitions—moving into new accommodation, leaving school, and becoming financially independent at a younger age than their peers who typically can rely on continued help from their families for a number of years.

Care leavers expressed a variety of emotions when characterising how they felt about leaving care. Some were pleased to leave, some were frightened; many remembered feeling ambivalent, as expressed in Evelyn’s comments:

I was happy because I didn’t have to listen to them anymore, but at the same time I was a bit scared and nervous. I didn’t know what I was going to do without their help. (Evelyn, WA, volatile pathway, currently homeless.)

Evelyn’s statements reflects a dilemma that many young people in care experience—often eager to get out of care there was, at the same time, a recognition that they required assistance and a fear that they may not receive it. Participants are also aware that they miss the material and emotional support that families typically provide to young people and the importance of this support in enabling young people to make a relatively smooth transition to independent living. As Prue told us:

When you turn 18 and live at home you still have your parents. When you’re 18 [in care] it’s bye, you are on your own. Whereas if you had good parents, you move out of home, you can still go back and have a Sunday roast with them and you can still go back and visit. (Prue, Victoria, volatile pathway, currently homeless.)

Table 5 below indicates that young people experiencing a smooth transition into independent living all left care at 17 or older; young people whose experiences were more problematic were almost evenly divided into those who left care at 17 or older and those who left care at an earlier age.

Table 5: Age left care by pathway from care (%)

	<i>Smooth</i> <i>(n=18)</i>	<i>Volatile</i> <i>(n=59)</i>	<i>Total</i> <i>(N=77)</i>
17 or older	100	49	61
16 or younger	-	51	39
Total	100	100	100

The data do not allow any tests of statistical significance or directions of causality. But leaving care at an early age is a concern if young people exit into unsustainable accommodation or social networks. For many young people, leaving care and ‘becoming independent’ is a complicated and emotionally challenging process, undertaken with limited resources. Recognising this, child protection authorities around the world have started to look at ways to address care leavers’ concerns. A key aspect of this involves transition planning. However, unplanned or early exits can limit the development of these plans.

4.2.1 Transition planning

Until recently, the state, in its role as corporate parent, relinquished statutory responsibility when a person in care turned 18 ‘regardless of the young person’s wishes, maturity or readiness for independence’ (Smith 1992, p.8 cited in Cashmore & Paxman 1996, p.1). As the state was not required to provide any formal assistance with the transition to independence, many care leavers were forced into adult life before they were ready, and some experienced periods of housing instability in the early years of their independence. The policy landscape has begun to change in Australia with the introduction of legislation in most states requiring formal transition planning and support for young people after they leave care.

Despite legislation in both Victoria and Western Australia that requires all young people over 15 to have a leaving care plan, and that the planning process commence well before they leave, only one-quarter of the sample in this study (26%) could recall having a leaving care plan (Table 6). Problems with the planning process have been noted in other studies. For instance, McDowell found that 58 per cent of the young people in their sample who had left care (N=77) ‘reported they did not have such a plan’. Worse still, in that study nearly two-thirds of those still in care but approaching discharge (N=87) ‘did not know of the existence of any leaving care plan’ (McDowall 2008, p.43). A follow up study in 2009 indicated that little had changed with only 36.4 per cent of the participants (n=335) indicating they had a plan or that one was currently being developed (McDowall 2009, p.63).

Table 6: Had a leaving care plan by pathway from care (%)

	<i>Smooth</i> (<i>n=18</i>)	<i>Volatile</i> (<i>n=59</i>)	<i>Total</i> (<i>N=77</i>)
Had a leaving care plan	33.3	24	26
No leaving care plan	33.3	63	56
Unsure	33.3	13	18
TOTAL	100	100	100

While the overall number of participants who had a plan was low, those whose transition from care was volatile were almost twice as likely as not to have had a leaving care plan than those whose transition from care had been smooth. The importance of leaving care plans was highlighted in Forbes, Inder and Raman's (2006) study of 60 care leavers. They found that having a case plan was significantly associated with stable housing on leaving care. Young people with such a plan were twice as likely to be in stable housing, three times more likely to be employed, and reported that receiving a range of advice and support 'significantly improved outcomes' (p.28).

For many of the care leavers in our study who had a plan, they found it to be an important part of the process of leaving care. At their best, the plans could specify resources and strategies and contribute to young people's sense of security and a clear path forward. Claire told us:

That everything was all finalised and we all had it planned and by the time I turned—I was about—I was nearly 18. (Claire, WA, volatile pathway, currently in public housing.)

However, the existence of a leaving care plan is not helpful if it is not a meaningful document. Some felt that their plan was simply developed to *tick the boxes*; in these situations young people could feel they had little control or input into the plan. This was evident when young people remembered discussions about accommodation, where inappropriate or unwanted options were presented to them as the only available accommodation:

It was sort of planned I would go into other accommodation. I didn't agree with the accommodation I was supposed to go into, so I left then. (Haley, WA, volatile pathway, currently homeless.)

They try to offer me places like a refuge, I got to share a room. I'm not going to a refuge. I'd rather go on the street, and then they say 'well you're just ungrateful'. (Ian, Victoria, volatile pathway, currently homeless.)

The failure to include young people in the planning process ignores the point that young people do better when they feel they have a choice and feel actively engaged in the planning process. The responses of Hayley and Ian, above, highlight the dual failure of such leaving care plans: they do not identify appropriate and sustainable accommodation for the young care leaver, and encourage young people to remove themselves from services and supports that might otherwise be important resources in their search for accommodation.

Less obviously, the existence of seemingly stable housing may also shape how a leaving care plan is formulated and focused. April remembers the discussion as focusing solely on employment plans:

I think the Department of Human Service said to me that what kind of job do you want: You're turning 18 soon, What job do you want? But I think that's the only thing they want me to do is get a job, I think, I don't think they know that, maybe they think I've got a stable house now they don't have to worry about me, you know, yeah. (April, Victoria, smooth pathway, living with her family.)

Although April was in secure housing (grandmother) when we interviewed her, she described herself as having limited life skills and is dissatisfied with the limited independence offered in her grandmother's home. A presumption that the accommodation young people move into after they leave care will remain secure fails to recognise that, for some, what becomes a tenuous situation might be mitigated through a plan that identifies alternative housing options.

We regularly found evidence to show that young people were provided with little material assistance or advice once they left care. Simon, a 22-year-old from Victoria was given a plan that included 'get[ting] stable housing, employment, and supposed to get back into music and skateboarding and all that stuff'. He was told how to apply for housing assistance, but he did not pursue the options and no-one followed up on his implementation of the plan. As a result, Simon left care with no access to appropriate accommodation and ended up in being inappropriately discharged into a refuge for homeless young people. While the lack of appropriate accommodation was a major concern, Simon thought that some follow-up might have made a difference:

I would say just to have people there that are making sure, that are following up on things, a month, two months, even three months down the track to make sure you know somebody, ring and say like right, did you move into that address that we told you to go to and did they get the rent cheque that we sent them and stuff like that, for someone to follow up. (Simon, Victoria, volatile pathway, currently living in a caravan.)

The data also suggest that many young people do not find their leaving care plans particularly useful. Leaving care is a frightening experience, and many face an independent life with few resources and little or no family support. In these circumstances, a meaningful leaving care plan needs to do more than list aspirations or provide support options—it must offer a plan of action that specifies how a care leaver can avail themselves of housing, training, employment, state support, health and other services. Further, this plan must be supported by case workers, with periodic follow-up throughout the leaving care process.

The data on the age people left care and whether they have a leaving care plan or not, strongly suggests a need to re-think the way leaving care plans are implemented—those who leave care early at around 15 or so often do so without a plan and they have the most trouble accessing and keeping appropriate accommodation and other necessary elements, such as income and emotional stability. Their housing outcomes are often the worse and homelessness is a common experience.

4.2.2 Preparation

While a leaving care plan can be a powerful tool in assisting young people in the transition from care to independent living, it does not indicate their preparedness to live independently. Tables 7 and 8 outline the participants' responses towards some closed questions regarding their preparedness when leaving care. Table 7 suggests that many young people felt somewhat or very prepared along a number of key domestic skills. While not directly associated with accessing housing, these skills do facilitate its on-going sustainability.

Table 7: Somewhat or very prepared by pathway from care (%)

<i>Skills</i>	<i>Smooth</i> <i>(n=18)</i>	<i>Volatile</i> <i>(n=59)</i>	<i>TOTAL</i> <i>(N=77)</i>
Shopping ^c	61	69	67
Cooking ^b	67	79	69
Cleaning and taking care of a house ^b	94	85	82
Managing money ^a	46	37	39
Living alone ^c	61	50	53

^a N = 73; ^b N=74; ^c N = 73.

Table 7 also indicates that young people feel less confident about managing money, which is perhaps the dimension that most directly impacts upon young people's ability to keep their housing. Reflecting on his experience of leaving care, Ted told us that:

Looking back I could have used a lot more help than I got ... teach you how to pay bills, teach you how to pay rent, teach you how to budget ... and support you until you are ready to live independently. (Ted, Victoria, volatile pathway, currently homeless.)

Those who felt they were prepared developed their domestic skills on their own, often out of necessity, in their early family life; they were not systematically nurtured in care placements.

No one has ever got me in the kitchen and said 'John this is how we make this', it's more I've just always been able to do it and like when I was younger I took on a lot of that role and responsibility at home with my two younger sisters. (John, Victoria, volatile pathway, currently living with foster family.)

Those who do acknowledge specific learning opportunities tended to have had stable foster placements or other long-term relationships, where they were given the opportunity to learn from their carers within the context of daily living—again, the existence of social relationships contributes to positive outcomes for young people. For example, Lauren has a close relationship with her partner's family, who have provided emotional, material and housing support:

... like I said I had no one from the welfare really there showing me you know how to do all these different things. I mean, my partner's mum has basically been my mum. Because she—I mean she showed me everything to do with the household, to do with the jobs to do with everything else. So she's still doing it. (Lauren, WA, smooth pathway, currently living in private rental.)

Table 8 shows that young people felt less prepared on those dimensions related to identifying and claiming resources.

Table 8: Somewhat or very prepared by pathway from care (%)

<i>Skills</i>	<i>Smooth</i> <i>(n=18)</i>	<i>Volatile</i> <i>(n=59)</i>	<i>TOTAL</i> <i>(N=77)</i>
Getting a job ^a	33	35	35
Finding housing ^b	39	28	31
Accessing resources ^a	78	53	59
Accessing welfare assistance ^b	83	70	73

^a N = 75; ^b N=74; ^c N=72

A majority of young people felt that they were not well prepared to find housing—less than one-third felt somewhat or very prepared to find accommodation—and this was reasonably consistent across both groups. The lack of attention given to housing during the planning and preparatory stage of leaving care is a serious problem. Given that accessing accommodation is consistently identified as a major challenge for care leavers, greater attention to the housing needs of care leavers is warranted. For many young people the housing market is confusing and over-coming numerous obstacles confronting, yet little has been done to address this. Housing has long been identified as a critical element of the transition from care and there is a clear need to ensure that preparations for leaving care focus more attention on this area.

In contrast, a much higher proportion of those who had a smooth transition felt that they had been prepared to find resources and welfare assistance. There are marked differences in the level of preparedness between those who experienced a smooth transition and those who experienced a volatile transition.

4.3 Conclusions

Many of the young people in this study struggled while in care. Their sense of satisfaction and security shaped their lived experience during their placements and, as we shall discuss in the following chapter, many acknowledge their experiences have had continuing impacts on their post-care lives. Some of the impacts are material, shaping their access to income, education and housing. But it is also important to acknowledge the implications of the absence of a sense of belonging suggested by the high levels of dissatisfaction, instability and insecurity reported by the young people in the study. A sense of belonging is foundational to the development of social, economic and cultural capital, as well as identity formation. While 'belonging' can serve as a protective factor, disconnection and a feeling of not belonging often leads to increased stress, anxiety and behavioural problems. Research exploring transitions of young people with experience in state care found that a feeling of profound isolation was a significant issue (Eardley et al. 2008, p.5). In fact, the issue of emotional security, or what Cashmore and Paxman (2006a) term 'felt security', is one of the most significant indicators of post-care outcomes. Young people who felt that they had a family member, a foster carer or even a professional worker to talk to, developed an important sense of security and well being. Stein's (2005) work on resilience also identified continuity and sustained relationships as key factors promoting well being among young people leaving care. Similarly, Reid (2007) and McDowell's (2008) work emphasises the importance of relationships in young people's development, a point that is particularly important for young people in care 'for whom meaningful connections with trusted adults has been difficult to achieve' (McDowell 2008, p.13). When there is no one to support them emotionally or financially, young people leaving care often fare poorly. As Stein (2005, p.22) notes, care leavers who experience multiple placements often feel abandoned and without on-going, reliable relationships and stable accommodation, they often end up isolated and disconnected from their local community. As we show in the following chapter, this often results in on-going housing instability and, for many care leavers, homelessness.

5 PATHWAYS FROM CARE

How can you have a good life if you don't have stable accommodation.
(Sandra, currently in public housing.)

5.1 Introduction

A key focus of this study is what characterises positive housing outcomes for care leavers. With this in mind, young people's varied pathways from care into and out of independent housing are revealing for identifying a range of issues that relate to positive and also poor housing outcomes.

At the time we did the interviews, just under half of the participants (45%) were securely housed, nearly one-third (29%) were in TTLA and one-quarter were currently homeless. Overall, participants' housing experiences since leaving care were extremely varied.

In this chapter, we examine the participants' pathways from care to their current housing. In attempting to unpack the sheer complexity of young people's pathways from care, we have sought to simplify our respondents into two broad groups—those who had a relatively *smooth* or successful transition from care, and those care leavers whose transition from care was 'volatile' or considerably more problematic. While those who had a problematic transition often experienced many years of housing instability and homelessness, just over half were now in secure or stable accommodation and were moving on with their lives. The defining characteristics of these pathways are discussed in more detail in chapter three. Ultimately, however, these two pathways are especially revealing for identifying some of the features that appear to be crucial in navigating a successful transition from care to independent housing, and for navigating a way out of the often damaging social circumstances young people can find themselves in after they leave care.

5.2 A 'smooth' transition from care

This section discusses the experiences of young people whose transition from care was relatively smooth and trouble free. It reaffirms the importance of care leavers having a stable first placement and how the success of the first placement is often underpinned by strong social relationships with family members, friends and/or support workers. These relationships appear to be instrumental in achieving positive housing outcomes for care leavers. Strong social relationships are an important source of emotional and material support, both of which are known to be central in young people's ability to successfully negotiate the transition to adulthood (Beer & Faulkner 2009). Importantly, when young people are able to build or maintain connections with biological or foster families, social or professional networks, their pathways out of care are typically much smoother than those experienced by other care leavers.

Of the eighteen people on the smooth pathway, ten were currently in secure housing and eight were in TTLA. Among this group about one-third initially moved back to their biological families or stayed with their foster families, and the remaining two-thirds went directly into transitional accommodation. We focus first on those whose initial placement was with their families before examining the experiences of those who left care and went directly into TTLA.

5.2.1 Families

Those who moved back (or stayed) with their families (both biological and foster) typically enjoyed supportive relationships that provided emotional support, practical

advice and advocacy and, perhaps more notably for housing, material support that included money, accommodation and references. While these relationships were marked by occasional conflict, pre-existing family tensions were less prominent for this group than others. Often a process of re-building relationships had started before they left care and, as relationships improved, there was a sense of optimism that returning home would work. Kelly told us:

The fact that Mum and Dad, even though they were very angry, very resentful, they still were there and were still prepared for me to do like a home detox. I think, well to be honest, I think that's a really big part of it, because a lot of kids their parents wouldn't open their house to them again. Never again after they've done the crime. Mine did and I'm thankful for that. So yes, I imagine in the next 10 years we will get closer and closer in a sense. (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.)

While returning to the family home removed the spectre of homelessness from a young person's immediate future, having a place to call home also had important emotional benefits. Charlotte explained what home meant to her:

Like, home to me is like where you've got a person who really cares about you and you've got a bed that you can feel comfortable and a house you're so comfortable in and which is just a happy environment where somebody loves you. Like, I'd go at home with my dad and I'll go 'I'm home'. (Charlotte, WA, living with her family.)

For care leavers on this *smooth* pathway from care, emotional security was often underpinned by a reassurance that if things did not work when they moved out, they still had a home to return to. This point is important for young people generally, for whom the transition to adulthood and independence is often an incremental process of leaving the family home and periodically returning (ABS 2009; Vassallo et al. 2009; Mendes 2005; Cashmore & Mendes 2008; London 2004). For young people leaving care, this is of even more importance. Bianca, who subsequently moved out of her foster mother's home into private rental, reflected on the fact that she could always return home:

She's [the foster mother] always said 'If it just all falls apart and you can't pick it up and move on' she said 'You can always come back home' and I said I will. I said, but I will try and do this on my own, if it doesn't work, I will go back home. (Bianca, WA, living with her family.)

Similarly, Lauren knows that she:

. . . was never going to be homeless because I knew my Grandparents would always be there to open their arms. (Lauren, WA, in private rental.)

Scott returned to stay with his biological family, and it has meant a lot to him:

It was good actually, yeah. It was very life changing, like it was something different for me and learnt a lot, I did. . . . Oh yeah, they said any time you're in trouble or you need any help, just ring us and we'll give you as much support as we can. (Scott, WA, living with foster family.)

Knowing they have somewhere to go and someone to turn to if things subsequently go bad can make the transition to independent living much easier for care leavers. When this option is not available, care leavers' housing circumstances often deteriorate rapidly, which is perhaps not surprising given the importance of these factors in facilitating positive housing outcomes for young people leaving the family home. Importantly, having a home provides the stability and security from which to

pursue not simply independent housing arrangements, but also other core activities, such as work and education, which in turn can play an important role in helping to maintain independent accommodation.

The experiences of our respondents also highlights the problem of what happens when post-care accommodation arrangements are not supported by child protection authorities, even when they are what the young person identifies. This is a particularly prominent issue for those who wanted to stay with their foster parents after they left state care. John, for instance, has had a relatively stable housing history, but his initial move out of his foster mother's home was under pressure from the Department, which offered him either a lead tenant scheme (which he did not enter into in light of his reluctance to live with strangers) or private rental. After some shared housing experiences, he returned to his foster mother's home when he moved for his employment, where he contributes to the rent. However, his decision continues to be unsupported by the Department:

See, whereas mum [John's foster mother] she was like 'you ain't going nowhere you're staying here' and there was just a push that, oh no, you're 18 so you've got to move out. And it's even with them now, they don't like me being there because I'm continuously having to be police checked every six months. (John, Victoria, living with foster family.)

Nonetheless, despite the departments lack of support, John considers that his home is with his foster mother. In light of the important role that families—both biological and/or foster families—can play in helping to negotiate a successful transition to independent housing for some young people from care, there is a pressing need for policies to more explicitly support young people in these living arrangements, a point which is considered further in the next chapter.

5.2.2 Transitional accommodation

Two-thirds of those who had a 'smooth' transition from care exited straight into TTLA. Importantly, this was often, but not always, linked to good planning.

Although it is widely recognised that young people should play an active role in identifying housing options, some literally had to make their own arrangements. Lauren, for instance, was facing accommodation in a mental health facility—the only option her residential care workers identified as suitable for her—when she took matters into her own hands:

Yeah, I was really frustrated and angry [that her only housing option on leaving care was a mental health ward]. So I looked in the phone book and I looked up for housing places and I found this woman at AGENCY X and she said that she could help me. (Lauren, WA, in private rental.)

This requires a level of resilience, knowledge and independence and also trust that can be difficult to build as a ward of the state. While Lauren had the confidence to take matters into her own hands, other participants did not and they often had inappropriate first placements as a result. Nonetheless, for the majority of this group on a 'smooth' pathway, moving into transitional accommodation was part of a well organised plan and knowing where they were going after they left care was important for a number of reasons. Not only did it reduce the anxiety of leaving care per se, but it also gave them an opportunity to think about the future and also what resources they might require. Both the support and the structure of TTLA can create stability, which for some young people helps them to focus on other aspects of their lives.

In many ways, supported and transitional housing offered the opportunity to live in a stable and secure location and further develop life skills. The role of support and

advice remains central here and appears to be instrumental in delivering positive housing outcomes. This is demonstrated by young people on the 'smooth' pathway who left care and went straight into TTLA tended to have experienced more consistent and helpful support from workers. Bruce comments:

Yeah, it [transitional housing] wasn't bad. Good support by the workers and what not. ... they come in and see us on a regular basis, help us out with what we need help with and, yeah, basically try their hardest to do what they can for us, (Bruce, Victoria, currently in public housing.)

Similarly, June described her relationship and the support she received from the staff at the transitional accommodation she had been staying at for the past five months with great appreciation:

... the workers there are really good... they were just really supportive and as soon as I moved there, cause I got moved on my sister's birthday and I was really upset that I wasn't going to be able to make it and they took me there and everything straight away and they were just really supportive and stuff ... so I have got really good relationships with all the workers there. (June, Victoria, living in transitional accommodation.)

Support was also important in helping care leavers take the next step into their own housing. Help could take the form of advice, assistance with applications or negotiations with landlords—that is, practical assistance. Ryan, who initially stayed in TTLA, credits his support worker with securing his current public housing. He has an on-going relationship with the worker and this made a significant contribution to his transition from TTLA and to his current housing stability:

... he's a good support, so he helps out with, if I need food, or if I need transport he'll pick me up. (Ryan, WA, living in public housing.)

Good support entails more than offering advice—it is as much about practical assistance as it is pro-active planning and preparation. Maintaining connections with support workers provides a sense of continuity. Ava describes the support of a worker whom she had known in supported accommodation:

And she always said to us if you need anything even though you are still not in our care, if you need to talk, just come and see me ... Yeah, just knowing that someone that knows the family that you can go and talk to. (Ava, Victoria, living in public housing.)

While consistent supportive relationships were the foundation upon which people's housing stability rested, there were operational features of transitional accommodation that could either facilitate good housing outcomes or imperil them.

Most participants indicated satisfaction with regards to the material aspects of transitional accommodation. In general, transitional accommodation is the only affordable option for these young people, as it is generally pegged to their income at 25 per cent. In turn, this raises very pertinent questions about how young care leavers fare in a highly privatised housing market, in which most young people face serious affordability problems. The participants indicated great appreciation of the affordability of transitional accommodation, many indicating that they could not afford alternative accommodation. In many cases, affordability is the most significant constraint with respect to obtaining secure accommodation. Those who were in transitional accommodation indicated that they would have to continue relying on it until they were granted public housing, as they simply could not afford or access private rental. Faith told us that:

The only thing that's sort of helping me to sort of guide me that way is probably [public housing], that's the only thing I'm really looking at because that's like a permanent place. I don't really want to move into [public housing] but what can you do when you're young and no-one will give you a house? Like no-one will let you rent anywhere and it's not for long so yes. I tried to get a couple of private rentals but they won't take an 18-year-old. (Faith, WA, living in transitional accommodation.)

The difficulties young people face in accessing affordable housing raise a number of important questions about broader housing policies, which we return to in the next chapter. Nonetheless, it is clear that TTLA can play a potentially important role in addressing the problem of affordable housing options for young people leaving care. However, there are some important caveats or limitations to TTLA, which may have important implications for their viability.

Some participants, for instance, felt that the location of their accommodation was not where they wanted to live. This related mainly to having friends or family in different areas. In contrast to those seeking private rental housing, care leavers have little control regarding the areas TTLA is located in. Service providers utilise a needs-based assessment, but matching the accommodation to a location the client is familiar with cannot be guaranteed. While it is still preferable to move to an unfamiliar or new location rather than being homeless, care leavers generally have fewer resources and contact persons they can draw on. Moving to a new location can lead these young people to become further isolated, which in turn can have a potentially serious impact upon future housing outcomes.

However, the different aspects of TTLA have to be viewed as a package and weighed against each other. June, for example, indicated that she did not really get along with her current share-mate and did not like the location, but:

other than that, I love the place I am living in. ... Maybe not so much the area, but I love the place that I am living in. (June, Victoria, living in transitional accommodation.)

While Bruce describes his time in transitional housing in a positive way—the accommodation and support were good—his tenure in transitional housing ended when public housing became available. This was a positive, but unexpectedly quick, outcome and crucially there was no other plan in place to support him during the transition from TTLA into public housing. This created problems for Bruce who suddenly found himself responsible for managing his own accommodation. While Bruce was fortunate to have some support to assist him through the initial transition into public housing, participants who travelled a *volatile* pathway from care into independent housing often did not. This emphasises the importance of post-care support for pro-actively managing housing transitions and not just those transitions related to leaving care, a point that we return to when we consider the policy implications of this study in the next chapter.

For some of those who experienced a smooth transition from care into TTLA this was their first and only accommodation after care. Consequently, it is difficult to say to what extent these arrangements are a potential stepping stone into independent living. This is a tricky issue, for as we will show in the following section, often TTLA is not a *stepping stone* to independent living, but a way-station between periods of marginal housing and homelessness.

In summary, all of the young people who experienced a relatively 'smooth' transition from care had important and consistent relationships—sometimes with members of their families, sometimes with friends, and some had established on-going

connections with support workers. Their extant relationships allowed them access to resources that helped them find and keep housing. However, these relationships were often the only connections young people had maintained. Subsequently, they were often in a precarious position, socially and economically, and thus their housing remained at risk. All recognised that before they could focus on training and work, they needed stable housing. As one participant noted:

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. (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.)

The central role played by housing in the successful transition to independence and financial self-sufficiency should not be under-estimated. Housing remains absolutely pivotal. The key to accessing and maintaining independent housing, however, was often the provision of meaningful support, both emotional and material, a point previously made by Biehal and Wade (1995, p.65) who found that those who managed their own accommodation did well if they 'received professional support'. Without such support, young people leaving care were often far more vulnerable to chronic housing instability and homelessness.

5.3 A volatile transition from care

The second pathway describes the housing experiences of three-quarters of our respondents (59 out of 77 care leavers). In contrast to those who experienced a relatively smooth transition from care, the participants on this pathway had experienced more complex and chaotic housing experiences since leaving care, with periods of housing stability interspersed with periods of acute instability and homelessness.

Of course, the initial transition from care is often a time of considerable change and disruption (Cashmore & Paxman 2006b), but many care leavers eventually overcome a difficult start and successfully manage their transition to independent living, a point we take up in the following section (5.4). However, some care leavers do not, and their housing and social circumstances remain poor years after they leave care. While they may eventually secure housing, their early independence is marked by unstable housing and homelessness, with serious implications for education, employment and social connectedness.

Relationships with others continue to be an important resource for young people on a volatile pathway and the breakdown of their housing was often a result of some form of relationship breakdown, even if housing costs, quality and location were also significant contributing factors, as we shall see.

5.3.1 Families

Although reunification with biological families can be successful—as we have seen with young people who enjoyed a relatively 'smooth' pathway from care—this was usually not the situation for those young people experiencing a volatile pathway, for whom family relationships often broke down. Daniel explained that he:

moved to my auntie's house and I stayed there for one week and I ran away because I don't like her. (Daniel, WA, currently homeless.)

Others who had idealised or romanticised their family life soon recognised that things were not what they imagined them to be. Prue, who was in care because of a troubled relationship with her step father, hoped that by going home her family problems could be addressed. After two months back at home, her relationship with her step father

had deteriorated and, once again, Prue found herself being verbally and physically abused:

And I think, why did I go back? Why would I put myself in that situation? (Prue, Victoria, currently homeless.)

When family relationships deteriorate or are non-existent, young people have few resources to draw on and they are at acute risk of homelessness. In Mia's case this arrangement failed after just two or three months. She did receive some support during the following six months, but it was not to her satisfaction as the offers related to short term youth hostels and refuges rather than transitional or more permanent housing arrangements. Mia said that her workers:

. . . tried helping, but they didn't do much of a job. It's like, well, hang on; you'd wanted me to stay in government places. It's like; you can only stay there up to two months, three months. It's like, as soon as I get kicked out of there, I want somewhere stable to live, so I can be stable, get a stable job, stay in that job. Actually live a life. Not me bouncing from place to place every couple of months. (Mia, WA, living in private rental.)

The lack of support after care leavers exit the purview of respective child protection authorities is a challenge—as we saw with young people on a 'smooth' pathway—and can lead to serious problems if family relationships break down. This is particularly evident if the breakdown takes place at some time after the transition from care and there are few support structures remaining. Shelley, for instance, was placed in care at the age of 10, had two placements, and left care at age 16 to be with her grandmother. She arranged herself to move in with her grandmother and claimed that her child protection department 'Didn't really do much'. She lived there for two or three years, but eventually this broke down:

My Nan couldn't cope with my drug use and my temper and plus she was getting too old to look after me. (Shelley, Victoria, living in transitional accommodation.)

She then stayed at a youth refuge, went into rehab from which she was kicked out, stayed on the streets for a while, and then couch surfed, lived with friends, at refuges, and other temporary arrangements. While child protection authorities did assist with organising her initial move into the refuge, they did not provide any follow up support; they did not assign a case or support worker; and there was no attempt to address her problematic substance use. Shelley felt that the child protection authorities:

just dropped me on me head, and left me and ever since then I've just been on and off the streets, in and out of refuges, drugs, alcohol, you name it. (Shelley, Victoria, living in transitional accommodation.)

Indeed, a number of our participants left care in what Biehal describes as 'a crisis move' (cited in Simon 2007:94)—that is when young people make an abrupt break from care with no permanent accommodation organised. Fiona told us that she:

couldn't wait, cause after a while she [foster parent] treated us like slaves ... I wasn't allowed to leave the house without her permission ... so like me and my two brothers [friends in the same place] just up and jumped the fence and just left. We just had enough. (Fiona, WA, currently homeless.)

The abrupt move out of care was also underpinned by a view that child protection authorities had 'washed their hands' of them; that they 'couldn't put you back' and that when you're 15 'you are not worth anything anymore to them'. For many this was

confirmed by the department's lack of interest in following up what happened to them after they left care. As Ted reflected:

Like, I am in foster care and as soon as they can get rid of me they do and they don't even do any follow up or anything, you know what I mean. (Ted, Victoria, currently homeless.)

Often their concerns about leaving care were exacerbated by a lack of planning, and some experienced a very abrupt end to their time in care.

They told me like a week earlier that, you know, I have to get exited and I have to look for a place and bullshit like that. (Daniel, WA, currently homeless.)

It is certainly of concern that almost two-thirds of young people on the volatile pathway had no leaving care plan. With few housing options, little assistance or apparent concern from child protection authorities, leaving care often meant moving into tenuous housing circumstances or directly onto the streets. For these young people their abrupt break from care highlights a specific policy dilemma—young people who make a sharp break from care at 15 or 16 years of age often do so with little support, no planning, and little social, economic and cultural capital. Without these resources breaking into the housing market is difficult—getting housing at such a young age is virtually impossible.

5.3.2 Temporary accommodation

The use of refuges and other forms of temporary accommodation designed for homeless young people as an exit strategy is a source of concern, not least because the permanency and support structures vary significantly. For example, a youth refuge may function as an emergency accommodation option for young people, without necessarily facilitating secure housing for the future. Youth refuges generally have a maximum stay of three months and while they provide shelter, they do not necessarily add to the long term prospect of secure housing. The level of independence in some of these places is also limited, with communal chores, meals, cooking and cleaning. Many care leavers were trapped in this form of emergency accommodation, bouncing between different service providers as the refuges often refer them to another shelter once their time is up. This creates a great deal of uncertainty for young people, who have to go through multiple transitions; multiple assessments and re-building relationships with staff and other tenants at different places.

While different support models may be appropriate for some, it is evident that it is not the support regimes by themselves that these young care leavers rely on. Rather, it is support from individuals that prove central. Building personal relationships with the professional staff at the various service providers can be of immense importance for the young person. Brendan, for instance, had a support worker through the Salvation Army a few years ago:

Well, I'm not actually still living with the Salvation Army, but I still have contact with the chick who's been my worker for a few years ... We are really close and we still catch up and go out for lunch and stuff ... I never thought a youth worker could be the most significant person in my life, but she kind of is ... I kind of feel like she's my surrogate mother. (Brendan, Victoria, living in transitional housing.)

Such relationships have to develop naturally and cannot be mandated through policy. Furthermore, research by MacKillop Family Services indicates that 'outcomes are dependent upon the quality of relationship that the young person has with their worker' (London 2004, p.14). Ironically, it seems that institutional practices often mean that it is difficult to maintain these on-going relationships, despite their significance.

Consequently, it seems important that policy should not discourage the development of these relationships, but rather nurture, support and sustain them, as part of a broader leaving care framework, something which is examined in more detail in the next chapter.

Time limited accommodation lacks security of tenure, and hence there was often ongoing anxiety among young people about where they were going next. The short term nature of TTLA often adds to an overall feeling of restlessness and an inability to settle down. Faith, who had been transferred from one transitional lease to another after staying the maximum twelve months, indicated that she no longer made any effort to make the place a home:

I'm not sort of making it all pretty with stuff and buying stuff for the house and stuff. Like, I've got the essentials, but I think everyone wants more than the essentials sometimes. (Faith, WA, living in transitional housing.)

Many care leavers have already experienced chronic instability while they are in care and short term accommodation often perpetuates this lack of continuity and stability. For young people, being forced to move on with nowhere else to go simply reinforces a lack of trust in a system that often appears to ignore their basic needs—namely, stability, safety and continuity.

5.3.3 *Housing breakdown*

While our participants' housing experiences were characterised by high levels of residential instability, a significant number had secured their own housing at some point since leaving care. However, most young people on the volatile pathway had subsequently been evicted from their accommodation, or had simply left before they could be formally evicted. We found a number of broad reasons why their tenancies were unsustainable.

First, the hard aspects of their housing (its costs, location and quality) were often inappropriate for young people leaving care. After struggling to find a place, Kelly eventually paid 'an awful lot of money' for her private rental (\$320 a week). She could just manage, but only when someone else was contributing to the rent. When her flatmate moved out it 'completely stressed' Kelly out and she was eventually evicted for arrears only nine months after signing the lease.

Affordability problems heavily influence the housing choices of all young people, and this is an especially pertinent issue when young people leave care. First, due to a shortage of affordable accommodation, many care leavers are forced to accept poor quality housing, often sharing with others. Yet poor quality accommodation is linked to a range of negative outcomes including poor health, lower self-esteem, diminished social networks, and housing instability (Biehal & Wade 1999; Walker, Hill & Triseliotis 2002). As we have previously discussed, care leavers are also often forced to accept accommodation in areas where they have few connections and that are removed from transport, shopping and employment opportunities. Of course, moving to a new area may be a welcome development and provide some young people with a 'fresh start' (Walker, Hill & Triseliotis 2002, p.182). Generally, however, moving to a new area presents difficulties in building up support networks and, more often than not, young people are at greater risk of isolation and housing instability when they are 'dislocated from their home area' (p.182).

Second, even if their housing was affordable and/or appropriately located, their social relationships often had a strong influence on their capacity to maintain housing. We found evidence to show that many had lost their housing as a result of a relationship

breakdown or falling out with their friends. We asked the participants about share housing and Teresa's comments were typical. She said that:

Well, if you live with friends, you end up not being friends 'cause there's always a fight sometime or other where you just end up not being friends. Or if you're living with like in a share accommodation, you end up fighting with the other people in there—so more to do with the fights I guess. Too many fights always, like, seem to pop up with any sort of share accommodation. (Teresa, Victoria, currently homeless.)

Third, some found managing their own housing more complicated and stressful than they had imagined because they had no support and little experience living on their own. There was a strong recognition that more support, and also better financial preparation, was necessary to assist young people to maintain their housing. Moira, for instance, lost her public housing after five months—she had fallen into arrears after struggling to make ends meet:

I could have used a lot more help ... they should teach you how to pay bills, teach you how to pay rent, teach you how to budget and support you until you are ready. (Moira, Victoria, currently homeless.)

Based on the experiences of care leavers who at some point did have secure housing but subsequently lost it, being able to draw on support to maintain their accommodation is vital. Care leavers have to obtain housing when they age out of care at eighteen, if not earlier, while it is common for other young people to live with and be financially dependent on their family until their early or even mid-twenties (Mendes 2005; Cashmore & Mendes 2008). Furthermore, care leavers are often not able to draw on financial support from their family and have little if any capital saved, a trend identified elsewhere (Courtney et al. 2001; Pecora et al. 2006). It seems evident that the available support prior, during, and after leaving care can play a vital role in minimising the impact of negative experiences, and enhancing care leavers housing outcomes.

5.3.4 Chronic instability and homelessness

When care leavers lose their accommodation they often experience periods of chronic instability and move in and out of homelessness. Once they are homeless, their circumstances often get worse and finding any form of housing can be particularly difficult. Most resorted to a range of stop gap measures including couch surfing at friends places. However, couch surfing often puts pressure on these relationships, which can then place the young person in danger of social isolation if they 'wear out their welcome'. Chris points to the tensions:

You can only do it for so long and then they start to get sick of it, you know. They might be your friends, but everyone has a breaking point at one stage. You know what I mean? You can only push it for so long. ... You don't want to lose friends, but you don't want to be homeless at the same time either. (Chris, Victoria, living in private rental.)

Over time, the option of staying with friends on a temporary basis disappeared and this often led them to access homelessness agencies and consequently engage with other young homeless people. A number had been in temporary accommodation in refuges or transitional housing managed by SAAP agencies. However, the way this sort of accommodation is configured often created additional problems. The most obvious issue was sharing with other young people and the most common concern regarding shared accommodation related to privacy. Over half our sample of care leavers have been in residential care and many of these care leavers yearn for

independence and privacy. Esther, for example, stated that ‘I actually don’t like sharing’. Miranda, on the other hand, bluntly stated the hardship of sharing:

It has been very hard, because, fuck me, we’ve had some crazy little fuckers through here. (Miranda, Victoria, living in transitional housing.)

Sharing was particularly problematic when young people were mixed together with others who had complex issues to resolve. Not only can sharing be disruptive, it can also be dangerous. Prue told us that:

Shared houses are my biggest issue ... when I was there, they’d put you in a place and say you are sharing with a teenage girl who’s just getting off heroin for instance. They’re off it, but only just ... they will put that person in the same house as someone who is still injecting or they would put a suicidal person in with a person who’s just stopped doing that stuff, or a violent person in with someone, you know, who’s scared. (Prue, Victoria, currently homeless.)

Some care leavers even found their way into boarding houses and it is widely recognised that boarding houses can be violent and dangerous places, particularly for young people. Ironically, boarding houses and other forms of temporary accommodation also provide the opportunity to mix with others in similar circumstances. Through these friendships they often ‘learnt the ropes’ and how to survive homelessness. As Teresa told us:

... you learn from everyone else ... how to fight, I had to learn where to get food. And also listening too. I guess I get advice from everyone. I never used to listen to advice. (Teresa, Victoria, currently homeless.)

While these relationships created a sense of belonging and provided some predictability in an otherwise chaotic world, there was nonetheless always a degree of caution and wariness about these friendships. Through these relationships, for example, young people were also introduced to social practices that had a negative impact on them and their housing circumstances.

Studies consistently indicate that rates of problematic substance use among care leavers are disproportionately high (Flynn & Vincent 2008; Forbes et al. 2006; Mendes & Moslehuddin 2007). Just over half (53%) of the participants reported a lifetime problem with substance abuse (Table 9). While some participants were introduced to drugs before they went into care and others while they were in care, the interviews revealed that for many of the participants their substance use issues got worse once they were homeless. Table 9 shows that among the participants whose transition from care was problematic twice as many identified that they had substance abuse issues at some stage in their lives compared to those who had experienced a smooth transition from care. Drugs are a major influence on care leavers’ life course—their access to housing, and ultimately their capacity to get out of homelessness are severely compromised.

Table 9: Likelihood of a person on different pathways to have a (lifetime) substance abuse problem (%)

	<i>Smooth</i> <i>(n=18)</i>	<i>Volatile</i> <i>(n=59)</i>	<i>Total</i> <i>(N=77)</i>
Has/had substance abuse problem	28	61	53
No substance abuse problem	72	39	47
TOTAL	100	100	100

For some, using drugs was a way to escape from their day-to-day reality; drug use was a means of coping with being homeless and their past. When people have a substance abuse issue, their day-to-day lives are sharply focused on the here and now, what researchers describe as a 'present orientation' (Snow and Anderson 1993; Johnson, Gronda & Coutts 2008). A present orientation makes it difficult to secure housing and other critical resources that require planning and luck to secure. Michael told us that every morning you:

wake up, do the same fucking thing every day, whether you sit there on a corner of a street and sell yourself. Whether you scab up a couple of dollars. You do the same thing every fucking day. Always the same God damn thing every day. That's our life. (Michael, WA, volatile pathway, currently homeless.)

Over time as their accommodation options dwindled and their substance abuse problems became more pronounced, people came to rely on the streets more and more. While being on the streets was physically and emotionally taxing, paradoxically it provided some autonomy and control over their circumstances. Living on the streets, Moira said that she had

... more control over where I want to go, when I want to go, how I want to do it and no one else is going to tell me any different. (Moira, Victoria, currently homeless.)

Nonetheless, while being homeless provided some control over their lives and often a feeling of belonging, many friendships were opportunistic in nature and did not provide the depth of emotional support that characterises good friendships. This frequently perpetuated a deep suspicion and lack of trust in others. As Moira said:

I've learnt as a way of being on the streets I guess is you don't trust anyone (Moira, Victoria, currently homeless).

Such feelings were often deeply rooted in their experiences prior to leaving care. Prue told us that:

when you live under care with so many people coming in and out of your life, you get angry because you get close to people and then they move on, and then you find it hard to trust people, and then someone really nice will be able to make you trust them, and then they move on, and you sort of get very angry at the world all over again. (Prue, Victoria, currently homeless.)

It is well established that the younger people are when they first become homeless the risk of remaining homeless for long periods is much higher. The longer people remain homeless the more complicated it is to resolve their homelessness (Johnson & Chamberlain 2008). Over time, people are said to adapt to the contingencies of day-to-day life in the homeless population. When this goes on for a number of years, people are said to be chronically homeless as they often then accept homelessness as a way of life (Chamberlain & Mackenzie 1992). However, this argument often misses the point that homeless people want to resolve their problems, but often have insufficient support or resources to do so. Among this group the development of a range of survival strategies, combined with social networks comprised mainly of other homeless people, often mired them in the homeless population for long periods. Most had tried, often repeatedly, to get off the streets and had tried to secure accommodation but with limited success. Three reasons were commonly cited.

First, many were discouraged by the complicated application process and the long wait times for public housing. Ian told us:

If you put your name down for housing commission and then you got to wait for two years ... so you're stuck for two years with nothing. (Ian, Victoria, currently homeless.)

For young people experiencing homelessness, waiting years for accommodation seemed pointless, particularly as many found they had been removed from public housing waiting lists as a direct result of their high mobility and the subsequent loss of contact with the appropriate housing office.

Second, while many had attempted to access private rental accommodation, very few of our respondents were actually in private rental housing. Many care leavers who wanted or preferred private rental felt that they were discriminated against because of their age and a prevailing view that young people were irresponsible tenants. A lack of references also creates significant problems for young people attempting to access housing, combined with a general reluctance from owners and real estate agencies. As Shelley outlined:

... they won't give me a chance. I don't know why they won't give first time renters a chance because of other people's that's done that, they've stuffed up their chance with new people, willing to give it a go, and wants to give it a go and live in private rental. It's because these other people have stuffed it, they don't do it no more. (Shelley, Victoria, living in transitional housing.)

The third issue is that many simply did not have the resources to secure and maintain housing even if it were available to them. Private rental was not an affordable option for many of our care leavers. Indeed, Benjamin outlined that this was not just the case for care leavers, but young people in general:

... just too expensive ... Yeah, because all my friends are basically the same as me. Like, they have no jobs and ... they're having a difficult time. (Benjamin, WA, living in transitional housing.)

Importantly, young people often become disillusioned when they struggle to gain access to private rental housing and, when this happens, they are at risk of becoming entrenched in the homeless population. In other words, problems accessing housing not only leaves these young people stuck on the streets, but also often leads to an acute sense of resignation that can trap them in a damaging cycle. After a long and unrewarding search for housing, Daniel had:

... given up hope and I don't want to look for a house anymore. (Daniel, WA, currently homeless.)

While the participants' circumstances prior to, in, and on leaving care are complex and fluid, the dominant narrative that emerged from the interviews with these young people was of a life characterised by a lack of continuity and stability. From their time prior to care, their time in care, and to their subsequent experiences while homeless, there was little stability or continuity in their lives. Many were extremely resourceful and developed elaborate strategies to survive on the streets. But these strategies often embedded them on the streets even further. With little social, cultural or economic capital to draw on, these young people were struggling to find a way out.

While the combined effects of their pre-care, in care and post care experiences left many care leavers vulnerable to long periods of chronic instability and acute social exclusion, studies have found that after a rough start many care leavers move on with their lives and successfully navigate a route to independence. In their longitudinal study, Cashmore & Paxman (2006b, p.20) found that many care leavers were 'faring better 4-5 years out of care than they were 12 months after leaving care'. For some of

the individuals on the volatile pathway there was evidence that their circumstances had improved and that they had started to ‘move on’ with their lives.

5.4 Moving on

Of the 59 care leavers who experienced a volatile transition from care, there was a notable improvement in their housing circumstances (Table 10), as well as employment, education and training activities, for 32 of them. The other 27 care leavers who also experienced a volatile transition from care remained ‘stuck’ in precarious and often damaging social circumstances.

Table 10: Housing circumstances among those on the volatile pathway (N)

<i>Current housing</i>	<i>Moving on</i>	<i>Stuck</i>
Secure housing	25	-
TTLA—Post care support and housing—medium term	7	-
TTLA—Short term accommodation—e.g. refuges	-	7
Homeless	-	20
TOTAL	32	27

Although the circumstances of those who were ‘moving on’ and those who were ‘stuck’ were profoundly different, there was little difference in the amount of time they had been out of care. Those who were ‘moving on’ had been out of care for an average of 4.5 years, while those who were ‘stuck’ had been out of care only slightly longer (5 years). There was also little difference in the average age of the two groups (21 years). This begs the question of how some care leavers managed to overcome the profound disadvantages that had accumulated in their lives, when others had not.

A notable feature of those who were moving on was the agency of young people and, more specifically, the positive focus and direction of their agency—there was a strong sense of the need to take control and of wanting something better. These young people displayed incredible determination, persistence and resilience to turn their lives around, something they were often 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. (John, Victoria, currently living with foster family).

Others were simply weary and exasperated by their experiences, while some were fuelled by a deep sense of anger. Indeed, for some young people, such as Bill, this tangible sense of 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, Victoria, post care supported accommodation.)

Moving on was often connected to a strong desire for a better life and securing appropriate, 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. Sometimes there were pivotal moments or experiences that encouraged young people to actively seize control over their lives and their circumstances. Ultimately,

however, the extent to which young people were able to exercise meaningful agency was heavily dependent upon broader circumstances, in particular the opportunity to access appropriate external resources. While there was considerable variation in the processes that resulted in those on the volatile pathway moving on with their lives, we found four factors that stood out among those whose housing (and other) circumstances were improving—addressing substance abuse; improved family relationships; establishing meaningful relationships with professional support; and finding work. As the subsequent sections show, the four factors are often interlinked, but the key point is that whatever the catalyst(s), the resulting turnaround in the participants' lives was pronounced.

5.4.1 Addressing problematic substance use

Addressing problematic substance use is the most instrumental factor that enables young people who experience a volatile transition from care to move on. Roughly two-thirds of the people on the volatile pathway had a substance abuse problem (double the rate among people on the smooth pathway—see Table 9) and substance abuse was identified as a key factor that created problems maintaining their housing and social relationships.

While there was rarely a single defining moment that resulted in young people abstaining from drug use, it was equally clear that there was a significant shift in their attitudes towards drug use. As was noted earlier (p.52), people with substance abuse problems often have a strong focus on the here-and-now. When people have a present orientation it is difficult to think about the future and things like housing, work and education, which require time and patience to organise, are often neglected. Among those who had addressed their substance abuse issues there was a strong desire to stop using. and while this occurred for a number of reasons—sometimes it was because they were worn out by the transitory, predatory and often violent circumstances associated with street life; sometimes it was because of the damage they had witnessed to their friends and this often included seeing people they were close to dying—the most common theme was their concern about what the future might hold if they continued down the current path they were travelling. For instance, the big motivation for Shana to address her lifestyle of substance abuse was a fear of prison:

I'd breached a suspended sentence at that stage, so therefore I thought I better get my shit together, otherwise I'm going in. (Shana, Victoria, public housing.)

Kelly also recognised that if she did not address her drug use her life would be miserable:

Heroin makes you so sick ... You're just going down this path and I didn't, I don't want that for the rest of my life. (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.)

A sense of wanting something better and of having a more 'normal life' was a primary motivation in their decision to address their substance abuse problems, but a decision to abstain from drug use is no guarantee of successful abstinence—among people with substance abuse issues relapse is a common experience, particularly among those with little social and economic capital. Here, as in all the subsequent moving on cases, abstinence only occurred when there was access to appropriate resources—among young people who had substance abuse problems this involved access to both drug and alcohol services as well as housing.

With respect to drug and alcohol services, there are only a limited number of services available to young people leaving care and consequently access is difficult. When

young people want to address their substance abuse problems and try to gain access to services but miss out, it often results in further frustration and anger at the system. When this happens, things typically spiral out of control once again. Without access to the services they need, when they need them, it ultimately becomes more difficult and costly to assist young people with substance abuse problems.

However, a lack of access to drug and alcohol services is only one of the issues they face—there is also the nature of the services provided. It was common to hear that the most appropriate services provided intensive, flexible, long-term support that had clear links to, and a focus upon housing. Kevin had been with his drug and alcohol worker for four years and while there had been many ups and downs, the relationship provided an important point of stability and security in his life—a cornerstone that enabled Kevin to move on. The service was flexible and Kevin could go to them for ‘whatever reason’ he liked. Importantly, his long term housing (public housing) was ‘all organised’ well in advance of his move out of transitional accommodation.

The link between support and housing is crucial as care leavers’ biographies are often extremely complex and typically characterised by backgrounds of extreme disadvantage. Addressing the physical impact of drug use is obviously important, but it takes a relatively short amount of time. However, addressing the social and psychological impact of prolonged drug use is more complex and takes considerably longer. Addressing drug use in isolation from care leavers’ social and economic context often results in relapse and reinforces a sense of failure. This highlights the important point that for young people who have experienced profound and often long periods of social and economic exclusion, policy-makers need to explicitly recognise that ‘moving on’ is a process that varies significantly depending on the individual’s circumstances and experiences. Further, moving on is often an arduous process where numerous obstacles and setbacks have to be overcome. When support is sensitive to individual circumstances and has the capacity to ‘hang in there’, rather than being structured around arbitrary time frames, the chances of care leavers moving on is considerably higher. Indeed, rather than fuelled by their anger at the system, their past experiences are often re-evaluated as something they can draw from. Faith summed up what many care leavers were feeling once they started to move on with their lives:

Right now it's good. I'm looking into private rentals at the moment and I've got like some positive feedback so like it's good now because I'm going into a social work course and I can go, cool, I've had that experience, I understand now what's going on. So it absolutely sucked at the time and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone, but right now I'm glad I have that experience. (Faith, W.A, currently residing in post care supported accommodation.)

When people address their substance abuse issues and experience continuity, stability and good support there is a noticeable improvement in other areas of their lives. There was an obvious improvement in their self-esteem and confidence. Kelly noted how her self-esteem had grown since she had been ‘off the gear’. This gave her the confidence to tackle other issues in her life, such as trusting other people, having other people begin to trust her and trusting herself. Trust is the foundation upon which relationships with others is built and social relationships are often the most common thing missing in care leavers’ lives. When care leavers begin to trust themselves and others, building positive social relationships are much easier. Kelly found that after years of using drugs:

So many people stop trusting you ... I didn't trust myself for years ... now I've sort of come out of that. (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.)

This gave Kelly the confidence to think and act more positively about the future. She had been in private rental for six months and her hopes were to 'remain clean and have stable housing and possibly a job'. Eighteen months ago such thoughts were far from Kelly's mind.

Once stable and *clean*, the progression of care leavers with substance abuse problems mirrored the smaller number of people without substance abuse issues who were also moving on. What was instrumental in assisting these young people was finding the right support. Overall, most respondents acknowledged the central role of support in successfully resolving their housing and substance abuse problems. Bill summed it up when he said that:

The only people that I ever do see pull themselves up, have got someone pushing them, and making them do it. And it's really rare for someone to be able to do it on their own. (Bill, Victoria, currently in accommodation supported by a post care support agency.)

5.4.2 *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 signified by an improvement in family relationships. We saw at the beginning of this chapter that some modicum of improvement in family relationships was very important for some care leavers in instilling a clear sense of stability and successfully navigating the route to 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, Victoria, 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. (John, Victoria, currently living with foster family.)

Yet John 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. (John, Victoria, currently living with foster family.)

The point is that even fairly small improvements in family relationships often had a significant impact upon young people's ability to successfully navigate their way 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, Victoria, private rental.)

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

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, W.A, public housing.)

5.4.3 Professional support

With respect to professional support, the participants' 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 [their] clients. It just makes me so angry because to me it's by the grace of God thing. (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.)

Yet, through a combination of good luck 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 forward 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's none of this emotional stuff, she just gets it done. (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.)

Similarly, Sandra noted that her support worked because the worker was both 'persistent and consistent in trying to help'. In addition, assistance to secure and maintain appropriate housing was consistently emphasised in the participants' 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 \$1600 rent assistance, [and] a \$1000 setting up expenses. (Sandra, W.A, public housing.)

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

It made my life better, having the house I have now has made my life better.
(Sandra, W.A, public housing.)

While stable housing is a critical element in moving onwards and addressing their difficulties, employment was also an important component in progressing onwards.

5.4.4 *Finding work*

The relationship between homelessness and unemployment is a complex and multi-dimensional 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, Victoria, private rental.)

Kelly also 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. (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.)

Others saw the problem differently. The nuanced links between homelessness and employment have been examined elsewhere (Wade & Dixon 2006; Parkinson & Horn 2002; Grace & Gill 2008), and it was very clear from our interviews that unemployment was a crucial 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 on 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. (Amy, W.A, 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. (Danny, Victoria, living with foster family.)

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-esteem. 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, W.A, in public housing for 12 months.)

Whatever the damaging impact of the care system and poor housing upon their employment prospects, securing employment was 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, Victoria, 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, Victoria, 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, we were struck by 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.

5.5 Summary

This chapter identifies three broad patterns. First, some care leavers make a relatively smooth transition from care. These young people often leave care at a later age, are engaged in the planning process, and have access to appropriate housing and support resources. Among the participants in this study they are a minority. In contrast, the majority experienced a volatile transition from care. They often left at a younger age and in crisis. Many had experienced numerous placements and had little trust in the system or in other people. Most experienced chronic instability and homelessness and their social and economic circumstances deteriorated rapidly. For many, 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 transition were *moving on*—they had, often through their own persistence and determination—turned their circumstances around.

Ultimately, accommodation options for young people—those who are leaving care and those who are not—are limited. The private rental market is highly competitive and requires a relatively high and stable income, along with considerable budgeting skills. There are also limited public housing stocks. Many of the young people could use transitional housing, but there is also a limited amount available specifically for care leavers. These options reflect, in part, the dynamics of the housing market and policy

and funding decisions that are outside the control of individual workers and, to a lesser extent, departmental approaches. However, the preceding accounts suggest that there are few programmatic attempts to manage young people's housing transitions within the system as it is currently constituted. Instead, young people are often left to find their own way by drawing on personal resources and relationships, rather than being offered structural and institutional support.

The interviews suggest that the difficulties faced by young people leaving care in accessing and maintaining housing are not simply the direct result of specific policies but also the outcome of practice. The young people themselves often acknowledge that they were sometimes difficult to work with and support, and many openly admit that they made bad choices. But the policy and practices of leaving care systems need to acknowledge this reality, and identify ways to respond positively to the needs of young people—and, indeed, to proactively address needs rather than reactively respond to them.

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 a number of relatively inexpensive policy innovations, such as a Secure Tenancy Guarantee, would also make a very considerable difference to the housing options of young care leavers. The next chapter examines these policy suggestions in more detail.

6 POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter we identify two ways improvements can be made in housing outcomes for care leavers. First, we focus on developing a leaving care framework with specific emphasis on the principles and the minimum standards that should support such a framework. Following this, we identify on a range of options that would increase care leavers' access to housing and assist them to maintain their accommodation.

6.1 A leaving care framework

Improvements in housing and non-housing outcomes for young people leaving state care can be achieved through the development of a framework that, ideally, would be consistently applied across all jurisdictions in Australia. It is readily acknowledged that the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States are further advanced than Australia in recognising and addressing the needs and rights of young people leaving care, as articulated in legislation, policy and practice (Cashmore & Mendes 2008). Likewise, there is an acknowledged need to improve the quality of leaving care plans and implementation practices (McDowall 2009).

As outlined in this report, the experiences of young people indicate that serious improvements are required in the scope and size of leaving care programs so that young people leaving care can equally benefit from a sure start into adult life. Some sense of the goal to be attained is expressed in the recent white paper on homelessness (FaHCSIA 2008, p.4) where the focus is on supporting people to obtain long-term housing and social and economic participation in the community as early as possible. This entails improving and expanding services: services will be more connected and responsive to achieve sustainable housing, improve economic and social participation, and end homelessness for their clients.

A review of the literature shows that there are two key elements for a leaving care framework. Such a framework is also informed by young people themselves who have experienced the best, and the worst, of leaving care arrangements.

The first element are the principles that underpin the framework and the second is the establishment of minimum standards that inform leaving care practices, such as the need for a stronger focus on housing in the transition planning for young people while they are still in care. The following discussion focuses on each element in turn drawing on current best practice both locally and overseas and our discussions with services providers who are in a unique position to identify significant gaps in current service provision.

6.1.1 Principles

There are a number of principles that should underpin a leaving care framework.

First, a *leaving care framework needs to be applied nationally*. At the moment there are significant differences between jurisdictions (McDowall 2009). As outlined in more detail in the positioning paper for this report (Johnson et al. 2009, p.10), when transition planning currently occurs it varies considerably between jurisdictions. For example, five states (ACT, Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania and Queensland) recommend the planning process commence at the age of 15. In Western Australia, the approach involves modifying the final case plan in the 12 months prior to leaving care. In Victoria, planning begins six months prior to discharge, while in NSW there is no specific time frame to start the planning process. Clearly, such an arrangement is not suitable for young people and there is a pressing need for a consistent approach to leaving care and transition planning to ensure that

all care leavers receive equitable treatment and have access to similar resources. As McDowell (2008, p.21) notes, 'on equity grounds alone it would seem desirable for the milestones to be the same across Australia'.

There is an opportunity for the Australian Government, with the support and involvement of other jurisdictions, to develop a national leaving care framework. A national framework would arguably address a number of key weaknesses of the existing system such as the wide variation in policy and legislation between the states and territories, and the absence of support for young people who shift from one jurisdiction to another. It is also evident from the UK experience as reflected in the introduction of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 that national legislation is likely to increase the profile of leaving care, and drive improved resourcing and higher quality of service provision (Dixon et al. 2006).

A national approach would be consistent with other social and economic policy developments being negotiated through the COAG process. In particular, it would help to ensure that the goals of policy instruments, such as the *National Affordable Housing Agreement* (NAHA), the homelessness white paper, the National Child Protection Framework, and the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care—to name four prominent examples—would be complemented by a nationally consistent approach to the leaving care arrangements of young people, including their housing opportunities.

Second, there needs to be an acknowledgement of government's *responsibility to young people as their corporate parent* (Green & Jones 1999, p.66). In this context, a leaving care framework should encapsulate a *thick* rather than a *thin* notion of these responsibilities. One option is to have such responsibilities, including obligations to provide leaving care support and appropriate housing options for young people, embedded in legislation, and supported by detailed policy frameworks and shared benchmarks. For example, the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 in the United Kingdom aims to delay young people's transitions from care until they are prepared and ready to leave; to strengthen the assessment, preparation and planning for leaving care; to provide better personal support for young people after care; and to improve the financial arrangements for care leavers (Stein 2006; 2008).

The principle of government being a corporate parent is readily applicable to the state's responsibility in ensuring that young people do not exit into homelessness when leaving care (see FaHCSIA 2008, p.27). This means ensuring that appropriate accommodation and support plans are in place before a young person leaves care to reduce the risk of becoming homeless. It also has implications beyond the remedial effect of reducing the risk of homelessness, important as this policy goal is. Research into the housing careers of Australian households show that most young people receive ongoing support from parents, guardians and other significant family members (see Beer & Faulkner 2009). This kind of support, while specific to the individual circumstance of families and needs of young people, does not necessarily and arbitrarily cease at the coming of age. Despite the policy rhetoric that acknowledges the need for a flexible approach, the reality is that in practice there remains a rigid adherence to discharging young people at 18. This continues to jeopardise many young people's transition to independent living. On the grounds of equity, it could be strongly argued that the government's role, as corporate parent, needs to be equally flexible and supportive in its care arrangements, including a duty of care towards providing care leavers with the necessary resources required to access and maintain appropriate housing (for example, see Raman et al. 2005)—a point we pursue in greater detail in subsequent pages.

Third, any leaving care framework, including proposed legislation, would need to acknowledge broader Australian Government initiatives in fostering *social inclusion and in enhancing and supporting human rights*. It is incumbent on governments to protect and enhance the rights of its most disadvantaged citizens, such as young people in care, in a manner consistent with the primary international treaties—the ICCPR and the ICESCR—to which the Australian Government is a signatory. One part of a human rights approach is the creation of a strong and independent advocacy and complaints mechanism, with a strong monitoring and compliance function (Council to Homeless Persons 2005a; b).

Last, on the basis of the problems experienced by some young people leaving care, it is necessary that *leaving care arrangements include a stronger focus on both building on care leavers' strengths and also areas where they lack skills and resources*. Young people leaving care need assistance and support to develop both 'hard' skills to do with employment and independent living (e.g. budgeting, finding and maintaining accommodation, housekeeping) and *soft* social and emotional skills required for interpersonal communication and relationships (Schultz nd). Such an approach would include placing a premium on housing provision that encompasses a range of accommodation options (Kroner 2007); addressing life skills training, preferably before the young people leave care; to include mechanisms to encourage participation in continuing education; and provide care leavers with every possible support to become self-sustaining in terms of employment (McDowall 2008). In this way, leaving care arrangements would help contribute to a sense of belonging and inclusion for young people.

6.1.2 *Minimum standards*

There is a clear need to establish consistent standards regarding planning, support and housing, and that all agencies and government departments involved in the case management of the young person should work together for the benefit of the young person (Department for Community Development 2006). The development of minimum standards means that there are a number of necessary features that must inform a leaving care framework. And, as noted above, such minimum leaving care standards must be established nationally. The omission of any one of these standards would effectively undermine the integrity of a leaving care framework and risk generating negative housing and non-housing outcomes for young people leaving care.

First, *permanency planning should begin before the formal exit from state care*. This builds on a point identified by Green and Jones (1999, p.66) in their review of the management of how young people leave care, and others such as McDowall (2008; 2009), who emphasise the importance of commencing the transition phase earlier. For example, the practice in Queensland is that transition planning begins at 15 years, providing time for leaving care arrangements to be negotiated with the young person in question, as well as with other agencies critical to the success of the transition from care. As we found, many people who leave care at 15 do so in an unplanned manner and they often fare poorly. Beginning the planning process earlier would help to both identify those at risk of leaving care unexpectedly, and also ameliorate some of the issues younger care leavers face.

Leaving care support must actively involve young people in their own life planning—a point consistent with the previous emphasis on human rights. As noted by Moslehuddin and Mendes (2006), it is important that the young person leaving care is both the focus of transition arrangements and is an active participant in their own care planning. Such a notion comes under the rubric of client driven service delivery (Department for Community Development 2006). In particular, this includes client

choice, the right to complain, the right to have decisions reviewed, and the right to be involved in the design and review of services. In the context of housing, this would include the right to veto housing that is inappropriate and does not address their needs. Typically clients of services express a strong desire to exercise some control over decisions that affect them and to re-establish a 'normal life' in which they were more independent and better able to be treated and recognised as an equal citizen, rather than a client who, by definition, is always in an unequal position of power and influence.

Second, leaving care arrangements need to *acknowledge a transition period* where young people receive training in independent living skills, and are offered appropriate information and mentoring (Johnson et al. 2009, p.13). Indeed, care leaving should be managed in a manner that acknowledges differences in age and circumstances of young people who leave care. For instance, those at older ages are less likely to experience negative outcomes. Further, as was consistently raised in the focus groups, care leavers' understanding of accessing and maintaining housing is often quite limited. Apart from an assessment for appropriate housing, young people require ongoing housing readiness and maintenance training. Likewise, recognition needs to be granted to the diversity of care leavers and their particular needs, including services that are culturally and contextually appropriate (Department for Community Development 2006). An integral part in planning for young people leaving care is identifying and supporting those young people who require extra support. As noted in this and other studies, 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. It is our recommendation that the transition from care be delayed (as suggested by recent UK proposals: Department for Education and Skills 2007) for those who require additional support to successfully move into independent living. It is evident from our analysis of the different pathways taken by our sample that those who have substance abuse problems, poor family relationships, limited professional supports and lack of access to training and employment, are most likely to experience housing instability. While not explicitly mentioned in our chapter, mental health problems and early pregnancy are also likely to be problematic. This group require additional support to address these challenges prior to leaving care.

Third, it is proposed that the needs of young people leaving care are *assessed with reference to an agreed industry standard* such as the *Looking after Children* guideline as proposed in Queensland (McDowall 2008) and used in some other jurisdictions. This requires a focus on outcomes ranging from the immediate, intermediate, through to long-term outcomes for care leavers in accordance with agreed life domains including housing outcomes (Osborn & Bromfield 2007). While the *Looking after Children* guideline is a positive starting point, it is critical that housing be added to the existing seven domains of health, education, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioural development, and self-care skills. The importance of longer-term outcomes cannot be understated. As noted in one study, 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 (Cashmore & Paxman 1996).

Fourth, it is imperative that the principles and minimum standards supporting leaving care arrangements are supported by a *quality assurance framework* and clearly articulated standards of best practice. Under such an arrangement, agencies involved in the planning and provision of leaving care arrangements would be required to provide high quality services and to undertake continuous improvement activities in

respect to leaving care practices. One possible mechanism is the establishment of standards and accreditation processes that can be an important means of driving reform and improving quality.

Fifth, any response to the needs of young people leaving care requires the development of a *joined-up approach* (sometimes known as an integrated model of leaving-care support) for care leavers, reaching across policy areas and levels of government. This requires both a holistic approach to service delivery and the preparedness and capacity of agencies and government departments to work collaboratively in the best interests of and with a young person (Department for Community Development 2006). For example, the introduction of Regional Leaving Care Alliances in Victoria promises to achieve a more integrated approach at a regional level. It also requires an appropriate *mix* of services and supports to assist a young person leaving care.

Generally, joined-up services across government and non-government services are an important feature of contemporary social policy. As articulated in the recent white paper on homelessness (FaHCSIA 2008, p.19):

Joined-up service delivery needs joined-up policy. An overarching policy framework is needed to guide all government approaches to addressing homelessness. Program funding and accountability boundaries must be changed to allow governments and funded organisations to take a multidisciplinary approach to addressing people's needs.

It has been long recognised that the needs of young people leaving care requires an inter-agency approach within states and territories and cooperation across different levels of government, in terms of the formal arrangements for the provision of services, policy frameworks, and an agreement on minimum leaving care standards (McDowall 2008; Bromfield & Osborn 2007). It is necessary, however, to move from the rhetoric of joined-up services to the actual delivery of such support. As demonstrated in Queensland, it is advisable to create and publicise explicit support relationships between government departments and agencies (McDowall 2008). Joined-up practice relies on constant communication to make the process clearer for the young people themselves and their families. Indeed, clear and readily accessible communication is needed, as are mechanisms to integrate information and coordinate services (McDowall, 2008).

Sixth, leaving care arrangements need to have a *well-developed leaving care plan with accommodation options clearly articulated* and should include a contingency plan should their housing arrangements break down. This should be agreed to by both child protection and the appropriate housing authorities. These plans should also be regularly monitored. Such an arrangement requires the measurement and monitoring of the delivery of support and services which, in turn, relies upon the development of accurate data collection systems to monitor success of transition to independence (Schultz nd). Put bluntly, successful transition outcomes for young people require that adequate systems are in place that can actually measure the desired outcomes (Osborn & Bromfield 2007). However, it would seem that the monitoring of outcomes, across all jurisdictions (except perhaps WA), remain either non-existent or ineffective (McDowall 2008; 2009). It has been noted how the monitoring of outcomes for young people relies on a clear understanding of who is responsible for the monitoring. Presently, there is a general lack of clarity over who is responsible for implementing and evaluating leaving care plans (McDowall 2008, p.31). In the UK, the Children (Leaving Care) Act obliges local authorities to appoint a personal advisor to help young people find, secure and maintain suitable accommodation. The type and level

of support should be agreed as part of the young person's pathway plan. Such a scheme could easily be adapted to meet the needs of Australian care leavers.

Seventh, a further minimum standard is the *provision of post-care support, periodic follow up and assistance for young people when they leave care*. As a minimum, it is necessary to provide support for a young person after they turn 18 years of age. One option is to maintain support until a young person reaches 25 years (McDowall 2008). A further option is that support for young people leaving care is ongoing, when and where it is required by a young person. This would ensure that young people leaving care have access to support typically available to other young people; and is consistent with the need to extend support available to young people leaving care, as noted in the review by Green and Jones (1999, p.66). Importantly, there needs to be a 'no closed door' approach to enable young people who experience problems after leaving care the opportunity to re-access support and receive further assistance.

While meeting these standards is critical if care leavers' outcomes are to be improved, our data show that improving housing outcomes for care leavers also requires specific attention to the issue of access to appropriate and affordable housing—one of the most difficult challenges that care leavers face.

6.2 Improving care leavers' access to housing

Care leavers require a range of accommodation options to meet their differing needs. These needs vary according to their care experience, ethnicity, gender, contact with their families, degree of preparedness for independence, and any forms of disability (Frost & Stein 1995). Currently, there are limited housing options available to young people leaving care. The current housing programs are too small and do not match the number of children leaving care. As a result many care leavers are forced to compete with the general youth population or the general homeless population for scarce housing resources. If the Federal Government's goal of reducing the number of care leavers exiting into homelessness is to be achieved, there needs to be a significant increase in the housing options available to them. This is no easy task as care leavers' needs are diverse and no single model will suit every care leaver. The following section identifies a number of improvements that could be made to existing services, identifies a number of alternative models that could be either developed or scaled up, and a demand-side alternative that recognises the constraints that young people face in the current housing market.

6.2.1 Improvements to current housing options: supply side responses

It is a common practice to exit care leavers into crisis, refuge, boarding houses and other forms of emergency and temporary accommodation (see McDowell, 2009:47-51). This is inappropriate. It places care leavers in direct competition for scarce resources with the homeless population. Boarding houses are unsafe places. They are unaffordable and they do not meet the best interests of young people nor do they meet the best interests of a 'responsible' parent. It is important that a 'no discharge to inappropriate accommodation' policy is implemented and monitored to put an end to this practice. As it currently stands, few states are monitoring young people's housing when they leave care. Among those that do, there is little consistency in the way housing outcomes are recorded, the data is only periodically available (e.g. Victoria) and there is often ambiguity as to what terms such as 'independent living' actually refer to (see McDowell 2009, p.47-51).

Transitional housing, another homelessness response, is one of the principle housing responses available to care leavers, but there is insufficient transitional accommodation available. Furthermore, the rules and regulations that govern

transitional accommodation are often applied too rigidly, irrespective of the needs, age and experiences of care leavers. More specifically, shared housing arrangements and time-limited leases are highly problematic for some care leavers. Some simple changes to existing transitional housing arrangements could make a significant difference. Young people should not be forced to share as this often leads to conflict which undermines their need for safety, privacy and a sense of control over their environment. Time-limited tenures also create problems for care leavers who are often anxious about their next accommodation. Many are forced to move on with no appropriate exit housing in place. While a *no discharge* policy would address this, policy-makers should consider converting transitional accommodation into a standard tenancy agreement once the person has become independent.

6.2.2 *Additional housing responses*

The development and funding of other supported housing arrangements with longer term tenures (a minimum of three years) need to be pursued. Given that 95 per cent of Australian children reside in home based care—either foster care or kinship care—one option would be to allow young people to remain with foster carers by redesignating placements as supported accommodation and providing continuing financial support to maintain these placements (see also Cashmore & Paxman 2006a; 2006b). Another option is to develop a model of scattered site apartments where a young person lives on their own and rents privately but receives support. Over time, there is a reduction in the level of supervision and support. Close consideration of supervised apartments located in an apartment building leased or owned by the support agency is also warranted. In this arrangement, live-in staff provide supervision, counselling and support if required. The Foyer model (a hostel type accommodation), which is currently a favoured response to homeless young people, is less relevant for care leavers, particularly those with complex or special needs.

While the development of a range of longer term supported housing arrangements is much needed, there is also a pressing need to improve care leavers' access to permanent accommodation. One approach that has been successfully trialled in the UK could be to *ring-fence* (or set aside) a percentage of social and public housing specifically for care leavers each year. This would require partnership arrangements between leaving care services and public housing authorities, but also housing associations and other social housing providers who are set to play an increasingly prominent role in the low income housing landscape. For some care leavers, direct access to subsidised housing would be a feasible response, while for others, dedicated public housing would be the exit point from transitional housing arrangements once they were capable of independent living.

6.2.3 *Social and professional assistance*

Whatever the form of housing, care leavers will require ongoing social and professional supports to maintain their tenancy or shift to more suitable accommodation as required. For those who enjoy social support networks comprised of family, friends and ex-carers, it is imperative that leaving care plans support the maintenance of these relationships which can play a crucial role in assisting housing arrangements.

However, many young people may have weak or non-existent social support networks, and are likely to require ongoing specialist support in the housing area. We would recommend the introduction of a flexible floating support system as trialled in the UK which aims to assist young people when they first move into independent accommodation, and to address problems when they arise. This support is linked to the individual and not their accommodation, and includes a combination of practical

and personal support. For example, the support service may address issues such as rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, harassment by other tenants, substance abuse, poor quality of accommodation, and general difficulties in coping with independent living. This could be of particular benefit to those in share accommodation and it could also be helpful for disabled young people, and those with mental health or emotional and behavioural difficulties (Dixon et al. 2006; National Care Advisory Service 2009).

6.2.4 Demand side interventions—income support for care leavers

Young people leaving care have had significant experience of bureaucratic systems. Our research shows that a significant percentage of children went on to use homeless services, and research into homelessness details the high proportion of former state care individuals in the homeless population. Ending the incidence of young people exiting care into homelessness is one of the Federal Government's current initiatives under NAHA. Yet this report demonstrates that there is insufficient housing available for the number of children leaving care each year. Services we interviewed expressed frustration at the cost shifting that goes on at the end of care, expressing a sense that the homelessness sector is paying for *poor planning by the department* (see also McDowell 2009). Young people express deep unease about their future and uncertainty about their housing as they exit care, and their housing careers demonstrate a significant period of instability that impacts on their capacity to pursue their goals and dreams that include education, employment and relationships. Creating housing options in the current housing market requires consideration of all options in order to stabilise care leavers' housing pathways and meet what is a growing need. The supply side solutions that have been explored so far are an important part of generating housing opportunities for young people leaving care: social housing and dedicated supported housing are important elements of a system-wide response. However, while the NAHA will increase the supply of social housing across the country by about 20 000 units, this level of growth is unlikely to be sustained in the medium to long term. Further, the NAHA is broadly targeted to low-income households and others who are feeling the affordability crunch. Given increasing demand on housing authorities around the country, a sole focus on these options will, in the long run, ultimately end up locating care leavers in competition for housing resources with the general low-income population. Similarly, the NRAS, which aims to increase the supply of private rental stock, is likely do little to address the problems that care leavers have accessing the private rental market—a strong preference among many of the care leavers we interviewed.

Consequently, there is also a pressing need to improve care leavers' access to other secure housing options and the following model presents a demand side solution to the issue of housing scarcity and unaffordability in the current housing market.

Australian authors have argued that care leavers require a rental subsidy if private rental is their preferred accommodation (Cashmore & Paxman 2007, p.30). The CREATE Foundation (2008, p.9) argued that:

Support for young care leavers to maintain stable accommodation is also urgently needed, through payment of increased rent assistance for, say, the first two years after establishing a home.

As was noted in the positioning paper for this report (Johnson et al. 2009), support for people in the private rental market primarily takes the form of income support, largely through Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA). CRA has been promoted as a more efficient means of providing housing support, compared to public housing. It decreases government expenditure and, theoretically, offers choice, flexibility and market responsiveness to recipients (Burke 2001). CRA is payable to people who are

paying private rent above a rent threshold and are receiving income support payments.

However, as work by Burke, Neske and Ralston (2004) shows, CRA has a mixed impact. On the one hand they found that the receipt of CRA has a positive influence on young people's education choices and they conclude that rent assistance contributed to creating greater choice about where to live (Burke et al. 2004, p.21). However, their data also indicate that greater choice may mean that young people end up living in dwellings with poorer amenities (Burke et al. 2004, p.22). They also found that when CRA recipients moved house, they experienced difficulties in raising money for moving and establishment costs, as well as a lack of suitable accommodation options. Discrimination by real estate agents and landlords was also reported, particularly among older students (Burke et al. 2004, p.24).

In recognition of the limitations of rental assistance and the current chronic shortage of affordable housing for care leavers, it is important that alternative demand side strategies be explored. These are efficient to implement and, given the relatively small size of the leaving care population, easy to target.

6.2.5 Secure Tenancy Guarantee Scheme

One approach could be to develop a Secure Tenancy Guarantee Scheme (STGS) for care leavers. The scheme would provide every care leaver with a tenure security package that would ensure they pay only 25 per cent of their income on rent until the age of 25. The scheme would have the following features:

Universal Coverage

Every care leaver would be guaranteed access to the STG scheme. As a demand-side instrument, it would be attached to the individual, somewhat like the Section 8 voucher model in the USA.

Coverage to 25

The assistance would be guaranteed to the age of 25. This recognises the current trend in child protection legislation around the world, and increasingly in Australia. It also aligns the corporate parent idea more closely with the relationships that 'natural parents' now have with their children. Young adults regularly live at home, or return home after a failed independent living experiment, into their mid-twenties. Even if parents are not providing shelter, they are often called on to provide financial assistance in the early years of independence. Care leavers generally do not have access to this kind of support. Assistance until the age of 25 recognises the changing nature of the transition to adulthood.

25 per cent rule

The housing market in Australia is in an unprecedented phase of scarcity and unaffordability. This is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. The secure tenancy guarantee would ensure that care leavers pay no more than 25 per cent of their income for their housing with the STG scheme making up the difference. This not only secures their tenure but also ensures that they are able to meet their remaining needs, including food, clothing, travel, education and employment expenses. These expenses were identified by both participants and service providers as frequently being unmet at some stage during the transition from care.

Security of tenure

The STG scheme would be available regardless of tenure. This element of the scheme ensures choice for the care leaver. If they would like to stay on with a carer, move into public housing, stay in supported housing for care leavers or establish their own private rental, they would only pay 25 per cent of their income in rent. This would effectively mean that some options are *cost neutral* for government—for example, social housing or public housing.

Some of the other advantages of a demand-side intervention are as follows:

Conceptual value

One of the advantages of an STG scheme is that it breaks the conceptual link between care leavers and a homelessness response. Again, this shift in thinking speaks to the expectations that the corporate parent has of the children in its care.

Structural constraints

An STG scheme addresses the nexus between labour force entry, education and chronic housing unaffordability for young people. It recognises that in contemporary society youth unemployment is high, youth wages are low and that the housing market is largely unaffordable for this group and/or limited in the case of subsidised housing by long wait lists and fierce competition. As a result, young people are often forced into inappropriate housing—housing that is in areas where there are few or no employment opportunities or housing that is distant from education and training facilities. Further, they are often forced to accept low quality accommodation which has attendant negative implications for physical and emotional health. An STG scheme would help to address these problems.

Addressing individual need

While addressing some of the structural issues confronting care leavers' access to housing, an STG scheme would also address some of the individual concerns expressed in this study. A lack of certainty about what was happening with their housing as they approached the end of care, and a lack of control were both concerns held by young people. An STG scheme addresses certainty and control in the following manner: to create certainty, the funding is secured to the individual (rather than the housing program or support service) so that the young person is guaranteed the financial resources to support their housing needs; in order to create an opportunity for the young person to exercise greater control over their post-care housing choices, the scheme does not favour any particular tenure. Practically, by providing care leavers with choice and more financial resources, they are less likely to be forced into inappropriate housing which carries a higher risk of breakdown.

Flexibility to deal with many difficult situations that present themselves to care leavers

Many care leavers experience unexpected difficulties when they leave care. One example of this, which is currently poorly met by the housing options available to care leavers, is the breakdown in family relationships where family re-unification has been the 'exit from care'. An STG scheme can effectively respond to the issue of children who return home after care or before their care order has expired, only to have the relationship break down. Many children in this situation cannot access support and have few economic resources. As a result, they often end up homeless. Being able to access an STG program would provide the sort of financial resources that care leavers often require to overcome rough periods in their transition from care.

Funding and administration of the STG

A federally funded and administered scheme has the advantage of being truly universal in that it would not be affected by idiosyncrasies of state-based child protection legislation. However, each state does have significant infrastructure to administer a scheme of this nature. Although it is beyond the scope of this report, an STG scheme could be easily costed and a clear budget amount could be calculated for each care leaver for a known period. Depending on care leavers' housing choices, some of these costs may be 'saved' in a given year. Given the small amount of money currently allocated to care leavers (between \$1200–\$1900 per care leaver—see McDowell 2009), such a program would require a significant investment but it would be a wise investment nonetheless, given the costs of failing to provide care leavers with a safe and supportive environment.

Improving care leavers' housing outcomes requires both demand and supply side responses. While providing a broader suite of supported housing options, tailored to individual care leavers' needs, some dedicated (or ring-fenced) public/social housing and an STG scheme are important housing responses for care leavers, the importance of providing care leavers with ongoing support is equally crucial if they are to enjoy a smoother transition to independent living.

7 CONCLUSION

Fundamentally, the young people in this study struggle in the current housing market. Its marginalising structures—competitive private rental market, limited public housing, the high cost of purchasing—are well established. The reliance on government financial support means that these young people often struggle financially. And, like other young people who are beginning to live independently from their parents, they cannot present evidence of a history as good tenants. Unlike others, few have family who can act as guarantors, many find themselves reliant on the references of support workers, which they believe leads to discrimination.

Access, affordability, location and the quality of accommodation are major issues confronting young people generally and care leavers specifically, and they are key factors that influence the quality of their housing outcomes. However, the impact of these factors is strongly mediated by the social and material resources available to care leavers. Care leavers' housing stability has also been linked to their experiences in care and preceding care (Green & Jones 1999). This research confirms that pre-care and in-care experiences exert a strong influence on the housing and social stability of care leavers. The way these experiences mediate housing outcomes draws attention to the fact that while most people have stable relationships with others, for many care leavers their lives are characterised by the exact opposite—they often have little, if any, continuity and stability, experience frequent movement, have limited social networks and few people to rely on. Without on-going, reliable relationships, care leavers often end up isolated and disconnected from their local community. A consequence is that many struggle to access and maintain their accommodation.

The number of young people exiting to independent living each year is relatively small but unless there are significant improvements to the child protection system, the planning process, the availability of post care support services, and an increase in the availability of affordable, appropriate housing, many care leavers will continue to experience poor housing and non housing outcomes.

Housing is but one of a number of resources that care leavers require, but it is a critical one. However, to improve care leavers' housing outcomes does not simply require the provision of more housing alone—it requires better integration between child protection and housing providers as well as other service responses, such as mental health and substance abuse services to name but two. If rates of homelessness and housing instability among care leavers are to be reduced and care leavers are to have the same opportunity as their peers to participate in education and employment, governments need to invest in a range of integrated services designed around care leavers' varying needs. As we, and many other researchers have shown, failing to invest in appropriate housing and support services for care leavers comes at a great cost to both individual care leavers and the community.

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Level 1, 114 Flinders Street, Melbourne Victoria 3000

Phone +61 3 9660 2300 Fax +61 3 9663 5488

Email information@ahuri.edu.au Web www.ahuri.edu.au