

Background



In a social landscape marked by low youth wages, high youth unemployment and rising rental costs, many young Australians are staying at home for longer. This is not an option for those leaving out-of-home care, many of whom come from backgrounds of significant disadvantage, have complex needs and are ill-equipped for independent living. While support is available through a range of DHHS-funded leaving care services, there is little detailed information available on whether these actually meet the needs of these vulnerable young people.

2.1 EMERGING ADULTHOOD AND THE VICTORIAN CONTEXT

Young Australians rely on the support of family and social networks to navigate through early adulthood. This can be a time of financial, emotional and housing instability, and many young people use the ‘revolving door’ of the family home as a solid base from which they can establish independent households (Lee, 2014). For the 763 young people in Victoria aged 15 to 17 years who were discharged from out-of-home care in 2015 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016), the family home and its financial and emotional supports are often unavailable.

2.2 THE COST OF LIVING

Moving out of home can be financially challenging. Youth unemployment in Victoria was at a 15 year high in 2014, with outer suburban Melbourne and other regional areas experiencing the highest rates (Cook, 2014). These sites of disadvantage paradoxically tend to constitute regions with the most affordable housing.

Young people can expect to be charged anywhere from \$110 to \$180 per week to live in a shared, three-bedroom, private rental property - a tough call for those on low wages or relying on the independent Youth Allowance.

Accommodation located within the employment and educational opportunities of the city and inner suburbs of Melbourne is, on the other hand, prohibitively expensive. Young people can expect to be charged anywhere from \$110 to \$180 per week to live in a shared, three-bedroom, private rental property according to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Rental Report for September quarter 2015 (Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). These high costs exist on the backdrop of often-meagre youth wages. Additionally, the independent rate of Youth Allowance from Centrelink is only \$216.60 per week (\$433.20 per fortnight), which together with available rent assistance of \$65.20 per week equates to a total income of \$281.80 per week. From this an unemployed youth may pay for rent, food, bills and incidentals (Department of Human Services, 2016a, 2016b).

Given youth unemployment rates and the high cost of living, it's unsurprising that even well-educated young Australians from stable backgrounds are remaining at home for longer. Those in care, however, are essentially cut loose at the age of 18, if not earlier, and expected to fend for themselves.

Even university and vocational education graduates are experiencing high rates of unemployment. The Foundation for Young Australians reported that four months' post-graduation, only 65% of university graduates are in full-time work, and only 58% of Certificate III or higher graduates were full-time employed (Foundation for Young Australians, 2015). In this context, it is unsurprising that over 40% of 22 year olds were living with parents in 2011, as were over one quarter of 25 year olds and over 15% of 29 year olds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). In the Australian context, parenting responsibilities habitually continue well beyond the nominal age of 'adulthood' at 18 years, instead stretching well into their children's mid-twenties.

2.3 VICTORIAN LEAVING CARE LEGISLATION AND POLICY

The Victorian Government discharges its responsibility for the direct provision of accommodation, financial and other supports to children under the custody or guardianship of the state at the age of 18 years or earlier. The Children Youth and Families Act 2005 appears to give the Secretary of the then Department of Human Services responsibility "to provide or arrange for the provision of services to assist in supporting a person under the age of 21 years to gain the capacity to make the transition to independent living..." (cited in Cummins, Scott, & Scales, 2012). Indeed, this legislative change led to the establishment of a number of Victorian 'Leaving Care' services including the creation of mentoring, post-care support and flexible funding programs for eligible young care leavers in Victoria. However, section 16(2) of the Act emphasises that these responsibilities "...do not create any right or entitlement enforceable at law," suggesting that leaving care programs are in fact discretionary, and care leavers do not actually have any legal right to seek or demand support services from government (cited in Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011).

The Leaving Care services suite is delivered by a range of Community Service Organisations (CSOs). *The Child Protection Practice Manual* (Department of Health and Human Services, 2016a) recommends preparation for leaving care be enacted over the two years leading up to a young person's exit from care. Leaving care preparation involves discussions regarding care leavers' future aspirations, and exploring reunification with family and other alternative longer-term accommodation, including supported or independent living as well as opportunities to acquire independent living skills through observation, role modelling, and supported trial and error (Department of Health and Human Services, 2016a).

Mentoring programs are designed to improve young people's social networks and community connectedness over the 15 to 18 year age range. Leaving care brokerage can assist with costs associated with accommodation, education, training and employment, independent living skills development, and accessing health and community services. Post-care brokerage covers these same funding areas, and is available to young people who have exited care.