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TO IMPROVE THE LIFE OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TRANSITIONING FROM STATUTORY CARE TO INDEPENDENCE: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Australian research indicates that young people transitioning from out-of-home care (foster, kinship, and residential) to independence have diminished life outcomes compared with those of the general population (McDowall, 2009; Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011; Stein, 2012). This report aims to explore and identify the success factors that aid the transition process and to understand the potential barriers that impede young care leavers' successful post-care outcomes.

This report is an excerpt of the author's report on a Churchill Fellowship that was undertaken in 2015. It focused on understanding the 'success factors'. Interviews were conducted in The Netherlands, United Kingdom, and France with researchers, workers, and young people who have 'lived experience' of the care system. Professor Mike Stein's book Young People's Transitions from Care to Adulthood: International Research and Practice provided fertile ground for understanding the issues across 16 countries, and in identifying the leading researchers in the field of transitioning from care.

In an attempt to protect children and young people at risk of abuse or neglect within their birth family, statutory bodies bring them into the out-of-home care system. While this is a noble intent, it is fraught with challenges as the 'system' itself is often over-burdened, lacks resources, and is so bureaucratic in nature that it often impedes the very goals it strives to achieve.

It is assumed by the wider community that bringing children and young people into care is a good thing; because of this action, they will be protected from harm and subsequently lead fulfilling lives. In an ideal world this would be the case. However, the reality is that it is a complex issue, and for over-burdened systems with a lack of resources (in particular a scarcity of carers), the prognosis for young people leaving the care system (transitioning) remains poor despite the protection afforded them by the state. In the Australian context there are 43,009 children and young people in the out-of-home care system as of 30 June 2014 (AIHW, 2015). Of these, 41% are in foster care, 48.5% kinship care; 3.9% home based care; 5.5% in residential care and 1.1% in other types of care. Of these 14.7% (6,301) are in the 15-17 year old age group.

We know from research across the world (Akister, Owens, & Goodyer, 2010; Dixon, 2008; Stein, 2012;

Tweedle, 2007) that young people transitioning from care are more likely to be:

- underemployed or unemployed

- parenting at a younger age

- more involved with the juvenile justice system

- more likely to have had a homeless experience

- inclined to have more mental health issues

- more susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse

- unlikely to have higher education.

Transitioning from care to independence has been an area of concern for the CREATE Foundation for several years with three major pieces of research (Report Cards) commissioned to highlight the issues faced by young people during the transition process (McDowall, 2008, 2009, 2011). Additionally, the supplementary report 'What's the Answer?' (CREATE, 2010) was commissioned by the Commonwealth of Australia. This project focused on what young care leavers felt that the system needed to do to improve the life outcomes of young people post-care.

In Australia, we continue to see that planning for the transition from care to independence is not optimum, and good planning could be seen as happening by chance instead of design. Unfortunately, the common thread between the CREATE reports was that there is a systemic failure across all States and Territories to plan adequately, and more importantly,

involve young people in the development of their plan. The 2013 Report Card *Experiencing Out-of-Home Care in Australia: The Views of Children and Young People* took a broader systemic view covering seven life domains that were articulated in the National Out-of-Home Care Standards (2011), the establishment of which was a priority project under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020. In the section dealing with transitioning from care, CREATE's benchmarking report echoed the results of previous reports, namely, that the number of young people who knew of the existence of a personal transition to independence plan (prepared in conjunction with their worker) was a disappointing 33% of the 325 15 to17 year olds in the sample. Interesting to note is that of those who had a plan only 48% claimed to have been 'quite' or 'very involved' in its development with 62% stating that they believed that the plan would be 'quite' or 'very helpful' for guiding their future and 12% saying they thought it would be of little use (McDowall, 2013).

The Netherlands

As North, Knot-Dickscheit & Strijker (2008) reported, there were 35,435 children and young people in the out-of-home care system in the Netherlands. This comprised 20,063 in family foster care and 15,372 in residential youth care. Interestingly, these figures show a different pattern from those reported in 2000 with a reversal of numbers in the two care types. In 2000 there were 11,646 in foster care and 20,126 young people in residential youth care. Drawing on research she and her colleagues have conducted in Groningen (Harder, Zeller, Lopez, Kongeter, & Knorth, 2013), Dr

Annemiek Harder, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, explained that it is widely believed that the move towards foster care as the preferable option is driven by several factors: (a) the negative perception within the broader community about residential care (that it is not optimum for children), and (b) a view that family-based care is more desirable, as well as foster care being cheaper than residential care.

From January 1, 2015 a new youth care system began operating in The Netherlands, one with a focus on prevention, and increased collaboration between professionals and families to ensure a more efficient, coherent, and cost effective system (Bosscher, 2014). After speaking with researchers, workers, and young people, it seems that there is a shared view that the move to decentralised services is premised on cost saving rather than on providing a holistic and responsive service system for young people. They also shared the view that there was limited consultation with the sector during the development of the new Act that does little to evoke confidence. This position was supported by Bosscher who reported on the national government's intention to introduce a single funding system for all youth care services, complete with a reduction in funding of 3% in 2015, increasing to a cut of 15% in 2018.

The impact of the new Act for young care leavers is largely unknown and will no doubt become clearer over time. There is a paucity of research on the outcomes for young care leavers from either foster or residential care. However, what is known mirrors CREATE's findings in the various Report Cards—young care leavers

experience problems forming social relationships, have difficulty finding and maintaining employment, suffer housing instability, and achieve poor educational outcomes. Importantly, those with a positive attitude towards leaving care and those with support fared the best (Knorth et al., 2008).

Similar to Australia, young care leavers in the Netherlands enjoy support until they turn 18 with provision for additional support till 23 (if it would be irresponsible to terminate the care process or in the case of a court order).

United Kingdom

Professor Stein, Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, reported that for the year ending 2014, there were 10,310 young people who left care in the UK: of these 1,660 young people left at 16 years of age, 1,770 at 17 years of age, with the remaining 6,880 leaving at 18 years of age or over. Statistics show that the percentage of young people aged 16 and 17 leaving care has gradually reduced from 38% in 2010 to 33% in the year ending 2014.

When trying to determine if there is a correlation between placement types and the experience of transitioning from care, Professor Stein unpacked the data to highlight that over half of the young people in children's homes (residential facilities/group homes) leave care before they turn 18. These data are interesting because the figures are quite a lot higher than the third of young people who leave care at 18 who live in foster placements. So, is there a difference in the outcomes that young people experience if they leave at an earlier age, or if they are from residential or foster placements? The data paints a grim picture for young

people who leave 'the system' earlier, with only a quarter of young people leaving care at 16 years of age remaining in education at 19 compared with 40% of young people who left at age 18 or over.

The UK approach to supporting young people through the transition process is integrated across service systems, and sound research and evidence-based policy is pivotal to the system being effective and adequately resourced.

Bath UK

Dr Justin Rogers, Department of Social and Policy Studies, University of Bath, has a keen interest in out-of-home care and care leavers. Dr Rogers highlighted an issue that affects all those in the care system, particularly young people transitioning from care, namely, the negative perception of the community towards 'social work' and foster care.

Largely it is the media that shapes public perceptions, and the sensationalist stories that are portrayed relating to child abuse, coupled with the negative portrayal of the role that social workers play, create an impression of negativity for the public. Recent cases highlighted in the media focus heavily on laying blame on social workers, often leading to disciplinary processes and dismissal. The culture of blame rather than accountability is neither conducive to building public confidence in the system, nor for attracting potential students to study in the area of Social Work or keeping existing workers in the field. There appears to be a different approach in Scotland where workers are supported and there is little engagement with the language of blame.

Hull UK

Hull was an area highlighted for its award-winning work with young people transitioning from care. However, recent changes to funding and the implementation of a 'systemic advocacy model' have had major impact on the ground. The loss of funding or reduced funding for some locally-based services that supported the transition process holistically was felt hard on the ground.

Two workers provided some excellent feedback about 'what works well' in the process of successfully supporting young people to transition from care to independence. Both felt that monitoring and governance by the authorities was pivotal in ensuring that the system was accountable and responsive to young people's needs. Independent Review officers monitor case workers and ensure that young people have a leaving care/transition plan. Additionally, at national level, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) audit local authorities to ensure compliance to policy and to ensure children and young people's needs are met.

France

The French child protection system is complex in that it straddles two major authorities that are separate but complementary. The majority of children in care are managed by the social services within local authorities, while the others are managed by the Judicial Juvenile Protection Department. Public debate about the efficacy of the child protection system and its efficiency and fairness led to the creation of the National Observatory for Children in Danger (ONED) in 2004. Essentially ONED is an oversight body with

responsibility for the production of research on key aspects of child protection including transition from care (Gabriel, Keller, Bolter, Martin-Blachais, & Seraphin, 2013).

For over 30 years the French child welfare system has provided support to young people living within the out-of-home care system who come of age (at 18 years). Young adults are provided with funds to assist with educational or training costs that can include course fees, support to finish their studies, and driver's license attainment. Provision is made so that young people are able to stay at their residential placement or with their foster families if they wish to. Interestingly, Dumaret, Donati, & Crost (2011) reported that after experiencing this high level of support, once the young people turn 21 they are unable to access welfare allowances that are only available from the age of 25 (unless the young adult is the head of a household). There is a heavy reliance on charitable organisations and local authorities to supplement and support young people during this welfare gap (between ages 21-25).

Youth unemployment is a major concern in France, and young care leavers are at higher risk. The most recent data show that unemployment is running at more than 22% amongst 15-24 year olds (Eurostat data cited in Lerch & Stein, 2010). It is estimated that young people without any real skills or without academic or technical diplomas will spend at least 1.5 years in their first three potential working years unemployed. This is a particularly difficult situation given the lack of a welfare safety net to support young care leavers post care (Dumaret, 2008).

Little data are available to track the progress of young people transitioning from care, and even where data do exist it is not usually retained for longer than five to 10 years (Dumaret, 2008). Often researchers are resorting to extracting from existing general population data. However, some data do exist within various government portfolios (such as education) that are useful.

Dumaret (2008) stated that research demonstrates that, compared with the general population (those of similar societal backgrounds and of the same age), the outcomes for young people with a care experience are surprisingly less negative than originally thought, especially for those with stable placements. Older studies identify that young people in France experience similar outcomes to those in Australia, UK, and the Netherlands with challenges faced in acquiring housing and housing instability, coupled with increased mental health problems (Thoburn, 2007). There are also studies that highlight the difficulties adults experience in overcoming childhood adversities related to multiple family disturbances and repeated traumatic experiences (Dumaret, Coppel-Batsch, & Couraud, 1997).

Agency workers in a regional French organisation that were responsible for a group home met with me to share their experiences of the system and the supports it provides to young care leavers. All were professionally qualified workers who had extensive experience. They felt that the group home structure was effective and met the needs of many young people. They did, however, agree that group homes can be fraught with challenges given the structure and governance requirements. For example,

one worker highlighted the often rigid approach to routines such as meal preparation, access to the internet and bed times. These were often 'blanket' rules applied to ensure the smooth running of the home rather than meeting the needs of individual young people.

Conclusion

What became clear after speaking with researchers, workers, and young people was that there is no 'magic' process, action, or plan that enables young people to transition successfully to adulthood. Each young person has individual needs shaped by their experiences of abuse and neglect, and then by the care system, which in turn shapes their needs post care. During the course of the interviews it became clear that young people primarily wanted to feel safe, loved, cared for, and to belong.

The policy framework and allocation of resources varied widely between the three countries visited. Moreover, the structure of support systems that aid and provide a safety net for young people are vastly different and are important to consider. However, their importance is not always evident in the opinions of young people about what is important to them during the transition process. This could be partly because they have an expectation of the services and have come to accept them as the norm. For example, in the UK young people are allocated a 'Personal Advisor' who is specifically tasked with assisting the young person through the transition process. There are also financial incentives and supports that are able to be claimed in the UK, the Netherlands and France specifically to help young people 'set up home' and

provision to cover university and higher education costs. These things are often taken for granted as mentioned, as they are entitlements, and rightly so.

Bearing this in mind, it is important to look at improving the lives of young care leavers with a dual focus. The first is the policy framework and the second is the humanistic aspect focusing on the individual.

In conclusion, young people's transition from the care system to adulthood (post care) could be strengthened by viewing the process through a humanistic lens. For example, strengthening supportive relationships with young people's significant others (carers, case workers, birth family, siblings and community services), and using empowerment techniques to build self-confidence and resilience. If planning were optimum this could be achieved through a strong relationship with the worker and a tailored individual support plan that is developed with the young person. The desired outcome of an effective plan is that it needs to be flexible and 'owned' by the young person. Such a plan, coupled with supporting the young person to develop coping and/or life skills, and a healthy sense of self, will go a long way towards assisting care leavers to transition successfully to adulthood.

Importantly in Australia we currently do not have adequate external monitoring that oversees the way in which services to children and young people are administered. Largely it is when things go wrong and public pressure is applied that inquiries take place. This is not only reactive (and after the fact) but also expensive. In the UK there are internal Independent Reviewing Officers attached to local authorities that do not

have case management responsibility but who have oversight of monitoring individual cases to ensure that the best interests of the child are upheld. There is also Ofsted who conduct research into the effectiveness of the system including statistics and personal feedback from children and young people. This level of oversight is important as it acts as an impetus for local authorities to ensure that they are compliant and facilitating good practice.

Quotes from young people

The quotations in Table 1 are from the Ofsted Report completed in the UK, and those in Table 2 are quotations from Australian young people included in CREATE Foundations latest Report Card (McDowall, 2013). It is interesting to see that the comments and views of young people appear to be similar despite their country of origin.

Table 1: Selected quotations from young people presented in the Ofsted Report (2012)

Young people need to be given more information about leaving care earlier on.
No one can ever prepare you for having to manage on your own.
Before you leave you should have three or four weeks of independence, to get a taster – given a certain amount of money and monitored. Given a trial period and a bit of assessment.
16/17 is too young for independent living.
It's only when you get in the flat that you find out what things cost, such as TV licence and broadband.
When I was in care I had a lot done for me. I was spoilt and it has been a shock for me when I left care.
I had my own place and wasn't coping, but now am in supported housing which is really good cos always someone around to ask for support.
I have no family contact now as no one kept me in touch with them as I was growing up.
Loads of responsibilities – it's not normal for kids to shop/pay bills and live alone at 18.
When you're in care you don't have to worry about bills and cooking or meals. All of a sudden when you leave it's harder to manage and it stresses you out.
Financial support is really important, like advice on budgeting. I had, over a period of time, gone shopping under a worker's supervision to make sure I was buying the right things. This had worked well and got me used to managing money.
It's a sense of achievement – finally leaving and finding out who you are.
As a 16 year-old I have gone from a children's home to a women's refuge – have gone from having lots of support to none at all.
You should have the option to stay in foster care if you want to stay.

Table 2: Selected quotations from young people presented in the CREATE Foundation Report Card (2013)

I like it in care and wasn't really taught how to live in the big world, and I've finally got a family. It's scary to even think about leaving them.
I am going to be lonely and that people won't care anymore.
I don't know what is going to happen to me, and I don't think it is right for young adults at 18 years old to leave care. I think it's too early.
Just feel kind of scared, because it's a first time and it's another step for me moving into the real world.
Being on my own and being able to financially support myself. Don't want to go downhill in school.
I don't want to leave care because I am happy where I am.
Most other kids my age have their parents to fall back on if they need some money help like with getting a house, and I don't have that. If I got a house and for some reason had to leave, like a housemate move out and I couldn't afford it.

Interestingly, from research and the personal accounts of researchers, workers, and young people, it appeared that there were more similarities than differences in the countries visited regarding the outcomes for young people transitioning from care. The issues, challenges, and obstacles within the three child protection systems often mirrored one another. In addition, the success factors outlined by all three groups were often humanistic rather than systemic, and focused heavily on support networks and relationships.

Young people identified three themes that aided their transition experience. The first was to be adequately informed and involved in the process of leaving care; the second was to have strong support networks and connections with key people and within the community; and the third was to have practical life skills training that buffered them against failure when living independently.

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