

Youth homelessness and state care: a comparative examination of British and Australian evidence

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Youth homelessness is a complex issue framed by the dynamics of local housing and labour markets. Welfare configurations also vary substantially from country to country, presenting a number of challenges for comparative work on youth homelessness. Nonetheless, despite striking differences, some important themes clearly transcend national boundaries. One of these is the close relationship between youth homelessness and an experience of state care. Whilst less than 1% of young people in the overall population have an experience of care, amongst young homeless people, this figure rises dramatically to more than 20%. In short, there is clearly a strong relationship between homelessness and housing problems and an experience of care. What this relationship reflects, however, is much more open to conjecture.

This paper presents some preliminary findings from a substantial Australian research project focussing upon improving housing outcomes for young people leaving care. It also draws upon findings from a smaller research project examining the problem of Australian youth homelessness in the context of an over-heated housing market and significant population mobility. The paper compares these Australian findings with various empirical work conducted by the author examining youth homelessness in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The paper suggests that there are a number of close parallels between the historical British experience of youth homelessness and the care system, and the current situation in Australia.

With the election of the Rudd government in 2007, youth homelessness has risen dramatically up the Australian political agenda and there appears to be a genuine commitment to address the issue. Crucially, the experience of the UK over the past 20 years offers many pertinent lessons for Australian policy-makers and the paper makes a number of suggestions for enhancing housing outcomes for young people leaving state care in both the UK and Australia. Some of these proposals involve substantial revision to national housing and labour markets. However, it is also apparent from both the British and Australian evidence that relatively minor modifications to support systems can often make an inexpensive but very substantial difference to successful housing outcomes for young people in the transition from state care to independent housing.

The election of Kevin Rudd and the Australian Labour Party in November 2007 heralded a significant shift in Australian social policy. An ardent admirer of Third Way thinking, the policy approaches of the Rudd government have been in some stark contrast to the preceding eleven year tenure of John Howard and his neo-liberal approach to both economic and social policy:

'Competitive markets are massive and generally efficient generators of economic wealth. They must therefore have a central place in the management of the economy. But markets sometimes fail, requiring direct government intervention. There are also areas where the public good dictates that there should be no market at all... Parties of the Centre Left around the world are wrestling with a similar challenge - the creation of a competitive economy while advancing the over-riding imperative of a just society. Some call this the 'Third way'', a new formulation of the nation's economic and social imperatives (Rudd's first speech to parliament, 1998)

Of course, there remains considerable ambiguity over the direction of the Labour government in Australia – after all, in the prelude to the Election in 2007 Kevin Rudd openly described himself as a *'fiscal conservative'*, albeit in a Blairite attempt to emphasise the economic credentials of a potential Labour government. Whatever the nuances and opacity here, it remains the case that Australia has seen a number of important shifts in policy direction and priority, one of which has been the dramatic rise in the political profile of homelessness.

Homelessness has risen too in importance for structural reasons. Like the UK, the early years of the 21st century have seen Australia experience a huge property boom and rampant house price inflation, a dynamic which in turn has heavily impacted upon the most vulnerable in society. While homelessness is a complex phenomenon, it is ultimately a housing problem and is directly affected by the broader dynamics of the housing market. In many ways, there have been very similar developments in both British and Australian housing markets, reflecting a dominance of owner occupation as the majority tenure. While double digit house price inflation in the UK and Australia has served to bring considerable political capital, it has also served to effectively marginalise a whole generation of young people.

Over the last decade the Australian housing market has experienced serious affordability problems. While these affordability issues reflect a complex range of global and local factors, it is generally acknowledged that Australia has been particularly affected, with a median house price to average annual income ratio of seven to one. This is one of the highest rates in the developed world (OECD 2005). Within the Australian housing market, however, some groups are particularly disadvantaged due to their economic vulnerability. Young people are at the start of their housing careers and their experiences of housing are typically more fluid than older people (Beer, Faulkner & Gabriel 2006; Flatau, Hendershott & Wood 2004). 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 (Lazzari 2008; Cobb-Clark 2008). In a tight rental market young people 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). Similarly, problems maintaining accommodation are often explained due to a lack of income combined with high rents (Cobb-Clark 2008). 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. Public housing is rarely a realistic option, because of the long wait times and also a general reluctance by young people to view public housing in a positive light (Burke, Neske & Ralston 2004).

Difficulties gaining access to and maintaining housing is just one, albeit important, factor that has altered the way young people manage the transition to adulthood. Whereas once young people left school at 15 or 16, got a job, married in their early twenties and set up a home, young people are now much more likely to stay in the family home until their mid to late 20s, stay in school longer and delay marriage and having children (Arnett 2000; Stein 2006; Wyn 2004). Whereas in the 1960s about 10 per cent of people aged between 20-29 years lived at home, now approximately a third do (ABS 2000).

By staying in the family home young people benefit from ongoing financial and emotional support, in addition to enjoying the benefits of a stable and secure place to live. They also have the security of knowing that they have a safety net to return to if things do not work out when they leave home (Green et al. 2007). Many young people return home at least once to save money or if things do not work out, and the entire process of leaving home is often an extended one (Fitzpatrick & Clapham 1999:178). This highlights the point that the transition to independence is rarely a linear process (Cashmore & Paxman 1996; Moslehuddin & Mendes 2006), but more effectively understood as a process of achieving interdependence.

The transition to independence is generally premised on the view that young people will be supported through the process by their families and friends in a stable environment. While this is the case for most young people, the notion is problematic when applied to care leavers, particularly those who 'age out' of the care system and who may have no home to return to. Leaving the care of the state is a *'final event'* (Stein 2006:274) and young people leaving care often do so in an unplanned way that can result in serious housing problems and homelessness.

Myself and a colleague have recently been working on a research project focused upon the problem of youth homelessness in the city of Mandurah in Western Australia, drawing on key actor interviews with housing and care agencies working on the ground with young homeless people. (Liddiard and Tiwari 2009 - forthcoming) It has examined in some detail how dramatic demographic growth; economic growth and house price growth are impacting upon young people in Australian society. The core objective of this study was to identify some of the key consequences of economic vibrancy for those young people who are not well placed to take advantage of such opportunities. In particular, the research sought to identify future directions for housing and other support services that match the particular needs of this group.

I have also been exploring a number of these issues further in a substantial research project for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute examining housing outcomes for care leavers (Johnson et al 2009-forthcoming). Australian and international research identifies young people with a care background as being at increased risk of homelessness and this study examines this in detail. Empirical data has been collected in two states – Victoria and Western Australia – consisting of 75 interviews with care leavers who have experienced housing problems. In particular, this study has focused upon which existing transitional support models most effectively facilitate positive housing outcomes for young people leaving care.

Both projects are due to be completed later this year and this paper begins to reflect upon just a few preliminary findings.

Housing and Labour Market Dynamics

Mandurah is an excellent setting for exploring the wider dynamics of economic growth and marginalization, as one of the fastest growing cities in Australia, having witnessed an overall growth rate of more than 400% over the last 20 years. This comes as a response to improved transport links, its proximity to Perth and the distinctive lifestyle that it can offer. On the other hand, this rapid increase of population also comes as a threat to the livelihood of a high proportion of the existing community. In short, the character of the emerging community in this region can best be described as bi-polar in nature – a community of haves and have-nots (Anthony and Pendergast 2003). One of the challenges for sustainable development is the high unemployment rate in this region, which is considerably higher than the State regional average. Ultimately most housing problems are problems of low income and unemployment and these has particularly affected young people.

According to Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1998), the decline of the youth labour market does not explain why some young people become homeless in the first place, but it does explain why homeless young people find it difficult to return to secure accommodation.

Even if employment opportunities do exist, low rates of pay detrimentally impact upon young people:

'the level of pay for those jobs basically means that you can work and not afford to be able to eat or stay where you do. So it is a significant concern for a young person entering the workforce in the hospitality and retail areas. Those jobs are particularly fickle, they are not particularly permanent, and the work force is quite casualised anyway, so for a young person to take up one of those jobs and move up is quite difficult' (Local authority housing provider)

Findings from the State Homelessness Taskforce (2002) indicate that there has been a dramatic decline in the affordability of housing in Western Australia. A lack of affordable, secure housing is a substantial factor in patterns of homelessness and also contributes to the cycle of homelessness. Renting privately was once seen as a transitional tenure for households while they waited to enter home ownership or public housing (Jacobs et al. 2005). A decrease in public housing and difficulties entering home ownership has resulted in more low income households seeking longer-term accommodation in the private rental market (Yates, Wulff and Reynolds 2004), as well as increased demand by middle income households (Yates and Wulff 2000). The growth of households looking to the private rental market has placed additional demands on the sector that have not been met by a commensurate growth in supply, resulting in a disproportionate shortage of rental property for the lowest income households. Finding appropriate accommodation is made more difficult by the reduction in the number of low rent properties. Even though the overall level of rental housing increased between 1986 and 1996 (AIHW 2003), the proportion of low rent homes has fallen by 15 per cent in the last ten years (National Affordable Housing Forum 2006). Currently, Australia's private rental market is characterised by low vacancy levels, high rental costs, and competition for accommodation. These conditions are challenges for most young people, but for those who are leaving care with few resources, the challenges are greater still:

'For the young ones, it's dreadful. It really is problematic. Their income just cannot cover the rents that are being asked for around here and it's very frustrating for them.' (Crisis accommodation provider)

According to the State Homelessness Taskforce (2002), young people under 18 years of age were viewed as the least able to access housing. Young people are generally considered as high risk with public, community and private rental options due to their age, likelihood of poor household management skills and possible high-risk behaviors (Burke et al. 2004).

The availability and quality of public and community housing stock has also declined over the past decade. Public housing, which is in short supply anyway, has become a tenure for very low income households, a large proportion of whom experience significant social and economic disadvantage. Over the last two decades public housing has been under on-going pressure from a decrease in real funding levels, the selling of stock, and high levels of demand from low income households, many of whom have complex needs. Increased targeting of housing services and support to people with the most complex needs has meant that even homeless young people can wait for months before they are able to access public or community housing.

Public housing is not an easily accessible option for many young people. The lack of stock for single persons is a particular problem, while the demand for limited places is now managed through strict eligibility criteria and prioritising the needs of particular groups, often to the exclusion of many young people. These long waiting lists mean that public housing is rarely a relevant option for young people who may be experiencing immediate housing crisis and have limited skills and resources to maintain their tenancy.

Family Context

While the structural context of the housing market is important, it is just one of many issues. One key influence upon successful housing outcomes is family background and a study conducted by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI 2004) indicated that 80 per cent of homeless youth come from 'alternative' family types. The largest group (38 per cent) were from single parent households (including parents who were separated or divorced). One-third (33 per cent) of the young people were from

blended families and nine per cent were from other family types (e.g. brought up by relatives, step parents etc.) Results from SAAP National Data have indicated that family or relationship breakdown were the most cited reason for being homeless for both women and men under 25 years of age, a finding reflected in these studies:

'Family breakdown is probably the main reason, they just don't get along at home, or mom and dad separated, mom brings in a new boyfriend or they get married, and there's just that breakdown, there's the lack of ability to retain. And so a lot of young people find it easier to leave, to jump ship and become homeless. It's a lot easier than dealing with the problems at home.' (Short-term accommodation provider)

'We've generally found that it is the break-up of the family unit and where the mum or dad has left, and the other has a new partner, and the new partner doesn't get along with the child, or the young person, or vice versa, so the young person moves out.' (Crisis accommodation provider)

These issues are especially pertinent for young people from care. Young people leaving state care are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community (Mendes 2005). Many people in care have experienced neglect, or physical, sexual and emotional abuse prior to entering care (Roman & Wolfe 1997; Zugazaga 2004). Problems stemming from a 'poor start' are often exacerbated by multiple placements in care, frequent changes in school, and irregular contact with families and workers. Research shows that those at greater risk of poor outcomes 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).

In Australia, there are over 28,000 young people in formal out of home state care such as foster care, group homes or state provided residential care. While many young people leave care before the age of 15, often to be reunited with their family, about 1,500 people

“age out” of the care system between the ages of 15-17 every year (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008). There is significant evidence that their experiences preceding, in and on leaving care have a significant effect on their transition to independent living.

Challenges for Policy

Homelessness is ultimately a housing problem, so addressing the lack of affordable housing is key. Even armed with a positive rental history, it is difficult for young people to gain access to secure housing in Australia faced with the current lack of affordable accommodation. It has certainly been recognized by the Australian Government that the availability and quality of public and community housing stock has declined over the past decade. While the maximum weekly rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance has increased for single people, and provides some rent relief, it is a demand side response and has no impact on increasing the supply of affordable rental housing. It is recognized that the supply shortage is currently the greatest drive of rising rents. Stable and affordable housing has been recognized by the Green Paper (2008) in playing a critical role in preventing homelessness.

The Australian Government’s housing reform agenda has sought to increase the supply of housing. New measures include the National Rental Affordability Scheme, which provide incentives to institutional investors to build 50,000 new, affordable rental dwellings for rent at 20 per cent below market rents by 2011-2012. If market demand remains strong, a further 50,000 houses will be built from 2012 onwards. The Government has also sought to increase the supply of land for housing by releasing surplus Commonwealth land for residential and community development. Capital funding has also been allocated to increase the supply of housing for homeless people through A Place to Call Home initiative. Together with the states and territories, this will deliver a number of new dwellings for homeless people. Recently, the Rudd Government also announced an increase in funding to public and community housing of over \$12b in the next five years. The additional funding will translate into approximately 20,000 additional units. By increasing the supply of affordable housing, more exit points are then created for homeless youth leaving crisis accommodation.

Importantly, a lack of affordable accommodation has major implications for move-on from crisis housing, which in turn presents a number of intractable challenges for agencies working in the field. According to one respondent from a local authority housing provider:

'We haven't got low cost accommodation, so the exit from crisis services is pretty poor, as it is across the country. And that is a significant gap. So we can avert the crisis, for three nights or three months, where they go after that is the question.'

'Well the problem with exit strategies is the options. It comes back to that.'
(Crisis accommodation provider)

This is supported by findings by Pendergast and Doran-Wu (2007). Their data indicated a shortage of emergency accommodation compared to the number of homeless people in the Mandurah area. Findings from this study also indicated that a lack of medium term accommodation was similarly a concern that needed to be addressed to resolve the problem of youth homelessness, along with adequate support. This was echoed by the following housing provider:

'There's not enough crisis accommodation and again the young person is particularly disadvantaged. There's not a lot out there for them. I'd say with the homeless person, crisis accommodation is not really going to solve the problem. If you're really going to address homelessness, you're dealing with a whole host of issues. Usually there's debt, there's drugs, there could be a whole sort of issues that you need to sort out and it's not going to happen in 6 weeks, and you'd be lucky if you can solve it or begin to solve it in 3 months. And so it goes on. There's probably more need for the medium term housing, say between 6 and 12 or 18 months where you can really afford to address a whole host of issues, and not once they get a job say 'off you go, out you go, do it for yourself'.

This sentiment appeared to be shared by many participants, who believed that an increase in crisis accommodation would not suffice in addressing the problem of youth homelessness – effective strategies were needed to address employment, education, and

the various issues preventing the young people from gaining housing. The role of support for young people was fundamental:

'(We need) more support for the young people in medium term accommodation because even though they've done tenancy training and living skills, once they get in there, especially if they've grown up in an environment where they were always surrounded by people, they have their mates over and they get kicked out for their noise level. So there needs to be I think a lot more intensive support for the medium term.' (Leaving care service provider)

In short, other support is essential and this is particularly pertinent for care leavers. These young people often need additional assistance to sustain their new tenancies once they leave crisis accommodation:

'You've got to give them that support. You can't just chuck them out there and expect they'll make it. You see young people out there that have been disadvantaged and abused and are working through a crisis recovery situation, that's the way we see it, and if you don't provide realistic housing options that can prevent them, they can slip back' (Leaving care service provider)

'We try and teach independent living skills to the young person, so hopefully there's enough skilling involved to prevent any issues. We teach them simple things like how to connect power, how to connect the telephone, how to connect the gas, all that sort of basic things that we probably take for granted when moving into a new place... So in the 3 months, if this is the person we want to move in, we equip and skill so that when the time of transition comes, there shouldn't be any problems. But if there's a breakdown in that process, if it hasn't been consistent or it's been a bit ad-hoc or whatever, then it's going to be on-going problems like how to pay the rent, where to pay the rent, and how to be responsible for rent and how to keep the house clean and tidy. There's going to be all this sort of problems because it hasn't been done properly.' (Short-term accommodation provider)

The importance of leaving care plans

Young people 'ageing out of care' have to manage multiple transitions – moving into independent accommodation, leaving school, and becoming financially independent – at a younger age and with fewer resources and supports than their peers (Cashmore &

Ainsworth 2003). Many care leavers are unprepared for independent living. A result is that many experience periods of housing instability in the years following their discharge (Cashmore & Paxman 2006b). A lack of stability is often linked to poor outcomes such as high rates of unemployment, financial difficulties, physical and mental health problems and loneliness. Care leavers who experience multiple placements and who leave care before they are 18 are particularly prone to poor outcomes. Many of those care leavers who manage to secure accommodation fall into debt because they have insufficient income and many lose their accommodation (State Homelessness Taskforce, 2002). A result is that many care leavers end up homeless, some for many years, where their problems tend to get worse and more costly to resolve (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008).

Breaking this cycle is difficult but the evidence suggest that the potential benefits of appropriate post-care support and housing assistance to the individual and the community can be significant (Forbes, Inder & Raman 2006). Failure to assist care leavers to make the transition to independent living often results in the ongoing use of welfare services. A recent study for the Department of Family Affairs, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs suggested that just over half of all care leavers go on to be heavy service users throughout their lives (Morgan Disney & Associates & Applied Economics 2006). They estimate the additional life-time costs to the community to be around \$2 billion dollars or \$43 million dollars per annum. In contrast the equivalent costs for 1150 people in general community is estimated to be \$3.3 million per annum. The additional costs are borne by a range of services with mental health, income support and housing services carrying the greatest life-time economic burden, estimated at \$350m, \$300m and \$210 million respectively. These costs are preventable and post-care support offers the possibility of reducing costs across each of the four main cost drivers – the quantity of services used, the costs of services, the proportion of people who use these services, and the length of time using the service system. In short, post-care support offers the possibility of significant long term fiscal efficiencies for Governments, as well as improving life opportunities for young people.

While the housing history and past experiences of every care leaver are different, reviewing their housing history collectively can give some insight into the challenges care leavers face in obtaining secure housing. From our sample of 75 care leavers, for example, just 10 per cent had ever had access to the private rental sector, suggesting that the private rental market may be a very limited housing option for many care leavers, either due to reluctance from owners and real estate agencies, or because care leavers themselves do not have the suitable skills, financial resources, and/or knowledge to enter the private rental market

Support in the transition from care has been linked with positive housing outcomes for care leavers. Yet as a result of the different legislative jurisdictions in child protection in Australia, entitlements to support for care leavers vary, as do the application of these entitlements. In addition, the different backgrounds for leaving care have direct implications for the level of support the care leaver may require. The transition from care can be broken down into two different stages, prior to leaving care and after leaving care. As the reality is that care leavers have to become independent at an earlier age than young people in the general population it is important that these individuals have sufficient skills for independent living when leaving care. In addition, support in the transition phase in the form of a leaving care plan can add structure in the uncertainty and volatility care leavers may experience in this transitional phase.

Appropriate exit planning and follow-up with care leavers have been identified as an avenue to mitigate the poor outcomes for care leavers. Particularly as housing is a pivot for other outcomes, proper exit planning and secure housing in the transition from care is fundamental. It is therefore of utmost importance that care leavers are not exited into homelessness, have a proper leaving care plan which engages and outlines the different avenues to secure housing, and offers transitional support and follow-up for young people leaving care in their transition to independent living. It is therefore of real concern that many of our sample had little or no leaving care plan.

Housing Classification								
	Secure		Transitional		Homeless		Total	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Yes	8	11	8	11	3	4	19	25
Kind of - not proper	5	7	5	7	2	3	12	16
No	16	21	10	13	16	21	42	55
No answer - unsure	3	4	-	-	-	-	3	4
Total	32	42	23	30	21	28	76	100

Table 1: Frequency of leaving care plan across housing classifications

Overall, only one-quarter of these care leavers indicated that they had a leaving care plan in place with an additional sixteen percent outlining that some efforts to create a leaving care plan was initiated, but this was not felt to be genuine or meaningful. It is obviously concerning that fifty-five percent of these participants indicated that they did not have a leaving care plan in place, indicating very little exit planning and follow-up in the transition from care.

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 the preparedness, or the individual skill base among these individuals. Most remarkable are the levels of not being prepared related to *getting a job, obtaining housing, and obtaining personal health records*. Two-thirds of our participants indicated not being prepared for getting a job, with forty-five percent indicating they were *not at all prepared*. More than half of the participants replied that they were *not at all prepared* in obtaining housing with an additional ten percent indicated they were *not very well prepared*.

In contrast, there was a higher degree of preparedness with regards to *getting health information, transportation, welfare assistance, and information on contraception, information of drugs and alcohol*, as well as regarding *shopping, cooking, and housekeeping*. The proportion of participants indicating *very prepared* is close to fifty

percent with regards to transportation and obtaining welfare assistance, and more than half the respondents were very prepared regarding information on contraception, drugs and alcohol, as well as housekeeping.

Keeping in mind the high occurrence of homelessness among these participants, not only with regards to their current housing classification but in their housing history since leaving care, the relationship between having a leaving care plan and experiencing homelessness appears to be important. While our evidence does not unequivocally indicate that having a leaving care plan in place leads to secure housing, it does strongly suggest that not having a leaving care plan in place is highly associated with homelessness, as more than three quarters of the participants classified in the homeless category indicated that they did not have a leaving care plan in place.

These preliminary findings begin to raise a number of pertinent questions, and also relate closely to other research findings. McDowall (2008), for instance, found that while states have articulated approaches to leaving care planning, the way legislation has been implemented in each state has been uneven. For instance, McDowell found that 58 per cent of the young people in their sample who had left care 'reported they did not have such a plan'. Worse still, nearly two thirds of those still in care but approaching discharge 'did not know of the existence of any leaving care plan' (McDowall, 2008:43). The importance of leaving care plans was also 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).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we know that youth homelessness is closely related to the broad structural dynamics of housing and labour markets. Progress in addressing homelessness amongst

young people is clearly dependent upon expanding the supply of affordable housing. However, it is also evident that the provision of appropriate support structures for young people is a crucial key to managing successful pathways to independence, especially for young people with a background from care. In short, there is an urgent need to prepare young people in care for independence while they are still in care, giving them the tools and skills for independent living. However, successful housing outcomes for young people are also dependent upon affordable and secure housing options being available when they age out of care, which in turn demands meaningful political engagement and cannot simply be left to the vagaries of a highly privatised housing market.

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