INDIGENOUS CARE LEAVERS IN AUSTRALIA:

A NATIONAL SCOPING STUDY

Monash University Department of Social Work

Monash Indigenous Studies Centre

SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children

We would like to acknowledge the people of the Kulin Nations on whose lands Monash University stands, and pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

We acknowledge the Countries right around Australia, where children have been removed from Indigenous nations. We acknowledge that the children whose lives are being discussed in this report come from Indigenous nations and countries across Australia. We acknowledge the work done within these communities to support connections to kin and country and keep families together.

Indigenous Care Leavers in Australia:

A National Scoping Study

Final Report

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SNAICC: A National Voice for Our Children

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACCO	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisation
ACIST	Aboriginal Cultural Identity Support Tool
APL	Aboriginal Practice Leaders
ATSICPP	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CSP	Cultural Support Plan
CYPS	Child and Youth Protection Services (Australian Capital Territory)
DCP	Department of Child Protection (Western Australia and South Australia)
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria)
FACS	Family and Child Services (New South Wales)
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
MISC	Monash University Indigenous Studies Centre
MUHREC	Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee
NAIDOC	National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee
OOHC	Out of Home Care
Resi	Residential Out of Home Care
SISPRU	Social Inclusion and Social Policy Research Unit
SNAICC	National Voice for our Children

Partnerships & Research Team

Partnership with SNAICC: National Voice for our Children

SNAICC is the national non-government peak body in Australia which aims to promote the rights, needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (herein called Indigenous) children and families. SNAICC's priority areas of work are early childhood development, child protection and child rights. SNAICC is governed by a national Council and Board of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and is committed to pursuing the rights of Indigenous children.

In recognition of the lack of nationally available data on the number of Indigenous children leaving care each year, and the overall lack of research focusing on their needs, SNAICC lent their support to this project.

In May 2019 SNAICC held a "Conversations" Event in Melbourne. This annual awareness raising event aimed to encourage public and political commitment as they launched the National "Family Matters Week of Action" calling for measures that increase the capacity for Indigenous organisations to support the health and wellbeing of Indigenous children nation-wide. This event was opened with the resounding belief that the child protection sector, particularly how it responds to Indigenous children, is in a state of crisis. A lasting comment was also made by one panel member: there is no greater purpose than to address the issues facing the welfare of Indigenous children because through them we are creating our Ancestors of the future. This is the sentiment that we carry into our report. We believe that:

"Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see" (Postman, 1982, p.xi).

As a partner on the study, SNAICC supported the research team by assisting us to identify and build relationships with key stakeholders particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). They also provided input into the research methodology, and reviewed and provided input into the final report.

We would like to thank John Burton for being our key contact at SNAICC and for actively supporting our research. We are grateful to John for chairing our presentation at the SNAICC 8th annual national conference in 2019, themed 'Growing up with Strong Identity, Culture and Connection'. This was a highly successful presentation to an audience of hundreds of people, of whom about 90% were Indigenous people working with or advocating for Indigenous children, demonstrating the real significance of this research for Indigenous people and organisations at this time. Our findings aim to recognise and contextualise the experiences of Indigenous workers, communities and families, and explore the governmental approaches to Indigenous families that continue colonising approaches in contemporary Australian life.

We would also like to acknowledge the continuous and ongoing work that SNAICC engage in around key policy priorities which directly impact on Indigenous children and young people across Australia, with a focus on those in state-based out-of-home care. This includes working with governments to implement a National Children's Strategy to eliminate the over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection systems, advocating for full implementation of all five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP), as well as calling for the enactment of all four building blocks of the Family Matters Roadmap (2017).

Sidney Myer Fund

This study was supported by a grant from the Sidney Myer Fund, who provide grants in a range of areas, with the vision to improve the lives of Australians in lasting and positive ways. We would like to thank the Sidney Myer Fund for their assistance and support in this research study.

Victorian Commissioner - Aboriginal Youth and Children

We would like to acknowledge Justin Mohamed, the Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, for his interest in and support of this research project. We are thankful for his engagement with Monash University more generally and his efforts in bringing issues relating to Indigenous young people to the forefront of the university's attention. In the

early stages of this project the Commissioner's office met with the research team and provided great assistance in building our knowledge of the Victorian context of leaving care service provision. The involvement of the commissioner in this project added tremendous value to our engagement with the Victorian child welfare sector.

We also acknowledge the position of SNAICC and more than 150 organisations who are calling for a dedicated national commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in Australia *to provide oversight and accountability for services to improve and protect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people* (SNAICC 2019; Family Matters 2020).

Participants

We would like to thank the participants of this research project. Over the course of this study the research team interviewed many Indigenous and non-Indigenous policy advisors, service provider managers, team leaders, case workers and Indigenous cultural workers, who whilst all working tirelessly at the front line in the OOHC and leaving care sector, were able to share their experiences and perspectives on the sector.

We want to specifically acknowledge the participation of the Indigenous respondents. The research team acknowledge the historically intrusive nature and misuse of research undertaken by non-Indigenous organisations, and the negative impact past research has had on Indigenous families and communities nationwide. We thank the Indigenous participants for trusting the research team with their contributions. We also acknowledge that some of the Indigenous participants may have their own lived experience of intergenerational trauma and involvement in the child welfare systems, and in some instances this may have resulted in a more onerous involvement in this project.

Ethical commitment statement

Throughout the research project, the research team were committed to the core values of ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. We have attempted to incorporate this through the constitution of the research team's activities, reflecting Monash's strengths in areas in both social policy and Indigenous studies.

Research Team

Who are we and where do we come from? In order to inform the reader of the background of each research team member we would like to state where our different perspectives come from.

Dr Philip Mendes was the lead Chief Investigator for this project. Philip is a non-Indigenous Associate Professor with the Department of Social Work who has been researching the experiences and outcomes of young people leaving out-of-home care (OOHC) for 20 years, and has completed major studies pertaining to youth justice, employment, mentoring programs, disability, relationship-based models of support, and Indigenous care leavers in Victoria.

Jacinta Walsh was a research officer for this project. Jacinta is a Jaru woman from Western Australia, and a single mother to three boys. Jac was adopted and raised in Melbourne. She has a Bachelor of Secondary Education (Visual Art) from the University of Melbourne, and a Graduate Certificate in Business Marketing from Swinburne University. Jacinta has worked previously in the area of Indigenous Student Support at a number of Melbourne Universities. Jacinta currently works and is a PhD Candidate through the Monash Indigenous Studies Centre at Monash University.

Dr Rachel Standfield was a Chief Investigator on this project. Rachel is a non-Indigenous woman who is a lecturer in the Monash Indigenous Studies Centre. Before becoming an academic she had a career in policy, working with Indigenous organisations, including ATSIC. She is a historian who works on histories of colonial governance of Indigenous peoples, and

the creation of racialised structures of power. She teaches both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in undergraduate Indigenous Studies classes, and has worked with Indigenous organisations and communities to complete historical research.

Dr Samone McCurdy was a Chief Investigator on this project. Samone is a non-Indigenous woman, and is the deputy head of the Department of Social Work at Monash University.

Dr Bernadette Saunders was a Chief Investigator on this project. Bernadette is a non-Indigenous Senior Lecturer/Researcher in the Department of Social Work. She has been researching and writing about injustices, resulting from law, language and culture, impacting disadvantaged groups, especially children, for over 20 years. She was a Senior Research Fellow at Monash, from 2006-2010, focusing on child abuse prevention.

Lena Turnbull was a research officer on this project. Lena is a non-Indigenous woman, who holds an Arts Degree (minor in Indigenous Studies) and Social Work degree through Monash University. Lena has worked as a social worker for ten years, primarily in direct practice (case management), working with adolescents with disabilities and adults in the criminal justice system, and has direct experience working with Indigenous young people transitioning from state care.

Emily Armstrong was a research officer on this project. Emily is a non-Indigenous woman who holds Bachelor Degrees in Social Work and Health Science and a Masters Degree in Public Policy and Management. She comes to this work with a commitment to social justice and ethical research that centres Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and self-determination. Emily commenced the program as the research assistant and was responsible for key areas of the data collection.

Ethical Principles

There are six core values outlined in the *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities: Guidelines for research and stakeholders* (NHMRC

2018). These core values include: Spirit and Integrity, Cultural continuity, Equity, Reciprocity, Respect and Responsibility. The research team were committed to addressing and incorporating each core value when undertaking this research project.

The research team acknowledge historical practices of research by non-Indigenous organisations having a negative impact on Indigenous families and communities. The research team have consciously embedded culturally sound research practice into our research activity and engagement with Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, government and non-government organisations and ACCOs, and have made every attempt to undertake respectful processes in the collection, storage and management of research data.

Executive Summary

In Australia, Indigenous children and young people are over-represented in all stages of the child protection system. Large numbers of Indigenous young people exit OOHC into 'independence' nationally each year, estimated to be approximately 1140 annually (AIHW 2020). Yet there is almost no information focusing on the experiences of this group of young people, or which examines the suitability of existing provisions to support their transition to independence. This is despite the known poor outcomes of care leavers in areas such as youth justice, homelessness, education and employment. Coupled with the recognition that Indigenous young people may face additional hardships, such as racism and disconnection from culture, it seems necessary to understand their pathway transitioning from care. This study was developed to address this knowledge gap and represents the first national study examining policy and practice concerning Indigenous young people leaving care.

This study was led by the Social Inclusion and Social Policy Research Unit at Monash University, and conducted in partnership with the Monash Indigenous Studies Centre and SNAICC. The aims of the study are as follows: To ascertain the number of Indigenous young people leaving state care in each state and territory; to document the existing policies and programs aiming to support this group in each jurisdiction; to gather information concerning the outcomes for Indigenous young people transitioning from care; to document and share identifiable good practice in supporting Indigenous young people transitioning from care; and to provide recommendations with regard to policy, program and service provision in relation to Indigenous care leavers.

Data collection involved 22 focus groups or interviews with a total of 53 individuals. Participants represented government departments, non-government organisations and ACCOs in the leaving care sector from every state and territory in Australia. The key topics discussed aligned with the aims of the study, and included funding of support programs, existing policies and policy application, service provision, challenges and outcomes facing Indigenous care leavers and best practice.

The findings of the study were organised into ten key themes; data, funding, policy, cultural planning, transition planning, service system failures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service provision in the leaving care sector, key challenges and outcomes facing Indigenous care leavers, current good practice and participant recommendations for improving the sector's response to Indigenous care leavers.

For readers with a specific interest in the challenges facing Indigenous young people leaving care, please see theme eight which discusses these challenges at length, drawing on information provided in the interviews and focus groups with participants.

Summary of Main Findings

Theme one: Data

There are significant gaps in the collection of data relating to numbers of and outcomes for Indigenous care leavers, across Australia, for a range of reasons. The number of Indigenous children who transition from care to independence each year in Australia was documented as 1001, based on information provided by state and territory governments. These figures differ slightly from the published AIHW data which suggest 1140 Indigenous children transition out of OOHC annually.

Theme Two: Funding

Only three states provide discrete annual funding for Indigenous care leavers; $300,000 in NSW, $1.16M in Victoria and undisclosed amount to one ACCO in Queensland.

Overall, funding for this cohort is insufficient and there are inconsistencies with regard to funding between regions. ACCO funding is scarce and does not meet existing need. NGOs providing services to Indigenous care leavers face minimal accountability.

Theme Three: Policies

Nationally, there are a range of changes to leaving care policy and service delivery currently occurring. Other than the extended care trials in four states, these changes seem lateral or minor, and not likely to result in any mandatory extension of state parenting responsibility.

There are some good policies, such as cultural plans, transition plans and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, however, their application is inconsistent and minimal.

Theme Four: Cultural Plans

Cultural plans are essential to support the development of Indigenous care leavers. However, they seem to be completed poorly or often not done at all. Good cultural plans are completed by Indigenous workers and ACCOs who hold the necessary specialist cultural knowledge.

Theme Five: Transition Plans

Transition plans are frequently done poorly or not at all, for a myriad of reasons. The result of poor transition planning is that Indigenous care leavers are ill-equipped to live independently and face significant barriers in accessing housing, education, employment and supportive relationships. Good transition plans start early, at around 12-15 years of age and are holistic in nature, addressing all aspects of the Indigenous young person's life.

Theme Six: Service System Failures

The entire OOHC system is broken and driven by crisis. It is an overly complicated and inconsistent system which is chronically underfunded and under-resourced, disproportionately impacting the young people with the highest need.

Workforce issues abound, including high levels of stress and burnout, high turnover of case workers and a lack of Indigenous workforce. The impact is that Indigenous young people, who may benefit from a consistent worker in their life using a relational approach, are seen as 'disengaging' from services.

Service delivery to Indigenous care leavers is frequently culturally insensitive and they face additional barriers to accessing services, such as remoteness, and communication and language issues. Mainstream services seem colour-blind to the issues facing Indigenous care leavers and do little to adapt their programs to this cohort.

Theme Seven: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service Delivery

Nationally, ACCOs are chronically underfunded to provide leaving care services. Where they do provide services, they have high caseloads and are responding 'like family', available 24/7 to the young people. Consultation, collaboration and relationships between ACCOs and mainstream organisations in the leaving care sector is often poor.

Mainstream organisations struggle to collaborate with, recruit and support Indigenous workers and communities. In some cases, Indigenous workers make important and valued contributions in mainstream organisations. However, they can experience high caseloads, stress and burnout, trying to complete meaningful work with Indigenous care leavers within a non-Indigenous framework.

Theme Eight: Key Challenges Facing Indigenous care leavers

The key challenges facing Indigenous care leavers are: connection to family, culture and community, reunification (wanting to reunify with family but not receiving support to do so), housing and homelessness, lack of independent living skills upon leaving care, family responsibilities, poor education and employment pathways, early pregnancy and risk of child removal for young women, crossover into justice system (particularly for males), wanting to avoid welfare involvement and therefore being seen as 'disengaging' from services, health and wellbeing (inclusive of mental health, trauma and other conditions), mobility and poor experiences whilst in OOHC.

Theme Nine: Good Practice

Within what was seen as the broken leaving care system, there were some examples of existing good practice for Indigenous care leavers: extending care, maintaining connections with family and culture, Indigenous community and ACCO involvement in service provision, culturally safe service provision, providing a holistic and flexible approach and early transition planning.

Theme Ten: Participant recommendations for policy and practice reform

Participants would like to see a national approach to leaving care for Indigenous young people, which focuses on early and ongoing reunification with family and community. Leaving care planning and processes should be embedded in every level of OOHC as a child or young person

develops. Indigenous children should have universal access to culturally appropriate care, and universal access to leaving care support regardless of length of time in care or age of leaving care. ACCOs should be given true self-determination to deliver all leaving care services to Indigenous children.

Policy Recommendations

In reviewing the findings, in the context of existing knowledge and grey literature on the service system response to, and experience of Indigenous care leavers across Australia, nine policy recommendations were formulated:

1. That the entire OOHC sector, inclusive of leaving care, embrace a greater awareness of the ongoing intergenerational trauma and disadvantage facing Indigenous communities and utilise this understanding in their decision making and service delivery
2. That a national commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people be appointed to monitor the performance standards of OOHC and transition from care programs, in line with all five principles of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP).
3. That nationally, ACCOs receive adequate funding to provide leaving care services to all Indigenous young people, proportionate to the number in their State/Territory.
4. That the annual Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) child protection report include reliable statistics on Indigenous children leaving care including the type of care they leave from, the reason they leave care, and their outcomes until 21 years of age.
5. That the annual AIHW report include detailed data concerning outcomes for all care leavers aged 18-21, including a discrete section on Indigenous care leavers and relating to areas such as housing, education, training and employment, income, health including mental health, family relationships, social and community connections, parenthood and involvement in the criminal justice system.
6. That all states and territories provide a guaranteed housing allowance to all young people leaving OOHC until the age of 25, with guaranteed provision of culturally appropriate housing for Indigenous care leavers in urban, rural and remote areas, on a proportionate basis.

7. That each State and Territory allocate proportionate resources to ACCOs to generate and apply meaningful early transition planning for Indigenous young people in care, starting as young as 12-15 years.
8. That each State and Territory allocate proportionate resources to ACCOs, to provide, design, generate and apply quality and meaningful cultural plans to all Indigenous young people in care and leaving care.
9. That each State and Territory allocate proportionate funding to ACCOs to support Indigenous children's connection to family and community whilst in OOHC, to provide a foundation for reunification when they leave care, with the aim of preventing Indigenous young people leaving care without family and community support.

Introduction

Young people transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC) are recognised globally as a vulnerable group of young people. Their vulnerability reflects a number of factors including a young person's experience prior to entering the OOHC system, the varied quality and stability of their placements within OOHC, and the inability to access support from responsible carers or adults once they leave care at the age of 18 years or earlier (Mendes & Snow 2016).

Indigenous children and young people are over-represented in the child welfare systems of several jurisdictions including New Zealand, Canada and the United States. Yet, the disproportionality among Indigenous Australians seems to be significantly higher (Thoburn 2008). Of the nearly 45,000 Australian children living in OOHC, Indigenous children comprise over one third of the total population or 11 times the rate for non-Indigenous children, i.e. about 18,000 children. That is, 54.2 of every 1000 Indigenous children are in OOHC compared to only 5.1 of every 1000 non-Indigenous children (AIHW 2020; Productivity Commission 2020). As highlighted in the Family Matters Report (2019: 6), this figure does not include children placed in permanent care.

It is now more than 20 years since the 1997 Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Bringing Them Home* report brought both historical and contemporary concerns around the high rates of Indigenous child removal to national attention. That report and associated research publications (e.g. Haebich 2000) exposed the forced removal of thousands of Indigenous children from their families (estimated at between one in three and one in ten) by Australian Governments. These policies were in official operation for over 60 years from approximately 1910-1970. The *Bringing Them Home* report amply demonstrated the traumatic effects of that policy. It also noted that Indigenous children constituted almost 20 per cent of children in OOHC in 1993 (2,419 out of a total of 12,363) which was seven times higher than their share of the population.

The *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) highlighted that the removal of Indigenous children from their families has a devastating intergenerational effect on the child, their close and extended family and their whole community. A more recent report on children living in households with members of the Stolen Generations found that they experienced a range of adverse outcomes including poor self-assessed health, high levels of stress, frequent non-attendance at school, and associated prejudice in the school environment. This demonstrates that the deleterious legacy of the Stolen Generations continues to impact on Indigenous families and children today (AIHW 2019a).

Not only did the family and the child experience the trauma of separation in that moment, it also formed the foundation of fractured long-term relationships between that young person and their family, community, culture and country for life. In this respect the removal of children from their families was, and is, the removal of that young person from their point of orientation from one of the oldest cultures on earth. It did, and will, impact that young person's ability to relate fully to the Indigenous community for the rest of their life. The *Bringing them Home* report illustrated the devastating impact child removal has, had, and continues to have on the ongoing and life-long mental health of the young person, their families and communities (HREOC 1997: 12).

As well as documenting the devastating effect of historical removals of children, the *Bringing Them Home* report made detailed recommendations concerning contemporary child welfare policies to ensure that authorities did not repeat the mistakes of the past (HREOC 1997). This assurance that governments would not repeat the mistakes of the past was also given by then Prime Minister Julia Gillard in her 2013 apology to people effected by forced adoptions or removals. She stated 'We resolve, as a nation to do all in our power to make sure these practices are never repeated. In facing future challenges, we will remember the lessons of family separation. Our focus will be on protecting the fundamental rights of children and the importance of the child's rights to know and be cared for by his or her parents' (Gillard 2013).

Despite these detailed recommendations, and assurances by the government, currently, the number of Indigenous children being removed by state and territory child protection

authorities has grown so rapidly that there is serious talk of a second stolen generation. In 2017, for example, Arrernte Elder Margaret Kemarre Turner gave evidence to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. She described how:

> Children were being removed by staff with limited cultural knowledge and putting children into non-Aboriginal homes despite kinship care options being available. 'It's like another Stolen Generation', she said outside the commission. 'We don't want that to happen, we want that to be stopped. They lose their connection, they lose their parents, they lose their identity' (Turner quoted in Campbell 2017).

The latest report by Family Matters, which campaigns to eliminate the over-representation of Indigenous children in OOHC within a generation, sums up these concerns succinctly:

> This year, Family Matters reports limited progress to redress over–representation and the drivers of child protection intervention… If the tide is not turned, we project the population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in out-of-home care will more than double in the next 10 years, and the level of over-representation will also increase (Family Matters 2019: 5).

It appears that approximately 3,350 young people nationally aged 15 to 17 years transition from OOHC each year (AIHW 2020: Table S5.2; see also ACT Community Services Directorate 2018: 6). About 1140 of these young people are estimated to be Indigenous (AIHW 2020) although those figures may not align with individual State and Territory reports which utilize different age groups or numbers (Baidawi, Saunders & Mendes 2017).

There has been remarkably little inquiry into, or information made publicly available, concerning the transition pathways of this group of Indigenous youth other than occasional media reports of individual narratives (Allam 2018; Archibald-Binge 2020). For example, one care leaver in NSW, Isaiah Dawe, the CEO of ID Know Yourself, an Aboriginal-led culturally-

responsive trauma-informed mentoring program for Indigenous young people within the OOHC system, has actively reflected on his own OOHC and transition from care experience.

Dawe describes the intergenerational removal of children in his own family through four generations, stemming back to his great grandparents who were removed as part of the assimilation policies of the time (Allam 2019). Dawe himself entered the foster care system at two months old, and permanent care at around four. He describes being placed in non-Indigenous families, with often abusive and neglectful carers, living in 17 different placements, often in small remote towns, far away from his Aboriginal family and community. Dawe had no contact with his extended family whilst in care and did not know his own history and ancestral lands (Silva 2020).

As a teen, Dawe won a scholarship to a private boarding school which provided some stability as he entered the leaving care period. Dawe describes this environment providing discipline, routine and a sense of family and brotherhood. This obviously had a scaffolding and nurturing impact on his development. However, when he was completing his final year of school, he received a text message from his carers advising that he could not return to their home at the completion of the school year (due to ageing out of care) and needed to collect his belongings. So whilst his peers were focused on study and completion of their High School Certificate, Dawe was left not knowing where he was going to sleep, or what was going to happen to him once he completed his final exam and could no longer reside at the boarding school, his home. With no family to turn to and unsupported by the system, he was facing homelessness, but on the day of his final exam, he was able to find a friend to couch surf with (Silva 2020).

Dawe's story highlights what is likely a common story for many Indigenous children and young people; the instability of their time in care, which extends to a lack of stability beyond care. He describes reuniting with family as a young adult, via social media, and finally realising that he was loved and part of one of the largest Aboriginal families in Queensland. He later established ID Know Yourself so that 'no one is left behind'; referring to Aboriginal children who get lost in the OOHC system, like he did (Silva 2020).

Dawe, like many Indigenous care leavers, had few viable options post 18. It may well be that many return to their families and communities of origin which are often located a considerable distance from their OOHC placements. Yet, there seems to be have been little examination of whether those families/communities have sufficient capacity to support their successful reunification, and/or whether there are still unresolved emotions or trauma from the earlier removal of children (Newton 2020; O'Donnell et al. 2019). It is also unclear what specific services (mainstream or ACCOs) have been established to meet their core needs in housing, health, education, employment and training. This is problematic because unless intergenerational trauma is actively addressed via culturally appropriate service interventions, it may be difficult to facilitate positive transition pathways for these young people.

The Commonwealth Government recommends but does not enforce minimum benchmarks such as the expectation for each care leaver to have a transition from care plan commencing at 15 years of age. The Commonwealth are currently funding a three-year Independent Adulthood Trial in the state of Western Australia which is intended to enhance social and economic outcomes for care leavers (Department of Social Services 2018). To date, all State or Territory legislative provisions for funding and support once young people have left the system at no later than 18 years of age are discretionary, not mandatory (Baidawi 2016).

Numerous Australian studies have documented that many care leavers experience poor outcomes for a range of reasons when they leave care at 18 years, without major support from responsible adults to live independently. Young people leaving care often have limited ongoing participation in mainstream education, and may exit care directly into homelessness or endure ongoing housing instability (Mendes & McCurdy 2019). The risk of young people in care (or having left care to what is termed an 'unendorsed placement') crossing over into the youth justice system is well recognized within research (Baidawi & Sheehan 2020) and then, once leaving care, the adult justice system. Additionally, there is clear evidence that time spent in OOHC may undermine Indigenous young people's connection to culture and community (Jackomos 2016; Krakouer, Wise & Connolly 2018; McDowall 2016; 2018).

Given these concerns regarding care leavers' outcomes, the Home Stretch campaign was established by Anglicare Victoria to lobby all States and Territories to extend the transition from OOHC (the leaving care) age from 18 until at least 21 years. In response to this campaign, four states are now trialling an extension of care until 21 years for selected groups of care leavers. Both Tasmania and South Australia are funding foster care placements until 21 years. Western Australia commenced a trial program supporting 20 young people in May 2019, and Victoria introduced a pilot program in September 2018 providing extended support to 250 young people over five years whether transitioning from foster care, residential care or kinship care. Victoria has agreed to allocate a specific proportion of places (about 13 per cent) for Aboriginal young people. The Victorian program includes three components: an accommodation allowance; caseworker assistance based on regular relationship-based contact; and a funding package that assists the young person to access critical education, employment and health supports (Department of Health and Human Services 2019). The ACT already offer financial and casework support to care leavers until they are 25 years of age. However, three jurisdictions – New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory – have not introduced extended care programs at this stage.

As noted above, to date there has been limited policy or research interest concerning the specific needs, experiences and outcomes for Indigenous young people transitioning from care. A recent national overview of transition from OOHC policy and services acknowledged that no jurisdictions explicitly address the cultural identity needs and connections of Indigenous care leavers. Nor are there any requirements for ACCOs to be directly involved in the transition from OOHC plans and processes (ACT Community Services Directorate 2018: 13). Some research studies suggest that Indigenous care leavers have more adverse outcomes than other care leavers in areas such as criminal justice involvement due to a range of factors including cultural disconnection, and the ongoing impact of colonisation and historical trauma (Malvaso, Delfabbro & Day 2017; Sheehan 2020).

This project builds on the findings of the earlier Monash University study (Mendes, Saunders & Baidawi 2016) concerning Indigenous care leavers in Victoria which identified significant service limitations. That study conducted in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Child

Care Agency (VACCA), the Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People and five non-Indigenous child welfare NGOs made a number of policy recommendations on:

- The need for accurate data on the number of Indigenous children and young people in OOHC;
- The need for accessible information on outcomes for care leavers aged 18-21 years including a discrete section on Indigenous care leavers;
- That adequate resources should be made available to create and action well-considered and well-informed Cultural Support Plans for all Indigenous young people leaving OOHC. These plans should be taken into consideration in the provision of leaving care services to Indigenous young people.
- That there should be funding of ACCOs, on a proportionate basis, to meet the cultural and other needs of the large number of Indigenous young people in and leaving OOHC

Consequently, we developed this national study examining policy and practice concerning Indigenous young people leaving care. This study, which was conducted in partnership with SNAICC and the Monash University Indigenous Studies Centre to incorporate an Indigenous-informed perspective, and funded by the Sidney Myer Fund Poverty and Disadvantage Grants Committee, aimed to:

1. Ascertain the number of Indigenous young people leaving state care in each state and territory;
2. Document and compare the existing policies and programs aiming to support this group in each jurisdiction;
3. Gather information concerning the outcomes for Indigenous young people transitioning from care;
4. Document and share identifiable good practice in supporting Indigenous young people transitioning from care.

In part one of this study, we present the findings from our review of grey literature including any public reports by national, state or territory government departments, ACCOs or child welfare NGOs, concerning policies and programs supporting Indigenous care leavers. That

review confirmed that there is enormous fragmentation and underfunding of support services for this cohort, and limited information concerning the numbers of Indigenous care leavers and the extent to which they access available services.

In part two, we present our review of scholarly literature nationally and internationally which revealed only limited information about the experiences and outcomes for Indigenous care leavers.

In part three, we detail the methods we used to recruit participants, and collect and analyse data.

In part four, we report the findings from our consultations comprising interviews and focus groups with service providers - government and non-government, and also Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - in each State and Territory. Our findings cover the number of Indigenous young people leaving out of home care in each State and Territory and the existing policies and programs aiming to support this group in each jurisdiction. Finally, we document the outcomes for Indigenous care leavers, and identify examples of good practice.

In part five, we draw on our reviews of grey and scholarly literature and consultations with service providers and government, to outline specific recommendations for policy, practice and funding reform.

Part One: Grey Literature Review: 2010-2020

We used a Google search to identify relevant grey literature covering State and Territory and Commonwealth government websites and peak body membership directories using the following search terms: care leavers, young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leavers, Indigenous care leavers, and young people in out-of-home care. We did not find any relevant reports for Tasmania.

Commonwealth/National publications

A search of grey literature found four principal sources of information which are discussed as follows:

Commonwealth Government (National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children) policy statements

This search uncovered six publications. Three reports specifically examined the needs of young people transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC). The first report noted that Indigenous children and young people were over-represented in OOHC, and suggested that Indigenous care leavers may need additional discrete assistance (p.20), but no specific policy or practice reforms were proposed (FAHCSIA 2010). The second report referred in passing to examples of programs in three states which specifically targeted the needs of Indigenous care leavers, but provided no detail of program funding or outcomes (FAHCSIA 2012).

The third report identified particular concerns regarding Indigenous care leavers such as they are 'more likely to leave care early, less likely to go on to further education or training, and are disproportionately represented in the justice system' (p.3). The report cited a number of examples of States and Territories working with ACCOs, but acknowledged that there was no formal requirement for ACCOs to be involved in transition from care planning or post-care support (ACT CSD 2018).

Three other reports briefly discussed transitions from care in the context of a broader discussion of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. The first report recommended the introduction of community mentoring programs (p.22) to assist Indigenous young people transitioning to independence (COAG 2012). The second report acknowledged that Indigenous young people 'have particularly complex and ongoing needs' (DSS 2015: 10). The third report did not specifically refer to Indigenous care leavers, but emphasized the importance of enhanced resourcing for ACCOs working with children and families involved with the child protection system (DSS 2018).

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data reports

This search uncovered three recent publications. A report on young people involved in both the child protection and juvenile justice systems noted that Indigenous young people aged 10-17 years were 17 times more likely to have dual involvement (AIHW 2018a). Unfortunately, this report did not trace the outcomes for this cohort when they exited care at 18 years of age, and identify whether or not they were also over-represented in the adult justice system.

A further report surveyed 2,400 children and young people aged 8-17 years (of whom 39 per cent were Indigenous) concerning their views of the OOHC system. The survey included some discrete questions to the 15-17 year old group (593 young people) concerning their assistance with leaving care planning (AIHW 2018b). Unfortunately, that question did not clarify how many respondents were Indigenous and/or whether they had different experiences from the others. A third report documents the over-representation of Indigenous children and young people in all components of the child protection system including OOHC (AIHW 2019b), but provides no data on the outcomes for those who exit care at 18 years or younger. All three AIHW reports are limited by their failure to examine the experiences of Indigenous young people aged 18-21 years as they transition from care.

Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee report

The 2015 Senate report contains detailed and informative sections on both Transitions from care, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, but does not specifically refer to the needs of Indigenous care leavers. However, the report emphasizes that ACCOs should be

more actively integrated within all components of the child protection system including out of home care (CARC 2015).

Independent reports

Four independent reports identified Indigenous care leavers as a particularly disadvantaged group requiring additional assistance. One report noted that this cohort are likely to exit care at a younger age and miss out on post-care assistance, and may have poorer outcomes in areas such as education and juvenile justice. The report proposed targeted services to meet their specific cultural needs (Campo & Commerford 2016). Another report recommended that mainstream service providers consult with ACCOs to ensure that Indigenous care leavers have cultural support plans in place (Cameron et al. 2019). A research-based report used a mixed methods study including qualitative interviews, an examination of national data sets and a quantitative survey to examine the educational experiences and challenges of care leavers across Australia. That report identified the Indigenous cohort as a group that were particularly disadvantaged in accessing further or higher education. They proposed targeted assistance by governments in partnership with Indigenous community organisations to advance access to tertiary education (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, & Luckman 2015).

Additionally, a 2011 report by SNAICC: Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care identified key components of a successful transition for Indigenous care leavers. The report argued that an effective return of ATSI youth to their community would require extensive outreach support including counselling and mentoring to parents, siblings and grandparent as well as the young person. They recommended that ACCOs be 'mandated participants' (p.7) in any leaving care planning process, and that an Indigenous caseworker be allocated to facilitate the young person's reintegration and reconnection with their culture and community (Hytten 2011).

Summary

None of the reports canvassed provide statistics or evidence on the number of Indigenous care leavers per jurisdiction, the funding and effectiveness of specific support services provided to this cohort, whether programs are provided by Indigenous or non-Indigenous

agencies, or the outcomes for this group of young people. However, a number of the reports recommend an enhanced role for ACCOs in working with Indigenous young people transitioning from care.

Australian Capital Territory publications

A search of grey literature found two government reports.

A 2010 discussion paper issued by the ACT Minister for Children and Young People identified 'consideration of the cultural needs of the young person including the specific needs of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' as one of the core principles to be incorporated into an improved system for young people transitioning from OOHC (ACT Government 2010). That principle of supporting cultural connection for Indigenous young people and their carers also informed the 2015 ACT OOHC strategy. That strategy included a commitment to additional casework resources including community-based cultural advisers to assist Indigenous youth to 're-establish family and cultural connections' (ACT Government 2015: 39). The strategy noted that about 25 per cent of children and young people in OOHC in the ACT were Indigenous, but did not confirm whether they formed a similar proportion of those young people transitioning from care (p.42).

Summary

The two reports identified recognized the discrete needs of Indigenous care leavers for assistance with their cultural identity and connection. But little detail was provided regarding their numbers and outcomes, or the impact of existing support programs.

New South Wales publications

There were seven relevant grey literature reports for NSW from a range of government and independent sources.

The NSW Ombudsman reviewed the leaving care experiences of 90 young people aged 18 years old, and found that the vast majority had inadequate transition planning. 25 of the 90 (28 per cent) were Indigenous, and more than half of those involved with the Youth Justice system were Indigenous. The review found evidence of reasonable actions to address the cultural needs of this cohort via referrals to after care services, but expressed concern via a consultation with the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec), that Aboriginal services were not funded to provide caseworker support after young people had transitioned from care. This deficit was particularly problematic in the state's Western region where Indigenous youth formed a disproportionate percentage of care leavers (NSW Ombudsman 2013).

An academic research report from the University of NSW (Skattebol et al. 2018) examined the leaving care pathways of 22 care leavers focusing on their access to and experience of utilising after care services. Most of the care leavers had experienced difficult transitions including significant periods of housing instability and homelessness and poor mental health. But later they had managed, with the assistance of good post-care service supports, to attain stable housing and access opportunities for further education and training. Nine of the 22 interviewees were Aboriginal, and whilst the report did not present a discrete analysis of their experiences, it can reasonably be assumed to be similar to that of the overall sample.

Tune (2016) conducted an independent review of OOHC in NSW. He expressed concern that Indigenous children were over-represented in OOHC, and that their outcomes were 'particularly poor' both in and after leaving care (p.19). He noted the generally poor outcomes for care leavers as evidenced by high rates of poor health including hospital care, involvement in the criminal justice system, demand for public housing, and intergenerational removal of children. He recommended the provision of personalised support packages to assist care leavers with complex needs, but did not specifically refer to the needs of Indigenous care leavers although he proposed measures to reduce the number of Indigenous children entering the care system.

Davis (2019) completed an extensive review of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC in NSW with a particular emphasis on the reasons for the high and growing grates of Indigenous children in OOHC, and the development of strategies to reduce this over-representation such as pathways to family reunification. The report, based on an audit of all case files of the 1144 Indigenous children and young people in OOHC from 2015-16, made no specific reference to leaving care processes or outcomes, but did make a number of recommendations that could prevent harmful impacts on Indigenous care leavers. In particular, there were proposals to reduce the vastly disproportionate number of Indigenous young people in the juvenile prison population (estimated at 50 per cent), and to ensure that Indigenous children in OOHC retain strong connections to their family, community and culture.

Delfabbro (2018) completed a study of the well-being of Indigenous children in OOHC in NSW covering areas such as physical health, socio-emotional and cognitive development, schooling, family and social backgrounds, cultural identity and connections, and family connections. However, his findings do not refer at all to leaving care processes or outcomes.

The NSW Legislative Council (Upper House of Parliament) General Purpose Standing Committee conducted an inquiry into child protection in 2016. That inquiry included a chapter on leaving care and after care support. The chapter drew attention to the specific needs of Indigenous care leavers for culturally appropriate plans, and endorsed a proposal from two NGOs for increased funding for the Aboriginal Aftercare State-wide Service (NSW Legislative Council 2017)

The NSW Department of Child and Family Communities and Justice presented a paper on leaving care and after care to the AbSec Aboriginal Child and Family Conference in 2019. The paper discussed how to create quality care and support for care leavers, and the parameters of a good leaving care plan, but only referred briefly to the specific needs of Indigenous care leavers. It was noted that a three year Futures Planning and Support Pilot on the Mid North Coast would target this cohort, but no detail was provided regarding Indigenous leaving care numbers or existing supports (NSW Government 2019).

Summary

The reports seem to identify that Indigenous care leavers may have more adverse outcomes than other care leavers, and be particularly at risk of homelessness and entering the criminal justice system. However, they do not provide any significant data on the number of Indigenous care leavers in NSW, the funding and effectiveness of specific support services provided to this cohort, whether existing programs are provided by Indigenous or non-Indigenous agencies, or the outcomes for this group of young people.

Northern Territory publications

A search of grey literature found three principal sources of information. This information was examined to determine the extent to which they were addressing the issue of Indigenous care leavers in the Northern Territory.

Transforming Out of Home Care in the Northern Territory (Territory Families, 2019)

This government document presents a new model for out-of-home care in the Northern Territory. This was released after the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. The report includes a small section on leaving care, indicating that the new model would provide universal support to young people transitioning to independence. Despite indicating in the introduction that 90% of care leavers in the NT identify as Indigenous, there was no indication of how the new model would acknowledge and respond to the unique needs of Indigenous care leavers.

Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (Commonwealth Government, 2017)

The final reports on the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (hereafter referred to as the Royal Commission) comprise six volumes. Of these six volumes, three volumes refer to issues of young people transitioning from care. None of the volumes address the unique needs of Indigenous care leavers.

Volume One

Volume One provides an executive summary, as well as context to the following reports. Whilst there is no specific section within this volume that addresses the issues of Indigenous young people leaving state care in the Northern Territory, there is a submission from a local Indigenous organisation highlighting the inadequate support provided to young people when leaving care (Commonwealth Government, 2017a, 198).

Volume 3a

Volume 3a focuses on child protection with specific sections on both the entry into the child protection system and the experience of children in out of home care. Unfortunately there is no specific section within this extensive volume which focuses on the experience of young people leaving state care and no discrete section focusing on the needs of Indigenous care leavers.

The first section of this volume, titled "Child Protection Experiences" uses case studies, in which three (DG, CJ and AI; all pseudonyms) are Indigenous young people who speak of their leaving care experiences. These three case studies specifically highlight poor leaving care experiences, processes and outcomes. These case studies are used to highlight, amongst other findings, the finding that *"Territory Families leaving care plans were inadequate and statutory and policy requirements for the implementation and modification were not complied with in some cases"* (Commonwealth Government, 2017b, 127).

DG

In the case of DG, in conjunction with other clear failures of the child protection system highlighted, it is noted that an initial Department of Community and Families (DCF) internal review found that leaving care planning for DG did not commence at the appropriate time and that two months prior to leaving care, no clear arrangements had been made in a range of areas, including accommodation (Commonwealth Government, 2017b, 24). A second DCF internal review noted that DG's personal preferences with regard to leaving care planning and supports were not taken into consideration (Commonwealth Government, 2017b, 24).

CJ

CJ advised the commission that whilst DCF had provided him a laptop as an 18th birthday gift, that he did not feel supported in the process of transitioning out of care (Commonwealth Government, 2017b, 35). He identified that there is a role for DC to help young people leaving care and that at 20 years old (at the time of submission) he still needed help.

AI (young person) & EE (carer)

AI advised the commission that the process of leaving care was rushed and isolating and she did not feel that she was involved in the process. AI indicated that she felt that DCF wanted her to know, and be able to explain exactly what she needed help with, but that it was complicated (Commonwealth Government, 2017b, 124).

According to DCF records, initial planning did occur at around 15 years of age, however at four days before her exit from care, no accommodation had been secured. She was then offered transitional housing but decided to share with a friend.

Further DCF records indicate that attempts were made to engage AI in the leaving care process but that she would not engage. It was noted that AI and EE attended three leaving care meetings with DCF, and that EE pushed for the care plan to include mental health and education support until the age of 25. The transition plan, however, did not indicate any mental health supports DCF would provide beyond leaving care.

Summary

All of these case studies are of Indigenous young people leaving care, and within their stories they raise issues unique to their Indigenous identity such as connection to culture and country and the impact of the ATSICPP. Despite these issues being raised in the case studies, there is no discussion in the report of the unique needs of Indigenous care leavers or how DCF failed to respond to these unique needs during the process of leaving care.

Recommendations

The Royal Commission makes a number of clear recommendations with regard to leaving care processes in the Northern Territory (Commonwealth Government, 2017b). These recommendations relate to care leaver's right to leaving care plans, and their right to access ongoing support to age of 25. Also that the NT government develop an evaluation plan for leaving care processes and work with AIHW to develop a dataset on outcomes of care leavers.

Unfortunately these recommendations do not take into consideration the unique needs and experiences of Indigenous care leavers in the NT, particularly cultural needs around placement and accommodation beyond 18 years. Nor is there any recommendation that the dataset collected with AIHW closely monitor the needs and experiences of Indigenous young people in their transition to independence. However, the report does propose in passing that the NT duplicate the Beyond 18 longitudinal study from Victoria with a particular emphasis on the needs of Indigenous young people.

<u>Volume 3b</u>

Volume 3b outlines issues unique to young people in the Northern Territory, particularly in relation to protecting children. Despite the focus of this volume on child protection, there is limited mention of leaving care issues. This volume simply reiterates the recommendations from the previous section. Again, there is no reference to the unique needs of Indigenous young people leaving care and how these should be met.

Office of Children's Commissioner (2016)

The annual report of the Office of the Children's Commissioner includes a file review of 37 files, which represented 25 percent of all young people in care aged between 15 and 17. Of these 37 files, 79 percent of the young people represented were Indigenous. As a result of this file review, it was found that 73 percent of young people aged 15 years or older did not have a specific leaving care plan to assist them in their transition to independence (Office of Children's Commissioner, 2016, 79). Of the 10 files (27 percent) that did have a leaving care plan, 80 percent did not have adequate accommodation arrangements (Office of Children's Commissioner, 2016, 81). Beyond identifying whether a case file under review belonged to

an Indigenous young person, there was no discussion of the unique needs of Indigenous care leavers or how the plans may need to be adapted to meet those needs.

With regard to leaving care support, the report notes that Anglicare NT's Moving On program, a state-wide brokerage and referral service for young people leaving state care, was supporting more young people than ever before and that the majority of brokerage and referral services provided related to accommodation issues. According to the report, 82 percent of 'support events' provided by the Moving on Program were delivered to Indigenous young people, the vast majority being females (Office of Children's Commissioner, 2016, 96). Despite the clear majority of the client group of the Moving On Program identifying as Indigenous, there was no discussion of how this program adapts their service delivery to meet the unique needs of Indigenous care leavers, and the effectiveness of these adaptations.

Summary

These three reports highlight the over-representation of Indigenous young people in care in the NT (and therefore the care-leaving cohort) and the failures of the current leaving care system. Despite this acknowledgment, none of these reports address the unique cultural needs of Indigenous care leavers, examine whether their needs are being met by the current system of support services, or present evidence on their post-care outcomes. Nor do they provide any clear recommendations with regard to how transition from OOHC policy or programs could better support Indigenous care leavers in the Northern Territory.

Queensland publications

Relevant grey literature on Indigenous care-leavers in the state of Queensland included four sources.

Crane, Kaur and Burton (2014) presented the findings of research that included interviews with 27 young adult care-leavers (13 from Queensland and 14 from Victoria, between the ages of 19-23 years old), who had either experienced homelessness or were perceived to have been

at risk of homelessness. Young people and service providers were also engaged through focus groups. Experiences of leaving care, how they were assisted, and identified support needs were explored. Four key recommendations were made pertaining to post-care monitoring of care leavers, development of a nationally consistent leaving care framework, improved housing supports, and a proposed national research study to examine the correlation between care leavers and intergenerational homelessness.

The study included only three Indigenous participants, one from Queensland and two from Victoria. All three were female. In Victoria, an Indigenous leaving care worker was included in the sample. (p.23). Additionally, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP) participated in the focus groups.

The study presented one case study of an Indigenous care leaver, 19 year old Jenny. The case study outlined Jenny's experience in care including multiple placements, and the absence of Aboriginal carers or placement with her siblings. She absconded from a residential care placement at the age of 15 years, and was homeless for three years. Consequently, she received no transition planning. At the age of 18 years, Jenny connected with VACCA who placed her in a Transitional Housing Unit, and provided ongoing counselling, and housing and cultural support. The report suggested that her challenging experience highlighted the importance of 'building cultural connections to the Indigenous community' via contact with Indigenous carers and workers (p.72). The participating Indigenous services argued that preventing care leavers transitioning to homelessness required enhanced support for young people's families and communities prior to their entrance into state care. The study recommended that further research was required to examine how Indigenous care leavers 'can best be supported in culturally relevant ways' (p.86).

The second report, *Our Way: A generational strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families 2017-2037*, was the outcome of a joint venture between the Queensland Government and Family Matters. The latter is 'a national campaign led by more than 150 Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous organisations across Australia …

committed to eliminating [the] disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in statutory out-of-home care, within a generation'. The report details a proposed strategy, 'encompassing the views and voices of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, community members and non-government organisations', to achieve this aspiration. In this report, Indigenous care leavers are specifically mentioned only once on page nine where it is proposed that Indigenous children in or leaving out-of-home care will benefit from this joint strategy, and this strategy will, in the first three years, assist 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people aged 15–21 years in or leaving out-of-home care to learn and earn, and stay safe and well' (Queensland Government 2017).

The third report details a 'care investment reform initiative' under the heading, *Improving care and post-care for children and young people*. The document discusses the expansion of family-based care for children with complex needs, enhanced support for foster and kinship carers, an improvement in residential care services, minimum qualification standards for residential care employees, scholarships for females leaving care, permanent care for children and young people, and stronger support for care-leavers. However, Indigenous care leavers are neither specifically mentioned nor highlighted as having unique in- and leaving care needs (Queensland Government 2020).

The fourth report was the *Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry*. That report included a chapter on transition from care (Carmody, 2013). The report referred at length to existing transition planning procedures in Queensland including specific supports for care leavers with a disability, and noted that programs and funding varied across different regions. But there was no specific reference to the needs of Indigenous care leavers other than a brief citation from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Legal Services NQ Inc. endorsing the role of NGOs in transition from care planning.

Summary

Only one of the reports provides any specific detail on Indigenous care leaver experiences, and suggests they may be at greater risk of homelessness than other care leavers. However, little evidence is provided on the number of Indigenous care leavers in Queensland, the

funding and effectiveness of specific support services provided to this cohort, whether existing programs are provided by Indigenous or non-Indigenous agencies, or the outcomes for this group of young people. Some of the reports suggest an enhanced role for ACCOs offering culturally safe services in working with Indigenous young people transitioning from care.

South Australia publications

Relevant grey literature on Indigenous care-leavers in the state of South Australia included four sources.

A 2019 commentary titled 'Extending the benefits of foster and kinship care' by the South Australian Guardian for Children and Young People, Penny Wright, refers to a Radio National podcast called *A Portrait of Foster Family*. Wright extols foster and kinship care as better out-of-home care alternatives than other forms of out-of-home care. She notes that maintaining 'connection to community, culture and spiritual identity is especially important for aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people'. Wright refers to the Homestretch campaign which was motivated by the fact that 'within one year of leaving care, 50 percent of young people will find themselves unemployed, homeless, in jail or a new parent'. Support up to age twenty-one in South Australia is only offered to young people in kinship and foster care, but not those leaving residential care. Wright calls for South Australia to amend this anomaly.

In a second report, Wright (2018) presents a *Snapshot of South Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People in Care and /or Detention from the Report on Government Services 2018.* She highlights the huge 'crossover' of Aboriginal children and young people between Child Protection and Youth Justice services, but make no reference to Indigenous leaving care statistics or outcomes.

Researchers Delfabbro and Malvaso (2014) present a lengthy report examining the problems experienced by young people with complex needs leaving out-of-home care in South Australia, prepared for the Department of Communities and Social Inclusion. Chapter eight of this report specifically explores the experiences of young Indigenous care leavers. The report highlights a

number of specific challenges experienced by this cohort including: the problems of geographical distance given that many of the young people live in remote locations where there may be few culturally appropriate support services so entering care may require relocation to a distant urban area; different cultural experiences and expectations regarding housing and family relationships, and backgrounds of trauma and substance abuse; and importantly the difficulty of re-establishing family and cultural connections on leaving care when placed a long distance from families of origin. The report identified the need for services that 'are more sensitive to their cultural background' (p.33), and ideally include Indigenous staff. Strategies were recommended 'that adopt a broader community approach via community awareness, school-based activities and practical support that builds trust with local communities' (p.14) to facilitate Indigenous young people's engagement.

Additionally in 2014, the then State Labor Party government of South Australia announced a Royal Commission into child protection. The Commission report, which was published in August 2016, noted in a section on 'Children in out of home care" the much higher and increasing proportion of Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous children in OOHC between the years 2005-2015 (p.272). The report also included a chapter on leaving care and an associated case study of one care leaver. But there was no specific reference to the needs of Indigenous care leavers (Nyland, 2016).

Summary

The reports cited provided little or no evidence on the number of Indigenous care leavers in South Australia, the funding and effectiveness of specific support services provided to this cohort, whether existing programs are provided by Indigenous or non-Indigenous agencies, or the outcomes for this group of young people. One of the reports suggested that enhancing the cultural and family connections and identity of Indigenous care leavers could facilitate better outcomes.

Victoria publications

Nine sources were identified including a range of government, quasi-government and NGO reports.

Whyte (2011) completed a scoping study of existing Victorian responses to the needs of care leavers. She noted that despite the overrepresentation of Indigenous young people in care, there was little research examining their specific needs, and only limited 'dedicated service provision' (p.30). She argued that culturally specific services were vital to assist Indigenous care leavers to reconnect with their identity, community and culture. She recommended the expansion of the existing leaving care services provided by VACCA in three regions to a state-wide service, and identified the Marungbai leaving care service run by the Great Lakes Manning Aboriginal Children's Service in Taree, NSW as a positive model to be emulated.

The Victorian Government Vulnerable Children's Inquiry completed in 2012 included a chapter on 'the experiences of children and young people when leaving out-of-home care'. That chapter made a passing reference to Indigenous young people as comprising 13 per cent of those leaving care in Victoria, but no specific recommendations were made regarding their distinct experiences and needs in relation to culturally appropriate supports and connections (Cummins, Scott & Scales 2012).

Nevertheless, the inquiry seems to have informed the development of a specific program framework aimed at Indigenous care leavers. That framework introduced 'a model of culturally appropriate support' for Indigenous care leavers aged 16-21 years, and directed that 'one or more ACCOs in each of the eight Department regions be identified to provide the support services' including 'cultural advice and consultation' for eligible Indigenous youth. A key objective of the program was for the young person to 'maintain and strengthen connection or re-connect with their culture, family and identified community' (p.3). The framework estimated that 145 Indigenous youth would be eligible for support each year consisting of 58 aged 16-17 years still in care, and 87 aged 18-21 years (Department of Human Services 2012).

A 2015 evaluation of the Springboard leaving care program, aimed at supporting young people aged 16-20 years transitioning from residential care to enter education, training and employment, accessed data from 448 participants. 6.5 per cent or 29 of participants were Aboriginal which was lower than the 11 per cent who were eligible. The study reported that Aboriginal clients were more likely to experience multiple problems and barriers in that 75 per cent were disengaged from education, training and employment. Examples of barriers included high levels of inadequate family support, alcohol and drug misuse, anger management, family violence, financial distress, poor self-esteem, suspected or diagnoses mental health concerns, and disconnection from cultural heritage. Additionally, 37 per cent of the 16 Aboriginal females were pregnant or parenting. Nevertheless, the study found that participating Aboriginal youth benefited from the program, and recommended that efforts be made to recruit larger numbers of this cohort (Baldry et al. 2015).

The Australian Institute of Family Studies Beyond 18 Wave One study based on an online survey of 202 young people reported that 24 of their sample of 202 youth were Indigenous. However, they did not report any specific findings for this sub-cohort (Muir & Hand, 2018).

A 2018 report by the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, which forms the basis of the Victorian Government's transition from OOHC service delivery framework, recognizes the specific cultural needs of Indigenous care leavers. The report argues that 'a strong sense of connection to family, community and culture is fundamental to supporting their safety and identity, and is positively correlated with smooth post-care transitions'. It adds that ACCOs 'are in the best place to work with young people's family, community and other professionals in providing a culturally informed service for those transitioning from care, informed by self-determination principles' (Howie et al. 2018: 15).

The Commission for Children and Young People in Victoria (2019a) conducted a study of the experiences of 204 children and young people in OOHC. 82 of this cohort were Indigenous, and they presented significant information about their participation in decision-making processes, their placements, and their connection to family and friends, workers and carers.

The report recommended that the government address the over-representation of, and lack of cultural supports for, Indigenous children in care by taking measures to enhance their cultural connections such as lifting the numbers of Indigenous foster and kinship carers and transferring case management and planning responsibility to ACCOs. However, there were no specific proposals regarding Indigenous care leavers.

The draft Home Stretch Evaluation Plan (2019) lists as one of its four key objectives to 'Strengthen Aboriginal care leavers' connection to family, culture and community'. The statement also refers to Aboriginal care leavers 'having a voice in the development of their own cultural support plans', and their contact with a 'culturally safe and competent workforce' (DHHS 2019a). Two associated leaving care workshops consulted with staff from six ACCOs to establish their views on how Victorian transition from care programs could enhance the cultural identity of Aboriginal young people. Some of the key themes identified included cultural awareness and safety particularly in the areas of education and employment, ensuring that the service delivery model incorporated the voice of Aboriginal young people, the value of strong relationships with Aboriginal mentors, prioritizing connection to family, culture and community, and transition preparation for Aboriginal young people to start earlier than 15 years and 9 months (DHHS 2019b).

Summary

The reports provided little data on the specific numbers of, and outcomes for, Indigenous care leavers. However, they revealed a consensus in favour of greater cultural supports for this cohort as reflected in significant government policy initiatives.

Western Australia publications

A search of grey literature found two principal sources of information which are discussed as follows:

WA Government

The most recent WA Government report on the OOHC system includes a full section on addressing the cultural identity and connection needs of Indigenous children in care including a requirement for a cultural support plan, and adherence to the key principles of the ATSICPP. However, a separate section on leaving care plans and supports makes no specific reference to the needs of Indigenous care leavers (Government of Western Australia 2019).

Independent reports

The Auditor General conducted a detailed overview of leaving care in WA based on an examination of key policy and practice documents; analysis of 60 case files; interviews with key child protection staff; a series of interviews and focus groups with care leavers; and consultations with a wide range of service providers and other stakeholders including the Aboriginal Legal Service WA. However, this study made no specific reference to the needs of Indigenous care leavers (Western Australian Auditor General 2018)

In contrast, an academic study based on linked data reported concerning outcomes for the 600 Aboriginal care leavers (just below 30 per cent) out of a total of 2003 young people who had spent time in care. That study reported that Indigenous youth were more likely to have high rates for hospital admissions due to either mental health concerns or substance abuse, limited educational achievement including low entry to university, higher rates of juvenile detention, higher rates of adult imprisonment and community-based sentences, and high rates of early pregnancy. Overall, Indigenous youth were assessed to have twice the likelihood of experiencing 'poor outcomes' compared to non-Indigenous care leavers (Lima, Maclean & O'Donnell 2018).

Summary

The reports provided little information on the numbers of Indigenous care leavers and the impact of existing program supports. However, the academic study provided significant detail on their challenging outcomes.

Discussion

The grey literature identified suggests that to date Australian jurisdictions have applied only limited consideration to the specific needs of Indigenous care leavers despite overwhelming recognition that ATSI children and young people are over-represented in the OOHC system. Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus that Indigenous care leavers may experience relatively poor outcomes compared to other care leavers in areas such as access to education, housing, health and mental health, early pregnancy, and involvement in the criminal justice system. But only two studies from Victoria and Western Australia (Baldry et al 2015; Lima et al 2018) have provided verifiable data.

There is also agreement that ACCOs should be more actively involved in transition planning and post-care support to enhance young people's opportunities for cultural connection and identity. But notably, there is almost no examination to date of the actual transition experiences of Indigenous young people as a discrete group rather than as disaggregated parts of a larger sample.

Additionally, there are only two reports (Delfabbro & Malvaso 2014; Hytten 2011) that explore the cultural and practical challenges faced by Indigenous care leavers as many of them return to the same communities from which they were removed as infants or young children. Those documents raise the question as to what resources and supports these communities need to ensure that young care leavers have access to reasonable levels of housing, health care, and opportunities for education, training and employment.

Part Two: Review of International scholarly literature

The following section reviews international scholarly literature on the experiences of Indigenous care leavers. This literature was accessed by the Web of Science, Scopus, Proquest and Google Scholar search engines using the following search terms: Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, First Nations and care leavers, post care support services, and leaving care support services.

We have chosen not to include a separate section on Australian scholarly literature given that most relevant previous studies (primarily the earlier study of Indigenous care leavers in the State of Victoria) emanate from members of this research team. However, those studies have been integrated into the broader report discussion.

New Zealand

Leoni (2007) completed a study of Maori leaving care experiences in New Zealand based on interviews with eight Maori care leavers and 10 professionals and community members. The study identified four factors that impacted on the cohort: the over-representation of Maoris in OOHC, the absence of clear leaving care policy and practice frameworks in New Zealand, the long time period spent by children in care, and the high number of Maori care leavers involved in criminal offending. The study presented three recommendations for policy reform: improving the leaving care transition planning, expanding the involvement of Maori community organisations in leaving care services, and enhancing the availability of culturally specific supports.

Stanley (2017) presents the findings of her study of 105 New Zealanders placed in residential care between the 1950s and 1990s of whom 47 were Maori, and two were Pasifika. The researcher collected legal statements and reports on all her sample, and additionally interviewed 45 care leavers of whom 23 were Maori and one were Pasifika. She reports that

96 of these 105 young people transitioned into either secure youth detention or prison before their 21st birthday, and that 19 of the 45 interviewees were still in prison at the time of interview. She argues that the disproportionate rate of Maori and Pasifika care leavers entering the criminal justice system can be attributed in part to 'systemic discrimination' (2017, p.63), and emphasizes that cultural disconnection is closely linked to adverse outcomes in education, employment and mental health for many of these Maori care leavers (Stanley 2016).

Cleaver (2016) completed a review of local and international literature to inform policy and practice debates around the needs of care leavers in New Zealand. She documented the over-representation of Maori young people in OOHC in NZ (estimated at 60 per cent or higher), and the failure of existing transition plans and supports to advance the cultural identity and connection of this cohort. She recommended that Iwi (Maori community) providers be utilized to provide leaving care services to the large number of Maori care leavers.

Atwool (2016) completed a detailed overview of existing research and policy literature on care leavers in New Zealand. She documented the over-representation of Maori children in the OOHC system (estimated at 58 per cent compared to 15 per cent of overall population plus an additional 9 per cent are Pasifika), and their even higher proportion within residential care placements (estimated at 65 per cent). At least half of all care leavers appear to be Maori. She presented evidence that many of this cohort lose their cultural identity and connections whilst in care, and recommended the introduction of Iwi and other Maori and Pasifika-provided transition services that would reconnect care leavers to their cultural networks and address their high level of disengagement from the education system.

Atwool (2020) critically analyses the implications of the new transition from care policy and legislation in New Zealand. She acknowledges a number of positives including the provision to remain with caregivers till 21 years, and the availability of support and resources till 25 years. But she also raises specific concerns for the large numbers of Maori or Pasifika children in the care system estimated at 68 per cent. Specifically, she argues that the continued focus on individual transitions to independence is not compatible with the Maori emphasis on

interdependence and collective responsibility. She concludes by urging a shift to 'culturally appropriate ways' of working with Maori youth leaving care (p.6) that includes recognizing their specific challenges in reconnecting with families and communities that may still have unresolved emotions about their initial removal.

United States of America

There is to date no specific research studies on the transition from OOHC experiences of Native Americans in the USA (Courtney 2019). However, a broader study of the transition experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth aged 17-23 years included a cohort of 18 care leavers. That study identified AI/AN youth as a group at particular risk of poor outcomes in areas such as mental health, substance use and poverty which was attributed to the traumatic impact of historical colonization and forced assimilation. They recommended the 'application of culturally grounded interventions' to assist the young people to overcome trauma and address mental health concerns (Friesen et al. 2014: 201).

Additionally, a report on the receipt of independent living services by older youth in foster care aged 16-21 years found that Native Americans were more likely to receive services than other groups. They consisted of only 1.5 per cent of the overall sample of 131,204 young people, but utilized significantly more types of support services (5.43) than any other group (Okpych 2015).

Canada

A 2014 study of 937 illicit-drug using street youth in Canada aged 14-26 years, of whom 455 had spent time in OOHC, included a disproportionate number of Indigenous youth (139/455). That study reported that Indigenous youth comprised 50 per cent of children in OOHC despite being only five per cent of the total youth population reflecting a range of factors including the long-term impact of colonisation and intergenerational trauma. The study recommended

that First Nations community organisations be involved in providing services that connected young people to their culture and community (Barker et al. 2014).

A recent Masters thesis examined the link between the high proportion of Indigenous children in foster care in Canada (52.2 per cent in care compared to an overall percentage of 7.7 per cent of the child population) and youth homelessness. The study, which used the 2015 Canadian Homeless Youth Survey (34.6 per cent of the 1103 respondents were Indigenous), found that Indigenous care leavers were highly over-represented in the homeless population (Dunn 2019).

A qualitative study of 10 care leavers aged 18-29 years in Manitoba reported post-care experiences of unstable housing and homelessness, limited availability of formal support services, and poor preparation in terms of independent living skills such as cooking, cleaning and money management. Eight of the ten young people identified as Indigenous reflecting their over-representation in the Canadian child welfare system, but there was no specific reflection on Indigenous culture or identity (Lalonde et al. 2020).

An overview of existing research literature presented a bleak view of the experiences of Indigenous care leavers in Canada. The study noted that First Nations children were highly over-represented in the care system at 12 times the level of non-Indigenous children. Their transition challenges were compounded by intergenerational trauma, and the impact of ongoing colonial policies and violence that undermined the caring traditions and functions of Indigenous family support systems. They argued in favour of policies that enabled this cohort to reconnect with their cultural identity and history and associated family relationships (Fast et al. 2019).

Conclusion

Our review of scholarly literature internationally revealed only limited information about the experiences of Indigenous care leavers. However, the common theme seems to be that Indigenous children and youth are over-represented in OOHC systems, that their transitions

may be difficult as reflected in significant numbers becoming homeless or entering criminal justice systems, and that their capacity to reconnect with their cultural identity and community appears to be a crucial factor Influencing better outcomes.

Part Three: Methods

This exploratory research study investigates the numbers, needs and outcomes of Indigenous care leavers across Australia. In addition, this project examines the funding, policy and practice relevant to this cohort. The study received ethics approval from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee and was supported by a grant from the Sidney Myer Fund. This project is led by the Social Inclusion and Social Policy Research Unit (SISPRU) at Monash University, which is located within the Department of Social Work in the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences. This project involves a collaboration between SISPRU, the Monash Indigenous Studies Centre, and our industry partner, SNAICC: National Voice for our Children, the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Aims

1. Ascertain the number of Indigenous young people leaving state care in each state and territory;
2. Document and compare the existing policies and programs aiming to support this group in each jurisdiction;
3. Gather information concerning the outcomes for Indigenous young people transitioning from care;
4. Document and share identifiable good practice in supporting Indigenous young people transitioning from care; and
5. Develop the background material and networks to inform development of a larger scale national research proposal focusing on the needs and outcomes of Indigenous care leavers.

In order to fulfil these aims, this study gathered qualitative data from key stakeholders in each state and territory across Australia. Focus groups and interviews were held with key individuals in government, non-government organisations, peak bodies, and ACCOs.

Recruitment

The research team aimed to recruit participants from each of the following categories in each state and territory:

- Key representatives from government departments who are directly involved in or responsible for policy and practice in relation to Indigenous care leavers
- Key representatives of non-government organisations, including managerial, 'frontline' workers and cultural consultants, who have direct experience in delivering leaving care services and programs to Indigenous care leavers
- Key representatives of ACCOs with direct experience delivering leaving care services for Indigenous care leavers.

A purposive sampling method was employed which allowed the research team to ensure that the participants held the unique knowledge, experience and expertise required to respond to the research aims and interview questions.
To recruit government participants, the researchers utilised existing networks to establish the most appropriate person to contact for participation. In lieu of any existing contacts, the researchers directly contacted the head of the relevant government department for advice.

To recruit non-government organisations, the researchers conducted a google search of the relevant leaving care providers in each state and territory and directly invited their participation. In some cases, where there were existing networks or contacts, the researchers used these connections to invite participants.

To recruit ACCOs, the researcher utilised the partnership with SNAICC who assisted contact with the relevant organisations.

Sample

A total of 53 individuals participated in a total of 22 focus groups or interviews. Nine participants represented government departments, 32 participants were from non-government organisations and 12 participants were from ACCOs. Interviews and focus groups ranged from 33 to 88 minutes and the average length was 50 minutes. Primarily the recorded

interviews and focus groups were conducted over the phone, with a small number completed face-to-face. In addition, two government departments opted to provide a written response to our interview questions.

State	Government (no. of participants)	Non-government (no. of participants)	ACCO (no. of participants)	Total number of participants
ACT	2	0	0	2
NSW	0	5	3	8
NT	Written response	3	0	3
QLD	Written response	12	0	12
SA	4	1	0	5
Tas	1	0	0	1
Vic	2	0	9	11
WA	0	11	0	11

Participants held a range of positions, including youth worker, case worker, Aboriginal cultural worker, after care coordinator, advocate, chief executive officer, program manager, and senior program manager. The majority of participants from non-government and ACCOs worked directly in aftercare/transition programs. Some participants worked for peak bodies, OOHC programs or large organisations that provided a range of programs that are utilised by Indigenous care leavers.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted by members of the research team with participants. Building on the findings from the earlier Monash University study of

Indigenous care leavers in Victoria (Mendes et al.2016), the consultations with government departments targeted the following key topics:

- Number of Indigenous care leavers transitioning from care each year
- Specified funding provided to Indigenous care leavers
- Consultation, planning and funding of ACCOs
- Strengths and limitations of the leaving care/post care system in terms of how it supports Indigenous care leavers
- The ways in which cultural identity and connection to country are supported for Indigenous care leavers, and any suggested improvements
- Knowledge of post-care outcomes for Indigenous care leavers
- Identified good practice for Indigenous care leavers

The consultations with non-government organisations and ACCOs examined the following key topics:

- Rationale, purpose and aims of the services they provide to Indigenous care leavers
- The number of young people accessing the service, proportion of Indigenous service users and any identified common factors involved in the decision-making or movements of Indigenous care leavers
- Existing barriers to Indigenous care leavers accessing their services
- Ways in which services are modified to meet the needs of Indigenous care leavers
- Consultation and communication with ACCOs in the delivery of leaving care services
- Strengths and limitations of current leaving care/post care system in terms of how it supports Indigenous care leavers
- The ways in which cultural identity and connection to country are supported for Indigenous care leavers, and any suggested improvements
- Knowledge of post-care outcomes for Indigenous care leavers
- Identified good practice for Indigenous care leavers

The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were reviewed by the research team and transcribed data was entered into NVivo12 for coding. Thematic analysis processes were followed, using the research aims to guide the identification of themes and sub-themes. The focus was on both the latent and the implicit meaning of the data, to uncover not only what was said, but what was left unsaid. Attention was paid to the repetition of ideas, the intensity of expression, and the absence of response across the key areas of data collection. We also paid particular attention to the historical context of the ideas expressed, in terms of the long history of colonialism in Australia. The interdisciplinary research team purposefully includes a range of knowledge and expertise, including lived experience, practice experience, the historical context and current policy. We tried to utilise that expertise to appropriately recognise the underlying themes and subtext of the qualitative data. Also of importance was who was saying what, and while drafting the themes, differences were noted between responses from government participants, non-Indigenous organisations, ACCOs, Indigenous participants and workers who work predominantly or exclusively with Indigenous care leavers.

Coding and the identification of themes were conducted by two researchers, an Indigenous researcher from MISC and a non-Indigenous researcher from SISPRU. An additional researcher from both MISC and SISPRU then re-coded a section of the data sets. The themes and sub-themes identified represent both the most significant and common responses from the data, whilst also representing any dissenting or unique ideas.

Limitations

This study acknowledges its limitations. Firstly, with regard to participation in the research. Whilst we were not seeking generalisability due to the exploratory nature of the research, the sample is non-representative and is skewed towards non-Indigenous mainstream organisations in the leaving care sector. This was an unavoidable outcome of the fact that nationally, the bulk of leaving care services are delivered by mainstream organisations. Also, we did not engage with ACCOs beyond the OOHC sector that may work with Indigenous care leavers in discrete areas such as health, housing, child and family welfare, and drug and alcohol support.

We were also unable to collect data from government representatives from all states and territories. Unfortunately, NSW declined participation in the study, and WA, who were going through tremendous shifts in the delivery of government services were unable to provide data in time, despite expressing ongoing interest in participation. In order to address this limitation, wherever possible we drew on publicly available grey literature which pertained to Indigenous care leavers, particularly in relation to numbers, policies, and funding.

The most obvious limitation of this study is that it does not include data directly from Indigenous care leavers themselves. Given the limited data currently available on the service system as it relates to Indigenous care leavers, and the nature of this study as a scoping study, we felt that the focus of this study should remain on service provision. We hope we have provided a foundational exploration and comparison of state and territory service provision. Wherever possible we tried to draw data capturing Indigenous care leavers voices through other studies and grey literature. We would recommend that a future study, led by Indigenous researchers and partnered with Indigenous organisations, focus on capturing the voices of Indigenous care leavers with regard to their experiences in care, and also the important voices of Indigenous kinship and foster carers.

In recognition of the large number of Indigenous young people from OOHC in the juvenile justice system, we would also recommend a separate study focusing specifically on juvenile justice and the importance of active transition planning, including cultural planning, in preparation for when they leave custody.

Part Four: Findings

This section summarises the findings from the focus group consultations and individual interviews with participants. There are ten sub-sections, or themes, which correspond to the research aims. The first two parts cover the collection of data related to Indigenous care leavers, and the funding provided to Indigenous care leaver service provision. Parts three, four and five examine the key policies impacting on Indigenous care leavers such as cultural plans and transition from care plans. Part six explores the overall service system failures. Part seven focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service provision (either individual, community or organisation) in the leaving care space. Part eight focuses on the key challenges experienced by, and outcomes for, Indigenous care leavers. Parts nine and ten present examples of current good practice, and a summary of participant recommendations to improve this sector's response to Indigenous care leavers.

Theme One: Data

One of the key aims of this research was to ascertain the number of Indigenous young people leaving state care in each state and territory. This data should be the basic foundation of policy and funding for Indigenous care leavers. In order to gather this data, we asked State and Territory government participants to provide the number of Indigenous young people leaving state care in their jurisdiction. We requested this information during interviews and focus groups and followed up via email communication. We also asked government representatives to identify the amount of discrete funding that is provided to Indigenous specific leaving care and after care programs in their state or territory.

Based on these requests for data, the following data table was formulated.

Nationwide data on the numbers of Indigenous care leavers and specified funding per state and territory

State/Territory	Indigenous children who exit care to independence annually (government published data)	Indigenous children who exit care to independence annually (AIHW published)	Identified funding for Indigenous care leavers
Australian Capital Territory	2018-19: 4[1]	9 (of 42)[2]	No data provided
New South Wales	2016-17: 433 (of 1213)[3]	426 (of 1173)	Approx $300 000 per annum[4]
Northern Territory	2018-19: 67 (of 83)[5]	64 (of 80)	None
Queensland	2018-19: 273[6]	264 (of 630)	Undisclosed amount to one ACCO
South Australia	Approx 50[7]	73 (of 216)	None
Tasmania	Referred to AIHW data	11 (of 66)	None
Victoria	2017-18: 77 (of 589)[8]	148 (of 871)	$1.16M[9]
Western Australia	2017-18: 86 (of 213)[10]	144 (of 280)	No data provided

[1] This number was provided by ACT government representatives
[2] It is important to note that ACT have increased the age of leaving care for all children. This number refers to children aged 15-17 who have left care, so does not represent the number of Indigenous children who are transitioning to independence.
[3] Taken from Dashboard 7 of the following page: https://public.tableau.com/profile/facs.statistics#!/vizhome/Objective2-Improvingthelivesofchildrenandyoungpeople/Dashboard1 This number reflects Indigenous children aged 15-17 inclusive who were exited from OOHC in the 2016-17 financial year..
[4] This approximate amount was provided by a participant in our study who stated that it goes to a non-Indigenous organisation that provides services to a solely Indigenous cohort of service users. This has not been confirmed by the NSW government or any publicly available documents.
[5] This number was provided by Territory Families and refers to Indigenous children aged 15-17 who exited OOHC in 18-19.
[6] This figure was provided by the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women QLD and refers to all Indigenous children aged 15-17 who left care in 2018-19.
[7] This figure was provided by DCP South Australia
[8] These figures were provided by DHHS Victoria. They are based on the number of children exiting OOHC for the final time, at ages 16, 17, and 18. They therefore do not include children under the age of 16.
[9] This figure was provided by DHHS Victoria. It refers to all funding to ACCOs for leaving care services in the previous financial year. It does not include the flexible funding which funds items on a child's plan, which is taken from a separate pool of funding.
[10] Taken from page 23 of publicly available document: https://www.communities.wa.gov.au/media/1630/child-protection-activity-performance-report.pdf . This includes children aged 15-18 who were discharged from OOHC in 2017-18. The document does not differentiate between those who have transitioned to independence and those who have experienced reunification.

Data issues

The researchers note the discrepancies between figures when comparing data provided by government departments to the AIHW published data, particularly regarding the number of Indigenous care leavers transitioning to independence each year. A number of impacting factors are discussed below.

Age

The first issue with collecting this data is related to the age range. The AIHW data refers to the number of Indigenous children who exited OOHC aged 15-17 inclusive. Mostly, this is also what was provided by government departments, with the exception of Victoria (who provided data for 16-18 year olds) and WA (who provided data for 15-18 year olds). This assumes that all children who transition from state care to independence do so within what is generally considered the leaving care period (15-17). However, anecdotal data from both this study and the previous Monash University study exploring the service provision and experiences of Indigenous children leaving care in Victoria, suggests that Indigenous children are often self-placing out of care prior to the age of 15. Consequently, leaving care statistics that only include young people aged 15 years or above may not be a true reflection of the numbers of Indigenous care leavers.

Additionally, some children in care may have the order extended and therefore exit care after the age of 18. An example provided in this study is a young man whose transition planning had not been completed by his 18th birthday and required a six week extension to his Child Protection order so that appropriate housing arrangements could be made. It is unclear how common cases like these are, however, the current method of counting would not include any Indigenous child whose order required extension for extraneous reasons. Looking at the WA publicly available data, the number of children aged 18 years or over who exited from care make up the vast proportion of overall children, far exceeding the 15-17 age range. Given that the AIHW data does not extend to 18 years and most states and territories did not provide a breakdown of exits by age to 18, it is unclear whether this variable would also extend to other states and territories.

Reasons for leaving care

All provided and publicly available data on exits from OOHC simply records the exit of a child from the system, and do not differentiate between reunification with family, an order being rescinded, or a transition from OOHC to so-called adult independence. Capturing the number of exits from the age bracket of 15-17 years assumes that those leaving at that age would be doing so because they are transitioning from OOHC to independence, but this is not necessarily the case. This information deficit further blurs the data.

A note on eligibility

While not directly impacting on the data collection of exits from OOHC for the leaving care age group, it is important to note that even if accurately representing the annual number of Indigenous children who transitioned from OOHC to independence, not all of those children would be eligible for leaving care services. As noted under Theme Six of our Findings chapter, eligibility for leaving care services varies between jurisdictions, and is based around being on an order at a particular age and/or having spent a particular period of time under state care. For example, in Victoria, support services are available for young people who were subject to custody or guardianship orders on their sixteenth birthday, and therefore any child transitioning to independence or self-placing at 15 years would be ineligible for those services. In WA, services are available from the age of 15 years for any child who was subject to a protection order for a period of at least six months. Notably, aftercare service provision in QLD is currently transforming and the new eligibility will be related to being on a care order at or after the age of 12. This is perhaps a reflection of evidence that some children, particularly Indigenous children, are leaving care much earlier than 16 years.

It is concerning that accurate numbers of Indigenous care leavers transitioning from OOHC to independence are unable to be captured in the current system. In order to appropriately understand needs, provide services and fund the system to adequately support Indigenous care leavers, we first need to know how many young people are included in this cohort.

Comments on Data

Separate to the quantitative data the researchers were seeking, a number of sub-themes emerged around the collection of data itself. These are outlined below:

Significant gaps in the collection of data related to Indigenous young people leaving care aged 15-18 years

Whilst all states and territories are required to report how many Indigenous young people are in state care at the end of each financial year, this reporting does not extend to the number of Indigenous young people leaving care each year. At the time of interviews, government representatives were unable to provide specific data on how many Indigenous young people leave care each year, however, many did follow up with an estimate. There was, however, a unified acknowledgement of Indigenous children being overrepresented in all stages of care, and an assumption that this applies to leaving care.

> *"I'm hard pressed to give you a specific number but we know that they are overrepresented in our population." (Tas gov)*

In relation to counting the number of Indigenous young people leaving care each year, participants expressed uncertainty about how they would even track or count this. Government representatives frequently responded that the data would exist, but they did not have immediate access to it, or there would be no clear-cut way to gather that data.

> *"So we do have stats, but what we don't have is it in an available form just this minute because we have transitioned from one old system to a new system and our data is pretty unreliable until we get our reporting modules sorted out" (ACT gov)*

Gaps in the development and publication of data in relation to Indigenous children in child protection systems is echoed in the findings and recommendations of the Family Matters Report (2019), where it was identified that a broader set of data is required to meaningfully indicate the safety, wellbeing and outcomes of Indigenous children in care.

The researchers were able to gather some data in all jurisdictions on the number of Indigenous children leaving state care each year. This was either via the government department providing the data, or through canvassing publicly available documents. However, even in these cases, the number was not clear cut. For example, it was often not clear if a number pertains to only those children who have graduated from care into independence, or whether it is also inclusive of those who have exited care due to reunification with their families. This was true of all states and territories, where the reason for exiting care was not clearly specified, i.e. whether there was reunification, an order rescinded, a child has absconded from care, or has 'aged out' of care into so-called independent living. This further blurs the data.

> *"They [NSW gov] have a whole range of different data they put out publicly. Often when they do report exits from the system, it doesn't necessarily mean that that was a child aging out of the system… it would include things like restorations or those sorts of things." (NSW ACCO)*

> *"We typically talk about exits from care, and sometimes that's a combination of children that are restored home versus children that are leaving care at the end of a care period." (ACT Gov)*

In a number of jurisdictions, the numbers of Indigenous young people leaving care were estimated by looking at how many Indigenous children were aged 17-18 years old in each state or territory at a point in time (for example, the last day of the financial year). This is a problematic way to gather the numerical data as it is based on the assumption that children are not leaving care prior to 17-18, which is not supported by anecdotal data from this study or the findings of the earlier Monash University study on Indigenous care leavers in Victoria (Mendes, Saunders & Baidawi 2016).

Clear data was not able to be provided on the type of placement (foster, kinship or residential care) each Indigenous person was exiting from. Respondents, particularly from NGOs working in this sector, indicated this was particularly important as they had noticed differences in the

readiness for independence and amount of support required depending on the type of care a young person was leaving from.

> *"What we haven't got at the moment is data that shows care type in care, then of those care types, who's accessing what post-care, if that makes sense. Yeah, we haven't got it to be able to drill down to care type and what they're accessing." (Vic Gov)*

Explanations and observations in relation to difficulties in collecting data

When reflecting on the difficulty in collecting data for this cohort, a variety of reasons were cited:

- Unclear definition of 'leaving care', i.e. does that relate only to anyone who is eligible for post-care supports? (Vic)
- Inadequate record keeping systems, due to transitioning between systems (ACT).
- Categorising all leaving care together so the data not differentiating between reunification with family (which may or may not be sustainable) and ageing out of care at 18 years or earlier into independent living (NSW, ACT)
- Child Protection systems not having the capacity to capture where young people have moved onto or what their outcomes are (SA, WA).
- Data is dependent on data entry which is subject to human error (Vic).

Summary

It is difficult to develop and apply meaningful policy and programs and adequate funding estimates when little is known about the actual situation, even the most basic details such as how many Indigenous children are leaving care each year, at what age are they leaving, and from what kind of care arrangement are they leaving from. The gaps in data collection amplify the need for a nationally consistent leaving care data system that should ideally be published within the annual child protection reports of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Theme Two: Funding

This theme responds to the research aim: document and compare the existing policies and programs aiming to support this group in each jurisdiction. Programs are supported by policy and funding, so in order to explore this, participants were asked about specified funding for Indigenous care leavers within their jurisdiction.

According to the government departments who provided information on funding, only three states provide discrete funding for Indigenous care leavers, $300,000 in NSW, $1.16M in Victoria and an undisclosed amount to one ACCO in QLD.

The prominent sub-themes related to funding are detailed below.

Insufficient funding overall and minimal funding specifically for the Indigenous cohort

Participants overwhelmingly felt that there was insufficient funding in the leaving care sector, particularly for Indigenous care leavers. In most states, there is no specific funding that is allocated to support Indigenous care leavers.

> *"I'm not aware of any specific funding". (WA NGO)*

> *"From my understanding there's no extra funding or anything in particular different for our young Aboriginal people." (WA NGO)*

> *"For us it's mainly just totally under-resourced. For us to be a state-wide service to be working on a model that we developed some 15 years ago and funded it the same way, the capacity has grown exponentially and our ability to meet that need - we've got waiting lists of over 150 young people at the moment."(WA NGO)*

In jurisdictions where there is a specified pool of funding available for Indigenous care leavers, that funding amount is not proportionate to the number of Indigenous care leavers needing support.

"We know that the funding to ACCOs equates to approximately 5% of the total funding under our budget for leaving care post-care. And if you're remembering back to your data that I just gave you there, joining the dots, our proportional funding isn't equating, if you like, so if we've got 13% roughly of Aboriginal young people leaving care and we've only got 5% going to ACCOs."(VIC Gov)

In some states there were additional funding pools provided to support transition-aged young people leaving care, however, that funding was provided to cover the cost of the leaving care caseworker costs but insufficient funding to provide the care leavers the resources they need for a successful transition.

"So under the new system, when kids are in out-of-home care and in that 15 to 17 age bracket, there is an additional package applied to fund the casework involved in developing an aftercare plan. But I believe that the dollar amount on that is relatively low. It's to cover the additional casework costs, and not actually the resources that kids need." (NSW ACCO)

Some participants noted that although there was no funding specifically for Indigenous care leavers, there was more general funding going to areas that might impact Indigenous care leavers, such as housing or community support.

"Specifically within leaving care I'm not aware of any pool of money which is targeted directly at Aboriginal young people, but it's more broader funding for specific Aboriginal areas in terms of housing, community support and intensive family engagement, rather than directly within leaving care." (Tas Gov)

Whilst it is a positive move that housing, family and community support programs are receiving increased funding, there is still insufficient resources to cover existing need. This is reflected, for example, in the extensive waiting lists for public housing Australia-wide. To imply that this increased funding would somehow be funnelled or directed towards Indigenous care leavers is unreasonable. The government has a statutory responsibility to Indigenous young people, where they have deemed their home situation unsafe, and

removed them from parental care. This responsibility should extend to ensuring that beyond the transition from care age, the young person will have guaranteed access to the necessary resources and support including discrete housing programs to establish a good life for themselves. Specified funding is required to ensure this happens.

ACCO funding - Scarce to none

Funding to ACCOs for leaving care services was minimal in most states, with the exception of Victoria which has had specified leaving care funding for ACCOs for approximately the last ten years, and NSW who provide discretionary funding to a mentoring program for young people up to the age of 18 years. Of note, QLD have introduced a small amount of specified funding for an ACCO delivering leaving care services for the 20-21 financial year. Where ACCOs are funded to provide support, it was not proportionate to the number of Aboriginal care leavers in that state, meaning that not all Indigenous children had access to ACCO leaving care programs.

Participants from ACCOs indicated that they were under-resourced to provide leaving care services to Indigenous care leavers and that they would like to see ACCOs be appropriately resourced to provide aftercare programs to Indigenous care leavers.

> *"I think the view would be that those things are quite under-resourced… we would certainly like to see that embedded within Aboriginal community organisations, and more grounded at the local level, and those sorts of things." (NSW ACCO)*

> *"Majority of leaving care services across Victoria or within the metro area, a lot of them have housing attached to their programs. So that initial part of their target and funding process was to have that attached to them so that they could then better service and teach life skills for the young people, to then give them the best chance of being able to sustain long term housing. Our program within [ACCO] , unfortunately, we weren't funded at that level, ours was more of an emergency service to try and not address the initial gap within the service for young people." (VIC ACCO)*

So, across all [ACCO] wide allied care services, only two houses are available, and we have in the metro up to 16 targets at any given time. That's just one region. So, it's a major issue within [ACCO] as a whole with the funding bodies and negotiating with those people. But initially, for young people leaving care, there's not enough stock available to then be able to put them into the right services that will be able to give them the skills they need to survive or become functioning and well engaging people in society." (VIC ACCO)

NGO funding - Minimal Accountability

Indigenous participants were critical of non-Indigenous organisations receiving large amounts of funding to support Indigenous care leavers whilst not improving outcomes for this cohort. It was felt that non-Indigenous organisations were not successfully supporting Indigenous families or care leavers and therefore failing in their contractual obligations.

"I think that's really important that – because we know that the work that has been done by non-Indigenous organisations, they're not meeting the requirements that they need in supporting our families. And that's been a bit of a bug bearer here with the department and also some of our organisations, because they get quite a lot of money to work with our families, but they're actually not meeting their contractual agreement with the department. So that's why there's this consortium business going on. And then probably the next four or five years hopefully more ACCOs will come into this space in WA to lead some of that work, and that's what we're working towards."(WA NGO)

Inconsistency in funding between regions

Participants reported inconsistency between and within regions around what kind of programs were funded, as well as the funding Indigenous care leavers can access. This is inclusive of what resources can be made available to the Indigenous care leaver and what will be approved in transition plans submitted to the government departments for payment. This will be covered in more detail in theme six.

The inconsistency in funding extended to how programs were funded, which included self-funded programs, programs receiving government funding, or running on corporate funding. Some programs drew on both government and corporate funding in order to provide sufficient resources for their Indigenous care leaver service users, but still were operating at a deficit or maintaining an extensive waitlist.

> *"We have some corporate funding that sort of got the program going and also helped build the houses… and then we're also drawing on the government's foster care funding."(NSW NGO)*

In the case mentioned above, this model was also still in pilot mode. In another case, where an ACCO did receive funding (NSW), it was not an ongoing annual amount. Instead they were required to invoice the relevant government department for the services they provided young people in care, at a rate that would be considered quite low for the service being provided. They therefore relied also on corporate funding in order to deliver their services.

The result of not having specified and adequate funding provided by the government on a regular annual basis is two-fold. Firstly, the government is not receiving a clear picture of the actual need and therefore not required to adequately fund programs because they are being 'topped up' by corporate donors. Secondly, without ongoing appropriate funding, it is difficult to be responsive and to adequately plan and expand a program's services to meet the need.

ACT Model

The ACT has extended care to all children to 21 years old. Therefore, funding is allocated annually to the NGOs (akin to OOHC funding), allowing discretion with how they use those funds.

> *"It's a set amount insofar as we provide funding to the organisations and then they're able to use that funding to respond to the individual needs of those young people. So what we don't have is somebody saying, "A young person needs counselling, education, a car and three other things, therefore it costs $25,000", we provide the*

same amount to the organisation as if those children still were in care, and they're able to use that to respond to whatever the young person needs." (ACT Gov)

Whilst it is a positive step to extend care to 21, there are potential issues with this model of funding. It may mean funding is appropriately funnelled to the young people that need it, or it may actually enhance inconsistencies because there are no agreed upon benchmarks with regard to what resources and supports young people can access.

Summary

Overall, the data indicated that funding for leaving care services is inconsistent, and there is insufficient funding provided in this sector to meet the needs of Indigenous care leavers. ACCO funding is minimal as is adherence to principles of Aboriginal self-determination. Additionally, there seems to be a lack of accountability for the existing non-Indigenous agencies and organisations providing leaving care services.

Theme Three: Policies

This theme responds to the research aim: document and compare the existing policies and programs aiming to support Indigenous care leavers in each jurisdiction. Participants were asked to comment on the service system policy and delivery for Indigenous young people in their state and territory. General comments on policies relevant to Indigenous care leavers are summarised here. Themes four and five provide a detailed summary on concerns that emerged in relation to cultural plans and transition plans.

Changing space

A dominant theme when discussing policies related to leaving care was that policy, programs and service provision within OOHC and leaving care were in a current state of change. It was noted that in many states new policies were being rolled out, i.e. Better Futures and Advantaged Thinking in Victoria, and reviewing current procedures, i.e. Our Booris Our Way in ACT.

> *"There's been quite a lot of activity and consultation in the leaving and after care space in NSW" (NSW NGO)*

> *"So there's a lot of work happening in that space but it's yet to come to fruition" (NSW NGO)*

> *"We're in a state of flux in that space, which may or may not have a positive impact on outcomes" (NSW NGO)*

In addition to reforming policy, participants commented on testing of pilots of new programs or extending care.

> *"We're just recommissioning these services to even strengthen that" (SA Gov)*

> *"I think that now we are looking at totally revamping the process of leaving care" (Tas Gov)*

"I believe the whole system's changing to a different model" (VIC ACCO)

Some participants noticed that this changing landscape was contributing to young people experiencing inconsistencies in OOHC, for example in some states such as SA and Tasmania, extending care applies only to home-based foster and kinship care arrangements.

"I think research around leaving care at the moment is particularly problematic because of all the different things that are going off, the various different trials, pilots, so every young person's experience of leaving care support is inconsistent at best, but now with the different pilots, it's even more confusing." (WA NGO)

Participants noted that in some cases, these changes were coming about due to a response to inadequate practices or outcomes within the leaving care space; a recognition that currently things are not done well. However, they asserted that ultimately these changes would contribute to a strengthening of response to young people leaving care, and therefore provide benefit.

"Leaving care's very hot on the department's agenda at the moment because they're realising that a lot of this isn't right and that's why they're trying to redress their funding strains." (VIC ACCO)

"The whole leaving care space would be - I don't know, like, it will probably look different in the next three years and we're all looking forward to it" (WA NGO)

A number of participants noted this 'changing space' as a caveat to their responses to the discussion; they felt that the current changes to policy and service provision restricted the extent to which they could provide comment. Some participants expressed concern that by the time this report would be published, their comments would no longer be relevant, as a result of the rapidly changing space.

For the most part these changes are lateral or minor and don't indicate any true reform, except perhaps for some of the enactments of Home Stretch and the changes made in ACT prior to Home Stretch.

Home Stretch

Versions of the Home Stretch campaign for extending care have been introduced in five states and territories. Although Home Stretch was rarely referred to in the data collection, it is important to note the roll out of these campaigns and how it is impacting the national service delivery of leaving care. Based on publicly available information, the below overview has been compiled, highlighting the discrepancies in the roll out of this campaign in terms of who can access the increased supports and what those supports look like.

ACT: Before the introduction of the Home Stretch campaign, ACT increased care to 21 for all children. In practice, this meant that family-based care payments and subsidies were extended whilst children in residential care had access to case management and other supports. From age 21-25, all children can access post order support services which are need dependent and can range from once-off funding to intensive case management.

SA: SA have extended carer payments for young people living in family-based placements up to the age of 21. A small number of eligible people (around 17/60 at the time of data collection) have opted to engage this option.

Vic: A trial involving 250 young people over five years (approx. 88 per year) whereby the carer payments are extended for young people in family-based care, and young people transitioning from residential care are offered a housing subsidy. All young people in the trial get access to Better Futures workers who help support their goals for independence.

Tas: Tasmania have extended payments to foster and kinship carers to the age of 24.

WA: Twenty-five young people are involved in the trial which includes one-on-one support and a safety net fund to provide stable living arrangements and facilitate access to health, education and life skills services for those leaving foster, kinship and residential care.

When Home Stretch initiatives were mentioned by participants, it was usually as an example of good practice. Many participants expressed the view that care should be extended for all children, in line with the kind of care children in an intact family receive from their parents or carers.

Policy Strengths

When discussing the limitations of policies, it was more so related to poor implementation rather than critiquing the policies themselves. There were acknowledgments that in many cases the policies exist (i.e. cultural plans and transition plans) but the implementation of them are inconsistent or poor.

When discussing strengths of policies, it was around things like extending payments to carers beyond 18 years (ACT, Tas), responding well to children with complex needs (ACT), high numbers of cultural plans (ACT) and policies that recognise Aboriginal self-determination (Vic).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP)

Limited comments were made in relation to the ATSICPP, likely because the placement elements of the ATSICPP are formally applied when a child enters care, but this project's focus is on leaving care. The ATSCIPP also includes elements of supporting connection to community and culture, which would apply to all children in care, from the point of removal to the point of leaving care. However these elements of the ATSICPP were not referred to by participants.

When it was commented on, it was mainly in relation to poor practices. For example, one ACCO participant observed that when Indigenous young people are placed with families, it

may be with their non-Indigenous family members so the extent to which the spirit of the ATSICPP is being upheld, in terms of maintaining a connection to culture, is unknown. Participants working in ACCOs were more likely to raise and discuss ATSICCP in the interviews, compared to representatives from NGOs and government departments who did not mention it.

Notably, participants did not discuss or refer to the possibility of applying the ethos of the ATSICPP to transition planning with regard to where an Indigenous care leaver will live beyond care. Given the emphasis on connection to culture, community and family, it would be apt to continue to apply ATSICPP principles when considering where an Indigenous young person in care will live once they transition from care. This blind spot may be indicative of a system which not only continues to fail to understand the holistic nature of the ATSICPP and its five elements, but seems to absolve itself of responsibility once a child reaches an alleged age of independence.

Summary

Generally, participants indicated that whilst there are policies in place to support Indigenous care leavers, they were not applied consistently. This was particularly so in relation to inconsistencies in the application of the ATSICPP, an issue mainly raised by ACCOs. This coupled with the changing nature of the space, was contributing to Indigenous care leavers not receiving appropriate levels of support at a crucial time in their lives.

Theme Four: Cultural Plans

All participants from all jurisdictions made frequent mention of cultural plans, and opined that they were essential for facilitating positive transitions from care for Indigenous young people.

Cultural plans are important

Across the board, participants indicated the importance of appropriate cultural plans to help support cultural identity and connection to community, as reflected in the fifth element of the ATSICPP (Tilbury, 2013). Cultural plans were seen as crucial in achieving a successful transition from care, and supporting reunification with family and community. Cultural plans support identity formation, seen as a key part of transitioning to adulthood for Indigenous young people.

Consistently, all states had policies which were aimed at ensuring all Indigenous young people in care had an appropriate cultural plan in place.

> *"It's a secondary consultation role primarily when a young person's in care, because they should have a care team. They should have effective cultural support planning, case managers, et cetera, supporting them and Better Futures is there to lend that expertise to the transition element of planning and support. [ACCO] are saying we are the primary support - often, not always, but often - the primary driver of support even for those young people that are still some way away from leaving care. And it relates back to effective cultural support planning and effective cultural support full stop." (VIC Gov)*

Many participants felt that cultural plans had to be consistently present in a child and young persons' life through every stage of care and after care, and in a meaningful way. It shouldn't be something that is applied as an afterthought.

> *"Cultural consultation has to be a thread through - it has to be a length across every part of their plan. And I look at it in two ways, it has to be they're taken on country. It*

has to be culturally aware about where they're from and the culture from that spot. But also where they're living now. So there has to be engagement with Aboriginal organisations." (NSW ACCO)

"So if there's a 10-year-old Aboriginal child in care, they need a cultural support plan. That cultural support plan should be reviewed regularly and absolutely it would be in place and reviewed and up to date, until the young person leaves care. So, yes, a nine-year-old should have one, a 10-year-old should have one, a 15-year-old should have one and a 17-year-old should have one" (VIC Gov).

Cultural Plans are done poorly or not at all

Despite their identified importance, participants noted that historically there has been a low percentage of Indigenous children with cultural plans, as well as a lack of review of plans (see also Family Matters 2019). Although many noted that the percentage of children with cultural plans is improving, they also highlighted the need for a focus on quality. This is reflected in data from the 2018 CREATE report which indicated that only 17.9% of the 374 Indigenous respondents were sure they had a cultural plan, with the remainder indicating that they either did not have one, or were unsure (McDowall 2018).

"They very rarely exist. I think of the 188 young people we worked with in the last six months there's two that have plans."(WA NGO)

"Part of it is around workers having huge caseloads and when we look at Aboriginal kids and Torres Strait Islander kids, pieces of work need to be done like the ACIST over here. It's an assessment tool where it identifies their clan group, their skin name and all that sort of stuff and their connection, how often they return to country and all that sort of gear, but a lot of them haven't got one." (SA NGO)

"There's change at a policy level to enable better practice, but we haven't really seen the fruits of that at this point in time, and certainly not for the cohort of leaving care and after care young people that we have now. We're possibly a few years away from

seeing young people coming through with appropriate cultural care plans in place, that then flow into an appropriate leaving care plan." (NSW NGO)

"We see a lot of cultural plans come across our desk that just says, "Knows who their mum is" or "Have contact with the grandmother." There's no expansion of that, no looking at what land they're from, what language group they're from, what connections they've got in what areas and that sort of stuff, so it's difficult to identify the needs of a care leaver when they actually don't have a total understanding of who they are, where they're from to be able to then look at what their needs are. That's just one thing." (WA NGO)

"Also as part of the care plan, they'll have a cultural and identity section as well that they're meant to go through with the young people....I would say, from my experience, the information is fairly slim… I think Community is under-resourced. And I think they're thin on the ground with Aboriginal Practice Leaders (APLs) being able to come along to what's a really important process for the young people.... It's generally in-house, so each district has a APL employed by the Department of Communities that is supportive through that process… And I think it's just worth noting, that the cultural plans usually involve the cultural elements that are already existing within the family dynamic or the care dynamics. So there's no work or goal mentioned in terms of strengthening their cultural practices or their sense of culture. … It generally involves information about whether they're still in contact with family members and what family group they come from. But nothing in regards to cultural practices or anything like that, that we've noticed." (WA NGO)

A primary reason provided for poor quality or lack of cultural plans was that OOHC and leaving care work are mostly crisis-driven. In many cases, service providers are focused on responding to placement breakdowns, disengaged young people and the need for urgent accommodation. Within that environment, cultural plans are not prioritised. Participants also suggested they simply do not have the funding, resources or consistent workforce that would support good quality cultural plans.

"It's like the hierarchy of need, isn't it? If you've got someone that needs to be housed or food or whatever you're going to be doing that more than you are cultural consultations" (NSW NGO)

"And what we're seeing here in Adelaide is that a lot of social workers are moving on to different positions and so then they don't get that consistency of work. Like, the young person the other day had four or five workers in a period of three months, so like that consistency blows out and then you can start to see why those pieces of work like the ACIST, life storybook and all that sort of stuff get put on the backburner because no-one's been around long enough to actually complete them."(SA NGO)

The importance of Indigenous led cultural planning

It was identified by participants that young people need good cultural plans to protect and support identity formation. Identity formation for Indigenous youth was described as being negatively affected by their involvement in the OOHC system. This was said to be especially true for Indigenous youth who enter care at a very young age and do not maintain connection with family. Knowing how to navigate one's Aboriginality while disconnected from Indigenous family and community was described as being highly complex requiring specialist cultural knowledge. Participants felt Indigenous workers and ACCOs are the ones that hold that specialist cultural knowledge, and were able to assist in the meaningful development of cultural plans for Indigenous care leavers.

"I think cultural plans are really important. But once again, they need to be done really well and I think Aboriginal workers need to be leading that cultural plan. I mean I've seen cultural plans done by white caseworkers, they're not worth the piece of paper they're written on because there's no history about the family, where the family is from, who their cultural group, who is their language group, the key family members for that young person. Or even supporting that young person to go and visit their family and build a relationship with their family. So, I think cultural plans are really important because it can become a bit of a roadmap for our young people, that they've got all that information there. They might need someone to walk with them for a certain

period of time until they're comfortable about visiting family and being with family and knowing their family and their country and their language and all those things. And then there might be a time when they don't need that person anymore. So, I think that's really important."(WA NGO)

"A lot of the kids that I've worked alongside, they were taken from care quite young from their families and so I call it - and I'll put it quite bluntly - it's a disconnection from family and community and culture because what happens is that they're days old and then they're in the system right up until they're 18 and their identity hasn't been formed. They don't know who they are. By the time they hit 12 - 13, they're starting to question, "Am I an Aboriginal person? Who are my connections?" and all that sort of stuff, and so for those pieces of work to be done they themselves don't know where to begin. Some of the social workers that are working with these young people don't have enough information around what their connections are, where they lie, and so a lot of them don't - unfortunately don't know who they are, where their connections are." (SA NGO)

"What we do is we sit down, we call the case workers, the social workers, the supervisors, the key worker and we bring them together into one place and we have a meeting with them around kids Aboriginal identity and culture and connections. Then we get the case worker to do their very, very best otherwise because we really push it that a family member is present. When the family member is present then we can do the genogram properly and then see where this kid's linked to and if – because one kid he's been in care for two years. No one knew she had all these other connections and we just found them by having an AICIST. We brought the uncle in and the uncle said, "That genogram's wrong, this is her connection and she's got a big family and she shouldn't be in care." (SA Gov).

There is therefore pressure on non-Indigenous organisations to employ Aboriginal workers and Elders to work with Indigenous clients and undertake cultural plans. It was acknowledged that these workers have specialist knowledge, but are in short supply so often experience high caseloads and potential burnout.

Non-Indigenous case workers who hold responsibility for the cultural plans may not recognise their depth of importance. They may feel under-resourced and lacking the knowledge to complete cultural plans in meaningful ways. This was reflected in comments by Indigenous participants who felt that non-Indigenous case workers are not qualified to do cultural plans for Indigenous youth. It was suggested case workers who have not built trusting relationships with Indigenous care leavers will have difficulties understanding the process of Aboriginal family reunification and connection.

> *"The third thing would be, and it's a huge one, I think, would be family, and it can actually lead kids back up to community culture and their true sense of identity. Unfortunately, the case workers can't connect these kids up to community. They don't have a good relationship from past experiences, that trust has not ever been built appropriately."(NSW ACCO)*

Participants also noted that in some cases, Indigenous young people in the transitioning from care age were reluctant to identify or connect with their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage. Historically Indigenous families and communities have experienced traumatic and abusive treatment when identifying as Indigenous and this likely has an effect on the capacity or willingness of Indigenous youth to embrace a connection with culture, particularly through working with a non-Indigenous worker.

Non-Indigenous organisations spoke highly of their Indigenous employees working with young people on their cultural plans. In one example, the Indigenous worker was often provided subpar cultural plans by the statutory organisation, and in recognition of the absolute importance of this document, would spend months researching a young person's family history.

> *"I call him a detective in how he tries to discover this information that's out there that a lot of people aren't aware of or not committed to finding and the value of that. I worry that when he hangs up his boots, this practice will be lost so I'm trying to learn as much about it as I can and share as much about it as we can because I think it's incredibly powerful. There's lots of different ways that he could approach his role and*

there's other people within our organisation and other organisations doing similar work in a broad sense to what he's doing but it's quite rare for them to do it in the pointed way that he does it.

There's lots of different things that people can do in these roles and you've got to play to a person's strengths and wishes largely as well and what they feel comfortable in doing, particularly acknowledging the challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to work in a mainstream organisation, not a community-controlled organisation." (QLD NGO)

Summary

Overall, the data from participants indicated a recognition across the board of the importance of cultural plans, which is in line with national policy dictating that all Indigenous young people in care have one. Participants felt that cultural plans are best completed by Indigenous organisations and individuals, however, this is rarely the case. Unfortunately, it is evident that generally, cultural plans are still not being completed by the time young people leave care, or when they are, they frequently lack quality resulting in Indigenous care leavers feeling unsupported as they navigate their Aboriginality, and their connections to culture, family and community.

Theme Five: Transition Plans

Transition plans were understandably mentioned frequently by all participants from all jurisdictions. There was consensus among participants that good leaving care plans are essential and every child has a right to one, as it supports a successful transition to adulthood and can mitigate many of the experiences faced by Indigenous care leavers that may lead to poorer outcomes.

Good Transition Plans

Participants felt that good transition plans for Indigenous youth in care were ones that started early, were holistic in nature, focused on developing independent living skills and improving relationships outside of care, included education and employment planning and housing, and emphasised strong connection to culture.

> *"Speaker 1: I guess it's starting them early, trying to figure out what they want to do in life so they're not waiting until they're 18 to leave care then they've got nothing to do. They haven't finished school. They've got nothing to fall back on. And also, I guess yeah, helping them learn how to live independently. I take them shopping, learn how to cook, clean, use the washing machine. Just kind of help them gain independent skills.*
>
> *Speaker 2: I would say housing and independent living. Do they know how to cook, do they know how to pay bills, have they got their payments for their work, do they know how to work, or they know how to go for the interview and all those sorts of things."(VIC ACCO)*
>
> *"Basically just working alongside them to prepare them as much as possible with their transition once they leave care… I guess it's just sitting down with them, going through an assessment where it assesses their basic day-to-day living skills and drawing from that information what it is that they need support in and looking at the different domains of their lives. For example, relationships, their health, their achieving domains like with how engaged they are in school and then from that information, putting some*

resources in and giving them the information to be able to utilise that once they leave care. There was one young person that I worked with earlier on in the year... in the beginning when I jumped on it, we obviously got him three months before he turned 18 so we had minimal support, so I guess it was just trying to figure out what it was that he needed at that time and in that space and identity was one thing that was raised during that time. In the beginning, he was quite reluctant to want to know more about his culture and identity. So, it was a good, collaborative work with [Aboriginal cultural worker] and I, where I can, link [Aboriginal cultural worker] up with this young person to be able to support him and give him that information so that he has it once he leaves care. The other area that we worked on was engaging him in a trade so that he can go on and have a stable income, stable home. He chose to remain with his foster carer which he had been for several years, so he made the decision that after care, he would remain in foster care. Other support that I was then to support him, was getting him set up with Centrelink, making sure that he was accessing what he was entitled to, so youth allowance and setting him up and preparing him as much as possible." (QLD NGO)

Participants frequently noted that good transition planning should start early, around 15 years of age. The need to start early was indicative of a recognition that some Indigenous adolescents would abscond from placements, self-place with family or be placed in custodial settings.

"We're trying to do transition work with young people from the age of 15 onwards across our service." (QLD NGO)

"Yeah. You usually fill it out when you're 15 or 16, and then it's planned to have it completed by when you're 18. (NSW ACCO)

"Yes, they need to be happening, well and truly, looking at and talking about leaving care plan at 18 - it's far too late, 14 - 15, earlier. And, I know some of those changes are happening, but the whole system, is very broken." (NSW NGO)

Despite that, it was also commonly noted that in practice, transition planning was occurring late, often within only days, weeks or months before the care leaver ages out of care, or sometimes not at all.

> *"When we first started the program nearly five years ago, we were getting some of the kids coming through – most of them did not have leaving care plans or financial plans. So that's still the case for that older cohort coming through that were under the age of 25. But I'm still getting kids exiting care – and I've been fighting with FACS and NGOs - we call it advocacy. But really we're pushing to get these plans completed. And in like a year - they've aged out for a year and they still haven't been completed." (NSW NGO)*

> *"The referrals – ideally the referrals will come in at 15, but they often come in quite late, at closer to 18. What we have done to try and strengthen the process is built relationships with the districts to ask that we be invited to young people's care plans even if they haven't been referred to us, just to share information about leaving care services." (WA NGO)*

Policies regarding transition planning across the nation indicate that it should start early, around 15 years of age. Unfortunately and likely for a multitude of reasons, this planning is not occurring in a timely manner.

Transition plans done poorly or not at all

Participants frequently reported that in their experience, transition plans are completed poorly, or in some cases, not finalized at all.

> *"There are some great ones (case workers)... that do the transition properly. Then there's those who do it last minute, so it's all last minute. They realise the kid's turning 17 or 18 and they went, "We need to transition them out". So it's a real quick - there's no thought behind it. Just set up so the kid still survives". (SA Gov)*

"Last year there were many young Aboriginal kids that transitioned out of care. Like, what do all those transitional care plans look like for those kids? As I mentioned before, there's been a couple that I have where they've rung up either on the day of their birthday saying, "I don't know what's happening. What is a transitional care plan?" or two - three weeks out of - before they turn 18, "I don't know, my social worker says I'm transitioning out of care but what does that mean? What does that look like?" So even just a basic definition, understanding of that, they don't seem to know."(SA NGO)

"I'm mindful of the recent CREATE report that came out at the end of last year, that suggested that a fairly significant proportion of young care leavers aren't aware if they've got a leaving care plan. And one might argue that if the young person itself is not aware of it, how useful is it? So I think there's that basic challenge there for all care leavers. And I don't know that there is really a whole lot of focus on the cultural needs of Aboriginal young people in particular, throughout their time in care, many would argue. And – but certainly no – that's not something that receives a big additional focus once they get to the leaving care period." (NSW ACCO)

"I mean at the age of 15 ideally they should be commencing that transition from care stuff and developing independent living referrals and all that sort of stuff and getting them prepared, but what we're starting to see is that that's left too late and a lot of the time the kids are left in residential care and not exposed to independent living or anything like that, and before they know it they're on the doorstep of leaving care without anything in place. They've got a referral through to the [postcare organisation] in terms of that post-care support work, but in that instance it's voluntary for these young people to engage with that particular service and a lot of them don't want to engage because it's actually being implemented too late. They don't know that particular person. They don't trust them and all that sort of stuff, so they end up not having a well-supported transition from care plan and most of them would move back to family that they were originally taken from, so it is quite disheartening to see."(SA NGO)

"Time and time again I – even for myself, like, obviously, I grew up in care for 18 years of my life, and when I was 17, I got a text from my carer saying I was no longer able to live with them. I then ended up homeless, couch surfing for a couple of years, and then, finally, someone from the community let me stay at theirs for a bit longer. Then, I met up with some good mates and moved in with them, and lived there ever since fortunately but I know that's not the outcome for many of our kids, so the system just kind of keeps that mentality around, "When they're 18 it's up to them," you know, "fend for yourself." It's not even – there's things called Life After Care Plans, and you can receive benefits. But if you don't fill out that Life After Care Plan, and know what you're entitled to, you don't necessarily get what you should get, like get what you should receive in support in the next part of your journey, which is huge, in being a young adult."(NSW ACCO)

"Just at a systemic level, the transition planning is pretty light-on. It's a bit patchy across the department as to how well that work is done and then thinking about the cultural support planning aspect that feeds into the greater case plan as well because they're standalone documents, they're subsets of that case plan, often there's not a lot of depth to them." (QLD NGO)

Participants provided examples of young people they had worked with who turned 18 with no transition plan in place.

Case Study

A young Indigenous male living in a residential care facility contacted a worker on his 18th birthday saying that he didn't know where he would sleep that night. Inquiries were made with the office responsible for his care and it was identified that there was no transition plan in place for this young person. Advocacy occurred to allow this young person to remain in his residential care unit whilst a plan was put in place. (SA NGO)

Transition plans are associated with specified funding that is provided to support a successful transition from care. Participants frequently commented on the overall systemic under-

resourcing of transition plans where demand outstrips supply, which results in care leavers not being able to access the financial and material support they need for a successful transition from care.

Impact of poor transition planning

From participants who worked primarily with Indigenous care leavers, there was a sense that Indigenous young people were even less likely to have a transition plan in place.

> *"I think more Indigenous care leavers don't get plans done and I think that impacts them. For whatever reason - quite often it's because they've gone home and they're disengaged. So they've gone home when they feel they're old enough to - so around 15. And they've disengaged from the department. Or they're incarcerated, that's another one - they're in juvenile justice. So often they just get pushed aside and forgotten about and therefore they don't get any leaving care, after care support." (NSW NGO)*

Poor transition planning may result in Indigenous care leavers feeling ill-equipped to live independently without intensive support and leave them facing significant barriers to accessing housing, education and employment, and building and maintaining successful and healthy relationships with family, friends and the community outside of care. They are at risk of homelessness and early juvenile justice involvement. Female care leavers are at a risk of family violence, early pregnancy and child removal.

> *"And that's some of the attitude that's around is that, "Hey, you're 18." All of a sudden you're an adult. You've got to start thinking for yourself, and they're still kids really. Eighteen's quite young to leave the big system that they've had all their lives and then all of a sudden, "Well, I've got to pay for this and I've got to pay for that," and that plays out hugely with kids who haven't had that well-defined transition from care plan where it's staged. We're at stage number one where you're learning to be independent. Go to stage number two you're learning now to get yourself to and from employment and education. Do you know, all those little skills that they need to*

develop, and I suppose the social workers being overloaded with work and even though they've got transition from care workers allocated, it still seems to be a really slow preparation and they leave it a bit too late for these plans to be embedded." (SA NGO)

"Just at a systemic level, the transition planning is pretty light-on. It's a bit patchy across the department as to how well that work is done and then thinking about the cultural support planning aspect that feeds into that greater case plan as well because they're standalone documents, they're subsets of the case plan, often there's not a lot of depth to them. So, if we were to secure a copy of a cultural support plan for the young person from the department that might be developed, there mightn't be a lot of information there and I don't how well it's shared with the young people in a user-friendly format that they can make sense of and that they can add to in their personal journey of collecting information and what their wishes might be and all those wonderful things that [Aboriginal cultural worker] talked about that they could be assisted with understanding. There's just not a lot of depth to the work that happens. It's quite surface - at a systemic level." (QLD NGO)

Reasons for lack of transition plans or plans of poor quality

When queried about the reasons why transition plans were lacking or of poor quality, participants identified a range of contributing factors. These included poor relationships with workers (often due to high turnover), young people disengaging from services, a general attitude within the industry of not prioritising transition plans, an expectation that NGOs or ACCOs will pick up the slack, and insufficient resources provided to transition planning.

"So, the kids go out of care and they say, "I don't know what this is, what's that, what's a Leaving After Care Plan? And, you're like, "Oh, you should have filled it out, that's the Life After Care." I guess, it's how the case worker approaches it too, because unfortunately a lot of our kids are placed with not really good carers. And, the kids don't know what's outside of care and haven't really had that explained by their carers, or their case worker, and then when they're given a Life After Care Plan, they're like, "Go and fill out that form." This is it, when you're 18 you don't know – I can talk from

my case; I was filling out that thing because they didn't know if the carer wanted to keep me on after I was 18, and I was like 16, I was like "Oh crap, well where am I going to live, like after 18?" they're like, "Oh, I'm not sure. You might have to stay at friends and stuff, and all this." I was like, "What? How am I going to do that? None of my friends are going to live by themselves, they are going to live with their family". So yeah, it's a pretty scary daunting thing, and if it's not approached right, by the case worker, then the kid's not going to want to do anything with it. That's what I've experienced, yeah."(NSW ACCO)

"Most of the time it's comments from social workers to say, "My caseload's too big"; "The young person's disengaged"; "The young person doesn't want to engage"; or "The young person's left it too late"; "They haven't come in to meet with me"; or "I've attempted to go out and meet with them but they haven't made themselves available"; and "They've only made themselves available three months out before they turn 18" is one of the common things that is happening that we're experiencing.
So there's a lot of mistrust with these young kids around their social workers. A lot of them don't get to see their social workers as often as they should. Ideally they should be seeing them every month, but there's kids out there that don't see their social workers for anywhere from three to six months and so at that critical time where they're ready to leave care they don't have a, I suppose, trusted relationship with their worker to what the plan is and all that sort of stuff that needs to be embedded in place before they leave care". (SA NGO)

"Essentially the referrals or part of the model is that the Department are identifying young people that are likely to experience a difficult transition. So the majority of the referrals for the program come from the Department. Having said that, for many of the Aboriginal young people in the program at the moment, I guess they commonly have disengaged from the Department. So it may be that they come to our attention either through youth crisis or through a range of our other community-based programs. And then we're going back to the Department and I guess supporting them around identifying where that young person has disengaged and is located and requesting the referrals. So it goes kind of both ways. So that's quite common.

And in terms of where they may have been prior to us, quite often they can be experiencing – they're street present. Or living with family in overcrowded and perhaps kind of not appropriate conditions. Like it can be generally it's unsafe for them. And they're not able to stay. And also the Justice Department. So quite often it might be within our youth crisis service, for example, we might have contact in terms of supporting young people to access supervised bail placements within the youth crisis service. And then it'll come to our attention that young person is actually eligible for this program. So we'll bring them in and then go back to the Department and request a referral and they quite commonly haven't seen that young person for an extended period of time. So that's the way it works with us". (WA NGO)

Participants further noted that practical and often crisis-driven elements of a transition plan frequently dominated, with an emphasis on finding accommodation at the expense of many other things, including education, employment and connection to culture. Whilst a range of needs required focus, all other aspects of preparing an Indigenous young person for readiness to live independently, safely and successfully were being largely neglected.

"The leaving care plans, if they exist, will often focus on things like education and housing – the practical bits – and not so much the relational bits… which is only addressing part of the person and part of the young person's needs, and arguably perhaps not even the most important ones. (NSW ACCO)

Inconsistencies between regions on how transition plans are done

Inconsistencies in transition planning were also highlighted. There were differences between states regarding who is responsible for leaving care planning (i.e. government case workers, NGOs, ACCOs) which meant that transition planning was not consistent across states and territories (i.e. when it should be completed, what it should include and what could be approved with regard to funding). It was highlighted that this can be particularly problematic for Indigenous care leavers who may be returning to Country in another state or territory.

There were also cases where a young person would transition between systems, programs and organisations which then contributed to a lack of proper transition planning.

Case Study example (VIC ACCO)

This was highlighted in one regional area where all aspects of out of home care for Indigenous young people sat with one organisation, but transition planning sat with another organisation (hundreds of kilometres away). This meant that the organisation that had cared for that Indigenous young person from the time they entered care then had to attempt to support a transition to another organisation for leaving care planning. This was frequently unsuccessful and relied on the worker from the original organisation physically driving the young person long distances to appointments in order for them to engage in transition planning. This was complicated further by the fact that the care leaver was transferring from an ACCO to a non-Indigenous agency.

Case Study: Culturally based Indigenous-led service

NSW ACCO

A small ACCO providing mentoring services to Indigenous young people up to the age of 18 is an example of a tailored approach that prepares a young Indigenous care leaver for independence. It is important to note, however, that this program seems to be funded from the OOHC budget, rather than as a transition from care program.

"We are an Aboriginal not-for-profit mentoring organisation supporting Aboriginal children going out of home care, from the age of 11 years old to 18 years old. Our purpose is to establish belonging, discover purpose and empower positive choices, in the young people's lives, so they're prepared for the skills that are essential for life aftercare."

Client Example

"We've got a young fellow who's 18 and he was in out of home care his whole life, basically, and when he was 18, he then ended up homeless and he had nowhere to go. Luckily, he knew of our service… he's got juvenile justice background, too, and they

even referred him from Koori Court, actually, because they knew of his circumstances from the Magistrate.

If he wasn't supported by us, literally, this kid would be homeless or he'd be back in jail, that's literally where he'd be. Fortunately, he's not in either of those, he's got a house, he's got stability, he's also got a job, and he hasn't reoffended. So, it's important to have programs like ours because, I know, there's nothing out there."

They offer trauma-informed mentoring by an all Indigenous team who all have their own history of care. The mentors have both the personal experience and specialist knowledge required to understand the complexity of needs of the Indigenous child in care. The program is culturally based giving the young people a range of living skills, cultural understandings and knowledge, personal development, healing and health, mentoring, caring for others, planning and support; building pathways into further education and employment.

"Our mentors are trauma-informed and aware, so they understand, I guess, the complexities and challenges that the young people come across, and how to help deal with and manage those emotions to navigate through the world. The case workers don't really – they don't completely understand, especially being - all our staff are Aboriginal, and they all have an out of home care background, so they understand. They can give them advice from learned experiences, personal experiences."

They also provide holistic and intensive support that mirrors what families and extended families outside of formal care arrangements provide for their children before they move into independent living.

"It's around eight to 10 hours a week, per mentee that we work with, but it often comes out more. So, within those hours, how we make up those hours is every Monday and Wednesday afternoon from 3pm to 6:30pm or 7:30pm, depending on drop-offs and stuff, because we pick them up from their schools or within community or their homes, and then take them to our activity space where have our sessions. So, that's Mondays and Wednesdays."

"We cover a lot of components, so it's not just helping these kids with education, it's a holistic approach to mentoring, it's really life-coaching, in a way…. There's six; there's cultural identity, there's yarn time, so that's for our spiritual empowerment healing and where we talk about our emotions, we talk about stories, and get people to come in and share theirs and where they're at, right now and how they got there."

"Then, there's Life After Care, so that's cooking and cleaning and budgeting, hygiene, resume building, getting the young fellows job ready and into full time/part time jobs. Then, there is education; so, we do go to their schools and we check up and see how they're working in their school environment, and how they're performing with their grades, and talking to their Aboriginal education officers at schools, and getting good relationships with the teachers."

"And, then there's health; we run different health workshops with a program… they have nurses, doctors, psychologists, and counsellors, and physios and stuff like that. So, a lot of their health professionals come in and share the importance of like vitamins, minerals, and looking after your body."

"Then, there's giving back... which we've done in the past and we'll get the kids to continue to do his – we get the kids to cook up meals for those in need and for those who are sleeping rough, and it gives the kids a good perspective and realising, because these kids are 14 times more likely to be in the same position as these other people, later in life. So, we want to show them it doesn't matter where you come from, it doesn't matter where you are, but we're all humans and we all need a little bit of support to get to where we want to go. Kids love to have an opportunity to contribute to someone else's life in a positive manner."

This is a new program and the founder indicated that the initial data collected suggests good outcomes for participants. This combination of culturally embedded, Indigenous-led holistic mentorship provides a template for Indigenous transition planning. However, this program sits within OOHC service delivery, not transition or post care services and mainly services a

younger cohort, with eligibility ceasing at 18 years. Being a pilot, it also runs without any guarantee for ongoing funding; instead it is a fee-for-service agreement. They also rely on corporate donorship to run their basic services. Unsurprisingly, they only have the capacity to support a small cohort and there is a long waitlist for their services.

They recognised that they were completing the transition and cultural planning work which is usually the responsibility of the statutory department or external organisations. They felt that a lot of their work was unrecognised in the sectors' funding model.

> *"Then, a lot of the time we're doing the case worker's work, so the money that they're paying the case workers should be distributed to us, because we're the ones who are working with the kids, and we're creating the outcomes. We were funded upon three different components, there was social and community, education and skills and empowerment, and within, pretty much, all of the questions that were asked from the start, where the kids started and where they ended, and that was just in a 16-week period, we saw dramatic growth in all areas."*

Summary

Good transition plans for Indigenous youth were described as starting early, holistic in nature, and focused on developing independent living skills and supporting relationships with mainstream and Indigenous communities. Additionally, they included education and employment planning, housing and emphasised strong connection to culture. Participants overwhelmingly recognised that this kind of transition planning was not occurring. Instead, poor, last minute or no transition planning was identified as commonplace. This was deemed to be a casualty of a crisis-driven, poorly resourced sector.

The result of poor planning is that Indigenous care leavers are leaving care feeling unprepared to live independently. They are facing barriers to housing, education, employment, and building healthy relationships and cultural connections.

An ACCO providing locally-based, trauma-informed programs preparing Indigenous youth for independence highlighted the importance of culturally sound mentoring and support for Indigenous care leavers.

Theme Six: Service System Failures

This theme responds to the research aim: document and compare the existing policies and programs aiming to support this group in each jurisdiction. Participants were asked to reflect on the strengths and limitations of the service system within their jurisdiction which was inclusive of service providers (ACCOs and NGOs), programs, and consultation with Aboriginal communities.

Apart from the Transition to Independent Living Allowance, which is a once-off $1500 payment by the Commonwealth Government for care leavers to pay for household appliances, supports or educational needs, there are no national support programs available to care leavers. Programs therefore vary between and even within states and territories. There are very few Indigenous specific programs, with the exception of NSW who provide an Aboriginal specific aftercare program through an NGO and an Aboriginal community-controlled mentoring program available to Indigenous young people in care (the cut off age is 18). Also in Victoria, ACCOs receive a portion of leaving care funding to provide after care services, however, it is not proportionate to the number of Indigenous young people in care.

Overwhelmingly participants spoke of the system being at worst 'broken', or at best 'complex', with an emphasis on limitations of the current service system to appropriately respond to or support any care leavers, particularly Indigenous care leavers. The service system was described as confusing, underfunded, under-resourced and with insufficient support mechanisms to respond adequately to need. The system is slow, impersonal, inconsistent and culturally insensitive to Indigenous care leavers. Many participants felt like this was common knowledge within the aftercare service system. Individual workers are trying their best to appropriately support Indigenous care leavers but are overworked and experiencing burnout; unable to make any broad shifts in service delivery or policy.

The entire OOHC system is driven by crisis

By and large, the sentiment from respondents was that the entire OOHC and leaving care system is in crisis and not equipped to appropriately set traumatised children up for living

independent, happy and fulfilled lives. Inadequate resources and supports mean that only the most urgent and essential tasks are prioritised.

> *"A lot of the Aboriginal children in care, everything here is driven by crisis - it's pretty chaotic. So if a kid leaves care and goes to a kinship carer or a foster carer, they're typically forgotten about because the case workers, they're so busy, and then they get on to the next case." (SA GOV)*

> *"I think if we have those supports earlier on, we can work with them through that and prepare them better with every aspect. Not just when we get to them at 17 years old, we're just basically okay cool, let's keep you alive, let's work on your drug and alcohol, let's keep you out of prison. That's basically what it is and then we can't work on all the other stuff. And then if that finally gets fixed we get to the stage where they're 18 and we're like crap, we haven't done any leaving care with you or independent living - sorry - because we were just focusing on this and then this same cycle happens." (VIC ACCO)*

> *"This is what the role is, we are trying to provide better care than what they would have when they're living at home. At the moment the sector is failing to instil that knowledge in these young people because we're so crisis-driven that this pre-planning for young people has not been focussed on". (VIC ACCO)*

Overly complicated system

Participants described a system that is confusing to navigate, with long delays in getting approval for resourcing and a lack of clarity about what support is available to Indigenous care leavers. Participants frequently described inconsistencies which added to the complexity - this was in relation to the type of support offered by aftercare programs, eligibility criteria and referral pathways.

> *"With WA it's just the level of inconsistency. I mean the policies, procedures, the care practice manual, all of this is better now than it's ever been, but its interpretation and*

its inconsistent rollout is the biggest factor. So one young person might start that leaving care planning at 15 and go through the tip sheets that are written out and have a really good experience, and others two days before they're 18 they're sat down and a leaving care plan is done." (WA NGO)

"But what I'm trying to explain here is that that cohort is probably where we invest a significant number of our resources and time and the time we've spent on them is mostly just trying to navigate the system. Unfortunately, it's trying to engage them into mental health services for getting diagnosis to really get in disability support packages that are more suited to their needs and so will housing be more adequate through those needs." (WA NGO).

Responding effectively to the Indigenous care leavers needs, in a complex system, can result in the client requiring multiple services to support them and as they move between organisations the service user risks being lost in the complex system.

"If you have a look at where the trajectory of the service goes from to where it was initially funded from, depending on the time it completely gets lost. So, it can go from all right, we need to embed life skills in this person and advocate for them in the care team, to them going to initial mental health and cross a support worker/housing officer. It's a model that one, doesn't bring the best service available to the young person, but just goes away from our initial funding and what we're there to provide."(VIC ACCO)

A consequence of an overly complex system is that service providers often saw success in very basic accomplishments, such as helping the Indigenous care leaver get access to Centrelink payments, a copy of their birth Certificate, Proof of their Aboriginality or a Medicare card. These are the absolute basic needs that every Indigenous care leaver should have established before they leave care, and are not reflective of a successful set up for independence.

Inconsistencies in definition of 'leaving care'

Eligibility to aftercare programs varied depending on the program, organisation and jurisdiction. This can vary based on age (i.e. 15-18, 15-21, 18-21, 18-25), type of order the young person was on and the length of their care order. Participants noted that strict eligibility requirements sometimes meant that there were young people who experienced unmet need due to not meeting eligibility for leaving care services. An example that was given was Indigenous care leavers who self-place out of care at aged 15 years or under.

> *"For our young people who haven't met the requirement for leaving care services, which is to be under a care order, over 15 - so if they're what the Department calls 'unendorsed placements' or if they return to family, my hope would be that they could come back to leaving care services regardless of when their care order finished." (WA NGO)*

> *"I've also had an experience with a couple of young people where their care order is actually revoked because they returned to family. So if they're revoked under 15 years old they're also not entitled to leaving care services." (WA NGO)*

Inconsistencies in policy application

Participants frequently referred to and gave examples of inconsistencies in policy application between regions (even within a state). The general consensus was that the policies exist and are often good policies, however, they are open to interpretation and rely on individuals to enact them. A frequent example given was inconsistent application of policies regarding what can and cannot be paid for in a transition plan.

> *"There can often be long delays in getting approval for some of the resourcing… there's a bit of a lack of clarity about the sorts of things that young people - and inconsistency, I think too, in various districts - about what young people can access, and the resources that can be made available to them in that early period from leaving care." (NSW ACCO)*

*"No they have the same policy and legislation, but there's interpretation of. An example of that is the CEO may be responsible for the following things, that is housing, education, health, social connection, family connection - those eight domains. Then you go to a leaving care meeting and you say.. "What about those things?" (And the response is) "We don't have to do those". And we say, "but the legislation says **may**," and they say, "it can just as easily say **may not**", and that's the premise they work from." (NT NGO)*

Leaving care organisations, often covering large geographical areas, expressed frustration that even within their own state or territory, young people were not consistently responded to, particularly in terms of what funding they can access and what they can use that funding for.

Some participants felt that this inconsistency in application of policy around what can and cannot be funded, was directly related to underlying values and beliefs held by those who have the authority to approve funding applications. Particularly, whether those approving funding applications held the belief that financially supporting young people during their transition from care period would result in a dependence on handouts. Some respondents viewed this discrepancy in what is funded and not funded as a significant systemic problem. It was noted that departmental decisions can be made that seem insensitive and result in the care leaver feeling unsupported at a time when they need the support the most.

"They (young people transitioning from care) find it difficult to get their driver's licence and get the support to get their driver's licence. There are pockets of… officers that support it, that will pay for their driver's licence and all that sort of stuff. There's other pockets that would say, "Well, no, you've got to contribute to it because this is a sign of you being independent. You get your own income now. You've got to do that," and all this sort of stuff.

And that's some of the attitude that's around is that, "Hey, you're 18." All of a sudden you're an adult. You've got to start thinking for yourself, and they're still kids really. Eighteen's quite young to leave the big system that they've had all their lives and then

all of a sudden, "Well, I've got to pay for this and I've got to pay for that," and that plays out hugely with kids who haven't had that well-defined transition from care plan where it's staged." (SA NGO)

Funding administrators having agency and authority to interpret and apply policy at will is a historical problem in the area of Indigenous welfare. This approach enhances regional differences in terms of cultural views of Indigenous communities and individuals, and may result in divergent policy application.

Inconsistent and confusing referral pathways

There is also inconsistency with regard to referral into programs, i.e. some states and/or territories implement a process whereby the government case manager does a standard referral to the leaving care agency in order to ensure all care leavers have the opportunity to speak with the leaving care service. This is easier to implement in some jurisdictions where one program covers the whole state. In other jurisdictions access to programs is an 'opt-in' process, but it is unclear how young people are being provided information about services they may be eligible for, or whether they are supported or encouraged to engage with these programs.

Sometimes there were differences in opinion from key stakeholders as to which Indigenous care leavers needed access to aftercare programs and which may not. This was highlighted in areas where NGOs and ACCOs wanted more control around referral pathways.

"The majority of our current client group [of aftercare program] are residential care clients. So because leaving care in the North sits under the same program management of residential care, it makes it a lot easier for us to identify young people who need leaving care services. The reason it moved under the residential care services was because residential care clients are often the most vulnerable and most at-risk upon exiting care. So we thought that it would make sense that they would sit under the same management. The obstacles we faced though is that leaving care referrals come via Child Protections placement coordination unit.

So we can't even self-refer in leaving care young people, they have to come via that pathway, which means that we're often reliant on the department actually identifying young people who require a service. Their idea of who needs the service versus what we believe is the client group we should be working with, is quite different at times. We think all young people need to be prepared for leaving care, whether they be in home-based care, kinship or residential care." (VIC ACCO)

Participants identified referrals as a key component to whether a young person has access to adequate support during the transition period. Frequently participants identified the importance of Indigenous care leavers being referred early, at least from 15 years, to provide adequate time for appropriate planning. Anecdotally, particularly from agencies that work solely with Indigenous care leavers, it appears early-planning is not occurring.

"Yeah, similar like clear identification of young people are eligible to be referred from 15 and half, but more often they're not. They're referred just before they're 18 and there's like a last-minute panic to get some type of leaving care."(VIC ACCO)

"Planning is not happening from 15 years on. You know, they [statutory departments and referral agencies] come to us generally a month before they turn 18 and go, "You know, we've got a plan half complete…." It doesn't happen until they're nearly 18 and then they just send them on. So the planning is just not there. (NSW NGO)

In some cases referrals to aftercare were incomplete, negatively impacting the program worker's ability to connect and work with the care leaver.

"Sometimes I get clients and it's weeks before I can actually do anything with them because I don't receive any information. I haven't received where they're staying, is there a school, what's their number, so I can't contact them. I send emails to the case managers and it takes them weeks or sometimes I don't even get a reply. So I guess more support and actually getting that information you need to actually help the child." (VIC ACCO)

Front line workers were acutely aware of the need for all Indigenous care leavers to know about their programs and services, even if involved parties (statutory department, referral agencies, foster carers and young people themselves) didn't feel a referral was needed. This is reflected also in programs in some jurisdictions that employ a 24 hour hotline and/or call back service which allows them to check back in with the care leaver about their need for aftercare services. This stemmed from a thorough understanding that transitioning from care and the need for support is non-linear - Indigenous care leavers need a flexible approach that allows them to access the support they need as their circumstances change. In order to do that, they need to know that programs exist and have access to a clear and simple referral pathway into support.

> *"So, we're finding that a lot of those young people aren't adequately prepared for exiting care, purely because the department thinks they're fine, they're in a stable placement, we don't need to think about post 18, let's just get them through to their birthday and then they're off our books. So that's a big struggle for us, is actually trying to actually get referrals in. So, we're trying to work with [program] who oversee all Aboriginal kids in out of home care to actually say to them, "Please flag with us when a young person turns 15 and nine months, irrespective of placement, irrespective of how stable you think they are. Let us know who they are."*

> *We can do some even just background planning for these young people, do some dual planning. So that even if the plan is they stay with their kinship carer, their home-based carer we have a backup plan. Or that we can put them on public housing list because the waitlist is currently 15 to 30 years, so why not get them on now. But we're just finding that because they're not reported through the department they're not that interested in actually creating that leaving care pathway for those young people." (VIC ACCO)*

There seemed to be a particular awareness of the instability of foster care placements continuing beyond 18 in areas where Home Stretch changes have not come into place. There was a sense that care leavers may feel settled in a placement and their ability to continue

there, but that the placement is sometimes more tenuous than they might initially realise, and that breakdown may occur shortly after support from the department is withdrawn.

> *"They [statutory department] offer the young person a referral to [aftercare program] but some young people don't actually understand why they would still need to be connected to something at that point in time. They describe it as about a 70/30 split, 70% of young people go yeah, I'm happy to talk to them and 30 will say oh no, I don't need them, I've got my foster carer or I've got this or I've got that. Which is all fine but what we've said to case managers, and we've had to say it remotely as well, that's cool, and we don't expect every kid needs [aftercare program] but if a kid's staying with foster care can you make sure the foster carer knows because if the foster carer needs just a little something extra which would tip the balance in terms of them keeping a young person on and it's a financial component in some way, or a practical component in terms of - we want to set this person up in their own room, we need a fridge and those sorts of things, make sure they know that we could help with that." (NT NGO)*

The result of inconsistent eligibility definitions, referral pathways and access to resources means that Indigenous care leavers are not receiving equal access to support at a crucial time as they transition to independence.

Funding and resource issues

Consistently, participants made comments that the leaving care service system is chronically underfunded and under resourced resulting in vast unmet need. This was echoed from all facets of the service system; ACCOs, NGOs, peak bodies and government.

> *"For us to be a state-wide service working on a model that we developed some 15 years ago and funded it in the same way, the capacity has grown exponentially and our ability to meet that need - we've got waiting lists of over 150 young people at the moment." (WA NGO)*

"There's certainly not enough resources at the moment. We know that demand absolutely outstrips supply, so not every Aboriginal care leaver would have a [transition] plan including a cultural support element to that plan." (VIC Gov)

"I went to a forum two weeks ago for the Better Futures rollout and the stats are that there's about 2,000 young people across the state that are eligible for post-care services at any given time. The funding at the moment I think affords support to about 30 to 40% of those young people" (VIC ACCO).

Despite policies stating care leavers should be able to access funding for their transition planning, the lack of adequate funds for every care leaver meant that the processes for accessing the funds had become over complicated and inconsistent, as experienced by both organisations and by the care leavers themselves.

"Every office is different. So some of the offices - trying to access some of the funds, some of the supports, it's really easy, some of them it's really complicated. We have to jump through so many hoops. And we're jumping through the hoops and yet it's supposed to be a system that young people can walk into an office and get money themselves and they can't. So, those system problems of how to actually access funds and access support just make it really difficult for them to get anything. And there just isn't enough." (NSW NGO)

They felt that this chronic under-funding led to poor outcomes for Indigenous care leavers; as the system was not able to appropriately and holistically respond to their needs.

"We really need to get the foundations right around this for Aboriginal kids. To me, it is about the investment from department to say, look at our numbers coming through the out of home care system. We need to make a better investment earlier and get this right, so that those years going into adulthood are better and there's more positive opportunity and outcomes for young people." (VIC ACCO).

Complicated restrictions exist on what in-care funding can be used for, which is coupled with long waitlists for aftercare funded programs. In some areas, where Indigenous young people

need to transfer from one agency to another between care to aftercare, this meant that they were unable to access the educational and housing support required.

> *"The targeted care packages will not fund anything to do with housing options when they're that age, or their education, because I get told I have to go over to [aftercare program] and seek the funding there. But then, we've been finding they've got quite a long waitlist, so I've got young people who want to engage in school, and then it's like well, there's 11 kids before them, because the whole area's underfunded unfortunately. So, it's a little bit of a challenge. We always find a way, but it makes hard work even harder." (VIC ACCO)*

When good outcomes were achieved, it was attributed to hardworking ACCOs and NGOs who were used to working under such conditions.

> *"They are in an environment that isn't funded, which does make it hard when you've got many organisations, because of the way funding is, that are operating on the smell of an oily rag, and - but they stretch it. They do what they can for young people that return. Because they're their kids. It's that community obligation that our services and their leaders have." (NSW ACCO)*

Lack of resources disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable kids

The impact of the lack of funding disproportionately impacts the most complex, vulnerable or at-risk care leavers, who need even more resources to be appropriately supported.

> *"You've got more complex young people, they need larger resourcing around the options for them. Whether it be young people with cognitive challenges, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is particularly one of those so we know it's not identified currently under NDIS, but there are ways where they can be assessed. But if those assessments haven't occurred whilst they have been in care, they're very reluctant to participate in those assessments at 17, 18 years of age. (NT NGO)*
>
> *"There is some tension between how government funds, and government funds via a set number of hours and targets et cetera, and how on the ground practitioners*

support young people. And that their experience is that there's very few Aboriginal young care leavers that need a low level of support, even whilst they are in care" (VIC Gov)

Lack of resources - impact on culturally responsive practice

The chronic underfunding, which extended to ACCOs, contributes to Indigenous care leavers having less access to culturally responsive supports during transition planning.

"We've rarely had any Aboriginal practice leaders be involved in the care planning process. I think Community is under-resourced. I think they're thin on the ground with Aboriginal Practice Leaders being able to come along to what's a really important process for the young people." (WA NGO)

The lack of resources was also seen as disproportionately impacting Indigenous young people who need a culturally appropriate approach which will allow time for engagement and relationship building, which is often not possible within strict and limited funding arrangements.

"*Young people have access to six weeks through community mental health and then they are discharged. So quite often with Indigenous young people, that support definitely needs to be potentially a lot longer than six weeks. They do have a culturally inclusive team with some great young Aboriginal role models on that team. However, they are limited to the six-week timeframe. And I'm not always convinced that some ongoing mental health concerns can be addressed in six weeks." (WA NGO)*

Organisations undertake unfunded work to meet need

Another by-product of lack of resources in the leaving care space was that non-funded programs were providing leaving care services. This means that the level of need experienced by Indigenous care leavers is further hidden as it is being absorbed by another program area, which would further support the chronic under-funding of leaving care services.

One example was in relation to an ACCO that operated close to a state border. If care leavers lived close by but were technically over the state border, the ACCO would continue to support

them (as the young people frequented their town and were known to them) despite not being funded to do so (VIC ACCO).

Another example included a young Indigenous person who had left care and who needed assistance. They contacted the NGO who had responsibility for their siblings who were still in care, as they did not know where else to turn. This NGO serviced the care leaver, knowing they already had their trust and engagement, despite not being funded to work with them (NSW ACCO).

The frontline worker participants who were interviewed for this study expressed great passion, interest and care in the wellbeing of Indigenous young people leaving care. Many organisations held an unspoken value of providing support wherever possible, irrespective of whether the young person met the often strict eligibility criteria. This was based on an understanding of the complex lives many of these young people were living, and the organisation's goal to reduce the likelihood of known poor outcomes for care leavers such as involvement with juvenile justice, substance abuse and early pregnancy.

Extensive Wait lists

Lack of resources meant that all organisations had extensive waiting lists. This means that there are young Indigenous people living in state care, approaching leaving care age, who have no idea where they are going to live or how they are going to survive beyond their graduation from care.

> *"We've always got a waitlist. We can sometimes have people on there for five or six months. So the whole thing just does not make any common sense at all. You have to work with complex clients. Obviously they'd have high needs and they're in crisis. But you know, they're on a waitlist for five or six months. Anything could change in that time. And that puts a lot of pressure on us." (NSW NGO)*

Workforce issues

The role of a case worker in both the statutory department, and the aftercare programs, is crucial in the support provided to Indigenous care leavers. Anecdotally, participants reported that caseworkers are feeling overstretched, which was particularly true in states and territories where one case worker covers vast regions.

> *"When [program] first started and we were doing the road shows and we were talking about the importance of making referrals, case managers were so flat chat with high caseloads and there was a lack of experience. So the legislation said you must do this but they didn't understand the underpinnings of the legislation plus they had nobody teaching them. So what they're always looking for when you talk about a service is, "Can I refer my young person to your service and will you do my job for me?" That's a simplification of the reasoning but that's the end result. So when we would say, "well no, we're not going to case manage them when they're in care 'cause they've got a case manager". "Well why should we refer them to you when they're 17?" "So they can know about us"." (NT NGO)*

In some regions, non-Indigenous case workers are covering vast areas with a mostly Indigenous population. Many non-Indigenous case workers recognised the importance of engaging the support of ACCOs and Indigenous workers to help support the work they are doing. They frequently felt under pressure and driven by crisis, having to engage clients and address wide-ranging needs.

> *"All the case managers that I've worked with are all under the pump. They don't necessarily have the time to fully invest in these young kids because especially when you've got kinship case managers, for example, they've got a caseload of I don't even know how many families, but in the families, there could be three kids, four kids. So, they're dealing with four kids plus their carers as a one target, sort of thing. So, they're not really meeting the need." (VIC ACCO)*

> *It's a state-wide service, we have a worker in [region] and a worker in [region]. So, they do take case work as well as providing support over geographic distances that are completely unrealistic. Funding covers two full-time staff members and that's it. That's*

it, and it doesn't cover their travel costs or when you're covering across the state and really is a huge - it doesn't really cover back of house, management costs, nothing". (NSW NGO)

Worker stress and burnout

Organisations and individual workers that care deeply for Indigenous care leavers are feeling overburdened by their inability to meet need with the resources they have. This is leading to burnout and stress.

"We were just very close to burning out and all that sort of stuff. So we've just had to pull right back and go, you know what? … The need is really high. So we went at it really really hard. And one of the workers ended up leaving because it was just too much. And it still is, to be honest." (NSW NGO)

Not only are they stressed about lack of resources, they are just generally overworked due to unrealistic targets and expectations.

"Case managers in general, this is not all case managers, but I feel like they are overworked, so then what basically happens is they're just meeting goals and meeting targets but they're doing that sort of extra bit" (VIC ACCO)

It is important to note that there is clearly very good work being done in this sector on a micro level. Unfortunately in many cases, this is in spite of the service system that is failing them, rather than because of a service system that supports them. There will always be passionate individuals that do good work in this field because they care deeply for the outcomes of Indigenous care leavers. However, for a service system to be constructed in a way that expects workers, who are overwhelmingly underpaid and lacking support, to create good outcomes without sufficient funding, resources or supportive policies that are appropriately implemented; this is ultimately to the detriment of both the workers and the young people they support.

High turnover of Case Workers

As a result of this widespread experience of worker burnout and stress, there is a high turnover of case workers in OOHC and aftercare programs. Experiencing a revolving door of case managers whilst in care undermines the trust of Indigenous young people in the support system and often leaves gaps in their continuum of care. The lack of relationship-building, particularly for Indigenous care leavers, impacts the willingness of the care leaver to engage with after care services.

> *"Generally you see some of these young people, they come through and they've had numerous, numerous case workers, because of staff burnout or whatever. And then the whole idea of supporting them doesn't happen, because in their last two years of being in care, they might have had a dozen case workers. So it just doesn't work". (NSW NGO)*
>
> *"I've realised there's a lot of kids that they've had a lot of different workers in their lives and I think they've gotten to this stage where they can't just rely on, like, they'll have one mentor in their life and two weeks later there's a different mentor that comes in, works with them for a few weeks and then I guess get out again. I guess that leaves them feeling like they can't trust anyone." (VIC ACCO)*
>
> *"But it just shows again that these kids need relationships with their social workers and they need their social workers to be consistent, and if a young person's running away from them, continue to be consistent and go out there because they are testing you. 'This person doesn't really care for me.' And in fact he said it. He said, 'I never see this social worker.' I said, "But, Brother, you're always running away from him.' 'Yeah, but he should keep coming. He's my social worker.' So they are testing, you know". (*SA NGO)

Turnover was a problem not just on the 'front line', but also when NGO and ACCO managers attempted systems advocacy and found that leaders within the statutory departments were also frequently moving on.

> *"We pulled back from that sort of one-on-one stuff to a more systems advocacy role. We met the team leaders a lot, we met with managers. High turnover rates at the*

Department are problematic and so anything you teach them, six months later, none of those people are there again which is what you need, someone in the office who is good at this." (NT NGO)

Impact on engagement

Participants commonly noted that having a trusting relationship between the Indigenous care leaver and the case worker was crucial to the success of engagement with OOHC services while they are in care and when the youth is leaving care. This was particularly poignant for Indigenous care leavers who culturally need a more relational approach. The high turnover of case worker staff and high caseloads resulting in minimal contact with Indigenous youth was seen as a key contributor to lack of engagement by Indigenous youth in the system.

"So there's a lot of mistrust with these young kids around their social workers. A lot of them don't get to see their social workers as often as they should. Ideally they should be seeing them every month, but there's kids out there that don't see their social workers for anywhere from three to six months and so at that critical time where they're ready to leave care they don't have a, I suppose, trusted relationship with their worker to what the plan is and all that sort of stuff that needs to be embedded in place before they leave care." (SA NGO)

"So, [non-Indigenous aftercare worker] and I, I feel work very well together. She understands how hard it is for the kids, and a lot of the time, I'll end up going to the appointment as well, just so the kids will engage. Which isn't ideal given my time constraints, but I want the kids to be able to engage. Unfortunately, none of them have really at this point, felt comfortable going there independently, no matter how many times they take them. So, it's just like I said, sometimes it's like a 12 plus month process for these kids to feel comfortable with someone, and that's when they're in their lives regularly. So, someone who's only there when they're as a voluntary service, and they are instigating the work, that's I don't know if that rapport will ever really be built to enough of an extent that the kids will be really happy to go in there."(VIC ACCO)

"Turnover, that's a big reason why I've stayed in the role for as long as I have because, these kids need consistency, they need reliability. And you have to prove to them that

you're going to stick around, that you're going to be there, even when things are hard, because that is the whole key to everything. So, the young man who I was talking about, he was quite extreme. In all of the two to three weeks, many of those behaviours towards me have disappeared, because he's figured out, that it doesn't matter what I do, she's not bloody going anywhere, and that's what it takes. It's not pleasant, and it's up to the worker and what they will tolerate, and what they feel that they have the capacity to manage definitely. But it's about upskilling and building confidence in staff and having them as connected to the kids as the kids are to them" (VIC ACCO)

Need for and lack of Aboriginal workforce

Participants frequently referred to the importance of Indigenous workers being visible within non-Indigenous organisations, in order to provide a safe and responsive environment for Indigenous care leavers. This was mentioned particularly in areas with a high Indigenous population.

"I think that all organisations need to have a percentage of Aboriginal staff because kids need to come in and see that. So that's something we have and strive for and all our offices have." (NT NGO)

"I think it's important to build the Aboriginal workforce in leaving care services. I think, you know, we've intentionally done that in the [service name] because I think, you know, there's some cultural knowledge that Aboriginal staff bring that is really helpful to smoothing the transition and accessing things like family finding and connection to culture and identity, that Aboriginal staff are best placed to do that. So I would say that particularly with the mainstream services - is something that needs to be in place. I think a workforce development program." (WA NGO)

Commonly, participants mentioned the inability to employ and retain enough Indigenous workers to meet the need.

"Even ACCOs are struggling to get enough Aboriginal staff" (VIC Gov)

"It's a struggle as well. I know just with the local CSC, they're constantly looking for Aboriginal workers. Because they just can't pick up what they need. But there's also just out in the community, I know there's probably a lack of workers. And that's generally probably because of the line of work and you know, we are - even though we're 50,000 people here in [town], still quite a small community in that sense. Like for Aboriginal people, there's complexities I reckon around working in this line of work and then still living in community as well, and being a community member". (NSW NGO)

Also mentioned was the difficulty in trying to increase the Indigenous workforce within a system that does not acknowledge Indigenous expertise, knowledge and experience equally to formal tertiary education.

"To increase our Aboriginal workforce we need to think differently and more creatively around experience and not looking at formal qualifications always, particularly in NT." (NT NGO)

In some cases, there was an acknowledgment of a need for this Aboriginal point of view to be extended to a broader service system perspective.

"Yes, intentionally recruiting high quality Aboriginal staff and not just for them to work with young people - Aboriginal young people, but to influence the culture in the whole organisation and to be able to I guess use their knowledge and cultural expertise to assist other team members." (WA NGO)

Sentiments like this highlight the immense pressure placed on the shoulders of Indigenous workers, who are working within non-Indigenous frameworks. In this environment they may be given responsibility for supporting all Indigenous service users within the organisation, whilst also feeling pressured or expected to assist the organisation on a systemic level to improve the organisational response to Indigenous service users.

Barriers to accessing services

Participants described a service system that was not appropriately responding to the needs of Indigenous care leavers. The leaving care system, a service system set up and perpetuated from a non-Indigenous framework, creates barriers for Indigenous service users. The most common barriers mentioned were remoteness, language and lack of cultural sensitivity.

Remoteness as a barrier

Commonly, care leavers in remote areas had less access to the necessary services. This was particularly prominent in states that covered large areas such as WA and NT.

> *"We know the young people go back to their families whenever they can and so young people who are leaving care are going back to remote communities. So for half of the young people going back to regional remote communities where there are limited services of any kind." (NT NGO)*

> *"There is no support for young people in relation to leaving care outside of major metropolitan areas." (NT NGO)*

> *"How the model works in the regional areas is a little different to the metro because obviously resources are a little more difficult to get hold of." (WA NGO)*

This kind of model is sending the message that if you want services, you have to move to the city. Participants indicated that in their experiences, Indigenous young people want to be with their family, which for some, is more likely to be in remote and rural regions. This reflects a service system response which is assimilationist in nature, rather than being shaped by cultural knowledge and cultural needs.

It was suggested that *"regional approaches should be different"* to support Indigenous community ways of being in rural and remote areas. An example was given where Indigenous youth in rural and isolated regions are encouraged to have more independence at an earlier

age than their non-Indigenous counterparts and so it was suggested the transition planning for the Indigenous cohort should start at the age of 12.

> *"There's also very little recognition that the regional approach needs to be different. Young people in regional areas are needing those protective behaviours, those independent living skills at a younger age, particularly in the more remote areas when a young male turns 15 is seen as an adult in his own community, so leaving care really with those young people should probably start around 12."* (WA NGO)

Practical issues were also faced in regional areas where workers had to physically cover vast areas for appointments and meetings. In some cases, examples were given where case managers were reluctant to drive the distance to meet Indigenous clients face to face. This is another example of an approach not meeting the cultural (in this case relational) needs of Indigenous care leavers.

> *"The kid in [regional town], the first time I met him his carer said that a lot of people don't like to travel to [regional town] to meet their clients which I felt that was, I don't know, I just felt that was terrible. If they're too far they won't give up their time to travel to see how the kid is."* (VIC ACCO)

> *"I guess the main area that we are able to support Indigenous care leaver is through the targeted care packages and through kinship. Unfortunately, we're not funded for Leaving Care or Springboard or any of those programs, and the closest aboriginal Leaving Care to us is actually in [place], so it's about 500 kilometres away." (VIC ACCO)*

Communication and/or language barriers

As well as remoteness being a barrier, verbal and non-verbal communication and language can be obstacles to Indigenous care leavers accessing the support they require. In certain places in the country a lack of language specific services is a major barrier.

> *"We know the young people go back to their families whenever they can and so most young people who are leaving care are going back to remote communities. So for half*

of the young people going back to regional remote communities where there are limited services of any kind. We've also – so therefore not only no services, but services in language being so critical.

Services must be delivered in people's vernacular wherever possible. And so there's an immediate barrier for us with our service with young people who have got limited access to interpreter services as well. And functional English, which means they frequently pretend or indicate some knowledge about what's being communicated but that is often not adequate to get to the deeper stuff. And in our non-Aboriginal services you often end up with a much different level of therapeutic engagement. " (NT NGO)

Participants noted that Indigenous care leavers felt the terminology and language used in leaving care was alienating and confusing. Participants described observing their clients nodding in meetings, knowing they did not understand the meaning of what was being said.

"Speaker 1: Not so much language barriers, more terminology that's used by the Department in their care planning or even in their pre-birth planning meetings, that our young people don't understand. So… they will disconnect straight away because they don't understand what's being said.

Speaker 2: I think that just reaffirms the importance for us to attend leaving care plan meetings as well, because our kids just sit and nod as well….and obviously we're aware of their level of understanding, so we can like kind of paraphrase things for them." (Vic ACCO)

Even the use of the term "Leaving Care" was seen to be problematic, particularly for Indigenous youth who have spent their whole life in care, where the idea of no longer being in care is difficult to understand, triggering feelings of impending abandonment.

"When we say 'leaving care' the language needs to change also because it's quite daunting when you talk to somebody about leaving care when they've been in care for most of their lives. Changing it to 'transitional' or 'moving forward' plan or any of those

language changes would significantly help the barriers with young people being involved in that process." (WA NGO)

Language, in general was seen as an important component of leaving care and was in need of examination and improvement to breakdown systemic disadvantage and improve Indigenous care leavers access to support.

"Also look at how we work within policies and practices and also change some of the wording that we have around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and young people and how we care. There's some of those languages in policies and practices and legislation that we really need to look at to change some of that because that really disadvantages us and sets up the department to continue to intervene in our lives."(WA NGO)

Lack of cultural sensitivity

Participants frequently noted the lack of Indigenous specific programs for care leavers, or Indigenous specific programs for young people generally. Within the services that are available, many felt a lack of cultural responsiveness became a barrier to Indigenous care leavers accessing those services. Indigenous care leavers don't feel comfortable to access those services and so don't. This isn't only about having an Indigenous workforce, although for some young people that may be a key ingredient to creating a culturally safe service for them to access.

"Many Aboriginal young people do feel more at ease when they're engaging with Aboriginal staff, and so are more likely to engage with those services. And I think having that where it's integrated in their community as well gives them more touch points to be aware of the services that might be available to them, and makes it less daunting to access. Having to explain the story over and over again is a barrier. But having to navigate the cross-cultural barriers can compound that." (NSW ACCO)

Lack of cultural sensitivity, combined with limited resources, was also seen as a precursor to culturally inappropriate decisions being made for Indigenous care leavers.

"The Department of Housing always tells us that the option is to direct that young person to the city. However that's not always culturally appropriate. The young people are taken off country and away from family and supports. So that's usually not something that we support as an option." (WA NGO)

"We've got child protection workers who are being imported from Ireland and southern states all the time. Their turnover rates are very high. And so they will not even have an understanding of extended family in the case planning process. And in our organisation where we employ fairly low qualified people to run residential care - often those people come from other cultural backgrounds themselves - African and Indian and Maori and Anglos - and they won't even know the questions to ask young people half the time. Like, 'what's your language group? Where's your Country? Where are you from? How do you help you stay connected to your family?" (NT NGO)

"The other thing is there's not enough Aboriginal workers within residential care, working with these children. So, a kid will come into care from the community, he'll see a white face to say , "Hello". And then he'll see a white face putting you to bed, then he'll see a different white face waking him up. So, when they get back to their community or go into independent living and trying to get back, they have a reverse culture shock." (SA Gov)

This lack of cultural sensitivity was seen on a broader service-wide level as well, for example, in Western understandings of family being applied to Indigenous families. This discussion extended beyond transitions from care, to the continuum of care from the point of removal. Some participants suggested this lack of cultural sensitivity was resulting in unnecessary or unjustified removals of Indigenous children.

"That's why it needs a lot more ACCO involvement in assessments of families and things, because we had a family recently who they assessed a family member as not appropriate for caring for this young person, and it turns out they just had too many mattresses in the lounge room. Their assessment was that the house was unkempt

and wasn't fit for living. It was just mattresses in a lounge room and that's pretty standard for Aboriginal families." (VIC ACCO)

"So even though they put in programs within the department that are supposedly culturally appropriate, culturally safe, they're generally non-Aboriginal workers who don't know how family networks work, they may consult with the ACCO but consultation isn't the same thing as actually being embedded within the community. And that's who we're relying upon to be doing these bigger pieces of work for our young people and then we wonder why they don't have great outcomes." (VIC ACCO)

"There's a strong level of systemic racism which has become really evident and I think if we look at winding it back to how we can address that, I would strongly recommend that when we look at our human service sort of course - nursing, social work, education - all these key institutions that are part of the reporting system that perpetuate this racism and what have you. There needs to be a unit minimum in cultural awareness training across all these human service sector places of work because you need a collective approach. It needs to shift I think as well. But we come across it all the time and you look through Child Protection here, histories when they come in and you think, really, this has led to removal? It's just sometimes been easier and assumed that the Aboriginal should be in care. That's kind of the message you get. We know that, we see that, but there's so many levels I think that we can intervene here." (VIC ACCO)

Non-Indigenous leaving care services and other related services were also seen as not being designed and delivered in culturally responsive ways, so are inadvertently excluding Indigenous care leavers from the get-go.

"[Housing Program] is built on a mutual obligation deal around education and employment. It has a lot of rules around how many visitors can come and who can stay over. And that was designed to keep the building safe. But it's not really designed to help young Aboriginal people navigate relationships with siblings and family, and those they want to reconnect with in a way that they feel is not monitored. You know, visitors have to sign in. There's CCTV. I think there's a perception that it's not

necessarily that open. So a lot of young Aboriginal people would often go off for five, six days or two weeks to go and test the waters to reconnect with different family members. And I think that's kind of different to some of the non-Aboriginal care leavers who often are, in my experience, probably less connected to family. Or have less draw or pull to other family members." (WA NGO)

"There's no real clear understanding of what good mental health provision looks like for young Aboriginal people. And I think that's a gap across the system. And probably even more so for care leavers who are probably less likely to want to trust and engage with the current system and the way it works." (WA NGO)

Indigenous care leavers not aware of services and support

Another barrier identified is that Indigenous young people are not aware of programs or services they are eligible for. Participants suggested a strength in their service delivery was their ability to find services for Aboriginal care leavers when the care leaver may not have otherwise been aware of these services available to them.

"Just having knowledge of what services are out there that are accessible for Aboriginal people. Like we've had some young people experience issues with housing, so we've accessed things like the PRAAL program, which is the private rental assistance loan program for Aboriginal people, to pay rental arrears. We've also accessed the First Nations Homelessness Project. So they help Aboriginal people that are at risk of being evicted. So some of our kids access counselling services through them. And just being aware of any – yes I guess health services that are Aboriginal specific - just having the knowledge of the services that are there for Aboriginal young people." (WA NGO)

Barriers related to remoteness, language, lack of cultural sensitivity and lack of knowledge of services may be insurmountable for some Indigenous care leavers, resulting in individuals not getting the care and support they require to transition successfully from care.

Programs targeting those care leavers 'most likely to succeed'

There are also issues in terms of the development of programs that limit and "cherry pick" certain groups of care leavers. Some programs appeared designed to choose as participants those young people "most likely to succeed" while working within a non-Indigenous conception of what success is, with an example provided below. Programs with limited places might choose those Indigenous young people who were more likely to be staying in cities or towns, have more proficient English, or be connected to non-Indigenous education and employment systems.

> *"And so the organisation will – I'm not saying this in a derogatory way – they will take the cream of the young people who have made a commitment to being part of an employment and education trajectory and they won't move – I think after five years if they've survived that service it means they're well on a path to employment and professional qualifications.*
>
> *So I think that's a really good model, it's just it's only 15 young people out of several hundred who will need the service. And the majority of them have gone home to remote communities or to, or couch surfing or other vulnerable situations living on Newstart and being homeless". (NT NGO)*
>
> *"Q: Why do you think that is in terms of ...Aboriginal Youth in Care constitute a high percentage of kids in care but only one of the 15 that are active for this particular program?*
>
> *A: Because if you think about the type of program it is you have to be relatively high-functioning and the earn and learn stuff in there is an indicator of whether a young person's high-functioning or not. So one of the ones that hasn't taken it up said yes but then never met one appointment. You would make appointments to pick her up and she would not be there. So she was voting with her feet in terms of engagement with the program but she said she wanted it because she wanted somewhere to live. But obviously wasn't tenancy-ready and responsibility-ready. You're talking about a heap of these kids not being ready to come out of care at 18. Some are and so the ones that*

are being housed are, they're not those kids who would opt in for another three years. They're the kids who go yeah, no, I'm good, I'm ready to go". (NT NGO)

Colour blindness of non-Indigenous services

Lack of cultural responsiveness was seen as a by-product of a service system which was colour blind to the difference in experiences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers. Care leavers were often seen as a homogenous group that all faced the same kinds of problems.

"Our kids, black and white kids, are walking around together all the time and you see… there's not a difference between the black and white kids, they're all hanging out together, they're all comfortable with each other. " (NT NGO)

This was evident also when interviewers specifically asked participants about what issues were facing Indigenous care leavers, and they frequently responded in a way that was addressing all care leavers.

"I guess it's not necessarily different, it would depend on the young person. Across the board, what we do is look at making sure they have access to all their financial entitlements - so their Centrelink, that kind of stuff. Make sure they have access to - the bulk claims have all gone in. All of that work that case managers might do but we do it a bit more intensely. Help them get employment, all that sort of stuff." (NSW NGO)

Disconnect between non-Indigenous and Indigenous approaches

Participants from non-Indigenous organisations recognised that the approach they used in their organisation was not working for Indigenous care leavers.

"I would love to see more support for us as an agency to work with the young people and I'd love to see more Aboriginal mentors around that could help us bridge that gap. Because I do feel that with some of our Indigenous young people there's a bit of a disconnect from the way we work and the way they maybe want us to work. And as

hard as we try, we seem to sometimes to just miss that connection. I'd love to have mentors who could kind of speak their language and engage with them more and help us in what we're doing to support them more effectively." (NSW NGO)

As previously highlighted, the non-Indigenous organisation's response to this disconnect is usually to seek Indigenous input to address the deficit in their service response, for example, by employing an Indigenous worker within a non-Indigenous organisation. However this is problematic; it is still seeking Indigenous care leavers to fit within a system that operates from frameworks that are alien to them. It also places an enormous pressure on the Indigenous workers and mentors who are working within a mainstream structure and are restricted by the services that structure allows. There are Indigenous ways of communicating, sharing, caring, living, and so on that may not be compatible with the mainstream mechanism. In this situation the Indigenous worker has to seek flexibility within the system to do their job their way. This puts the onus on the mainstream organisation to be more flexible in their structures. Again the decision as to how culturally appropriate a service is comes down to the decisions of the mainstream organisation management in the department they represent, not the Indigenous worker or community.

"Some of the issues, you know, not really being respectful of Aboriginal ways of working and not really being respectful of the young person's story or the family's story or understanding the impact of colonisation and the impact of intergenerational trauma that a lot of our young people carry with them even though they don't know that they have trauma. So, it's helping them understand that but also organisations understanding that as well. I see that quite often in my line of work. But I think we have the opportunity now to change some of that thinking and they're coming from our own cultural knowledge base" (WA NGO)

On a macro level, one response is to consult with Aboriginal communities for input at program conception and formation stage. Participants expressed frustration in terms of difficulties they faced in appropriately consulting with communities.

"The Royal Commission named that there should be local decision making and put a plan that every region would have a local authority group. I think they had a different name, based out of QLD for that. So that doesn't exist in the NT, Elders Group for local decision making. In fact, QLD have recently not abandoned the idea but have modified the idea because it was quite problematic to use Elders Groups for decision making and they have broadened their – under their Act – they've broadened Aboriginal, the local Elders Group to allow for a person who is in conversation with child protection to use a local Elders Authority Group or a senior family member if available.

And so what you find in the, a place like Darwin is that the cultural authority is just so dispersed. You have the office – let's say 16,000 people living in, Aboriginal people living in Darwin, it's a population of only about 130 (thousand), there's 16,000 Aboriginal people possibly. Maybe 1,500 of those are the traditional owners. They're called the Larrakia people. And they have, they've been colonised since the late 1800s and so those are a community that's lost a lot of culture and language.

And then you've got language groups from right across the NT and people of both mixed heritage, and people of non-English speaking vernacular people. So you've got such a diversity that it's almost impossible to find an Elders Authority Group to work with young people in particular. So the real question is how do you engage – that is a good question but probably the practical answer is how do you engage each individual young person in a conversation about their extended family and where support can come from for them."(NT NGO)

Some non-Indigenous participants expressed their frustration at not being able to successfully engage with Indigenous care leavers, Indigenous communities and Elders at an operational level. One respondent suggested sharing decision making with Elders was *"problematic"* and it was difficult finding Indigenous workers who could be mentors. It was commonly suggested by non-Indigenous organisations that difficulties to engage successfully with Indigenous communities was a problem impeding the non-Indigenous service providers from providing a better service to the Indigenous community. These types of comments appear to place the onus for success of programs back onto Indigenous communities and away from the non-

Indigenous system of out of home care provision itself. One respondent said "*They've been colonised since the late 1800s and so those are a community that's lost a lot of culture and language"*, a comment that reflects notions of "authenticity" within Indigenous cultures that the non-Indigenous interviewee felt they were qualified to judge. These comments collectively highlight a number of significant tensions embedded within the service sector that were also voiced within our earlier Victorian study (Mendes et al 2016):

- Some non-Indigenous organisations acknowledge that they have difficulty working with Indigenous communities. The model of provision means that non-Indigenous organisations work to integrate Indigenous communities into mainstream operations;
- The diversity of Indigenous cultures, i.e. the diversity of languages in regions, can be described in the context of being a deficit and used as an excuse for not collaborating with Indigenous communities and Elders;
- Concerningly non-Indigenous perceptions that Indigenous cultures have been "lost" can be used as a vehicle to justify government-controlled intervention or "protection;"
- Systemic failures may be indicative of historically entrenched non-Indigenous subconscious or conscious racially-based decision making.

It is important to recognise that there may be legitimate reasons that Indigenous care leavers are not engaging with non-Indigenous organisations. Indigenous communities have had a long history of abuse in all mainstream systems and therefore distrust mainstream services. Past government legislation has ensured that there is a disconnect between mainstream Australia and the Aboriginal community (for example by moving Aboriginal communities, families and children to missions and reserves - out of sight).

The non-Indigenous worker or organisation understands they need the assistance of Indigenous workers and Elders. But to actually engage with them effectively, the organisation has to adopt Indigenous ways of knowing, sharing and working. Organisations say they are being flexible, but if the engagement is not working, it may mean they are not responding

successfully to the local Indigenous ways of collaborating or working together. It may be that the community do not feel listened to or meaningfully engaged with.

Summary

The entire OOHC and leaving care system was seen as in crisis and under-resourced, and those working in the field are overwhelmed and unable to adequately respond to the needs of Indigenous care leavers. Inconsistencies within service provision extended to eligibility, referrals and policy application, meaning that Indigenous care leavers were at risk of getting lost in the system. A range of barriers face Indigenous care leavers, including, remoteness, communication issues and a culturally insensitive approach to service provision.

There is a lack of Indigenous specific programs for care leavers, resulting in a lack of cultural responsiveness becoming the key barrier to Indigenous care leavers accessing services. Lack of cultural responsiveness was seen as a by-product of a service system which was colour blind to the difference in experiences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers. NGOs recognise the need for Indigenous involvement in service provision, however, often struggle to meaningfully engage Indigenous organisations and communities.

Theme Seven: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in service provision

The extent to which Indigenous communities, organisations and individuals are involved in the development and provision of leaving care services varies nationally. In all states and territories, non-Indigenous service providers are providing the bulk of the leaving care services for Indigenous young people. Some of these organisations employ an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. However, Victoria is the only state where ACCOs are consistently funded to provide leaving care services to Indigenous young people, although they are not funded to provide these services to all Indigenous care leavers.

In other areas, ACCOs are involved in consultation to service delivery, but the extent to which this happens varies jurisdictionally. On a micro level, some aftercare workers are consulting with Indigenous communities and organisations, and others are not. Again, the extent to which they will involve ACCOs, Indigenous Elders and communities varies.

What is evident is that despite widespread agreement within OOHC that Indigenous communities and organisations are best positioned to provide services to Indigenous young people, there is no guarantee an Indigenous care leaver will receive leaving care services from an Indigenous organisation, an Indigenous worker or an organisation that is informed by Indigenous knowledge.

The extent to which Indigenous individuals, communities and organisations are involved in aftercare and leaving care service provision will likely have a direct impact on an individual care leavers connection to community and culture, which has widespread impacts on identity formation, self-esteem and a sense of who they are, where they have come from and where they would like to be in the future. What became apparent from data collection is that individual Indigenous care leavers access to Indigenous individuals, communities and organisations varies greatly, based on a range of variables - jurisdiction, organisational knowledge and interest, and individual interest.

Despite the varying levels of Indigenous involvement in service delivery, the overwhelming response from participants was that there should be more Indigenous community involvement in all facets of the leaving care system.

ACCOS

ACCOs are involved in the leaving care system in a variety of ways. In Victoria they deliver leaving care services to Indigenous care leavers. In other areas, ACCOs such as health services may be part of a care team that provides services to Indigenous care leavers. On a broader level, they may be consulted to provide input to policies and service system changes in an attempt to make the service system more responsive to the needs of Indigenous care leavers.

Support for ACCOs to lead service delivery for Indigenous care leavers

Many participants in NGOs and government were, in theory, supportive of ACCOs providing all the transition from care services for Indigenous care leavers, and in many cases some steps were made towards more meaningful engagement with ACCOs.

> *"The two organisations here in ACT have involvement in the consortium. They provide support for transition planning for example for Aboriginal kids or cultural advice on the development of cultural plans for Aboriginal kids in OOHC. So there is input absolutely, and ideally the ACT could contract an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation to do this work directly rather than have to do it through a consortium arrangement. We're working towards that but we're not in that space at the moment." (ACT Gov)*

Whilst there was support for the idea of ACCOs delivering leaving care services, participants recognised that frequently ACCOs weren't provided with enough system-level support or funding to provide Indigenous specific, community driven, locally based support systems for their communities.

> *"I don't think there's a lot of capacity building…. the kids that I've had over the years that have come through Aboriginal orgs have been really let down, unfortunately….*

and hence I think that's why there's probably not a lot of Aboriginal orgs doing out of home care across the state. Because they haven't been - there's been no capacity building and support to get - I believe Aboriginal orgs should be doing it. But I don't think they're being supported to develop it." (NSW NGO)

"That should be ACWs, Aboriginal Community Welfare workers or community workers [completing cultural plans] but they're often so busy out doing things that the quality of cultural care plans is poor. But there is going to be an expectation that community agencies start taking that role on if you're providing out of home care which makes sense." (NT NGO)

"...services in the future for out of home care must be delivered by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. And so there's a – but unfortunately, unlike New South Wales and Queensland there's not a capacity building support for those organisations so they're not being inundated as yet, anyway, with Aboriginal organisations wanting to work in some of these spaces". (NT NGO).

Consultation with ACCOs needs improvement

Whilst ACCOs are involved in consultation for leaving care services in some cases, the level of that consultation varied and was frequently described as poor. At worst this was seen as ad hoc and tokenistic. Participants felt that consultation needed to be done in a more meaningful way and be from the developmental stage all the way through to service delivery, to ensure the programs were informed by Indigenous understandings of wellbeing to meet the needs of the Indigenous care leavers.

"I would like more consultation to occur because listen, like honestly, there's only one place that they refer to which is that [after care organisation] that I was talking to you about before, and it's not culturally appropriate. Like, if they could consult with those ACCOs and all that sort of stuff and well before this young person leaves care, I could probably put my house on it to say that they would have a well-defined plan when they leave that would be encompassing family, community, maintaining connections with their culture and all that sort of stuff because those ACCOs or the community have had

direct involvement in the development of those transitions from care plans. Over here we've got what we call the Principal Aboriginal Consultants. I would like to see a bit more consultation with the PACs in terms of devising those transition from care plans and what cultural considerations are embedded in those plans."(SA NGO)

By and large, ACCOs spoke of wanting to move beyond consultation and towards a real sense of culturally embedded services. Peak Aboriginal bodies ask for ACCOs to be proportionately resourced and embedded into OOHC and leaving care systems.

"*Most of our families - what they don't like about that sort of work is that a lot of our people that work in that area, they're not in a position where they can actually make decisions on behalf of the young person. The decision always has to be made by someone in management or it has to go back to the department, and so things get delayed and it's disheartening for the young person or the decision that they make isn't really – they say it's in the best interest of the child but really it's not in their best interest if a young person is not moving back home or reconnecting or maintaining contact with family, because that would be the best thing for them." (WA NGO)*

Participants expressed a recognition of the connection between ACCOs providing the services and self-determination of Indigenous peoples. ACCOs spoke of true self-determination relating to Indigenous young people being supported by ACCOs with full freedom to design their own programs with locally based solutions.

"And so that – in terms of really understanding what that consultation ought to be about – and like Bringing Them Home called for going beyond consultation, to actually having an approach that's about genuine partnership, and that's about community being involved in designing the sorts of responses that the children and the young people in their community need, that can respond to or seize on local strengths, and be focused towards the issues that the community face there. Really local, community and culturally embedded services is what communities are asking for. And instead the conversation is, "How do we do this one-size-fits-all?

And so that has been a bit of a challenge, and yes, that focus on the mainstreaming of services, and just having the overall going beyond the conversation to actually implementing this properly, and giving it the focus and the resources that it needs, if we're going to understand the intergenerational implications of doing this badly, which seems to be what we're doing at the moment.

So, in terms of the consultation, not enough, and I think not genuine in that 'let's have a focused partnership approach that's focused on what is it that Aboriginal children and young people need', because both their needs and how you deliver it are different for that cohort." (NSW ACCO)

Inconsistent referrals to ACCOs

Feedback from participants in non-Indigenous organisations indicated that often the extent to which programs and services partner with ACCOs and Aboriginal communities is dependent on whether the direct worker or the organisation leaders see this as a priority. It also seems dependent upon how each organisation defines their own processes of consultation with Indigenous communities. This means that in many cases, referrals to ACCOs are not occurring and when it does occur it is inherently dependent upon specific relationships that are working well between ACCOs and the non-Indigenous organisation. In this instance the success is not due to systemic success, but rather individuals making connections that work.

"In terms of when they leave care, unless they come over with the young person as a stakeholder, it's not the first port of call, which is a real shame. I guess we have to make those referrals ourselves and it's often more who do you know and how can we link you in type of thing rather than a formal referral process." (QLD NGO)

Participants who worked mainly with Indigenous care leavers prioritised developing positive relationships with ACCOs, in recognition of the importance of linking Indigenous care leavers in with Indigenous organisations. Participants felt that it would be ACCOs, Indigenous communities, Elders and mentors that would provide the Indigenous care leaver with the ongoing informal support network that they need once they transition from care.

"I'm working really hard at a local level the last couple of years to be really engaged with any Aboriginal organisation that is youth oriented or medical or - so they [the young people] have Aboriginal workers… which takes a lot of time in itself, so to network, to get along to things - like I'm part of a lot of committees locally with Aboriginal organisations." (NSW NGO)

In many cases there was a siloed approach to forming relationships with Indigenous organisations. The issue with relying on individual workers to make an effort to develop a relationship with Indigenous organisations and communities means that often it will not be done - either due to lack of resources or lack of confidence of the non-Indigenous workers. Unfortunately, this results in an Indigenous care leaver having inconsistent access to culturally responsive service provision; in some cases they will receive assistance, and in others they will not. All Indigenous care leavers have a right to access culturally responsive services, and it should not be reliant on the interest or confidence levels of the individual workers.

High caseloads - Respond like family

Indigenous staff in ACCOs described providing support to Indigenous care leavers akin to caring for extended family. Knowing the care leaver outside of the office context, after hours for instance, seeing them on the street and having a yarn over the course of months or years, was viewed as being crucial to building strong and trusting relationships with Indigenous care leavers. In some cases, Indigenous staff described making themselves available to the care leavers 24/7, often completing work which is unfunded and not appropriately recognised in the broader system or funding arrangements. In this instance the trusting relationship that has been developed between the Indigenous worker and the Indigenous care leaver is the critical base from which any success is achieved thereafter. Success achieved through the development of such a trusting relationship over an extending period of time, largely unfunded, cannot be credited to the OOHC system at large but rather to the tireless work of the Indigenous worker.

"A lot of her work was actually done out of hours as well, just given the need. So, if she was at home, for instance, and then Mum had an episode, the police would get called, and then I would be called out, things like that. And, at the end of the day, that's what

helped build that relationship. I don't think I could do anything other than leave the country. I went on six weeks' leave and I still had her on the phone every day, but that's what she needed, to feel safe. Because, I can't say go talk to such-and-such or such-and-such or such-and-such, there is no family who are appropriate and can give her a therapeutic response that she's needing, based on trauma history. And, she does have a diagnosed intellectual disability as well, so she's kind of stuck…. It's pretty much what it is, parenting from another house". (VIC ACCO)

"So, we're funded for the equivalent of 18 targets, but we received funding for nine targets. So, we have to find funding from other services to be able to supply a second worker in the North to meet the target demand. We go beyond our target. We probably triple them easily per annum and that's just not even touching the sides. We also provide a lot of secondary consult which isn't a track target within [region]. So that means that the workers will go to care teams and provide leaving care assistance even though they're not active leaving care clients" (VIC ACCO)

Non-Indigenous organisations want to improve relationships with ACCOs

Participants working within non-Indigenous organisations spoke of an aspiration to improve relationships with ACCOs, recognising that it would have a direct positive impact on the work they are doing with Indigenous care leavers. However, they often spoke of the difficulties in working with ACCOs.

"I think as case managers and the future planners, we struggle with working effectively with Aboriginal services, finding the right one, linking the kids in well and providing that ongoing support. It just seems to be - I mean, it's difficult with any service, trying to link in young people. There just seems to be ongoing challenges particularly around linking them in" (NSW NGO)

Indigenous workforce within non-Indigenous service providers

Indigenous people are working within all facets of service provision related to leaving care services, everywhere from frontline workers through to informing policy and service

provision. Participants frequently spoke of the importance of having Indigenous workers embedded into non-Indigenous organisations involved with service provision to Indigenous care leavers.

Unique value of working with Elders

Participants working in ACCOs or Aboriginal specific programs felt it was essential for government and non-Indigenous organisations to partner with Aboriginal communities and Elders in order to achieve meaningful outcomes for Indigenous care leavers. Indigenous workers described the very special role Elders play in the Indigenous community at large and suggested that their presence in the OOHC sector was crucial.

> *"The first thing you learn as an Aboriginal person is respect your Elders, but especially your Aboriginal Elders…. So, having those people around to be a part of your program, is definitely, it's assets. It's assets that you can't get from any degree because it's instilled within them and their sense of self to then understand the connection with them." (VIC ACCO)*

Participants from ACCOs spoke of the work they do with Elders and the strong contribution it brings to supporting the Indigenous care leavers' transition to independence. Elders in the community were described as being strong mentors and champions for Indigenous youth. Often having lived experience of intergenerational trauma themselves and having the respect of the community, they have the capacity to provide specialist knowledge in loss, grief and trauma-informed therapeutic responses. In some instances, being the first Indigenous Elder to have ever been involved in the young person's life.

> *"I don't know if you guys know [Elder] over here, the loss and grief counsel that she is, and she works through the seven stages of loss and grief. And, you know, this particular case was pretty close because it was the family member but I linked him up with [Elder] for some sessions and we were able to manage to get that over the line and, you know, through that, young fellow learned some coping strategies. And at that time he was 16 and a-half going on 17, whereas before, you know, 15 he wasn't ready to deal with that stuff, but he was at an age where he was ready to do it. And it was only because*

I reached out to [Elder]. It wasn't DCP but I just made an enquiry call to [Elder] and I said, "Have you got capacity to see this young fellow?" and in actual fact young fellow's related to her as well, so she was able to make that happen. And that's a case management responsibility, to be able to do that. Like, well get [Elder] on board or other culturally appropriate sites, whatever it is."(SA NGO)

"I mean, for [Elder] she's our main go to, she has an expansive experience in – she has fostered like 6 kids herself. She's a Wiradjuri woman, she is extremely passionate about kids in care, she's perfect, and she knows a lot about the system, she's a massive - she's a fighter. She goes in there and tells them how it is, basically. The foster care system is, in a way, afraid of her; one woman just tackling on a whole system, really. She voices these kids when they're not being heard. So yeah, it's powerful having Aunty here, she's an absolute Wiradjuri warrior, really." (NSW ACCO)

NGOs define success through Indigenous workforce

Responses from non-Indigenous organisations across Australia demonstrated that they frequently defined their success with Indigenous care leavers through the employment of an Indigenous workforce. This could be through employing Elders in Indigenous cultural roles, or by having a portion of transition planners/case managers being Indigenous.

Case study

A large non-Indigenous service provider is providing OOHC services to a large percentage of Indigenous children. They employ an Aboriginal Elder in a cultural support role and he works with all their Indigenous service users. He researches the child's country and family history and provides them all the relevant cultural knowledge so that they have access to all the information they need, when they are ready. His expertise is highly valued within the NGO (QLD NGO)

The positive recognition of the contribution of Indigenous Elders and individuals is indicative of the overall positive regard for Indigenous involvement in mainstream service provision for Indigenous care leavers. There are clearly many Indigenous workers across Australia doing

strong meaningful work for Indigenous care leavers within non-Indigenous organisations. The risk of using this involvement as a measure of success is that this positive work shields and absolves the organisation from making broader systemic changes to make their practice and service delivery more culturally responsive. It also diverts focus from the need to support self-determination and empower service delivery by ACCOs.

Peak Indigenous Bodies and Indigenous Children Commissioner's

Whilst there is a national peak body for Indigenous families and children (SNAICC) there are inconsistencies between states as to the existence of state-level peak bodies or Indigenous children's commissioners. It was felt that the absence of broader bodies representing Indigenous children and families meant that Indigenous voices were being ignored and not viewed as a priority in policy discussions.

> *"The other problem we have here is we don't have a peak body or an Indigenous children's commissioner. We find our voices get lost within the system, so if our voices of the people that work in the system is getting lost in the system, there's not much hope for our families who have to fight the department just to have a contact visit with their children or grandchildren here in care. That's the issue that we have and we're continuing to advocate for that with the department and with the minister and with the government. But you know this has been a 10-yearlong battle and we're still fighting the fight. "(WA NGO)*

Summary

Overall, the response from participants was overwhelmingly supportive of more Indigenous community involvement in service provision related to Indigenous care leavers, whether it be through ACCOs, Elders or building up an Indigenous workforce. Unfortunately, in the current system, Indigenous involvement in consultation, service building and service delivery is minimal and ad hoc, which results in a continuation of culturally inappropriate service provision to young Indigenous care leavers.

Building the capacity for ACCOs to play a greater role in the OOHC space generally was considered an important matter to be addressed. ACCOs are recognized as having the specialist knowledge in the sector, able to make service systems more responsive to the needs of the Indigenous care leavers.

Theme Eight: Key Challenges Facing Indigenous Care Leavers

A number of key themes emerged relating to the unique circumstances facing Indigenous care leavers. Included were topics already known to be a key challenge to care leavers; homelessness, mental illness, early pregnancy, lack of access to education and employment, and substance abuse. In addition to these, key themes emerged which were seen as challenges unique to Indigenous care leavers, such as reunification with family and maintaining connection to culture and community. It is important to recognise that processes of leaving care are very stressful and anxiety-producing for Indigenous young people and needs to be supported:

> *"Walking out of care on your own is a scary, scary thought. And so if they had someone there with them for the long haul and we know that program's only funded for a period of time or it's aged limited and all that sort of gear, but I think for us to get it really right I think there needs to be something that is available ongoing right from that age of 15 right up until 25". (SA NGO)*

> *"Kids feel rejected when they leave care, now I'm on my own, no-one cares, I've got no-one to go to. That's why I find on the weekends the kids reach out more than they do during the week, because they're scared, I can't go to the office, I can't go here, there's no-one here for me. If you answer a text message to one of these kids, their anxiety goes. It doesn't take anything, it doesn't cost anything, it's like yeah, we can sort that out on Monday, and that's all it takes to calm them down.*
>
> *So, when they're leaving care, that's going to be a million times worse for them. Instead of just the two days on the weekend when they're freaking out, it's the rest of their lives. So, creating those connections before that happens with people who are willing to engage with them outside of nine to five would make a huge difference for them not to feel so isolated and alone, and so easily led into those not so appropriate behaviours. It's all the planning before it I think that is key to them being successful once they do turn 18". (VIC ACCO).*

Connection to family, culture and community

The importance of connection to culture, community and family is highlighted in policies that require all Indigenous children in care to have a cultural plan. These rights to maintain a connection to culture are enshrined in both the *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007) and the *Conventions on the Rights of the Child* (1989) which state that all Indigenous people, including children, have the right to practice, maintain and strengthen their culture. Yet in practice, we know that cultural plans are not always completed, and at times are of dubious quality (Family Matters 2019: 78-80; Jackomos 2016).

Broken connection to family, community and culture for Indigenous care leavers was something raised regularly by participants. Participants frequently saw this as an issue that greatly impacted on care leavers' outcomes, but was also one that stretched through OOHC, impacting Indigenous children in care at all ages.

> *"I think what would work better is that our young people are connected to family throughout their care experience so that there's not such a trend for them to completely leave any care supports from the care system to connect to family. If that was encouraged and supported throughout their care experience, I think we would have better outcomes". (WA NGO)*

Connection to family, community, culture and country was clearly identified as crucial to Indigenous care leavers development and identity formation. It was seen as particularly critical in supporting their transition from OOHC to independence.

> *"Recognising the work that needs to happen while those kids are in care, from the earliest, to make sure that Aboriginal kids are connected to their family, connected to their community, and have that deep and meaningful understanding and appreciation for experience of their culture, and those relationships. Because those are the relationships that are going to help those kids through this period that you're talking about, but also onwards, throughout their whole life. And I don't think there's enough focus on those elements within the broader OOHC space." (NSW ACCO)*

"There are not enough appropriate options. If kids are going to go home, are we preparing home for them and are we saying to home, "what do you need for this young person to come back here?" Especially if the reasons they got removed haven't been clearly identified and worked through which they often haven't and that's for non-Indigenous and Indigenous. So I think there's an understanding that if kids had a choice they would be home so how do we make our service system work towards that and what resources need to be given to that?" (NT NGO).

"The young people that are connected to their cultures, especially as an Aboriginal person are then significantly easier to engage with and then you get better outcomes" (VIC ACCO)

This is recognised by all facets of the system of leaving care (government, ACCOs and NGOs), and participants spoke of the need to address this disconnection from culture. This was seen as the key aspect that differentiated the experiences of Indigenous care leavers compared to the broader care leaver population.

"Recognising the displacement that Aboriginal young people have often experienced coming into our system and the need to assist them through re-establishing and supporting their cultural identity. In addition to that, their needs are similar to what's being presented in the rest of the out-of-home care population" (ACT Gov)

This sentiment extended particularly to Indigenous children in care who are placed with non-Indigenous carers (either kin or foster). Respondents emphasized the importance of supporting deep and meaningful connections to culture, early in care, with those family and cultural connections being able to offer a community of support for young people post-care.

Connection to community will provide the ongoing support care leavers need

Young Indigenous care leavers are more likely to benefit from connection to Indigenous communities, even if it is not the community they themselves were removed from. One

frontline worker spoke of the two facets of connection; firstly, engaging a young person with the family and community they were removed from, and secondly, connecting them to a sense of Indigenous community. This was seen to create a community scaffold which would support a successful exit from welfare systems. This participant said the following of a young woman she worked with who was now working within an Aboriginal organisation.

> *"She said, 'I feel like I've got a family for the first time that love me.' Yeah, she is not even from this community. Do you know what I mean? So it's possible to instil that in young Aboriginal people. I think there's a real issue with identity. And knowing where you come from is really important. But also feeling like you belong is really important. So they're two factors I think that we can be working on and doing better. And I think that I'm feeling like that makes a difference, because I can't be across all of them all the time. And I certainly am not going to be around forever." (NSW NGO)*

This sense that the community will be the ongoing support for the young person beyond involvement with welfare organisations was echoed by many participants, particularly frontline workers, who were clearly worried about who would support the young person once they were exited from care.

> *"I think being able to work with the kids enough to have them behave appropriately to be around Elders, and then have a voice. We have a property out bush for men, having two, three times a year, that cohort before they turn 18, go out with those Elders, do what they do on land, and build that relationship with them, before they exit care. Because, it's all about having that connection before they complete….*
>
> *Creating those connections before they leave care with people who are willing to engage with them outside of nine to five would make a huge difference for them not to feel so isolated and alone, and so easily led into those not so appropriate behaviours. It's all the planning before it, I think that is key to them being successful once they do turn 18." (VIC ACCO)*

Reluctance to engage with family and culture

Participants indicated that in some cases, Indigenous care leavers were reluctant to explore and engage with their culture and family connections. It was also noted that the length of time in care had an effect on the care leavers level of disconnection from culture and community, also affecting the care leavers feelings about their ability to reconnect.

> *"I find our young people - unfortunately I believe they disengage at an early age with their location. I believe that there is a disconnection completely." (WA)*

Organisations understood the difficulty for a young person who has been removed from family and culture from an early age to foster an interest in their past. Recognising the importance of cultural connections and the difficulty in sourcing that information once a person has left the care system, some organisations responded to this by collecting all the young persons' family and cultural information, and passing that onto them before they left care, even if they weren't ready yet for that connection.

> *"He was in care for 18 years and within the last two months of that care, I was fortunate enough to have been able to bring all that information forward for the young fellow because I remember him stating to me, 'what does all this mean to me?' and I simply replied, 'That's something that may take you five, 10, 15 or even 20 years to be able to answer that question'. I suppose the most important thing out of all this here is that he's actually got all this information and basically, he's got that information for life, I think it's something in time for him to come to understand but the reality is, he probably won't look at it until he gets to 25 or 30 and then he'll start to appreciate it even more." (QLD NGO)*

Identity formation of Indigenous youth

Identity formation for Indigenous youth was seen as a key issue closely related to connection to family, culture and community.

"It's quite anxiety provoking that they're coming to a stage where it's a new unknown. "What does it look like when I leave care? Who do I connect with on the outside?" and all that sort of stuff. And so they've got to relearn all that stuff, where their connections are when they leave care, so without those developed plans and those connection points before they leave care, they're left to their own devices unfortunately to navigate their life post-care, and it's finding who they are and where do they fit in society." (SA NGO)

Participants felt that identity formation was negatively impacted by growing up in the OOHC system, and was particularly neglected for those who had been removed from family at a very young age. Knowing how to navigate one's Aboriginality while disconnected from Indigenous family and community was described as being highly problematic requiring specialist culturally informed support.

"A lot of the kids that I've worked alongside, they were taken from care quite young from their families and so I call it - and I'll put it quite bluntly - it's a disconnection from family and community and culture because what happens is that they're days old and then they're in the system right up until they're 18 and their identity hasn't been formed. They don't know who they are. By the time they hit 12 - 13, they're starting to question, "Am I an Aboriginal person? Who are my connections?" and all that sort of stuff, and so for those pieces of work to be done they themselves don't know where to begin. Some of the social workers that are working with these young people don't have enough information around what their connections are, where they lie, and so a lot of them don't - unfortunately don't know who they are, where their connections are." (SA NGO)

For Indigenous youth who were placed in care later in their life, the system was described as damaging the connection they have with their family, community and country. Limited contact with family or being moved far away from their community meant those connections may be severed. This was described as putting the Indigenous care leaver in a vulnerable identity position only describing themselves as having been *"a young person in care",* not knowing how to reconnect with family, often not knowing who they are any more.

"There are the young people that have been brought into care a bit later in life and they've got that connection and it seems that when they don't have - what the kids are saying to us is that when they go into care their contact with their family and their community and even going back to country is diminished a lot and so therefore they slowly begin to lose that connection and all those assessment plans and all that sort of stuff sort of don't get done and so when they do eventually get to a stage to transition out, it's almost like it's a foreign thing for them now because they've been in care for such a long time. "What does it look like? How do I connect with my family? Where do I go?" and all that sort of stuff. So it's quite critical to them because it forms their identity. And when they leave care all they've ever known is that their identity's been, "I'm a young person in care." (SA NGO)

Participants working directly with Indigenous care leavers saw the goal of their work with the young person is to support them to form a sense of Aboriginal identity. It was also acknowledged that this journey was an individual one that required the support of a team who understood the sensitivities and complexities of this journey.

"There are things that we can bring forward - with all this information that we can bring forward for the young person, that slowly… works on their identity, their Aboriginal perspective on the views of things and their cultural understanding". (QLD NGO)

Reunification

Closely related to the challenge of maintaining connection to family, culture and community, is the drive to be reunified with family of origin and extended family. Overwhelmingly, participants spoke of Indigenous care leavers' deep desire to leave care and return to their family.

"Given the fact that once they turn 18 majority of young people leaving care will seek out family to return back to and then look for the nurturing and the safeguard."(VIC ACCO)

Mainstream Reunification systems in the OOHC space

In recognition of the importance of connecting with family, across Australia, there are mainstream reunification programs designed to help all young people in care reconnect with family as they transition into the leaving care age. Concerns were raised, however, that these programs do not meet the unique needs of Indigenous care leavers.

"*There is a package that is about trying to reconnect young people - and again, not specifically Aboriginal young people, but reconnect young people with their families as they move towards leaving care. It has only been around really for a bit over 12 months or so. So it's a bit early to say how effective or how useful that's been, or what the impact's been for Aboriginal young people in particular. But I think the general sense would be for those Aboriginal young people in out-of-home care who are not case-managed by the Aboriginal agency, which I think is about three-quarters of them, I don't think that there would be any real, meaningful focus on those sorts of connections for Aboriginal young people.* (NSW ACCO)

There was criticism of the system's ability to meaningfully navigate care leavers through reconnecting to their families and communities. It was suggested case workers who have not built trusting relationships with Indigenous care leavers will have difficulties understanding the process of Aboriginal family reunification and connection.

"The third thing would be, and it's a huge one, I think, would be family, and it can actually lead kids back up to community culture and their true sense of identity. Unfortunately, the case workers can't connect these kids up to community. They don't have a good relationship from past experiences, that trust has not ever been built appropriately." (NSW ACCO)

It was also suggested that young people need greater information about their rights in relation to reunification, whether they are even allowed to see their families after leaving care:

> *"I suppose one of the other things is that a lot of them still want to know - it's probably not related to this stuff, but they want to know, "Can I see my family when I leave care or is there still stipulations that I can't go and visit my family?" and all that sort of stuff. So that's a real worry for some of them." (SA NGO)*

This highlights the need for a relational approach with Indigenous young people in care and leaving care, as well as with Aboriginal communities and organisations. Trust is key. Historically, mainstream child protection services have actively separated and controlled Indigenous families and communities. These agencies have been the administrators of legislated Aboriginal child removal since the 'protection era'. This is not ancient history to Aboriginal families and communities, and many understandably have a deep distrust of mainstream organisations.

In order to overcome this distrust, mainstream agencies and non-Indigenous workers need to work especially hard to maintain positive relationships with Indigenous communities and individuals. Unfortunately, in an under-resourced system with high levels of burnout, stress and turnover, this relational approach is neglected, to the ultimate detriment of the Indigenous care leaver and their connection to family.

Supported reunification

The unique needs of Indigenous care leavers and communities described above, highlights the need for Indigenous specific locally based, community driven reunification programs. Participants raised examples of care leavers reconnecting to kin and country in a supported way. The examples highlighted the time and resources necessary to ensure a meaningful and sustainable connection to family.

> *"It's varied and different on every different level, but one of the beauties of [leaving care program] because it is such a needs led thing, when we end up with a couple of*

siblings for example that haven't seen each other or have been disconnected through care, we might be able to do a particular camp just designed for them to reconnect or we might be able to put on some sort of social connection events that might mean that they can get to know each other again in a safe way, and we can work individually with them around developing protective behaviours to enable a safe connection to family. Across the state it is interesting and challenging both to have knowledge around sibling groups but not knowing that those siblings don't actually know where and what each of the other siblings is up to and trying to find ways to link them to help that family reunification." (WA NGO)

"I mean we did - it's a number of years ago, but we did a cultural camp where we took 10 young people down south and during that time six of those young people worked out through some of the activities we were doing that they were related. Now, we obviously knew that prior to the camp but structured the activities around discovering who you are, where you're from and all that sort of stuff, so then from that they were able to start to build safe, supportive relationships and reconnect with family." (WA NGO)

Unsupported reunification

Overwhelmingly, participants identified that Indigenous care leavers are usually left to their own devices in terms of navigating relationships and reunification with family.

"I have heard quite a few young people talk about that period being when they do their family research – where they try to reconnect with – it might not be their immediate family – their mum or their dad – but it's where they try to find their grandparents, and their wider connections to community, and nation groups and things like that... And so that becomes a thing that's put on them, and that they have to try to manage for themselves. So that's been a challenge for them." (NSW ACCO)

This seemed to be a common trend across jurisdictions; that young Indigenous people in care were self-placing back to families within the 'transition period' as they approach 18.

Anecdotally, this is occurring at as young as 15 years. This transition from care at a young age was also a finding of our earlier Victorian study (Mendes et al 2016).

> *"In actual fact, we've got lots of kids walking from care and leaving at 15. And particularly going back to Country or trying to find Country." (NSW NGO)*

This was seen as a response to a deep yearning for connection that was not being met within care. Unfortunately, frequently these families and communities are still living with unresolved intergenerational trauma which resulted in the young person being placed onto OOHC, and so this reconnection is not always a smooth or successful experience.

> *"They just want to be loved by their families. Unfortunately they haven't been connected to good role models in their family. So they're still trying to connect with the family that's still not doing well. And usually that's mum and dad or siblings and stuff. So it just perpetuates what they're going through…. And it's almost like they're supporting their parents… Mum is still an alcoholic, or something like that. I think if they'd been supported and that connection defined - because we know that there's always family around for our Aboriginal kids - but I don't think that connection is made early enough. So they go back to what they only know and they often do that before they exit care. And then they find themselves getting into trouble and stuff a lot. NSW NGO)*

> *"Because of bad leaving care processes, young people are often going back to family. There was no reparation work done, none of the issues were addressed and that accommodation was falling over within four to six weeks. So then they would come back through all the various services because they were homeless." (NT NGO)*

Self-guided and unsupported reunification with family was commonly described as "couch hopping" with cousins and other extended family. Frequently the reason for this was that the care leaver was not ready to live alone, or culturally appropriate housing was not able to be found.

"There's been cases where Indigenous kids here, they don't want to live on their own as well, and they said, "No, I don't want to do the Independent Living Program. I don't want to do that. I want to go back with family," and all that sort of stuff, and so then their social worker's planned all that sort of stuff and worked alongside of family and all that and all of a sudden the young person changes their mind and so that's a tricky one as well." (SA NGO)

"But for these kids what I've seen is that there are limited options when they can't go through these Independent Living Programs. There is a stretch in Housing to try to identify appropriate housing for them. Some of the kids are quite particular where they want to go as well when they do their selection of housing and some of the areas are sort of hard to get into, but a lot of them want to go to those areas and so on some occasions the young people do put up barriers themselves in terms of, "No, I want to go there," or, "If I don't go, there's nothing. I will couch surf with friends or cousins" or what-have-you. But you've also got to look at it in terms of this is quite scary for them to live independently where they've lived in a resi house or whether it's been with other family members or what-have-you. It's a scary time for them, so they don't know what to expect. They don't know what they want until they experience it sort of thing."(SA NGO)

Leaving care early - Indigenous youth self-placing with family

Participants felt that the natural consequence of a lack of support to reunify with family, was that Indigenous youth in care were self-placing with family, sometimes at quite a young age. In some cases, if an Indigenous child living in care absconds from their placement to live with their family, the department may revoke their order. If this occurs prior to the age of 15, not only have they not been supported to return to family, in many jurisdictions, this means they will not be able to access any leaving care support.

"From my experience working with the young Aboriginal people in the care system, there's a trend that young Aboriginal people will seek family out early and want to connect with family, which hasn't been supported during their care experience. And that can often lead to the Department withdrawing support because they consider that

to be an unendorsed placement. I've also had an experience with a couple of young people where their care order is actually revoked because they returned to family. So if they're revoked under 15 years old they're also not entitled to leaving care services." (WA NGO)

"With our kids, it's this magic age of 18 things seem to happen, but in actual fact, we've got lots of kids walking from care and leaving at 15. And, particularly going back to Country or trying to find Country. So, there's lots of changes that have really got to happen." (NSW NGO)

"We know that some young people are leaving from resi care. The problem with resi care of course is that the structure is quite constraining. It's also quite expensive, and often, young people are not keen to remain in resi care afterwards, once they turn 18. We do get a significant cohort leaving before they turn 18, and so I think that's something that needs to be acknowledged, that Aboriginal young people would be part of this cohort or leave the system or leave because they don't feel that it's actually meeting their needs. And they leave at 16 or 17, before they actually turn 18." (Tas Gov)

"So they've gone home when they feel they're old enough to. So around 15. And they've disengaged from the department. Or they're incarcerated. That's another one. They're in juvenile justice. So often they just get pushed aside and forgotten about. And therefore they don't get any leaving care, after care support. So we get once they might have fluked, found out about us, like I said, through siblings or through some sort of other organisation or something. But there are tons of kids around the age of 21, 23, that go I didn't even know that I was entitled to get this stuff." (NSW NGO)

Housing and homelessness

Housing was seen as a prominent issue facing all care leavers. This was in relation to lack of appropriate housing available to care leavers, insufficient planning around accommodation, care leavers not being ready to live independently, and many care leavers experiencing

homelessness once they have transitioned from care to independence (see also McKenzie et al. 2020).

There is insufficient public housing for care leavers, transitional housing is scarce, and short-term crisis housing options are often inappropriate or unsafe for Indigenous care leavers. One focus group noted that when the Department referred young people to a homelessness service, they were able to "tick off" that housing aspects of leaving care were complete. Effectively this means that the care leaver will officially exit care, without any housing, and only an appointment with a homelessness service.

> *"The supported transition referral from the Department has often been challenging, in that it's not aligned with what the young person wants sometimes when they refer to a homelessness service, the Department is ticking off the housing element". (WA NGO)*

There were also concerns that when policies have been put in place to support young people leaving care to have priority access to public housing, that those policies were not being followed:

> *"Reality is accessing houses firstly is a barrier because a lot of the departments don't actually understand the rapid response MOU. One of our roles is having to take department forms to departments to get them to fill them out to send them to their own departments. The rapid response for care leavers means that at 16 an application could go into housing and then pretty much they'd be guaranteed community housing by the time they turned 18, but up and across the state it's so inconsistent it's kind of scary" (WA NGO).*

The private rental market is financially unviable for a young under or unemployed Indigenous care leaver, and may be difficult to penetrate due to the competitive nature of the market which may be systemically biased against Indigenous care leavers, particularly in regional areas.

Transitioning into homelessness

Participants frequently described Indigenous care leavers 'transitioning to homelessness'.

> *"So historically we have had a lot of young people hitting 18, 17 and a half and being essentially transitioned into the homelessness space. And that is often from resi care contexts." (WA NGO)*

This was attributed to inadequate planning for housing post-care, a shortage of appropriate and sustainable housing (particularly in regional areas), long wait lists for public housing, lack of culturally responsive housing options (which for example can allow family to come and go), vulnerability to couch surfing and other forms of homelessness, lack of understanding of the housing system, young women remaining in relationships with domestic violence due to lack of housing options, young people needing support to sustain housing and reliance on short-term crisis accommodation.

> *"But the other factor of that is getting the house is just one barrier - and there's tenancy support and the support for those young people in that first transitional stage is really difficult because also the homelessness service across the state is in crisis as well, so once the young person gets a house they're then obligated to support the rest of their family that are homeless as well. That then causes over-occupancy issues, tenancy responsibility issues, that sort of stuff, so it's not only just about getting the houses, it's about the support to maintain those houses and to work with families around supporting the young people to sustain those tenancies as well." (WA NGO)*

Indigenous care leavers are also struggling with the shift from care, where they had access to a range of supports, to being responsible and independent post-care. This was seen as contributing to homelessness; that when those supports are removed, the young person cannot cope.

"The minute services fall away, often a few of our kids might go completely MIA for a few months and then resurface and we found they've been living under a tree, or whatever it may be. Others will just couch surf." (VIC ACCO)

This shift to less holistic support was particularly heightened for Indigenous care leavers who had been in residential care with a high level of support and upon leaving care are placed in new units or housing located away from family, friendship and other support networks.

"A lot of young people prior to leaving care don't really have the knowledge of the housing sector and the shortage of houses, especially young kids that are in resi and are able to go to contingency placements… the department can kind of support them to make sure they're housed until 18. They've kind of had that expectation that once they're post-care, they'll just be able to rock up to a housing agency and get the housing the way the department looked after them in the past." (VIC ACCO)

Lack of housing

A key issue was the severe lack of adequate housing for Indigenous care leavers. Anecdotally, participants indicated that it was a frequent occurrence for Indigenous care leavers to be exited from care without any housing at all, or with only short-term housing, or into inappropriate or financially unviable housing.

"We don't have a lot of housing options. I know we don't here, in Perth, and that becomes a real issue because a lot of the young people end up homeless or they get into trouble and then they are then part of the youth justice system." (WA NGO)

"In terms of where they (Indigenous care leavers) have been prior to us, quite often they can be experiencing - they're street present. Or living with family in overcrowded and perhaps kind of not appropriate conditions. Like it can be generally unsafe for them, and they are not able to stay" (WA NGO)

"A: Housing. [Regional town] has 0% occupancy; we have no housing. So, I've had a young person on the priority housing list for over 12 months, and she could still be waiting another two years."

Q: How old is she now?

A: "Seventeen".

Q: "And, so what's happened to her while she's?"

A: "Couchsurfing."

Q: "So, does that technically mean she's homeless?"

A: "Yeah, and that's why she's on priority. In [regional town], if someone would present to a housing service, it's not uncommon for them to be given a tent to go down the river. That's a weekly occurrence. And given we have one-degree weather overnight at the moment, and in summer we were 45 plus, it's quite extreme to be out in the weather."

(VIC ACCO)

"I guess the other vulnerability is just ensuring accommodation on leaving care. And so, we've had quite a few conversations over time with Housing and ourselves, and continue to have that. We have protocols with the Housing Department, and we have local conversations with case management and their local providers of housing. So, that vulnerability that young people have if they don't transition to secure accommodation is quite significant. So, I guess we're hoping in recommissioning that we'll have people that have a broader network of housing so that there's an opportunity for young people to transition into accommodation post-eighteen, or remain where they are, which would be a fabulous outcome. So, I think all jurisdictions would have that concern about homelessness in their leaving care population". (SA Gov).

The rental market is unachievable for Indigenous care leavers, often unemployed or under-employed, not able to financially maintain high costs associated with mainstream rental markets.

"The kids are well aware of the reality and our rents are through the roof. Like, there's a one-bedroom unit with a bathroom and laundry together and just like a kitchen-dining and that's it, it's like a little box. For rental, that's 210 a week"(VIC ACCO)

In many areas, the rental market is not geared towards share house arrangements, which might make it more appealing and financially viable for an Indigenous care leaver.

"The real estates in [regional town] don't tend to approve those kinds of arrangements. They will accept couples into a property, there's not many who would allow a shared type arrangement. And, because you've got 50 plus people showing up to every house inspection, there's people in town who are two adults, full-time employment, no kids, no pets, and they can't get a property. So, what hope do our kids have?"

"If a young person were to be given housing, then that Leaving Care would support with the basics of white goods, a bed, chest of drawers and a table. They don't provide a TV; they don't class that as being something that's necessary". (VIC ACCO)

In some cases, in an effort to avoid homelessness, Indigenous care leavers were supported to obtain private rental accommodation which was ultimately unaffordable and unsustainable. This was viewed as a combination of poor transition planning and lack of appropriate housing options. In one example, this occurred in the case of a young Indigenous care leaver with a five-month-old baby who was supported to find a private rental. Once that financial support was removed, she was unable to maintain the rent, was facing eviction from the property and was at risk of having her child removed. This lack of support and foresight was seen as contributing to and perpetuating an ongoing cycle of intergenerational removal of Indigenous children.

Frequently Indigenous care leavers are keen to reunify with family, and in some cases, they are encouraged to return to their families. This can be the case even when these family members demonstrate limited or no capacity to support the youth.

"Their options are quite limited and their social workers are sort of like trying to find a suitable option and there's been cases where the social worker has said, "Well, why don't you move back with family?" and the young person has said, "No, I don't feel comfortable moving back with family. I want to be able to live on my own and be supported to live on my own." And so then they try to find something for them and source it but most of the time it's sort of temporary arrangements where young people are encouraged to couch surf with maybe some friends or some relatives until something is put in place. I mean they've got a referral through Housing and all that sort of stuff but, as we know, their waiting lists are pretty big, so a lot of the young people have sort of got to identify where they can go, whether that's family, friends or extended friends within their circles." (SA NGO)

"But unfortunately what we're seeing is that those referrals into [program] are being pushed out until they're 16, 17 and they haven't been able to go through that process of developing those independent living skills and so therefore - and then also doing that program and while they're doing that program a Housing [...] house is identified - they miss out on that because they've only done a portion of that program and a house hasn't come up available for them." (SA NGO)

Lack of culturally appropriate housing

Generally, the housing plan for care leavers is to find them an independent living situation where they would live alone, or in some cases with one other person. The idea of an Indigenous care leaver moving from a care situation where they are supported by a family arrangement or by workers to living on their own was viewed as culturally inappropriate.

"The type of housing isn't for them at this point in time. They're quite happy to stay in care or they're quite happy to believe they're going home. For Aboriginal people the concept of getting your own house or unit or whatever and living on your own is like saying to them you're going to go and live on Mars. What kid moves out by themselves?" (NT NGO)

There were examples whereby Indigenous care leavers were provided government housing which they then shared with siblings or other family or community members. In these instances, the care leavers faced eviction from the property due to overcrowding or too much noise. Sharing government housing with siblings, family and community is viewed unfavourably by the government housing institutions who have to ensure that people are living in 'appropriate housing' situations. Sharing housing with extended family is an expectation within Indigenous families and communities, so this becomes a systemic barrier to Indigenous care leavers obtaining and retaining government housing. When the care leaver is evicted, so too are their family and community members.

> *"Getting the house is just one barrier… then there's tenancy support and the support for those young people in that first transitional stage is really difficult because also the homelessness service across the state is in crisis as well, so once the young person gets a house they're then obligated to support the rest of their family that are homeless as well. That then causes over-occupancy issues, tenancy responsibility issues, that sort of stuff. So it's not only just about getting the houses, it's about the support to maintain those houses and to work with families around supporting the young people to sustain those tenancies as well" (WA NGO)*

> *"One of the other youth workers has been working with another young person who turned 18 about six months ago, and we accessed housing for her through the Department of Housing. Now she's got a cultural obligation to allow family – extended family to come and stay with her, which doesn't sit well with Department of Housing requirements. So she's looking at being evicted because of that." (WA NGO)*

These care leavers have been disconnected from their family and community while in care and more than likely, have not undertaken a cultural or transition out of care plan. This then results in an Indigenous care leaver who is unprepared for independent living with limited independent living skills, craving a reconnection with family and community, trying to make decisions for their future, and largely unsupported. The pressure to care for siblings and reconnect with family and community in these instances would be more important to the care leaver than the rules and regulations outlined by the Department of Housing. These

examples, however, have demonstrated that attempts to reconnect with family and community have resulted in an eviction notice for all those housed in that accommodation.

Accommodation placements offered to care leavers can be located far away from where their established support networks are. A particular barrier to appropriate accommodation options for Indigenous care leavers was said to be the severe lack of culturally appropriate housing in rural and remote regions. This is being identified as a systemic problem for Indigenous care leavers who want to return to country and family in rural and isolated regions. This causes conflict for the Indigenous care leaver who may have to choose between having access to family or having somewhere to live.

> *"Also really important to mention the shortage of housing in regional locations in WA.... the other thing also to recognise is a lot of Aboriginal people placed in care are not necessarily placed in care from where they're from because of the lack of accommodation options in the care system. You get young people placed in Perth that are from Kimberley's and by nature of that they want to reconnect with family and therefore move back to family, struggle to make those connections because they've been so disconnected, but then travel away, but then that pulling to be connected to family is apparent again, so they drift back to those areas and try and reconnect."(WA NGO)*

Housing issues extended also to Indigenous care leavers living in urban areas. Care leavers wanting accommodation near their closest friends or family members, and refusing housing that is offered, due to it not being in a preferred area. This was also seen as indicative of Indigenous care leavers' lack of understanding of the shortage of appropriate housing in the system post-18 and their inherent desires to remain close to family and / or friendship support networks.

> *"I've got a young person that's refusing housing at the moment because it's not in the right area. He's got a really picky – he's telling me he wants to live in two suburbs, two of the best suburbs in the West as well. And we've had housing available for him and*

he doesn't want it and he says, "Oh, I'll just wait for Aboriginal housing." I was like, "Well, you can wait 10 years mate.

At the moment he's in [suburb]. He only wants to live nearby. His girlfriend's in the same area where he's at the moment and he doesn't want to be too far from his girlfriend."(VIC ACCO)

In some instances, the care leavers would rather couch hop between relatives than take up a government housing placement. Living a transient life moving from one relative to another was viewed by the care leaver as a safer option than taking up a government housing placement.

"I've probably had three young people present with this in the last probably six weeks, is that they will leave care or be self-placing before they leave care with family or even in kinship placements, I guess, and then the real transience will begin, but the young people have been around. They'll have their housing application in, but they won't be excited to go and update it because so far as they can see, they can stay at this aunty's or that uncle's or this cousin and the hunt for permanent housing or their own dwelling or their own share house or whatever isn't as much of a struggle. Even though it's something that they want, it's not as immediate an issue because they can always go stay at auntie's house. And you will see them bouncing around between five different houses, "Where are we picking you up from today?" And it obviously takes its impact, but I guess it's not – it may not be the top of their list because they're safe where they are."(QLD NGO)

Leaving the OOHC system and escaping what is seen by many as government surveillance was one reason given for Indigenous care leavers to refuse government housing. The priority was given to reunification and reconnection with community which often results in couch hopping with uncles, aunties, siblings and cousins.

"You haven't got the government looking down at your family and that kind of thing. And I think we're all familiar with past policies and things like that, so there's a lot of

reasons families don't connect with kids that have been taken into care for those exact reasons."(QLD NGO)

"Yeah. Absolutely… they've got their free will then to go find whoever and that kind of thing. They're not monitored or told what to do."(QLD NGO)

Severe shortages of safe and culturally appropriate housing options for Indigenous care leavers was viewed as a systemic barrier having a negative impact on the care leavers ability to be surrounded by strong support networks and preventing feelings of safety, stability and progress towards reunification with family and community.

"In terms of that access to housing and access to opportunities, often – I don't want to use "often" because we don't have solid data – but some of the things that we hear in that space is about young people being put in the position where they've got to – to take up those opportunities, they've got to leave those support networks that they've established. So they might have been most recently in one particular area of a town or a city, and that's where their relationships are. That's where their supports – their interpersonal supports are. And then they say, "Yes, we've got a house for you. It's 60kms away." (NSW ACCO)

In some cases, housing programs acknowledged their program structure was not supportive of Aboriginal ways of being and were resulting in a low number of Aboriginal care leavers accessing their services.

"The proportion of Aboriginal care leavers in that program is much lower. I think that's potentially because of the structure of that program. It being like a large-scale conglomerate kind of housing with quite strict structure around visitors and some of the expectations around living in that program have been not really that consistent with young Aboriginal people wanting to reconnect and stay connected with family." (WA NGO)

"Not every young person wants the housing that's being offered through the provider. So we often end up doing interviews and assessments and engaging with young people who don't necessarily want the service that we're offering, but want a more long-term sustainable housing option where they can live with family or look after their siblings." (WA NGO)

In areas that serviced a high number of Aboriginal young people, there was recognition of the need to have discussions around the long-term suitability of these housing options.

"I guess I'd want to see a bit of consulting happening and like measuring what are the many outcomes that happen if you moved into this house? Who else could come to this house? Who are you going to feel like is going to need to be in this house with you? You know just a cultural approach I guess, so there can be more chances for a successful outcome." (WA NGO)

Ultimately, care leavers are not supported to find and maintain culturally appropriate housing. Without stable and secure accommodation, it is difficult for Indigenous care leavers to address other aspects of their life that would lead to successful transition from care.

Lack of independent living skills

It was commonly mentioned that care leavers are exited from care without basic independent living skills and have not been supported to develop the skills required to successfully manage independence.

"Do they know how to cook, do they know how to pay bills, have they got their payments setup, do they know how to work, or how to go for the interview, and those sorts of things" (VIC ACCO).

"A lot of the kids, they don't know how to cook, they don't know how to clean, they don't know how to budget, they don't have a resume, they don't know about hygiene, just like the basics." (NSW ACCO)

"And, many of our kids spent quite a bit of time in custody, so much of their adolescence has been spent locked up, they have no living skills. They're going to go into independent living and don't know how to use a washing machine, can't cook a meal, don't know how to pay a bill, how to use the new phones. Everything changes while they're away, they come out and everything's strange and they've got all these expectations.

They've got to go report for their income, they've got to go to school, they've got to do this, they've got to do that, and it's not something they're used to or comfortable with. And then, they offend and go back in, because it's safe in jail, it's consistent, it's reliable, they've got three meals a day". (VIC ACCO)

Finding work and a house were viewed as primary concerns for care leavers. Managing a budget was noted as an important skill needing to be incorporated into transition planning.

"The kids they don't really know – in their eyes it's kind of like house and job, I see that's a common theme and that's their idea of success, a house and a job, and a job will give them money, and money will enable them to be self-determine where they want to go and what direction they want to pave for themselves. I feel like money is a big thing, because kids, they get placed with many carers who do it for money, and then the kids have a negative stigma around money. Then, when they get money, they don't spend it appropriately, so that's why they have to do a lot of budgeting sessions, as any young kids do, I guess." (NSW ACCO)

For the Indigenous care leavers themselves, it was suggested that this lack of independent living skills contributed to a feeling of being overwhelmed, isolated, and unsupported. Anecdotally, there have been cases where this has led to Indigenous care leavers self-sabotaging their housing situation.

"But what we're finding about the independent living skills, if they don't have that and we just chuck them in a house, that's when they start self-sabotaging because they're freaking out because okay, you've got me a house, now what?" (VIC ACCO)

This was seen as particularly pertinent when young people were coming from heavily supported environments, where they have not had to learn these skills. This was seen as a failure of the system to properly support that young person for their transition to independence.

> *"They're coming from housing arrangements where they've not had to exercise their living skills whatsoever. So you know, it's just a recipe for a disaster half the time. "(WA NGO)*

> *"To go from being in care having adults looking after you, reminding you to go to your appointments, look after your hygiene, and then to all of a sudden be homeless, and then get your house – like that's – it doesn't work. It just doesn't work. "(WA NGO)*
> *"At the moment, they're just setting up these kids to fail, and the kids don't know anything to go out to the real world, it's just, 'fend for yourself,' that's what I think" (VIC ACCO)*

As illustrated by the following case study, there can be a very deep impact of lacking these skills to live independently, often combined with other key challenges such as familial responsibility.

> *Case Study*
> *An Indigenous female was exited from care into homelessness. After one-year, transitional housing was located for her. Her younger adolescent sister (approximately 15 years old) was placed in her care.*

> *"Unfortunately this young girl is now struggling to learn to look after herself and then also setting an example to her sister that when you get this house, this is what you do with it - she's unintentionally setting a bad example to her sister in the process. And it's just a mess. But you know, obviously we're here to try and – try and make things a little bit more sustainable for her. But unfortunately she is going to be evicted and, you know, that's just the fact." (WA NGO)*

When this eviction occurs, both sisters will be facing homelessness.

These young people are dealing with adult issues at a very young age, after graduating from a system that has failed to support their development.

Family Responsibilities

As mentioned previously in relation to housing, despite growing up in care, family responsibilities are frequently central to the lives of Indigenous care leavers. It was seen that kinship and community expectations around housing and caring responsibilities were a key challenge for Indigenous care leavers that differentiated them from the mainstream care leaver population.

> *"Housing and family and kinship arrangements and high expectations put on young people around the support that they feel they're expected to give to their families." (WA NGO)*

Anecdotally, Indigenous care leavers commonly find themselves caring for siblings and other extended family members immediately after leaving care themselves. Whilst transitioning to independence, they are also learning to take care of others. This was also a finding of our Victorian study (Mendes et al 2016).

> *"I'm supporting one young person at the moment. She is 18 now, but her Pop, who is her father figure, passed away recently. So now she's taking on a caring role for her younger siblings and cousins. So she's got a lot of responsibility on her shoulders now. And she's kind of taken that onto herself." (WA NGO)*

> *"Just from personal experience if we're working with one young person we will often support the siblings whose care order may have been revoked early. So generally we don't just work with one young person in the family; we'll provide support for the siblings as well." (WA NGO)*

As discussed earlier, this is indicative of Indigenous care leavers deep yearning for family and cultural connection, as well as their desire to participate with familial obligations within Indigenous communities. As an example, participants commonly shared stories of Indigenous care leavers putting their family obligations before themselves, actively demonstrating 'what's mine is yours'. In many cases, this need for connection is so important to the young person that it takes precedence over any other concerns, no matter how crucial they are. Looking after siblings and other family members at the risk of losing housing or access to vital ongoing supports seems to be the 'choice' young Indigenous care leavers commonly make.

Education and Employment

Accessing education and employment was seen as a key challenge for Indigenous care leavers. In most jurisdictions there existed programs to support care leaver access to education and employment, although none were noted as Indigenous-specific. Frequently, participants noted that accessing education and employment was inter-related with cultural identity and housing needs.

> *"It means that the youth worker's focus is on engaging the young people in employment and education. But as we've learned very quickly the other domains will impact those outcomes as in housing, health, cultural identity." (WA NGO)*

> *"What we've learned is that a number of our young people have not got stable housing. So the focus on education and employment isn't their main priority. It's about getting stable housing and then looking at all the other domains before we can really focus on education and employment."(WA NGO)*

It was suggested care leavers are not developmentally ready to manage independence at the age of 18 years, especially considering that they may have been in OOHC from an early age, experienced numerous placements, may have experienced trauma throughout their lives, have diagnosed or undiagnosed health issues and be disconnected from family and community. All of these things were mentioned as factors which adversely affect the

Indigenous care leavers' ability to engage successfully and independently in education and employment. It was frequently mentioned that Indigenous care leavers are unlikely to have even finished secondary school.

> *"The vast majority would not be finishing grade 12, so that, for anybody, whether it's a child in care or whether it's not a child in care, there's limitations to young people who aren't finishing grade 12 full stop. So I guess it's really important to note that most of our young people who are leaving or many of our young people who are leaving care, whether they are Aboriginal or not, might – that is definitely, absolutely a limitation to employment. I think it's also the availability of jobs and the lack of experience for some of these young people. But it also comes down to motivation and if we've got young people who are transient, their priority isn't obtaining employment. It's finding some way to put a roof over their head." (QLD NGO)*

> *"Some young people are capable but the majority of them aren't. I think out of my time working in foster care, kinship care and now leaving care, I've supported maybe 70 – 80 young people and probably half of those would be leaving care age. Out of all those young people, I can think of two that have completed year 12. So, education's a major issue."(VIC ACCO)*

> *"The problem I think that we struggled with in the past is that developmental problem which is that often young people who are in the care system have very skewed developmental pathways. Some areas they may be very advanced and some areas in terms of reasoning skills they may have real challenges in and then when you tie that to a certain age of 18 which traditionally has been the case. Up until very recently, you're really only into the very start of middle adolescence or late adolescence and so it's created a cut-off and a significant disconnection that people have". (TAS Gov).*

Without basic high school education, the opportunities for employment and further education are minimal, as reflected in the low number of care leavers in tertiary education (Harvey et al. 2019). It was identified that an important part of transition planning is to try to

understand what the young person's goals are and help them see what supports they need to achieve those goals.

> *"I guess probably setting goals for the young kids. A lot of the kids don't know what they want to do when they're older. A lot of kids don't want to say, finish year 12. So, I guess some goals are kind of getting to know the kid and finding out what they want to do when they're older, whether that be school or getting a job. So, I guess it's starting them early, trying to figure out what they want to do in life so they're not waiting until they're 18 to leave care then they've got nothing to do. They haven't finished school. They've got nothing to fall back on." (VIC ACCO)*

> *"it's about our young Aboriginal kids getting this information early enough, working towards being earning or learning because remember that's a key criteria. So if you dropped out of school when you were in Year 9, Year 10 and since then you haven't been engaged in education, it's going to be difficult for you to take up education. But it might be difficult for you in your teens but when you're 23 you might go back to education. Something might have happened, you might decide you want a trade, whatever that is. But at this point in time, for this program to be successful they need to be letting kids know this is out there really early and if you're thinking about dropping out of school, having a tough time or whatever, that somebody's working with you saying but hey, what about this when you're ready to come out?" (NT NGO)*

As well as minimal educational and employment experiences, opportunities for education and employment were impacted by broader issues around lack of employment pathways and minimal availability of work, particularly in regional areas.

> *"We can refer to local employment agencies that can provide that one-on-one support for young people exploring further education or employment pathways. Again, I don't think it's necessarily Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clientele as such. It's just the whole cohort struggles in that area, one of access in, but also the availability of employment within the region."(QLD NGO)*

Another impact on access to employment and education was what was described as the transient nature of the Indigenous cohort, often because of lack of access to stable and secure housing.

> *"It's difficult to pinpoint what the barriers are. I guess job availability is the number one. The transience does play a part into it if you are trying to engage these young people to connect to a program in a local area and then they start that, whether it's traineeship or further education, then they move, then the program gets dropped. So transience, again, is a major factor, I think." (QLD NGO)*

Participants commonly spoke little of education and employment outcomes often mentioning that other key needs, for instance, severe shortages in housing are taking precedence in discussions of support provision. They mentioned, however, that all things are connected. Without safe and stable housing Indigenous care leavers face ongoing difficulties accessing, participating and achieving success in education and employment. Without successful completion of secondary and some degree of tertiary education, employment options become limited, even more so in rural and remote areas. Without stable and ongoing employment, Indigenous care leavers face difficulties in achieving fulfilling independent lives and with the ripple effect, whole communities and families are impacted negatively.

The combined impact of these multiple and complex issues is that poverty for Indigenous care leavers is a very significant issue.

> *"Our post-care services would highlight poverty as one of the biggest issues for young people post-care. They talk about, I think they provide some backup food parcels and they would say they use routinely and regularly" (SA Gov)*

Female Experience

Gendered experiences and the possible need for gendered support, particularly with cultural plans, was noted, alongside the need for Country-specific cultural knowledge.

"As an Aboriginal person I do not have all of that knowledge that is needed. I am not necessarily from that particular area, and that there is the cultural needs and cultural things that actually happen that you have to have a male worker and a female worker. And I think if organisations and funding bodies actually understand that, that for me, that would be a great reform to actually happen. That you really, really have to have the understanding that there is some parts of a cultural plan, that if it's a young man, you need to have a male worker, if it's a female, you need to have a female worker. And, that is not really being embraced at the moment. It is being taken on and it's being listened to, which is I'm holding great hope into that, but again, it always comes down to the funding factor.

...we have got quite a few Aboriginal workers across the state, in a variety of different sectors , we are starting to form a network. So, that we can actually tap into more Aboriginal people that we can actually get the appropriate cultural knowledge from to actually put into these case plans. (NSW NGO).

In addition to these needs, currently not being met, Indigenous female care leavers were seen as experiencing unique issues, particularly around early pregnancy, family responsibilities and family violence.

Housing issues faced by female care leavers

As well as the general housing issues discussed above, female Indigenous care leavers had unique challenges in relation to housing. Generally, they were seen as more vulnerable when homeless, particularly to abuse and violence.

"Often the women are in vulnerable situations, where they're living they're going to be thrown out of which means a young woman out on the streets is very different to a young man out on the streets in terms of vulnerability, in terms of DV" (NT NGO)

Speaking to this vulnerability, one participant gave an example of a female Indigenous care leaver who was using substances and was homeless. She was engaging in sexual acts with

men in exchange for housing. She then became pregnant to one of these men, exposing her to risk of intergenerational child removal.

Early pregnancy was raised frequently and participants spoke of Indigenous care leavers who would strategically seek to become pregnant in an attempt to secure priority housing.

> *"Young women especially. Their knowledge of what is available to them in certain situations is a lot more tailored towards getting a baby and that's a lot of the conversations that most young girls, especially in care, their ideal around all right I want to be safe, if I have a kid then obviously I'll be able to get a house."(VIC ACCO)*

Another example of vulnerability was female Indigenous care leavers remaining in accommodation with abusive partners due to lack of housing options.

> *"So there is also a partner of the young person, but he perpetrates family violence. At the end of the day, she said it's pretty much if I leave him, where do I have to go in between. So she's putting up with being treated very poorly, because she doesn't have somewhere consistent and safe to be" (VIC ACCO)*

Anecdotally, in some situations, this issue of remaining with abusive partners due to lack of housing options, was supported by what was described as the 'broken' housing system. This was seen as the system allegedly supporting and perpetuating family violence and violence against Indigenous women.

> *"One of the leaving care plans that the department can often approve or set up for young people is actually accommodation with partners. So, we've actually had quite a few young people whose leaving care plan was to reside with a partner. Often that partner, there may be violence, AOD, all of these issues and we've actually stuck, particularly a female young woman, in those domestic violence situations. We haven't found other accommodation options for her alone because she had said she wanted to remain with a partner.*

So, we're actually creating quite complex scenarios for our young people just to be able to put a leaving care plan in place because for the department at least a house is better than no house, even if it's with the wrong person. So particularly we're now in this big climate of family violence and violence against women, a lot of the planning is actually perpetuating those cycles of abuse."(VIC ACCO)

From these examples, it is clear that female Indigenous care leavers at risk of homelessness are facing unique issues of vulnerability to violence and sexual violence.

Early Pregnancy & risk of child removal

Previous research (Mendes 2009) indicates that care leavers in general are more likely to experience early pregnancy. This was identified as an issue also facing Indigenous care leavers.

"I think there needs to be early intervention in regards to education around pregnancy. And we've got a number of young people not – non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, that are – have unplanned pregnancies. It doesn't seem to be raised, and there's not much education around it. A lot of our young people aren't in school where they might receive that education" (WA NGO).

"So, we definitely need them to be preparing them. I've got a client that I just picked up at 17 and doesn't know how to do this stuff and she's with a baby on her own in a house. Doesn't know how to clean a toilet. I just did a life plan with her and I was like, okay, there's a lot to work on here" (VIC NGO)

Indigenous care leavers who become pregnant are at immediate risk of having their child removed, because they are already 'in the system'. In some cases, these women are experiencing complex issues and have not received adequate support to keep their child in their custody.

"I've got a young girl at the moment - I've seen her twice now - she's 18 and she's got a five month old. She was placed in an unaffordable private rental by her provider and NGO. But not realistic that she could sustain it. And she's got major mental health like

bipolar and borderline personality disorder, and drug addiction. She couldn't even get the right parenting payment…. because she left hospital before the birth was registered…. So now the baby is five months old and if you haven't got the birth registered, you can't get the proper payments from Centrelink. So things that should be happening just aren't, and then we look at the next generation of young people getting removed, because they're not being supported." (NSW NGO)

This sense of lack of support for pregnant care leavers was commonly reported by participants. Anecdotally, they spoke of a trend where unborn children of Indigenous care leavers were being reported to statutory authorities, when their only risk factor was that they had been in care themselves.

"Well, we're condemning and profiling a young woman before she's even had a chance to be a mother. And often what we find is a lot of our young women want the chance to be able to do everything for their child that wasn't done for them, so they end up being quite amazing mums. Often they will need support, but that's why we've got things like Cradle to Kinder so that it doesn't have to go through Child Protection. But yeah, we've just very recently had a young mum who was reported for an unborn and literally the only risk factor was that she had a care experience." (VIC ACCO)

"Having really honest conversations with them about what's expected of them as a parent and why they're having to go through that process of going to the pre-birth meetings. Because I find the young people that do have to go through that process, they feel like a real strong sense of powerlessness. Because they were in the system and it almost feels like they didn't get a chance to even prove that they were going to be a competent parent. So they feel I guess very let down in that process, because it feels like – well some of what they've said to me is, "This probably wouldn't be happening if I wasn't in state care." Like if I had no involvement with the DCP, they wouldn't know and I could just go about my life until – I mean if something did start to happen, then it would be brought to their attention. But I guess they feel like they're already failing because they're already getting told what's not going well I guess. Before they've even had the child. So it can be really difficult for them." (WA NGO)

Particularly for those working solely with Indigenous care leavers, this was seen as perpetuating intergenerational Indigenous child removal.

> *"It's really sad because it's then creating another level of stolen generation, because we're initially saying, "All right because you're this, you can't look after a child." Without any understanding around that. You know, there were at least five to six stakeholders wrapped around that young person within their care team. If you have a look at their mother or the father, most likely they didn't have any service available to them or any skills to then be able to look after kids themselves, or people to advise them on that." (VIC ACCO)*

> *"I think we need to change our thinking to be thinking about leaving care as an early intervention service, because the number one reason for a young person going into care is their parents have a history in care. So, if they've got leaving care young people that are having kids, there's going to be a report straight away and then there's like, all goes over again." (VIC ACCO)*

Male experience

There were some experiences mentioned as unique to male Indigenous care leavers, such as high-risk behaviours, drug and alcohol abuse, and higher likelihood of justice system involvement. In order to appropriately respond to these risks, participants suggested that the case management team for male clients needed to be relatable and culturally sound involving Indigenous community members and Elders they can trust. Often this was not the case due to existing funding and service provision arrangements.

> *Case study*
> *A male Indigenous care leaver who was in and out of juvenile justice custody. He was both using substances and then was involved in the distribution of illegal substances. He was engaging in high-risk behaviours (e.g. firearm use) requiring an intensive response. He received services from an Indigenous specific aftercare program,*

however, from a service system perspective, they were seen as consultative/secondary to the primary after care program worker who was non-Indigenous. This was seen as a failure of the system to provide the culturally appropriate and intensive response he needed.

Young Indigenous males were also underrepresented in some leaving care services. This was seen as a gendered issue, in that young men often felt that they had young women (girlfriend or sister) or female family members to look after them and so did not seek out formal services.

"'Somebody will look after me', mother, sister, girlfriend - a lot of the time it's the girlfriend. We have a lot of young women come in looking for accommodation and they have a boyfriend attached to them who isn't on Centrelink. Some of them are eligible for our program but they won't engage in an assessment and they're eligible for Centrelink but they're too proud to take Centrelink and so everything relies on this young woman to be the provider" (NT NGO)

This creates a risk for the young woman who holds the responsibility to care for herself, but also for the young man who is relying on her as the provider.

Crossover into justice system

Multiple Indigenous care leavers are experiencing criminal justice system involvement during their time in OOHC, as they transition from care, and once they have exited care. Participants spoke of Indigenous children as young as 10 years old incarcerated in a juvenile detention centre. Having these early involvements in the justice system would understandably impact a child's ability to engage in transition planning, as well as set them up for continuing involvement in the justice system.

High risk behaviour and involvement in the justice system was seen as a result of trauma, poor decision-making, self-destructive behaviour, mental health issues and substance abuse. Diagnosed and undiagnosed mental illness and disability were explained as contributing factors resulting in Indigenous care leavers being more susceptible to high-risk behaviour. If

a care leaver commits an offence at the time they turn 18 they are at risk of entering the adult justice system. With mental health concerns they are even more vulnerable to abuse and violence within the system and susceptible to lifelong negative patterns of behaviour.

> *"If there's added layers of intellectual disability that sort of thing, it just creates a complex need there and creates more risk of them entering the justice system." (VIC ACCO)*

> *"I think another trend that we found is that we've got a number of young people who have gone through the care system to be diagnosed as foetal alcohol syndrome at 18. And they've already been in and out of detention and they've got involvement with the justice system, and now they're 18, it's the adult justice system, which is a real concern. One young fella in particular I'm thinking of, was actually in residential care and wasn't diagnosed until he was 18."(WA NGO)*

Spending time incarcerated itself is a traumatic experience for a young person which compounds the trauma they may have already experienced, and can contribute to poorer outcomes in terms of the young person struggling to settle in housing, education, employment and more broadly family life.

> *"I've seen them leave care and have become quite dysfunctional. And going from that care system to the youth justice system, and it becomes a revolving door. A lot of young people that I've seen come through the out of home care system have become homeless. There's been issues of drug abuse, you know, they've been abused themselves outside or the young girls having babies early. A lot of the young people, the issue for them is the intergenerational sort of aspect of being in care because their parents were in care. So, that is another layer, I guess, of issues for them*."(WA NGO)

In some extreme cases, workers spoke of young Indigenous care leavers seeking the familiarity of custody or not knowing how to break that cycle of behaviour that leads back to the justice system.

"Then I've got a current plan at the moment that we're struggling with, he's nearing 18, could not get through to him and now he's come to the realisation where he was like, wait a second, everybody's leaving me now, I've got nothing so what's the point. We've just got him a TCP, he's smashed the whole house up and because he's just scared and frightened, so sort of leave what he knows best. And all he knows best is to be in Parkville really."(VIC ACCO)

Although it was recognised that justice issues were common for the general care leaver population and particularly common for Indigenous youths, it was surprising to note that government participants were unable to provide clear data on the incidence of crossover from OOHC into the juvenile justice system. Some notable NGOs working with this cohort recognised it as a prominent issue of intersectional disadvantage that needs good clear data in order to be addressed appropriately.

"This got our attention because we saw that there are similar features of young people in juvenile detention centre, males in care, Aboriginal kids from regional areas with diagnosed and most of the time undiagnosed disabilities. So, disadvantaged young people that have been falling through the cracks of the system. They're just kind of falling over and over; they're coming back. There was a case that the young person was released the same day and 24 hours later came back to prison, there is no follow-up; there is no attention to these young people. They're disadvantaged. But for us it's an early stage. We would like to actually monitor a little bit what's happening there." (WA NGO)

One jurisdictional response to this was to employ a designated worker for the Indigenous youth in the juvenile justice system. Whilst celebrated as an innovation, this is the bare minimum needed for an appropriate response. This perhaps reflects a service system that is struggling to respond appropriately to an issue that needs immediate intervention at a systemic level.

Participants referred to cases where young people in care at 'transition' age became lost in the system as they entered custody. For some this means reaching the age of independence

whilst incarcerated and can result in not knowing about services and supports that are available to them post care upon release from custody, and not having access to appropriate transition planning.

> *"They are incarcerated, that's another one. They're in juvenile justice. So often they just get pushed aside and forgotten about. And therefore they don't get any leaving care, after care support." (NSW NGO).*

Engagement

Engaging with the appropriate services was seen as a key challenge facing Indigenous care leavers. Participants frequently spoke of Indigenous care leavers not wanting to access services. This was seen as a result of a range of reasons, including wanting to return to their community, suspicion of mainstream services, wanting to shake the 'in-care' identity and having poor relationships with statutory services whilst in care.

> *"Aboriginal kids, as we know, quite often disengage before they have left care. And they go home to country, and all that sort of stuff" (NSW NGO)*

> *"They've been burnt so they generally don't have a good engagement rate with other services." (NSW NGO)*

> *"It's a voluntary service, so a lot of our young people actually choose to close at 18, because they're 18 and they're free." (VIC ACCO)*

> *"No, [aftercare program] is non-Indigenous, which I think makes it quite challenging for our kids, because with Indigenous kids, it's all about that relationship building, and if they've decided that they like me or whoever else it may be, they don't want to move past that one worker. And, it takes 12 months - two years before they build up enough of a rapport, and by that time they're almost exiting out of the service, and they've not had the benefit of it, because the Leaving Care's voluntary, and our kids just won't walk in there. And, it's not somewhere they're used to going into, it's not somewhere that*

they feel like they can go and just say, "Oh, I need help." Whereas, they have been coming here, because we have a health service, we have early years, we have a gym, we've got Elders. We cover much of the service sector in terms of what can be provided to the indigenous population. And then, all of a sudden, it's like okay, now off you go. But then, some of the services still remain here, so they just keep coming here, asking things of programs that they can't provide. And, even if you do encourage them, and offer to take them over there, sometimes they won't because the anxiety around a non-indigenous service or new works, is just too much for them, and they'll just miss out, rather than be uncomfortable." (VIC ACCO)

Service Engagement is dependent upon relationships and trust

Participants commonly spoke of the importance of relationships in the engagement of Indigenous care leavers. The availability of supportive social relationships with key OOHC and leaving care professionals, has also been identified by other studies as vital for advancing the social and emotional well-being and stability of care leavers (Muir et al. 2019; Purtell et al. 2016).

Formal meetings with strangers were seen to be an ineffective way to engage Indigenous youth. In fact, it was seen to be a clear barrier to meaningful use of a service. Service provision was more effective when the Indigenous care leaver had an established trusting relationship with the case worker or service provider. This is particularly true for Indigenous youth who live in regional and remote areas.

"One of the main focuses is to try and give young people a voice in that space, so we tend to do a lot of community arts projects to raise awareness of the young people's thoughts, feelings and views on things. There are obviously - I mean [youth agency] have got a consultation thing going at the moment, but for a lot of the young people that really need to express that voice it's really difficult for them to join a formal consultation because their lifestyle is so transient, and interfaces with the department in particularly regional areas is very ad hoc and is really relationship based and some young people connect with somebody and therefore can continue to get good support, but others don't and then feel that they can't access that."(WA NGO)

Indigenous care leavers need consistent key workers with whom they develop a relationship and trust, so that they know who to turn to when they require support. This is frequently not happening in the current system. In the absence of this, Indigenous care leavers are left to advocate for themselves, but are often not in a position to do so. Those who have someone who can advocate on their behalf were seen as experiencing better access to services. However, not every Indigenous care leaver is going to have that designated person in their life who can support them.

> *"One of the other things that has come up is about leaving care – there was a leaving care plan and development. It was through FACS, and he was trying to access what his supports were, and what was incorporated into his leaving care plan. But he went to the FACS office numerous times. No dedicated worker and no one bothered to sit down with him and go through what he needed to do, or what they should be doing. And the carer, who maintained a relationship with him, even though he was over 18, had advocated on his behalf to try and push forward to access what his supports were that were indicated within his plan. And then it got to a level where there was a lot of toing and froing, and it was a young kid that would have given up if he didn't have a dedicated person in his life to follow through for him*." (NSW ACCO)

In order for every Indigenous care leaver to have equal access to support and resources, a trusting relationship needs to be at the core of the work. Developing relationships with Indigenous care leavers was seen as something that takes time and was better developed outside of an office. Unfortunately, the system often isn't resourced or set up to support a long-term relational approach to service delivery for Indigenous care leavers.

> *"Especially for our kids where everything is so relational based and when our kids come into [aftercare] program, the model says okay, you've got six weeks to do assessment, we just can't go there because it's taking us sometimes six months just to build trust and relationship and a level of stability if we're lucky. So definitely, I think that fragmentation has done more damage to the kids."*

"Yeah and the longer you're working with the young people the more you can have those open conversations with them. Young people aren't going to discuss some of their issues about drug use or about what they're doing in the justice system with someone that they don't trust. But I've got a young person that I've worked with for three years because I managed them in kinship before leaving care. And if he's out smoking I can have an honest conversation with him about his use and he'll tell me everything he's doing. But a young person that I might not have that relationship that yeah, they're not going to tell me and then it makes it difficult to work with them with anything." (VIC ACCO)

Participants recognised that often ACCOs have a better understanding and ability to deliver this trusting relationship. Switching from an ACCO to an NGO at transition age, or vice versa, was seen as a barrier to success as the Indigenous care leaver experiences a break in that trusting relationship.

"A lot of the young people don't have trust in services and if there hasn't been consistency and they – for example, young people that have been through the care system with [ACCO] and have [ACCO] case manager with foster care, resi, kinship care, usually transition and engage really well with the leaving care worker because they've got that trust in [ACCO]. Young people that are coming from other agencies, residential and with mainstream and then referred to [ACCO] leaving care, a lot of the times really difficult to engage because they don't have any idea about their culture, they don't have any connection to [ACCO] and a lot of the time it's difficult that they don't trust [ACCO]." (VIC ACCO)

Indigenous youth are blamed for lack of engagement

Participants felt that caseworkers often shift the blame of non-engagement onto the Indigenous care leaver. Rather than seeing the systemic issues that don't support the kind of relationship-based approach needed by Indigenous care leavers, the individual service users were blamed for their reluctance to turn up to meetings, or engage in the process.

"Part of it is around workers having huge caseloads and when we look at Aboriginal kids and Torres Strait Islander kids, pieces of work need to be done over here. There's an assessment tool where it identifies their clan group, their skin name and all that sort of stuff and their connection, how often they return to country and all that sort of gear, but a lot of them haven't got one. They don't have a completed life story book which is a story about who they are, who their connections are and all that sort of stuff, and so a lot of them don't have all that gear leading out to transitioning out of care and most of the time it's left with the residential care workers to facilitate that piece of work and it's not being done. But most of the time it's comments from social workers to say, "My caseload's too big"; "The young person's disengaged"; "The young person doesn't want to engage"; or "The young person's left it too late"; "They haven't come in to meet with me"; or "I've attempted to go out and meet with them but they haven't made themselves available"; and "They've only made themselves available three months out before they turn 18" is one of the common things that is happening that we're experiencing."(SA NGO)

Participants expressed that in their experience, the Indigenous care leaver frequently does want the support and to engage, but is wary and mistrustful of service system involvement in their life due to their history in care.

Wanting to avoid 'welfare' involvement

One respondent commented on the legacy of suspicion of statutory departments involvement in Indigenous communities. This was described as being a result of historical welfare department interventions and intergenerational experiences of family control and child removal. It was noted that this has left Indigenous families feeling disconnected, largely not feeling safe accessing mainstream support systems. Indigenous care leavers who have grown up in a mainstream non-Indigenous care system have often been let down by that system and are keen to be free of statutory/service involvement.

"I guess families have their own histories of intervention with the Department or with the welfare or whoever you like to call it, the native welfare from a number of generations. So, there's all that suspicious aspect going on for our families. So, there's

all that suspicious aspect going on for our families, but there's just this disconnection I think that's occurred over the years. I don't know how to put it – a lot of our families are actually quite isolated as well and they are quite disconnected from support services around the place, also there's that suspicion that's going on. So, accessing some of those support services can be quite difficult for people."(WA NGO)

Some care leavers do not engage with department care leaver support mechanisms initially because they want to disengage with department services and escape surveillance. It was also commonly said that the young care leavers would often self-refer a few months later after finding difficulty with living independently without any support.

"I don't see them accessing many services. And that's because I think a lot of our young people when they've been through the care system are quite suspicious of supports and people providing those supports, and services just generally. I feel that they could sort of maybe gravitate to family or other young people that have been through the same sort of system themselves, and that becomes their support space." (WA NGO)

"One of the other things that has also come up is a sense of some kids, when they get to an age where they're 18, they just want to get out, and get away, and not have that looking over their backs all the time". (NSW ACCO)

"And it's a voluntary service, so a lot of our young people actually choose to close at 18 because they're 18, they're free. For a lot of our resi kids that 18 date had been on their calendar for the last four or five years because that's the day finally, Child Protection can get out of the picture. So, what we actually find is a lot of the kids will have actually closed off all their services the day they turn 18, which is why we have the pathway for self-referral at a later date and we actually find a lot of young people will self-refer back a few months down the track or when they finally realise oh shit, no one is getting me that housing."(VIC ACCO)

"A lot of our young people don't realise what it's actually like to all of a sudden have nothing and no matter how much we talk to them about you're not going to have this

person, you're not going to have that person, they cannot conceptualise what that will feel like or look like." (VIC ACCO)

Not all care leavers want to escape the system, in fact some care leavers want the assurance that the system will still be there to support them when they turn 18 years of age.

So, we actually do find that 18 for a lot of our kids can be quite conflicting and when they rolled out Home Stretch and there was talk about kids being able to extend their time in care, most of our resi kids were like, "Hell no, I'm never signing up for that. I cannot wait until the day I'm 18." Whereas other kids are like, "Thank god, now I have something, so I don't have that anxiety around 18." So, it really is as rich as really coming down to the individual.(VIC ACCO)

Care leavers are unaware of the services available to them

Some participants suggested that lack of awareness of services available was another reason that Indigenous care leavers did not engage. This was supported by anecdotes from aftercare programs who spoke of care leavers coming into their services in their 20s, who had no prior knowledge of what kind of support they were eligible for.

As mentioned previously, successful engagement with services can depend on the individual Indigenous care leaver having an advocate to help them navigate the system, persist with questioning and actually receive help. In many cases, Indigenous care leavers did not have this kind of advocate. When they did, this advocate role was usually performed by an Indigenous person; either a formal advocate, case manager, worker or mentor.

Health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing was seen as a key challenge for Indigenous care leavers. This referred to experiences of trauma, intergenerational trauma, poor emotional wellbeing, mental illness, disability, substance use and poor general health. Participants felt that this cycle of susceptibility to poor health outcomes began with the removal from family and community in the first place.

Complexity

The cohort of Indigenous care leavers were frequently described as 'complex'. This was seen as a combination of various health and wellbeing issues such as substance use issues, mental health, neurodiversity, disability and experiences of trauma.

> *"Certainly the young people that we have been supporting since 2015, there's a really high incidence of FASD. And acquired brain injury. So that complicates the work. And the number of young people that we've supported to connect with disability supports, that's certainly not been easy. And I guess around that transition to independent living, a lot of that can be compromised for obvious reasons. And then again I guess what's different is that it might be that young people have very limited connection to culture and family. And about setting up supports for them to make those connections. So we partner with an ACCO – an Aboriginal controlled organisation, to do that work for young people. So they're an organisation that will have a number of different programs, but it's essentially about mapping for young people that have been in care in particular. Mapping back where their families are and I guess supporting them to understand and connect with where they belong. And potentially connecting with people through that process as well" (WA NGO)*

Lack of connection to culture and its impact on identity formation was seen as an added layer of complexity that impeded good outcomes for Indigenous care leavers.

> *"Sometimes young people are exceptionally settled in their care arrangements and other times they have complex needs that are presented in terms of their experience of trauma and mental health and disability and that's exacerbated I guess for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who might also have that on a background of intergenerational trauma and displacement from country and community." (ACT Gov)*

Participants also described working with Indigenous care leavers who displayed quite extreme behaviours, which was seen as a consequence of this complexity, such as violent behaviour, fire lighting, anti-social/criminalised behaviour, amongst others.

> *Case Study*
> *An ACCO case managing a 14-year-old Indigenous boy in care. The young man presented with extreme behaviours such as fire lighting and carrying and using weapons in a threatening manner. He suffered from insomnia and developmental delays (but did not meet the criteria for intellectual disability). He was engaged with a clinical psychiatrist to explore diagnoses such as OCD and ADHD. He was disengaged from school and required a high level of support. (VIC ACCO)*

Cultural disconnection and identity formation: an added layer of complexity

A key component of the complexity of Indigenous care leavers was their experience of disconnection from culture and how that impacts their identity formation as they grow up in the care system. Participants spoke of the difficulty facing Indigenous care leavers who may not have been supported to connect with family or community, or not been provided a safe space to explore their Indigenous identity, or even have it formally recognised. Struggling with identity; who they are and how they fit in the world, as they approach transitioning to adulthood, was seen as an extremely vulnerable time for young Indigenous people.

One example was provided whereby a young female with trauma related mental health issues was certain she was Aboriginal all her life but was advised one day that her Aboriginality was not confirmed and so she was ineligible for Aboriginal support services and had to deal with her identity repositioning alone as she was exiting care.

> *"These kids, when they're ready to talk about it, it's like a floodgate. They will let it rip and you guys have got to be in a position to do that. And there's been instances here where - I'm thinking of one girl there, she was struggling with her identity alongside some mental health and then some trauma and all that sort of stuff, and closing the link on her confirmation of Aboriginality is a big thing here over in Adelaide. A lot of the kids in care, they don't have that confirmation and so this young particular girl, she*

knew - she knows she's Aboriginal. She's got connection to family, but she needed to get a confirmation so that when she leaves care she can apply for ABSTUDY and all that sort of stuff that comes available, but again DCP were slow off the mark to get that done as well, and it went to - you know, Aboriginal Legal Rights have got a board where they meet and they can do confirmations and all that sort of stuff. That took a long, long, long time and it came back that it was insufficient evidence to suggest that this young person was of Aboriginal descent.

And so for her she - all through her DCP life she's always said, "I'm Aboriginal. I'm Aboriginal," but she's never ever had that confirmation. Then all of a sudden the agency rings her up and says she's not Aboriginal. What a time to deliver that when she's about to exit and she's got all of these other issues going on with mental health and all that sort of stuff, so - and then there's also the loss and grief over that. Always thinking that you're Aboriginal but then someone to say to you, "Well, there is no linkages within your line" is big, so I think there needs to be a bit of work around that stuff for our kids, that trauma stuff and leading up to care and what's in place for them around that stuff. They seem to rely on CAMHS throughout their journey in care, but once post-care what's available? There doesn't seem to be too much available in terms of supports around that, is the stuff that we're seeing here."(SA NGO)

Undiagnosed conditions

Participants felt that Indigenous care leavers were dealing with significant levels of undiagnosed health concerns within the OOHC system. This compounds the adversity faced by the care leaver, leaving them exposed to homelessness, violence and the juvenile justice system and the adult justice system. It also means that the young person is not receiving the appropriate level of support they need for a successful transition into independence.

"Majority of our young people have some form of intellectual disability due to the traumas that they've experienced while in care and initially why they were taken off their parents. Most of it would be I'd say undiagnosed. They'd fall in between the spectrum. The majority of our young people aren't at the level to then have the diagnosis." (WA NGO)

"I don't have any statistics for this one, but I do believe that a number of young people we come across with, I won't call it 'disability' but I will rather call it 'unmet health needs', whether this is mental health, whether this is then some sort of intellectual disability or something else - I don't believe that we have enough information to be preparing to work with them around it. I actually think that we're trying to gauge with them where is the issue, what's the problem, and that also links a little bit with the question now."(WA NGO)

Issues then become not only around lack of funding and resources to support a young person with complex issues, but also a lack of diagnosis. When young people are not diagnosed in care, there may be difficulties in engaging those young people in assessments during the transition age, either because they are not interested or because they want to be free of service involvement in their life once they have exited from care. Post transition from care, other barriers arise the least of which is the high cost of neurological and other assessments which may or may not be covered by a transition plan.

There was also recognition, however, of the fact that Indigenous people disproportionately face additional diagnosed health or disability issues.

"And the other thing that happens for young people with disability is, we have a disability program that works really assertively to ensure they have a post-care disability pathway through the NDIS. Because Disability probably hasn't received as much attention as it should have in Child Protection, but the numbers are really high, of children and young people. I think it's probably sitting around, I mean we would say 25 to 30% of children and young people have a significant developmental delay or disability, but you say around 25%, it might be ultimately when we've finished our program, we could have some regions that are getting close to 19% of kids having a NDIS plan.... And obviously Aboriginal children and young people in care, I think there's been research that suggests that their rates of disability are higher than even the general in-care population." (SA Gov).

Mental Health

Poor mental health for some Indigenous care leavers was seen as a direct outcome of layered disadvantage; experiencing trauma, abuse or neglect, growing up in OOHC, and being disconnected from their culture and community. There is an identified need for culturally appropriate mental health supports that takes into consideration all of these issues.

> *"All of the young people that we have could really benefit from that kind of intensive culturally appropriate mental health support, if I was creating a wish list. That would be great, it's just a major gap." (WA NGO)*

> *"There's no real clear understanding of what good mental health provision looks like for young Aboriginal people. And I think that's a gap across the system. And probably even more so for care leavers who are probably less likely to want to trust and engage with the current system and the way it works". (WA NGO)*

Young people who have mental health issues then need to have this taken into account to support them while they are transitioning out of care in order to ensure that transition processes do not trigger mental health problems:

> *"Now I heard a young Aboriginal girl in one of our forums, she got up and she told her story. She said they told me when I was 17 and I had to leave. She said I didn't know where I was going and what I was doing and where I was going to go, who I was going to go to. She said that just triggered off her mental health issues. She said I haven't been the same since. It's those sort of things we really need to be aware of. And we really need to be talking to the young person every couple of days and just making sure that they're okay, and they're still okay with what's going to happen to them when they leave care". (WA NGO)*

In some cases, participants spoke of young Indigenous care leavers who had attempted or committed suicide, a concern raised by a recent Victorian study into the suicide of children

and young people who were known to child protection (Commission of Children and Young People 2019b).

A key theme that emerged was the sense that the process of removal and experience of living in OOHC was deeply impacting Indigenous care leavers' self-esteem and hope for the future. The process of transitioning out of care can be extremely overwhelming. It is difficult for Indigenous care leavers to aim high and to work towards success when they have suffered significant and continued trauma in their lives. The trauma of being removed from family and the trauma experienced while in the OOHC system, affects deeply their ability to envision a brighter future for themselves.

> *"A lot of young people don't back themselves, they don't have great esteem, they don't think that they're worthy of opportunities and good things in their life and they don't strive for further qualifications sometimes because they think that they haven't experienced success before, they've had a fractured journey through education, they mightn't feel as though they have the basics to build upon or the other things and don't have the supports around them to manage their progression through extra studies."(QLD NGO)*

Trauma

Unresolved and ongoing trauma can instigate high levels of stress for individuals and all those around them. When left untreated or unsupported, this trauma can be passed knowingly or unknowingly from one generation to the next. Indigenous care leavers who carry the burden of lived trauma, can experience difficulties with decision making, attachment and maintaining successful and supportive relationships in the mainstream and Indigenous community. Unresolved trauma has been found to impact negatively on all aspects of a person's life and can especially affect a child's development (Healing Foundation 2020).

The cycle of trauma was referred to by respondents as the driving force behind the removal, the experience of removal itself and at times, the experience of additional trauma whilst in care. At the time of transitioning out of care, ongoing or unresolved lived trauma was seen as

contributing to behavioural changes such as exhibiting low self-esteem, low confidence levels, acting out or aggressive behaviour.

Participants who worked solely with Indigenous care leavers particularly recognised the role of trauma; seeing past trauma experiences contributing to delayed developmental capacity and impacting the young person's ability to make safe and reasonable decisions as they transition to independence.

> *"That past trauma, it's just such a big effect on them that they're truly - it's a difficult time to get them through what they need to do to be living independently" (NSW NGO)*

> *"A lot of kids have had severe trauma, been too exposed to a lot of negative experiences, and you can see it, like behavioural change. A lot of the kids are getting suspended all the time, they're acting out, they just show all the different traits, like physically, emotionally. You can see, spiritually, that they're impacted too, on a lot of different levels. Their confidence is low, self-esteem, yeah, just a lot of different things." (NSW ACCO)*

> *"These kids aren't bad for the sake of being bad, they've been through some horrendous things, and they are big and scary and loud on the outside, but on the inside, they're scared little babies. They're just little kids and they don't know how to respond and they just want everyone to go away, because that will be safer. How to help community understand, that's what we need, how to manage that, because the more we manage it, the less times it will happen. Make the whole community therapeutic, that would be the ideal." (VIC ACCO)*

> *"I think with a lot of young people leaving care, they need to see that these things are in place, particularly if they've experienced trauma, which a lot of our children have, even just being removed from the family that's a traumatic experience, they can't cope with too much change and that then sets up another trauma". (WA NGO)*

Organisations that worked with an exclusively Indigenous cohort spoke of seeing high numbers of young people experiencing additional trauma once placed in care.

> *"I hear so many stories of kids who are in care, and I've met kids who have been through care and they come out the other side and the carers are horrible. There's just too many. I just don't understand how many horrible people there are out there. It seems to be all the horrible ones that want to be carers… the whole system just needs a whole big service of accountability. People are just getting away with murder, really. The carers are allowed to abuse the kids, and then the kid's taken and nothing happens to that carer, at all, legally." (NSW ACCO)*

> *"And I know it is within my own program, that Aboriginal kids are being sexual and physically abused in care, quite frequently. And that it looks - we're expecting that there'll be a Royal Commission into it and a class action." (NSW NGO)*

There was an identified need for Indigenous-specific, culturally and trauma-informed therapeutic healing programs to support Indigenous young people in care and leaving care.

> *"Our mentors are trauma-informed and aware, so they understand, I guess, the complexities and challenges that the young people come across, and how to help deal with and manage those emotions to navigate through the world." (NSW ACCO)*

> *"We just had Aboriginal organisation open up to residential care, specifically for Aboriginal children to do Aboriginal cultural – it's a therapeutic trauma-informed service. So, we're working closely with them at the moment, so we only started with them about two or three months ago, two months ago. They opened up two residential care units." (SA Gov)*

Intergenerational Trauma

A key aspect of trauma identified by participants was the experience of intergenerational trauma otherwise known as the cycle of Trauma or 'Trauma Trails' (Atkinson 2003). In many cases the young person in care is one of many generations within their family who have experienced being removed from community and family. It was identified that this collective

unresolved trauma and continued experiences of fractured family and community relationships was a heavy load to bear for Indigenous care leavers.

> *"Recognising the displacement that Aboriginal young people have often experienced coming into our system and the need to assist them through re-establishing and supporting their cultural identity, in addition to that, their needs are similar to what's being presented in the rest of the out-of-home care population, and that's variable. Sometimes young people are exceptionally settled in their care arrangements and other times they have complex needs that are presented in terms of their experience of trauma and mental health and disability, and that's exacerbated I guess for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who might also have that on a background of intergenerational trauma and displacement from country and community. (ACT Gov)*

> *"Question: You mentioned the stigma… The stigma that organisations can have towards the department. Could you expand on that a bit more?*

> *Answer: Look, it wasn't so much organisations, it's the Aboriginal community. So DCP are the ones that are taking their children. So, there is a stigma around that about working with DCP because when they do take the child DCP is still hovering over the top and they don't want to be under a magnifying glass all the time, 24/7 because some of them have just come from that or were stolen generation. So that's the stigma that's around, DCP, the Aboriginal community". (SA Gov)*

> *"I guess families have their own histories of intervention with the Department or with the welfare or whoever you like to call it, the native welfare from a number of generations. So, there's all that suspicious aspect going on for our families, but there's just this disconnection I think that's occurred over the years. I don't know how to put it – a lot of our families are actually quite isolated as well and they are quite disconnected from support services around the place, also there's that suspicion that's going on. So, accessing some of those support services can be quite difficult for people. But then you know trying to reconnect with young people that are being involved in the system, that*

can be quite difficult as well. So, there's just a number of things I think that's occurring for the families and for the young people". (WA NGO)

Substance use issues

It was identified that some Indigenous care leavers go on to struggle with alcohol and other drug use. This was seen as a self-medicating coping mechanism to managing pain, trauma or an underlying undiagnosed mental illness. Substance use issues end up impacting the care leaver's life and the lives of those who they are close to in a range of different ways, particularly making them susceptible to family violence, the removal of their children, homelessness and involvement in the justice system.

"I've seen them leave care and have become quite dysfunctional. And going from that care system to the youth justice system, and it becomes a revolving door. A lot of young people that I've seen come through the out of home care system have become homeless. There's been issues of drug abuse, you know, they've been abused themselves outside or the young girls having babies early. A lot of the young people, the issue for them is the intergenerational sort of aspect of being in care because their parents were in care. So, that is another layer, I guess, of issues for them."(WA NGO)

"Because I don't have the capacity to work intensively with someone, but to try and make sure this person has the best start once leaving custody, they're 18 and I don't want them to re-offend or go shack up with an old bloke and go on drugs, I've got no choice but to work intensively and I've got to do that."(VIC ACCO)

"But yeah, but housing is I think one of the big stress issues. Supporting them between being homeless, you're probably going to want to go use substances as well. How else are you going to deal with the stress of not having somewhere to live and six days in this refuge and then waiting for another hostel or something to be open and moving their belongings here, there, everywhere? There's just not enough support for our young kids."(VIC ACCO)

Mobility

Participants identified that Indigenous care leavers in particular were a transient cohort and that it was important to provide services that support the mobility of Indigenous care leavers in the system. This is particularly true for Indigenous care leavers who have family living in different rural and isolated communities within large states like WA, NT and QLD.

> *"There are different reasons why they're transient. One can certainly be the young people especially if Aboriginal they have family connections in different areas, even in regional areas for example, but then moving from one community to another, from one town to another or multiple cities or multiple towns, so it's a different concept of home compared to the Western perspective, so it's just the way it is and we need to accept this." (WA NGO)*

> *"There are other factors around accommodation, employment, family conflict, even accessing services because in some regional areas young people won't access services because they've got family there that know they need services, so they might drift to a different area to access services." (WA NGO)*

> *"From my end in [regional town], many times you'll have a very transient community. So someone could be here for a week but then be in another town for the next week for a period of six or seven weeks or whatever."* (QLD NGO)

> "*Yeah, it's usually family so they'll have family in WA or QLD, usually, they're the two major places our Aboriginal kids go. Yeah, it's because they've got a family and a community there. But they're often transient in terms of, "I'm going to live with my family in Katherine" or whatever but they're back six months later spending some time in Darwin and then they're going to go back to where they were. I mean that is just normal transient nature of kids who have family everywhere." (NT NGO)*

Services which could provide support for Indigenous care leaver mobility expressed this as a key strength in their service provision.

"Another strength of leaving care services is that we all work really well together, the three services. So if the young person moves between areas we'll prioritise a case transfer so that they're not lost."(WA NGO)

It was suggested a good model involves supporting the strengths of local Indigenous community organisations who know and have existing relationships with the Indigenous care leaver. It was suggested agencies collaborating with each other to support locally based organisations and the mobility of the Indigenous client was an example of a successful model.

"Then for example we have a young person who for the first time they engaged with us in Port Hedland, but his drug use was getting to a point where he then went to a detention centre in Perth. His case originally was based in Geraldton. You imagine to really get track and keep the story going just with those regional movements, then we engage with the young person for the pre-release meeting in the detention centre. We facilitate for - we're part of that because he aged out of care meanwhile in the detention centre, so then we facilitate for him to link back into Port Hedland, although he was from Geraldton and that the plan was developed in Perth, he will have a way to connect to an agency or a network of support after being released back in the community, and it will be - then our partner agency will be supporting the community order that he will be doing back in Port Hedland, but what I'm trying to show is there is a network of support that is based on community based agencies, and that it's probably what fits well and seeing clients that are moving across regional who can keep the story across the regions." (WA NGO)

In-care placement experiences

An Indigenous young person's experience of placement (numbers, duration, type) was seen as impacting their ability to manage life as they transition to independence. Participants observed that Indigenous young people were not only entering care at a higher rate but were likely to stay in care longer and less likely to be restored to their families (AIHW 2020: Table S47; Family Matters 2019: 32-33). Anecdotally, participants felt that Indigenous young people

were experiencing higher numbers of placements than non-Indigenous children and were more likely to end up in residential care.

> *"We do have probably a higher breakdown of placements with Aboriginal young people… they end up going to resi and I couldn't tell you where they go from there. So that's probably more common amongst the Aboriginal young people." (NSW NGO)*

Although residential care services are staffed by workers, it was seen as the least supportive place for an Indigenous young person in OOHC.

> *"It starts from as soon as the kid comes through the door in residential care…. what a carer's presented with; how do they work with this child at the start. But it doesn't happen properly. The carers are guessing how to work with the child's trauma and they don't know the risk they're carrying because the kids just come from like a family member even though it was probably horrible, but he's coming to someone in a space in an institution that rotates staff, so there's no attachment. There's no real attachment. " (SA Gov)*

It was identified that these difficult OOHC placement experiences were negatively impacting on the young person's readiness and ability to successfully transition from care.

Summary

Broken connections to community, family and culture was seen as the primary issue facing Indigenous care leavers, and consequently addressing this disconnection was seen as paramount. Reunification processes, starting early in care and supported by highly skilled and knowledgeable cultural workers was seen as important. In the absence of reunification, strong connections to culture, family and community are essential to support Indigenous care leavers successful transition to independence.

Housing was noted as one of the most significant issues facing care leavers. Culturally appropriate private and public housing options particularly near family and support networks were described as scarce to non-existent. Rural and isolated areas have even less accommodation options. Indigenous youth who want to go home to country commonly have to choose to take up housing in the city or go home to country. In this instance, housing options that are available can act as a barrier to successful reconnection to family and community. Commonly when talking to respondents about housing, they would say the young care leavers were more often "transitioning into homelessness."

Health and wellbeing was seen as a key challenge for Indigenous care leavers. This is related to lived and intergenerational trauma, poor emotional wellbeing, mental illness, disability, substance use and poor health generally. Their health issues were described as complex by service providers, made more so by a disconnection from family, community and culture. Female Indigenous care leavers faced issues related to early pregnancy and child removal as well as risk of family and sexual violence. Male Indigenous care leavers were at risk of engaging in high-risk behaviour and crossing over into the justice system at high rates.

Indigenous care leavers struggled to engage with services, for a range of reasons, including the culturally insensitive approach, and a desire to be free of what was sometimes seen as 'surveillance'. In addition, the system struggled to appropriately respond to the mobility of Indigenous care leavers, and poor experiences in care were contributing to the difficulties they faced transitioning from care.

Theme Nine: Good Practice

Whilst universally recognising that the aftercare system is failing Indigenous care leavers, participants did recognise some examples of good practice. The following sections outline the key themes that emerged in relation to good practice. These examples often reflected a recognition of the existence of good policy and a need for those policies to be consistently and universally put into practice.

"Q: And would you have any comments to make about the strengths of the current leaving care system in your state?

A: Strengths.

Q: I don't know. You can say there's none if that's how you feel. It's all - you're de-identified in our reports. You can be honest. But yeah, if there is anything that you feel is working well and that could be part of some best practice recommendations.

A: My silence says everything" (SA NGO)

"You know, for me what's working well, what I've only seen working well was like that comment around My Health where they actually stepped up to the plate and they took ownership of it, which in actual fact they didn't need to do because that was the responsibility of the appointed guardian. And in that case the appointed guardian, it seems like, didn't have - I can't use - didn't have an idea, but it just seemed like with - I don't know what it is. When these kids come to the age where they're ready to move on and move out, in particular Aboriginal kids, it seems like pieces of work are left really late and it takes NGOs to step up to the plate and say, "This is not right. If you're not going to do it we're going to do it," and that's the only thing that I've seen to work really well with some of these Aboriginal kids coming out, is that other invested agencies seeing that well, if this is not going to be done then who suffers in the end is the young person leaving care really, so we've got to do something about it". (SA NGO)

"It's not even just Aboriginal care leavers, I'd say after care services are an afterthought. Like it's right way back in everybody's priority. And resourcing, I think, is evident of that. And then you put Aboriginal care leavers on top of that, and I guess it's quite complex. How do you fix something that's so broken? I think that's what they just don't know how to tackle." (NSW NGO)

Extending care

Extending the age that young people leave care was seen as good practice for all children in care. It was seen as a way to provide an integrated, holistic continuum of care into adulthood and a way to scaffold the young person as they transitioned from a youth to adult welfare/support system.

"One of the benefits of providing this support for young people post 18 years, whether that's intensive case management support or whether that's ongoing support to the carer to sustain the placement, is that the case management component comes at a time when young people are typically transitioning in mainstream services from a youth based service to an adult service, and so what this allows for is a bridging of those two systems rather than what might've happened in the past where there's no longer case management support being provided by the child protection system and so that navigation becomes the young person's responsibility." (ACT Gov)

"The payment of a subsidy post 18 is best practice support I think. So the fact that that exists and the fact that we provide funding to our NGOs for young people up until the age of 25 years where they can come back and receive the support that's tailored to their needs at that point in time. Young people that are in out of home care also have a therapeutic assessment and a plan coming from that, so it means that the needs that are being met are based on the therapeutic assessment that has occurred within the context of their care environment, and that's reviewed regularly as well. So that's an important element." (ACT Gov)

"I would say the increase to 25, firstly – or even 21 with the ongoing potential of support to 25. Depending on the kids - age is one thing, it doesn't deem if you're ready or not. Age doesn't automatically give you that knowledge or skills that you need to know for after-care, so the kids, they really need to have a structured plan. Depending on the individual, it's like case by case, depending on where the kid's at. Financially, they should be backed until they're 21 and then with ongoing plans to 25, but, unfortunately, that doesn't happen." (NSW ACCO)

"The idea now … in terms of leaving care, that whole process from 14, 15 in terms of the initial steps, in terms of taking on responsibilities for some of their own choices and those sorts of things and then following that through to age 21 and engaging with different services. That's certainly where the plan for this in terms of family services, the Aboriginal Housing Corporation, the new Aboriginal liaison roles will be part of that" (Tas Gov)

Maintaining connections with family

Participants felt that good practice meant programs were heavily focused on supporting Indigenous care leavers to maintain strong connections with family. This could be reunification with family whilst in care, or appropriately supporting a return to family post care. Participants also felt good practice meant supporting children to maintain contact with family and extended family whilst in care, which would ultimately support a return to family post care.

As an example of good practice in this space, one Aboriginal participant described a reunification program that was culturally based and trauma informed. The program involved working with the young person while they are in care. Understanding that the parents are often still living with mental illness and/or living with past or present trauma, the program was designed to also support the parents to reconnect with the young person in a culturally safe way.

"What we provided was a really good sort of therapeutic support base for the children and mum and dad, and also a very good cultural base. So, supporting them both in a culturally appropriate way but also in a trauma informed therapeutic way. What happens is, when a lot of our children are in care and they're leaving care and they are wanting to go back home, family are not prepared or they don't know how to relate to the children. So, there's this disconnection that's occurred while children or young people have been in care and are transitioning out. A lot of them don't know how to reconnect back with family. And so, the young people have their own trauma, the family has their own trauma. So, it's helping them to make sense of those two issues, those common issues and then how to get them to understand each other's perspective and then working in a way that helps them to reconnect, I guess, therapeutically but also culturally. I've heard that quite a number of young people talk about that, like they have this disconnection and they know who their family are but they don't know what the first step is to go back to their family and how to reconnect with family. And then family are not really prepared for how the young people come back, and a lot of them come back and they had trauma issues. So, it's helping to understand some of those things, I think, for the young person and for the family."(WA NGO)

Maintaining connections with family members as the transition process commences was seen as crucial to the ongoing and lifelong wellbeing of the Indigenous care leaver. So involving family in the ongoing transition process was seen as best practice.

"It's probably only been two young people that I've seen that have been super strong and that have probably more so had good family or good links in with the community during their time in care. The young people, I guess, go through their own cultural transitions as well. There's certain information that I'm most definitely not privy to, but there's certain information that gets passed down to our young people when they're ready to receive it and that just happens to be the case for our young people that seem to be living more independently and doing well and have a stronger identity and connection with family and community and culture." (QLD NGO)

"We have an Aboriginal cultural tool developed that was about saying, "Who are all the people in the life of a child? How do they contribute to that?" So, this is for Aboriginal children and young people, "How do they all contribute to that young person's connection to community and culture, and to extended family?" And so, all young people in care complete that. And we're reinvigorating very strongly the ATSICPP, which as you know is about participation and partnership and connection. And so, in reinvigorating that and having that in our Aboriginal Action Plan, and strengthening that across our service system, it is not just a hit and miss thing. I mean, how that translates into practice is a much longer conversation, obviously, but the intention is not hit and miss". (SA Gov).

"That's what we're doing, even when young people move from Kimberley to Perth, from Perth to northern, to so many other regions. And sometimes when we get feedback from the department because our resources are very limited and sometimes we cannot action a referral within not even two months sometimes, but in saying that, when I asked the department to send the referrals I'm asking them to send them because the window of opportunity for them to engage with leaving care services is when they turn 15 up until they turn 25. There is a huge window of opportunity for them to … and connect with the network of support … offered in regional." (WA NGO).

ACCO & Indigenous community involvement

Participants across the board felt that best practice meant meaningful collaboration with Indigenous organisations and communities. This was at all stages; when formulating policy and services, as well as being responsible for or involved in the delivery of leaving care services and programs, particularly cultural plans and transition plans.

"The whole premise of what we're trying to do is improve outcomes, so hearing from ACCOs around how we can make sure that whatever we're developing in terms of practice advice or guidelines or the model itself appropriately supports Aboriginal care leavers." (VIC Gov)

"We had a practice advice working group yesterday where ACCOs were present again and then, giving us very clear feedback around what they need basically. They're calling out for guidance and information, a toolkit basically, so it's exciting that we're finally going to have that. Yeah, it's going to be great."(VIC Gov)

"[ACCO] provides family-based care, and they also provide residential care for young people, so they're the primary provider of out-of-home care that we have. And they also, because they provide both family-based care and residential care, they don't provide kinship care, but they do have the ability for young people to move between those forms of care, which is a very positive opportunity, really. And they've been very good in stabilising quite complex young people. They have quite small residential care houses, like they're three-bedroom houses, so they're not large; they're more like a home environment in which you have rotational staff." (SA Gov).

"The organisation also has their own cultural people and advisors, and they work very strongly in partnership with our staff as well. So, they are obviously, as an ACCO, very keen to be involved in kids' connection to country and community and culture, as are we. So, it's not a replication of effort, really; it's a consolidation and a partnership in regard to case planning and meeting the cultural needs of kids in care". (SA Gov).

When ACCOs and Indigenous communities are involved, participants felt that the end result is a more culturally safe service provision, which was seen as the absolute centre of best practice for Indigenous care leavers. Participants felt that meaningful cultural support mechanisms, experiences and opportunities to develop relationships with Elders and communities could only be delivered via ACCOs and Indigenous community involvement. Meaningful cultural connectedness was seen at the core of strong mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous care leavers and a key contributing factor in enabling success and happiness later in life.

"I think culturally appropriate responses are best practice, allowing the community or the Aboriginal community to lead in some of that and to guide that."(WA NGO)

"I think the cultural support, cultural knowledge, cultural information, or a cultural person that they could access to support them, so that they – who would have an understanding of what it would be like for them to be an Aboriginal coming through the system, and having a person who would be culturally aware of their circumstances, and what their needs are when reconnecting back to family. (NSW ACCO)

"In terms of best practice, you would have to suggest that - well, it's not even best practice - a starting point would be to be making sure that all Aboriginal young people in care "have the Aboriginal - with cultural support plans and the goals and actions that are identified in those plans come to fruition."(VIC Gov)

Indigenous workforce in all facets of leaving care

Good practice within non-Indigenous organisations was seen as utilising the services and skills of Indigenous staff to support the needs of Indigenous care leavers as they transition out of care.

"I guess it's the connection and just networking with other organisations out there and linking up with agencies, especially within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait corporate backgrounds. I think I've met another lady from [organisation] who works as an Aboriginal advisor there and I guess just linking up with her and being able to provide that to the young person so that they have access to that afterwards and knowing who's out there and knowing what's available would be something to provide to the young person". (QLD NGO)

"I think it's important to build the Aboriginal workforce in leaving care services. I think, you know, we've intentionally done that in the [transition program] because I think, you know, there's some cultural knowledge that Aboriginal staff bring that is really helpful to – to smoothing the transition and accessing things like family finding and connection to culture and identity, that Aboriginal staff are best placed to do. So I would say that particularly with the mainstream services, is a – something that needs to be in place. I think a workforce development program."(WA NGO)

"Well yes, intentionally recruiting high quality Aboriginal staff and not just for them to work with young people – Aboriginal young people, but to influence the culture in the whole organisation and to be able to I guess use their knowledge and cultural expertise to – to assist other team members."(WA NGO)

"I think as well, I guess as Aboriginal staff, we have lived experience and they can see that in us. And I guess they see us in helping roles and it helps them aspire to – I guess, get into a career like that as well. Some of our young people – our young Aboriginal people have told us that they want to get into community services so they can be in similar roles as well. And I find – I guess we do encourage our young Aboriginal people to be proud of their identity and their heritage because there is stigma attached to is and it's – I think that's something that they really need, to be honest. I think that helps." (WA NGO)

"I'd like to see the Aboriginal Practice Leaders being more involved. I'd like to see more of them as well. Well especially because they've been working with them long before this program, a few of them. So the relationship is much stronger. And for some of our Aboriginal kids that don't engage - they already have that relationship with their young person. So that helps us to form a relationship with the young people as well." (WA NGO)

Indigenous workers and mentors

Participants indicated that good practice meant ensuring Indigenous care leavers had connections with and access to Indigenous workers and mentors. This helps the young person to feel understood and supported.

"I think it's really important to have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person available to meet and do that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people". (QLD NGO)

"Especially as an Aboriginal person, are then significantly easier to engage with and then you get better outcomes. They want to engage with you because they can relate

to them. One of the first questions they'll as you is, "Are you Aboriginal?" If you can say, "Yes", it makes your job easier. (VIC ACCO)

Indigenous mentors were also seen as an important aspect, to be role models to Indigenous care leavers. This could be Elders in the community or other members of the community who could provide care and support, to connect back to community and be an ongoing presence in the young person's life.

"What I'd love to see is that for the young person there was somebody there for them that could mentor and support them that was Indigenous that could help with that linkage to culture but then could also, if we weren't hitting the mark, somewhere could go, "Hey little Joey is really struggling with this, can you -"... "This would really help him if you could do that". Because sometimes - I don't know, is it communication we struggle with? I'm not sure. And somebody that was there for them that connected to their culture as well, that also understood the system and the way we work, so that they could help to make that fit a bit better." (NSW NGO)

"The child needs a mentor. I couldn't express enough how powerful mentors are. That mentor needs to help that kid transition out, stick around, teach him how to do things and be that real strong support. The mentor needs to - if not the person, if he's not Aboriginal then that mentor connecting him or her back to community, making sure it's a safe place… Because from here, the case manager's still involved for a while, but the case manager is not a mentor." (SA Gov)

Engaging Indigenous care leavers with community Elders was seen as a way to keep young people connected with culture and learning what it means to be a young Indigenous person. A lot of this work is done through ACCOs working in this sector.

"*It's wonderful and it's been an opportunity to engage Elders to work one-on-one intensively with these young people as well. Although we haven't had miracle outcomes, the value of that to connect them to give them a sense of belonging has been phenomenal." (VIC ACCO)*

"She [Elder] understands and just gives the kids a lot of that love. That love, the kids love it. For example, Aunty is in a walker, she's got a little walker she cruises around on, and the kids they always go out of their way to help her lift up her walker or open the door and hold it for her, and are just really really respectful too. It's showing them, culturally, what's right." (NSW ACCO)

Connecting to country via cultural camps

Cultural camps on country were viewed by a number of respondents as a transformative tool to engage Indigenous care leavers with their culture and community through the involvement of ACCOs, Elders and Indigenous community members. They reported that Indigenous care leavers appreciate the experience meeting other care leavers and community members. Cultural camps can help the Indigenous young person to re-engage with family and Indigenous community support systems. Camps also have the opportunity to improve self-esteem and give Indigenous care leavers a sense of identity and place in their communities.

""We've run a bunch of cultural camps... just to see these young kids engage in culture and we have Elders and to give them an opportunity to be a mentor and go to camp with younger kids as well. I've met kids who have later come into my program and I've already got that strong connection with straight off the bat due to cultural camps.

Like, it's just amazing, to see them come together, they're meeting other young people who are going through the same or similar things and they support each other. It's always a calming environment and I think camps also give us a good opportunity to work with the kids and build that relationship as a community and organisation with these young people. So that's another positive outcome.

All these camps have been without incident. We've had about half a dozen across two regions and sometimes, three regions. The Elders, being amongst each other, building, connecting has had profound, I think impact. Yeah, it says a lot I think about what's important about Aboriginal young kids and what they need. "(VIC ACCO)

Culturally safe service provision

It was agreed by participants that the cultural needs of the Indigenous care leaver cohort are unique and require culturally appropriate responses across all facets of the sector. Participants recognised that good practice for Indigenous care leavers was tied closely to the existence of good quality cultural plans. This was covered extensively in Theme Four.

A culturally appropriate response to Indigenous care leavers went beyond good cultural plans, it meant that culture needed to be considered within every aspect of service delivery. Some participants felt that this was not possible in mainstream non-Indigenous organisations, working from a non-Indigenous framework.

> *"It almost seems that they cannot use mainstream services. Our (Indigenous) young people at the minute in WA is well-acknowledged to be overrepresented in homelessness services, in detention centres, so then our cohort is a high priority because out of the most vulnerable they are even more vulnerable, so it's - anyway, just going back to what is my opinion in terms of whilst they're in care their location system doesn't seem to be very responsive and you link again with the rapid response. How can they bring solutions, targeted approaches that can help them identify things earlier? How can we, because - well, we probably see that we just go to the detention centre and try our very best to do release meetings and really bring the young people back in the community, but we know that they are already walking on the edge. Trying to hold them so that they don't fall." (WA NGO)*

Participants from Aboriginal organisations and some participants from NGOs felt that best practice in relation to culturally-embedded and appropriate service provision could only be achieved through handing care of Indigenous children back to Indigenous communities.

> *"So, there should be more Aboriginal controlled organisations for their kids. We did it for over 65,000 years, we've helped out kids, why can't we do it now?" (NSW ACCO)*

It was suggested non-Indigenous organisations do not necessarily have a thorough understanding of Indigenous family experiences of past government welfare department policies and practices which have caused intergenerational trauma for Indigenous families. Non-Indigenous organisations, whilst well-intended, may not understand the depth of trauma experienced by Indigenous families and therefore not have the capacity to service them with enough sensitivity and care.

> *"I think that's some of the issues that I have. Some of the issues, you know, not really being respectful of Aboriginal ways of working and not really being respectful of the young person's story or the family's story or understanding the impact of colonisation and the impact of intergenerational trauma that a lot of our young people carry with them even though they don't know that they have trauma. So, it's helping them understand that but also organisations understanding that as well. I see that quite often in my line of work. But I think we have the opportunity now to change some of that thinking and they're coming from our own cultural knowledge base."* (WA NGO)

It was suggested culturally sound service delivery would best be achieved by going into Indigenous communities and visiting family's homes. Service delivery face-to-face, on country, and in family homes.

> *"A lot of our families, they don't have the capability or are able to access services for one reason or another. But I think if we're going to be culturally appropriate, we need to go to where the families are and sit with them in their homes, where they're comfortable within their own environment and you know talk about what's happening for them and make it really informal. We try and do a lot of support work within a western framework, and you know that really doesn't work for our families because that's what we've been conditioned to do. But I think where I've had success in some of the work that I've done throughout the years, it's where you go and you sit with the family in their own home, or you go out to community and you sit with people under a tree in a community. And it's those sort of things that I think we need to be looking at and how we provide that in a cultural and responsive way. That's respectful and that builds trust and that's relationships, how you build those relationships."* (WA NGO)

Culturally sound Engagement Approaches

Participants felt that there were changes that needed to be made to service delivery, model and framework of organisations in order to make it culturally safe, allowing an Indigenous care leaver to appropriately engage. Indigenous workers spoke of the engagement strategies that they utilise in order to help an Indigenous care leaver prepare for meetings.

> *"Even us preparing them for the meetings that they go into, so they have an idea of what they want to talk about and what they want to ask for, as part of their care plan meetings."(WA NGO)*

Similarly, one respondent commented on having Indigenous spaces within organisations where the Indigenous cohort can feel safe engaging in meetings and actually understanding what is being discussed. This respondent suggested the language used in consultations, and the cultural appropriateness of the engagement was crucial.

> *"It's like having Aboriginal places involved in organizations is really, really important for many, many reasons. We've got issues there of transgenerational stuff and there's that whole lack of trust and other stuff I'm sure you guys are aware of, but it really does start to close that gap a bit and I think it's around how we're explaining different things to the young ones. You'll find a lot of Aboriginal people that will say yes to most things, but probably only understanding about five or 10% of what anybody's actually saying. So I think it's actually how we are explaining what the support is to how it actually works, that kind of stuff, but that it could be a bit to what Will's saying as well where maybe that's a process, moving forward or even in the future, that it's an area of that cultural connect for them in a way that they're able to then grow from that and actually become comfortable and not so transient."* (QLD NGO)

The role of Elders within programs to create connections to Aboriginal communities and cultural safety was noted as a feature of certain programs that were working well:

"So historically we've had a lot of young people hitting 18, 17 and a half and being essentially transitioned into the homelessness space. … housing I think has quite strong connections with community. And so some of the clients coming through into that program have a real need for housing. And are comfortable enough to contact it because we obviously have a really strong Aboriginal Elder in that team. And so I think those family networks create that safety to connect with the program. That's often not a referral. It's driven by the Department.

And those young people have come from a mixture of backgrounds. Resi care, kinship care, and often some of these young people are completely disengaged from the Department and have been since about 16. So they're either a bit older, 18 or 19, or some of them are referred by other services and not the Department at 16, because they've identified there's a need for housing. So I think yes, housing has a much broader mixture of backgrounds of young people. And I think the success of that program has largely been due to its strong connection to community, I think. And the focus on trying to get young people housed for a longer period." (WA NGO)

"...so 35% of our staff are Aboriginal staff. So I guess – and as an organisation, like I talked before, a huge majority of our clientele are Aboriginal people. So [program] has done a lot of work and continues and will continue to do a lot of work around creating culturally safe places and practice. So I think that that's what has been critical in – it's one thing to be referred young people, and it's another to be able to retain and continue the relationship of support. So yeah, I think just in general our relationship with the local Aboriginal community and Elders therein has been ongoing and strong for a number of years. So all of those things I think kind of interplay with the success of being able to support those young people and them feeling that they're somewhere safe." (WA NGO).

The need for trauma informed care

Related to culturally appropriate care, participants identified that Indigenous specific, trauma-informed care is best practice, in recognition of the intergenerational trauma

experienced by Indigenous families who in many cases have had repeated care experiences through generations.

> *"So, supporting them both in a culturally appropriate way but also in a trauma informed therapeutic way. What happens is, when a lot of our children are in care and they're leaving care and they are wanting to go back home, family are not prepared or they don't know how to relate to the children. So, there's this disconnection that's occurred while children or young people have been in care and are transitioning out. A lot of them don't know how to reconnect back with family. And so, the young people have their own trauma, the family has their own trauma. So, it's helping them to make sense of those two issues, those common issues and then how to get them to understand each other's perspective and then working in a way that helps them to reconnect, I guess, therapeutically but also culturally." (WA NGO)*

> *"I think trauma too. We've got to realise that a lot of our young people, their brains don't finish actually maturing and developing until they're about 25. We need to have someone walking alongside them to help them or to facilitate them making some good decisions about themselves."* (WA NGO)

> *"Our mentors are trauma-informed and aware, so they understand, I guess, the complexities and challenges that the young people come across, and how to help deal with and manage those emotions to navigate through the world. The case workers don't really – they don't completely understand, especially being - all our staff are Aboriginal, and they all have an out of home background, so they understand. They can give them advice from learned experiences, personal experiences."* (NSW ACCO)

Utilising a relational approach

Participants frequently referred to the importance of relationality when supporting Indigenous care leavers. They indicated that best practice focused on building strong and trusting relationships over a flexible time period and providing the young person continuity of care with a familiar care team or organisation. They felt it was important for the young

person to know they can trust and rely on a person/organisation and weren't required to retell their story in order to access the support they need.

> *"Building the relationship I think is core and a lot of the time, not feeling heard, not feeling that they're validated and having that opportunity to build relationships and genuinely listen to them and hear what it is that they're going through is really important, which I feel that - I think is something that we do at [NGO] - quite highly do."*(QLD NGO)

> *"It's so important that it's relational and we can build through the relationship opportunities to address those primary needs and therefore then build on that and work on education, self-care, living skills and that." (VIC ACCO)*

Relationality, when supporting Indigenous care leavers, extended to relationships with community and organisations as well. It was seen as important to create a support network to scaffold an Indigenous young person when they are leaving care.

> *"I talk about relationships a lot. I think the relationship with the young person - and you can still have that and have boundaries. So definitely - and I find the more that you can kind of work with young people like that, the more they respect that. And relationships with your support network I guess around people… that will help you to get better outcomes for these young people." (NSW NGO)*

> *"The other thing I want to say is, in Indigenous social work now we're talking about relational approaches. We need to build relationships. We talk about partnerships but it's really relationships that's the key to how we're going to work culturally appropriately with young people and their families."*(WA NGO)

> *"We've talked about connection, the importance of connection, so building those connections before they leave care and maintaining those connections after care as much as the young people want and always being available to them because we know that young people drift in and out of wanting support. So, they need to have that*

familiar face, known relationship, trusted relationship to try and come back to an access". (QLD NGO)

Holistic & flexible approach

Participants noted that good practice meant programs needed to be holistic, incorporating a variety of aspects such as cultural identity, independent living skills, education/employment, health and wellbeing, etc. This was frequently spoken about in conjunction with the need for a flexible approach that could meaningfully adapt to the individual needs of the Indigenous care leavers. In some cases, this was mentioned specifically in relation to Indigenous young people being used to a higher level of independence and this needing to be considered in terms of their 'fit' with current services.

"I guess it's around that flexibility within the provision of services… without all of those kinds of rules and regulations and things. I guess the majority of young people that we have on our program that are Aboriginal probably had a lot of independence. So to come into those systems where it's really kind of regimented, it's just not a good fit. So yeah, certainly really mindful around the flexibility of services" (WA Gov)

"To be able to deliver the resources that they need, because they do have additional needs or challenges that they might face. So it's got to be flexible to tailor those and target those issues, but deliver through the sorts of things that exist in their community." (ACT Gov)

"The service is very needs led and needs focused, so depending on the cohort we're working with and what their identified needs are we model and change the service to meet those needs. We have a youth consultation group that help direct us in that space, but if we trends where we've got a number of Aboriginal kids that are looking to do like a leadership course or something, then we might do something in-house to upskill those young people so then they can go on to do those more mainstream kind of leadership courses and stuff." (WA NGO)

"So that sort of creative and flexible approach to meeting the young people's needs is an example of good practice and that sort of connection. And people talk about metacentric models not working in the regions. Well, they don't. But an overarching model where an external agency partners with local providers that have local knowledge, local capacity, is a connection that's needed. You listen to the young people; you listen to the voice of the community; you work out where the strengths are; you help that young person identify who best to work with; but then you support that local service to build capacity" (WA NGO)

"The needs based approach, which is flexible, it's organic, it's needs based because the number of young people who age out of care every year is different. It's different in terms of their needs, in terms of their number, in terms of the challenge every day." (WA NGO)

"We run a small program from one of the agencies that really focuses on those young people that are probably hitting adolescence, that are running home. But we've set up a program that basically provides support to the young person, but also the family to help, I suppose, address some of the relationship issues, like the anger that the young person feels, and the guilt and that, that the parent feels around the child coming into care. So, it's not only about providing support to young person, but it's actually providing support to the parent, to support reunification efforts in what's really quite a difficult age, fourteen to seventeen, really. The program focuses providing support to those particular families" (SA Gov).

"If you can sustain young people in stable accommodations, connect them up with education, make sure that they have an adequate support system around them that their outcomes in terms of being able to be successfully independent and avoid involvement with justice system and reduce the extent of disconnect with the community. You have to actually to plan a process which occurs over time. We haven't been delivering that. We certainly acknowledge that some young people have become so disengaged that they actually leave before age 18 and that doesn't produce desirable outcomes at all. There's definitely a need to improve what work they're doing

and to make sure that our approach is one that says, what are the needs of this young person and how can they best be met around their particular needs rather than saying, "This is what you need to do, what you need to fit in." (Tas Gov)

This need for flexibility was also discussed in terms of its application to the whole service system and having a funding model that allowed an individualised response to funding for each young person.

"It's really about the degree of flexibility that we can build into this model given what we know about the destinations, post-care destinations of young Aboriginal care leavers. And we want to make it absolutely as flexible as we can, but it's so multi-layered and there's so many things to consider" (VIC Gov)

Mobility of Indigenous clients was often mentioned as a key area that requires flexibility in service provision. A service that could follow a client as they move from different jurisdictions was viewed as a strength.

"Obviously, you've already identified that this cohort is extremely transient, so one of the strengths of the model is that if a young person was say up in Hedland, drifted across to Broome, they'd be able to call us and we'd be able to link them in to some of our local networks there. Equally so, if they find themselves in Perth then we can link them up with a youth worker directly here and help them make some stability to their transient lifestyle." (WA NGO)

Flexibility also meant an open-door approach to service provision where young people are able to dip in and out of a program as their needs change. Responses of this kind tended to be made more in relation to general care leavers and therefore a reflection of the adolescent age group rather than being comments made specific to Indigenous care leavers.

"I think there needs to be possibly more flexibility in young people not engaging all the time. Lots of young people go their own way and we need a system that allows an

open-door system that allows them to come back when they're ready. And not a timeframe on, you know, we haven't heard from you so you're out." (WA NGO)

'I think from my perspective, we as an organisation are given a lot of flexibility in – in our case management model to connect with more than just the young person, and connect with family members and significant others who are important to that young person's support group, and not – you know, like you never just work with the young person, generally. Another strength of leaving care services is that we all work really well together, the three services. So if the young person moves between areas we'll prioritise a case transfer so that they're not lost.

Just having knowledge of what services are out there that are accessible for Aboriginal people. Like we've had some young people experience issues with housing, so we've accessed things like the [name of program] which is the private rental assistance loan program for Aboriginal people, to pay rental arrears. We've also accessed the [name of program]. So they help Aboriginal people that are at risk of being evicted… So some of our kids access counselling services through them. And just being aware of any – yes I guess health services that are Aboriginal specific, like [name of program]. Yes, just having the knowledge of the services that are there for Aboriginal young people." (WA NGO)

"Well I think best practice is that – and I think part of the home stretch campaign is leading to that, that the door is always open. The department is the legal guardian for children until they are 18. Basically, they're the parent of that child. So, if that was your child would you shut the door to them when they're leaving home at 18? No, you would leave the door open for them to come and go and to be part of things for a while until maybe they're 25 or 30 when they're matured enough to actually stand on their own two feet. So, I think that's best practice."(WA NGO)

The need to adapt programs for Indigenous care leavers

Participants frequently described their own programs as 'responsive' and 'based on need. However, that was generally in reference to working with all service users in an individual

way, rather than referring specifically to the need for non-Indigenous programs to adapt service provision for Indigenous service users, despite a recognition that they made up a disproportionate amount of the client group.

When participants from non-Indigenous NGOs could identify adapting practice for Indigenous young people, it was usually around recognition that working with the individual meant working with extended family members (i.e. partner, siblings, parent or even close friends) and therefore enacting a 'whole of family' response. This was seen as an important component of working with Indigenous care leavers

> *"I think we work more with family [when working with Indigenous care leavers]. Often a non-Indigenous kid will come in, especially the 21, 22-year-old, they're already set up, they're looking for something for themselves. Often if we're dealing with young Aboriginal people there's either a child involved or a partner involved, or a parent or something, and so we find you naturally have to work with them to be able to assist what the young person wants." (NT NGO)*

> *"If we are working with one young person we will support the siblings who may - whose care order may have been revoked early. So generally we don't just work with one young person in the family' we'll provide support to the siblings as well". (WA NGO)*

> *"We as an organisation are given a lot of flexibility in - in our case management mode, to connect with family members and significant others who are important to that young person's support group, and not - you know, like you never just work with the young person, generally." (WA NGO)*

Early transition planning

Participants frequently stated that best practice meant starting transition planning earlier for Indigenous care leavers, with some suggesting that this process needed to begin as early as 12. Frequently the suggestion was that it should start at 15. This is the current policy, however infrequently adopted in practice.

"But ideally that should really be the planning for these young people the minute they enter care is what are doing to make better individuals, better humans, better family members."(VIC NGO)

"We've definitely noticed that the need was to start earlier and that there was an early intervention, to begin those conversations and to begin preparation at an earlier stage rather than leaving it for the very last moment. So, again, a lot of those young people that I'm currently working with, they vary from 15, 16 to 17. So, if we can try and prepare them and give them as much resources and information and linkage to services out there, then that I think, is a positive, rather than leaving it for the last moment where we rush things and they're feeling anxious about leaving care."(QLD NGO)

"We're trying to do transition work with young people from the age of 15 onwards across our service…. we have about 60 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people within our service of all ages and [Aboriginal cultural worker] does work specifically with those young people which one could argue is contributing to their knowledge base and preparation for life beyond their time in care".(QLD NGO)

"It's not uncommon for it to be quite rushed at 17 and a half and then suddenly we're getting involved with the department then at six months prior to exiting care. So it's just that from 15 onwards process, I think, would be better and possibly too if we, as a [aftercare program], were able to commence that at planning from an earlier age than opposed at the moment where we'll meet them at 15 or maybe three months out from their 18th birthday."(QLD NGO)

"Support earlier on. I think when they get to a certain age and they're set in a way and they're basically living day to day just to survive and like you said, the older they get the more scared they get. I think if we have those supports earlier on, we can work with them through that and prepare them better with every aspect. Not just when we get to them at 17 years old, we're just basically okay cool, let's keep you alive, let's

work on your drug and alcohol, let's keep you out of prison. That's basically what it is and then we can't work on all the other stuff. And then if that finally gets fixed we get to the stage where they're 18 and we're like crap, we haven't any leaving care with you or independent living sorry, because we were just" (VIC ACCO)

"Like, we have 13 – 12 year old's who one of their biggest anxieties is where am I going to live at 18 and yet the department goes, "They're not ready for leaving care planning yet." We're not having those conversations. But that doesn't turn those kinds of thoughts off for our young people. A lot of the behaviours are actually coming from those uncertainties. So, we need to better-equipping placements to do that work." (VIC ACCO).

"Q: You were saying earlier that the plan for many of the aboriginal young people leaving care was to start preparing them at 14 which I think is early. Usually I think it's around 15 years 9 months. Was there a particular reason for that earlier preparation for that?

A: That was the policy that was developed in 2009. That was I think to acknowledge that there were particular demands on indigenous young people. That we actually need to get ahead of the game and a recognition that the outcomes for that group weren't certainly ideal at that time. I'm not saying they're ideal now but by actually doing that planning early we're actually starting the processes." (TAS Gov)

"I think there's some really good practice across the state… I think that needs-based, individualised approach is what works, that community connection and natural occurring support networks needs to be enhanced and supported and recognised as needing to be supported, because it's all right being able to discover them and find them, but to resource the support to keep that support network is not recognised at the moment… Because of the diverse experience of young people in care, but also the geographic distances and the individual regions having their own challenges, I think you can't go past the very similar model to what we already do, but we only do it on a

very small scale. We would like to be able to invest more resources into that and support into that...

I mean services need to work in collaboration with the department when the young person turns 15 because developing that relationship with the young person is the key to any successful transition. If you know that they've got somebody that they have a connection with, whether that be a person particularly or a connection through a person to a service or an agency that is going to be around until they turn 25, it offers a level of consistency and support and confidence for that young person. Those sort of steps. I think it's imperative that that work gets done at an early age. Historically, the barriers at the moment is that services still get referrals just before young people turn 18 and expect them to pick them up when they're already in crisis". (WA NGO).

Summary

Participants recognised some examples of good practice within a failing system. Universally, participants felt that care should be extended to 21 or 25 years for all care leavers.

Particularly for Indigenous care leavers, culturally safe service provision was seen as best practice. This means meaningful collaboration with Indigenous organisations, Elders and communities when formulating policy and delivering leaving care services and programs. It also means employing an Indigenous workforce and improving service provision to be both culturally sound and trauma informed. Good practice also means supporting the Indigenous care leaver to connect with family, culture and community at all stages of OOHC, particularly through the transitional stage. Cultural camps, mentors and connections with Elders were also seen as examples of good practice.

When working with Indigenous care leavers, a trusting relationship should be the basis of working with a young person, and the approach should be holistic, flexible and adapt to need. Universally, participants felt that Indigenous care leavers needed to start transition planning early, between 12 and 15 years, to allow a relational approach and to support independence.

Theme Ten: Participant Recommendations for policy and practice reform

As well as identifying good practice within the existing system, participants identified clear recommendations for policy and practice reform.

National Approach

In recognition of the inconsistent approach to leaving care between states and even within states, some participants called for a uniform national approach to leaving care.

> *"Yeah, I just think it would be good through the research, I guess, to have a national approach to – and I don't know whether the Home Stretch campaign is going to be part of this or what comes out of that Home Stretch campaign. It might add value to this scoping study but certainly I think it has to be a national approach because the states – and we have this problem in [state], where the head office and the Department says one thing but the districts and the regions departmental officers do whatever suits them at the ground level. So, the head office might have something – what am I trying to say – they might have policies in place or ways of working that are trying to be best practice for Aboriginal people, but when you get out to the districts and the regions it's a quite different approach and they do what they think and what they want and what suits them at the time. It can be quite difficult. So, if there was a national approach, it might bring some consistency and some continuity to how we support our young people leaving care."* (WA NGO)

Focus on reunification

Some participants felt that a greater emphasis should be placed on prevention and early intervention to keep Indigenous families together in the first place. Whilst not directly related to the leaving care system, the suggestions were based on the recognition that good intervention early on in the continuum of care will have a positive impact on leaving care outcomes.

Some participants suggested that ideally transition and reunification planning should take place as soon as an Indigenous child is placed in care and that the goal firstly should be to provide greater support for Indigenous families to stay together. Comments were made that it is unacceptable and should be far less common that an Aboriginal child be removed from their family as a baby and remain in care till they are 18 years of age.

> *"They wouldn't be kept in care in the first instance"(SA NGO)*

> *"if they do it right when a young person or a child comes in care from the beginning, right from the beginning, and I've always said this in my line of work, that when a child comes into care, there already should be a reunification plan starting to be done, even if they're a baby. We shouldn't be having kids, babies in care until they're 18 years old. The maximum should be two years. Those things are really important that we start looking at those systems that are in place already that, I guess, set up young people to fail really when they do leave care*. (WA NGO)

> *"It should be early intervention and preventative strategies before they come into care. Identifying what are the needs, wrap-around services to make sure that's not something that down the line if this a wanted service that then the numbers are dwindled down so we're not hitting those 20 to 30 clients over a 12-month period. That would be the initial thoughts, but if that is the case and there is a need then at least one to one house to target, I think that would be an initial strategy that would be able to better service the sector."* (VIC ACCO)

Self Determination for ACCOs

Self-determination for ACCOs was noted as a key issue to be addressed in the sector. Participants overwhelmingly felt the current system was failing Indigenous young people and that Indigenous communities can provide the appropriate care if given the necessary space and resources to do so.

"So, there should be more Aboriginal controlled organisations for their kids. We did it for over 65,000 years, we've helped out kids, why can't we do it now?" (NSW ACCO)

"We're quite capable of managing, but if we have our people working with our people, I think we can do some really great things and support our young people to become the next leaders." (WA NGO)

"I really think that there has to be self-determination for ACCOs to be able to design their own programs for young people and that's not within the parameters of what already exists within mandated guidelines. Like, we're told, "Yeah, do what you want as long as it meets all these requirements." Even this morning I got told that we had to take all our leaving care plans off [ACCO] templates and put them back on departmental templates. Exactly the same information, ours are actually more thorough, but they had to be on a DHHS template. For our young people, I want to be moving away from that. So just being able to let the community make plans for their own young people I think is so important. And the other thing I think is just mandatory referrals to ACCOs. If it's an Aboriginal young person in mainstream service, I think it should be non-negotiable, they need to be referred to an ACCO."(VIC NGO)

Universal access to culturally appropriate housing

With housing recognised as a key challenge facing Indigenous care leavers, many participants called for more access to culturally appropriate housing.

"Actually, leaving care planning's another one. The majority of young people are coming across that don't - have very limited or no leaving care plan. So that's another one, if we had less case load, if we had housing attached as well would be great."(VIC ACCO)

As well as housing, participants felt that Indigenous care leavers should have access to a well-designed, culturally-responsive independent living program.

"So if I could describe an ideal sort of scenario it would be that - and I've only heard a couple times where this has happened - where at the age of 15 they're referred over to the Independent Living Program. They do really well there. They're set up and by the time they have spent that time in Independent Living Program and they're about to transition out, they have their own property identified and then they move into that space and then they're supported to maintain that property and then eventually they will maintain it themselves. So that's an ideal scenario where they move into their house and it's their own and it's what they call their forever home." (SA NGO)

Universal access to leaving care services

In recognition that in some cases Indigenous care leavers are falling through the cracks and unable to access leaving care services, participants felt that any Indigenous child who spent time in care should be able to access leaving care support.

"For our young people who have – who haven't met the requirement for leaving care services, which is to be under a care order, over 15 – so if they're what the Department calls 'unendorsed placements' or if they return to family, my hope would be that they could come back to leaving care services regardless of when – when their care order finished." (WA NGO)

Leaving care processes embedded into OOHC service delivery

Embedding leaving care processes into the existing care services at an early stage of care was mentioned as an idea for improvement. This could mean appropriately resourcing the existing care teams, residential workers or foster and kinship carers to take over the leaving care processes, with the leaving care worker to act as a guide, rather than transferring this stage of care to a new person, organisation or sector.

"I actually think that to get better outcomes for our young people we need to be embedding leaving care planning and preparation for exiting care into the placements of these young people. To be honest, running residential care, it doesn't matter to me whether I believe in care worker or not attached, because if the carers are doing their

job they're preparing the young people for leaving care. I believe it's the responsibility of the kinship carers, the home base carers, the residential carers to be doing this work. The leaving care worker should just be there as a resource and a guide to be able to help navigate that." (VIC ACCO)

"And the number of young people who have any real active support from a case manager is fairly low, which means the foster carers or the kinship carers have very low support as well." (NT NGO)

OOHC/Leaving Care Savings Account

In recognition of young people approaching leaving care age with little to no savings or ability to support themselves, it was suggested by one participant that a leaving care savings account be started for that young person from the moment they enter care and the savings amount reflect the length of time spent in care.

"I've just been wondering whether the young person goes in care - and I don't know how this gets shaken out - but whether through the process, that there's a small monetary value that gets put into a savings account for that young person so that when he does hit 18, if they're in care for 18 years of their life that there's some assistance there that can help them financially, that a certain amount of money has been put away on a weekly basis for them when they get out of care."(QLD NGO)

Summary

Participants provided recommendations for policy and practice reform for Indigenous care leavers. Firstly, that there be a national approach to leaving care to create a uniform response to Indigenous care leavers across Australia. There were recommendations for a greater focus on reunification to prevent poor outcomes for care leavers.

It was also proposed that an ACCO-led self-determination framework be introduced as they are best placed to provide appropriate care and service provision to Indigenous care leavers.

Additionally, Indigenous care leavers should have universal access to culturally appropriate housing and leaving care services, regardless of time spent in care.

Part Five: Discussion & Recommendations

Discussion

Young people transitioning from OOHC are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. Their pre-care experiences which have resulted in them being placed in OOHC, their often poor OOHC experiences, their accelerated transitions to adulthood, and their lack of post-care support leave them vulnerable to a significant number of negative outcomes. Indigenous young people are over-represented at all stages of the child protection system due to a range of factors including past policies of forced removal of Indigenous children from culture and community, intergenerational trauma arising from these policies, and resulting socio-economic disadvantage. Consequently, they often have different needs and experiences to their non-Indigenous care leaver peers including dislocation from culture and kinship structures, and experiences of racism. This formative research project investigated the numbers, programs, needs and outcomes relating to Indigenous care leavers across Australia, with a view to scoping the current state of affairs, and identifying initial good practice principles for supporting this group of young people.

Our first aim was to clarify the number of Indigenous young people leaving OOHC in each State and Territory. It appears that Indigenous care leavers comprise a disproportionate number (approximately 34 per cent) of total care leavers. However, this calculation is not a straightforward process given that the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) figures count 15-17 year olds, whereas a number of jurisdictions seem instead to count 16-18 year olds. Also it is unclear whether these figures include both young people who return to live with their families, and those who transition into so-called independent adulthood. Additionally, it seems that many Indigenous youth self-exit from care at 15 years old or younger, and are not included in current statistics. It is imperative that a nationally consistent leaving care data system be established that enables an accurate identification of Indigenous leaving care numbers for each jurisdiction.

An associated objective was to identify the specific levels of funding provided to support services, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to assist the transitions of the large number

of Indigenous young people. It appears that funding levels are inadequate, and except for the dedicated Aboriginal leaving care program in Victoria and one ACCO in Queensland, there seems to be little if any leaving care or after care funding allocated specifically to ACCOs.

Our second aim was to examine and compare the existing policies and programs aiming to support Indigenous care leavers in each jurisdiction. We found evidence of inconsistencies both between jurisdictions, and even within different regions of the same jurisdiction. This included the uneven application of Home Stretch reform trials whereby five jurisdictions offer forms of extended OOHC till 21 years, and three jurisdictions do not. Most notably, there seems to be very limited to no application of the ATSICPP to transition from care planning.

As noted in our scholarly literature (e.g. Atwool 2020; Fast et al. 2019) and grey literature review sections (e.g. ACT Community Services Directorate 2018), there is an international consensus that advancing connections for Indigenous young people to culture and community facilitates positive identity development and consequently smoother transitions from care. Yet, we found that many young people either do not have cultural plans when exiting care, or that the plans developed are of poor quality. Indigenous interviewees stressed that cultural planning should be led by Indigenous organisations or individuals with specialist cultural knowledge.

Previous research has found evidence of poor transition planning for all care leavers. For example, Wave One of the Beyond 18 study based on an online survey of 202 young people aged 16-19 years in the State of Victoria, found that only 46 per cent of care leavers and 22 per cent of those who were still in OOHC, had a transition plan. Overall, the report concluded that 'young people were frequently not involved in formal, structured planning about their future' (Muir & Hand 2018: v). Similarly, Wave Two of the Beyond 18 study based on an online survey of 126 young people, reported that only 33 per cent of care leavers and 22 per cent of those still in OOHC had a transition plan which suggested limited engagement with the transition planning process (Purtell et al., 2019).

Our study constructed good transition plans as commencing early, being holistic in nature, targeting independent living skills, supporting relationships with wider social and community

networks, and including key transition areas such as education, employment and housing plus a strong connection to culture. These plans would preferably be developed by ACCOs that understand the specific cultural needs of Indigenous youth. Nevertheless, it was felt that poor transition planning was more commonplace, and that this contributed to poor outcomes for Indigenous care leavers including a risk of homelessness and involvement in the juvenile justice system, and for females, the threat of exposure to family violence, early pregnancy and child removal.

The overall service system was described as having limited capacity to support any care leavers, particularly the Indigenous cohort. This was due to a number of factors including inadequate resourcing, widely varied eligibility criteria, confusing referral pathways, very high caseloads resulting in worker stress and burnout and high staff turnover which undermined the potential for supportive relationships with young people, and particular pressures placed on Indigenous workers working within non-Indigenous organisations and structures. Additional barriers for Indigenous youth included lack of accessible services in remote areas, communication and language hurdles, and an absence of cultural sensitivity.

These service system failures amplify the importance of greater Indigenous community involvement in service provision, either directly via ACCOs, or alternatively by Elders or an enhanced Indigenous workforce within non-Indigenous organisations. The need for partnerships to be formed with ACCOs to ensure more culturally appropriate services for Indigenous youth has also been recognized by the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (ACT CSD 2018).

Our third aim was to probe the outcomes for Indigenous youth leaving OOHC in each jurisdiction. A key finding was that many young people experience a broken connection with family, culture and community. However, some young people are able, with the assistance of Indigenous specific locally based programs, to successfully reconnect with kin and country on leaving care.

Other challenges for Indigenous care leavers include accessing stable and affordable housing that is culturally appropriate given that Indigenous youth may want to share with family

members rather than living alone; exiting care without acquiring basic independent living skills such as cooking and budgeting; needing to take on responsibilities to care for younger siblings or other family members; and accessing viable education and employment options. As already noted, Indigenous females have particular struggles pertaining to securing safe housing free of family violence or abuse, the risk of early pregnancy and losing children to the child protection system. Indigenous males may be vulnerable to substance abuse, or engagement with the criminal justice system. Both genders appear to have poor physical and mental health reflecting unresolved trauma.

Our final aim was to identify examples of good practice in supporting Indigenous youth leaving OOHC. These included the extension of care till 21 years in some jurisdictions, programs that supported the maintenance of relationships with family both in and when leaving OOHC, and particularly the active involvement of Indigenous organisations, communities, workers and mentors in the delivery of leaving care services including preparation of cultural plans and transition plans.

An overriding recommendation was the introduction of a self-determination framework into the leaving care space so that ACCOs are given the resources and authority to develop and lead culturally appropriate support programs for Indigenous youth. Other more discrete recommendations within the existing system included development of nationally uniform leaving care policy and legislation, and a much greater emphasis on early intervention, either to prevent removal in the first place, or alternatively to enhance the prospects for family reunification at a much younger age.

Recommendations

Policy Recommendation One

That the OOHC sector embraces a greater awareness of historical government policies and practices of Aboriginal child removal, and the ongoing intergenerational trauma and disadvantage that shapes the experiences of Aboriginal families and communities, and that the OOHC sector makes a commitment to utilise this knowledge to genuinely inform all decision making and service delivery systems.

Policy Recommendation Two

That a national benchmarking approach be developed by the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children to provide a vision and clear strategies to inform fundamental change to policy and practice legislation in adherence to all five elements of the ATSICPP. This national approach should be overseen by a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth, and applied in response to local community needs.

Policy Recommendation Three

That every State and Territory prioritize funding of ACCOs in line with principles of self-determination, on a proportionate basis, to support community-led initiatives that meet the unique cultural and other needs of all Indigenous youth leaving OOHC.

Policy Recommendation Four

That the annual Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) child protection report include reliable statistics as a priority for all jurisdictions, to address gaps in the data for every State and Territory on Indigenous young people leaving OOHC aged 15-21 years. This data should provide a much broader set of data that can meaningfully indicate who is leaving care at any time, from what type of care they are leaving, for what reason they leave care and their outcomes upon leaving care.

Policy Recommendation Five

That the annual AIHW report present detailed data concerning outcomes for all care leavers aged 18-21 (including a discrete section on Indigenous care leavers) in key areas such as housing; education, training and employment; income; health including mental health; family relationships; social and community connections; parenthood; and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Policy Recommendation Six

That all States and Territories should provide a guaranteed Housing Allowance to young people leaving all forms of OOHC until they are 25 years old. This guarantee should include the provision of culturally appropriate housing for Indigenous care leavers in urban, rural and remote areas, on a proportionate basis to allow greater access and affordability to seek stable and safe accommodation close to family and community support networks.

Policy Recommendation Seven

That every State and Territory allocate resources to give capacity to ACCOs to design, generate and apply quality and meaningful early transition planning for young people in care as early as 12 to 15 years of age. This will help equip Indigenous care leavers with the skills, resources and support to prepare them for a successful transition into adulthood and independence.

Policy Recommendation Eight

That every State and Territory allocate resources to give capacity to ACCOs to design, generate and apply quality and meaningful cultural plans over extended and flexible periods of time. This will support all Indigenous youth leaving OOHC to maintain existing and build new connections with Indigenous communities, family and culture.

Policy Recommendation Nine

That each State and Territory allocate proportionate funding to ACCOs to support Indigenous children's connection to family and community whilst in OOHC and provide a foundation for reunification when they leave care, with the aim of preventing Indigenous young people leaving care without family and community support.

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