

**Office of the Guardian for
Children and Young People**

Preventing homelessness in young people after care

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of South Australia**

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Young People

At this time there are almost 1,600 children and young people under the guardianship or in the custody of the state. We collectively have a special responsibility for them and their happiness.

About one hundred young people each year 'graduate' from state care to independence, most at age 18. Their move to independence is about three to five years earlier than their age peers. From research interstate, it is likely that more than half of them will not have completed their schooling to Year 12. About one in three of the young women will have children of their own or be pregnant by the time they turn 20, compared with two per cent in the general population.

As you would expect, the group of young people leaving care are not homogenous. Some are doing really well, some are struggling. Almost one in four is an Aboriginal young person and a growing number, though still relatively small, are refugees from Southern and Central Africa and the Middle East. Just under half are young women.

Vulnerability to homelessness

Jake is 27. Although he hasn't been in care, he hasn't had it easy. His parents separated when he was young. He moved around, his family changed, and he changed school too many times. He dropped out of school at age 16. He left home at 17. He was unemployed for a long time but got casual work on a process line. He has mates from school who are students or into music and is on good terms with his family who are interested in his welfare. He has ambitions; he wants to be a teacher. He uses drugs but only recreationally. His literacy is good.

Jason is 17. He adores his Dad. He shouldn't. His Dad uses him to get drugs. So does his Dad's brother and his brother's wife. Jason has been in and out of care since he was eight and left home early. He has missed most of his schooling because life has been chaotic. He suffers from depression related to trauma and uses drugs as part of his daily life. He has few friends and few people who are interested in him other than his social worker, therapist and youth worker. Jason has plans too, he wants to be a mechanic.

What is the difference between Jake and Jason?

Both have family but only one has safety in that family. They both have ambitions – one to be a teacher, the other to fix cars but only one has encouragement from his family.

Both in theory have access to information but Jason has serious obstacles such as low literacy, low self esteem and no ready access to the internet.

Jason's drug problem and mental illness are likely to disrupt study and his ability to maintain stable housing. Jake went back to study at age 26.

They both have support networks but they look very different. Jake has mates and family, Jason has professionals who will move out of his life as they change jobs or when he falls out of their target group.

They both had or have authority figures in their lives, but only one has an authority figure who will be there when at age 25 or 26 he needs to be told to 'cut it out' or 'do it now' – the sort of encouragement even in your 20's that helps to sort your life out.

Their likelihood of secure housing is a world apart – as is their vulnerability to homelessness. The risk factors for chronic homelessness include poor information access, few social supports, episodic mental illness, poverty and substance dependence.

Jake will almost certainly do OK without our help. The chances are that Jason will not.

What is being done?

Public attention was first brought to the connection between state care and homelessness in the 1989 Burdekin Report on youth homelessness and in subsequent state reports, mostly from non-government organisations. Despite this, no action followed from the Commonwealth government to introduce national standards for leaving care – until this year – and so what we have are considerable differences across states and territories.¹

In South Australia, there is still a lot we don't know about young people under guardianship and their housing outcomes. We don't have good data on their use of SAAP services, we don't know how many and how often they go missing, we don't know what the best response should be.

Fortunately we're not waiting until we have perfect knowledge. In the past year there is renewed emphasis on getting it right for young people leaving care. Youth Support teams in the metropolitan area offer assistance with the move to independence, a leaving care kit and accompanying procedures is nearing completion. The Rapid Response commitment includes improved access to further education and housing and there is a formal agreement between Families SA and Housing SA to smooth the referral and response to requests for housing assistance. There is to be a post-care support service available partly through the Youth Support teams and a centralised information and advocacy service.

In South Australia there is no statutory obligation to provide support beyond 17 – there is now in NSW and Victoria – and many argued at the time of the child protection legislative amendments that this should have been included.

What state services don't solve is the 'big picture' issues such as growing insecurity in the labour market, the rising costs of further education and the reduction in youth income payments driven by the federal government's expectation that parents will financially support their children until at least age 25.

¹ Moslehuddin, B and Mendes, P [2006] 'Young people's journey to independence: Towards a better future for young people leaving state care in Victoria' *Children Australia* v 31. n3 p 48.

While all young people will experience these 'big picture' conditions it is much harder for young people leaving care because their transition to independence is usually accelerated, can be sudden (at age 18), and they often have low educational attainment and poorer self-esteem and identity.

What is to be done?

It would be easy for me to list the very practical things to be done, some of which are done now, such as, assistance with budgeting, paying bills, buying and using a washing machine, looking for work and regular Youth Allowance payments.

Also additional financial support for further education, improved assistance with finding and keeping housing and financial assistance for setting-up costs.

And let's not forget assistance in finding and understanding information about the young person's past, such as access to records, files and photos.

I should also list the improvements needed to services and practice while they are in care such as trauma-related therapeutic care, stability of care and attention to their talents and skills.

But for a moment I want to assume all this is done. And instead look at the less tangible things that will lead to secure housing for young people under guardianship.²

Urie Bronfenbrenner was a leading child development expert in the 1970s and he is still much quoted today. Among other things he talks about the interaction of related systems in a child's life – micro, meco, exo and macro.³ Unlike most other children, children and young people in care often have very weak micro systems and it is in the microsystem that a child is treated as an individual, not as a generic child. It is provided by family and friends. It is where they are loved.

In the absence of people who affirm who you are many of the young people we come in contact with develop an identity as "young person at risk", "young person in care" or a "client of social services". Such stigmatised identities lend themselves to more restricted social networks, few social roles, excessive reliance on formal services and, at a more personal level, to isolation and aloneness.⁴

Returning to our two young men, when Jake was hospitalised following a terrible motor bike accident he had family and mates visit him and encourage him with the long rehabilitation. If the same accident should happen to Jason at age 22 he could be very alone. Who is it who reminds Jason of the good things he is and can be?

² The following section draws heavily on a previous conference address in 2006 by Angela Andary, Senior Project Officer, Office of the Guardian. See 'Doing More Than is Practicable' www.gcyp.sa.gov.au

³ Bronfenbrenner, U (1979) *The ecology of human development: experiments by nature and design* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press

⁴ Gilligan, R (unpublished) 'How can we help children to blossom' conference address, Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, Wellington NZ, 2006

Jason may have his most obvious needs met, but who cares about **him**?

What would this look like, this individualised caring and love, in the world of corporate parenting and alternative care?

We have to pay attention to their sense of 'belonging'. We can do this by finding and supporting long term relationships with carers, carer families, friends, social workers and mentors. We have to build the expectation that they are all in there for the 'long haul', for the ups and downs and well beyond the age of 17. We have to stop ourselves from seeing this as a one or two year commitment to the child and, even more challenging, is not accepting that when adolescence hits, the young person can sever ties with significant people. Too often now I have seen a household argument turn into what is quickly labelled a 'placement breakdown' and the young person is moved. We don't do that with other families, we shouldn't do it with foster families.

Their sense of belonging will also come from their interests and we should pay attention to these, no matter how well hidden. We can help them build another network around their interests, be it sport, music, building things, fixing cars, hair and make-up.

We should always ask the question of how well are they doing in self-esteem, love and affection. And what other identity are they building beyond being a child in care, for example, as a friend, football player, artist, or someone who works at Darrell Lea's.

If we don't have a continuing relationship with the child or young person in care, that is, we are acquaintances or service providers of a different sort, we can still have an impact by showing respect and concern, listening well to them and acting on what they say.

In sum, the things that matter most to a pathway well away from homelessness are the continuity of relationships, a young person's well being and their sense of belonging.

So we should pursue all the tangible things but we must also ask 'who loves this child?'

[Excerpts from an address given by the SA Guardian for Children and Young People at the State Conference of Homelessness SA, 16 November 2006.]