



YOUNG PEOPLE VULNERABLE TO DISENGAGING FROM EDUCATION

Educational outcomes for children in contact with the child protection system

Children in contact with the child protection system are particularly vulnerable to disengaging from education. While at school they are less likely than their peers to meet national numeracy and literacy benchmarks.¹ They are also less likely to complete school or go on to further studies.^{2,3,4} In addition to poor educational outcomes, careleavers in Australia (and internationally) are more likely to experience homelessness, criminal justice interventions, unemployment, and worse physical and mental health outcomes than their peers who have not been in out-of-home care (OOHC).⁵ The financial cost to government and the impact on the young people themselves resulting from these negative outcomes is high.⁵

How do school students with care experiences perform academically?

Many school-aged children living in OOHC struggle to reach national numeracy and literacy benchmarks.

A significant number of Queensland children and young people are in contact with the child protection system. As at 30 June 2021, 12,260 Queensland children aged 0–17 years were the subject of a child protection order.⁶ Among children and young people attending Year 9 in Queensland schools in 2018–2019:

- 60.9 per cent of OOHC students met national minimum standards for numeracy versus 87.6 per cent of non-OOHC students.
- 72.3 per cent of OOHC students met national minimum standards for reading versus 95.2 per cent of non-OOHC students.¹

How do careleavers fare in terms of educational outcomes?

Educational outcomes are generally much worse for young careleavers than for young people with no OOHC experiences. Careleavers are far less likely to be engaged in further or higher education than young people without experiences of OOHC.⁷

In 2020–21, 886 young people in Queensland aged 15–18 years left out-of-home care.⁸ Data about the outcomes of young people once they leave OOHC is extremely limited. Australian jurisdictions do not routinely track careleaver outcomes data. Post-OOHC outcomes data is only available via ad hoc research studies.

In 2019, the CREATE Foundation conducted an Australia-wide survey of 325 young people aged 18 to 25 years with prior care experiences.²

In relation to educational outcomes, key findings from the survey were that:

- 57 per cent of careleavers completed year 12
- 18 per cent were continuing their studies at TAFE and 11 per cent were attending university
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young careleavers were less likely than non-Indigenous young people to complete year 12 (40% versus 61%).²

These findings show improvements since the CREATE Foundation asked similar questions of a cohort of careleavers in 2009, where:

- 35 per cent of respondents completed year 12
- 11 per cent were continuing their studies at TAFE and 3 per cent were attending university.⁹

Beyond 18 is a Victorian longitudinal study of careleavers.³ Within its Wave 3 sample of 126 participants, just over one quarter of the school leavers had completed Year 12 (either at school or by completing a post-school vocational qualification). This school completion rate was very low relative to the general Victorian Year 12 completion rate of 77 per cent.¹⁰

In 2020, an Australian study using linked Australian Census data examined the educational outcomes of 67,452 children, 541 of whom were living in OOHC.⁴ It found that 36 per cent of non-OOHC children were attending university versus less than 10 per cent of foster children.

How do careleavers fare in terms of other outcomes?

Examining other related outcomes, a Victorian study of 60 careleavers aged 18–25⁵ found

almost 50 per cent were unemployed, in jail or taking parenting roles, 36 per cent had moved more than five times in previous 12 months and 65 per cent were diagnosed with illness or a disability.

This study estimated the direct cost (in 2006 dollars) to the State resulting from these poor outcomes to be \$738,741 per careleaver. This included costs relating to health, drug and alcohol treatment, housing and lost GST revenue.

Conclusion

There is clear evidence that as a group, children and young people who have had contact with the child protection system perform less well academically while at school and have worse post-school educational outcomes than their non-OOHC peers.

As Australian jurisdictions do not routinely track careleaver outcomes data, the data is quite limited. It has been argued that the lack of data means the careleaver cohort is ‘out of sight – out of mind,’ and not identified as being ‘vulnerable’.⁷ This impacts the ability of the general public and policy makers to understand the challenges facing careleavers and identify effective interventions.

Even though the number of young people leaving care each year is relatively low, the financial cost to government and the impact on the young people themselves resulting from these negative outcomes is high.

As educational successes such as the completion of high school or an undergraduate degree create opportunities to improve these outcomes, identifying effective interventions and supports needs to be a priority.

Seeking your feedback

This research summary addresses one of the topics within the Queensland Family and Child Commission's research agenda. The research agenda identifies opportunities to expand the evidence base and to improve services and outcomes around matters that are relevant to Queensland children, young people and families. We welcome your feedback on this research summary which can be provided via the QR code.



References

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