Factors enabling smooth transitions from out-of-home care: A scoping review

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Abstract

Young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) may face health, educational and social disadvantage due to experiencing childhood adversity. When young people transition from OOHC at 18 years of age it is recognised that this experience of disadvantage continues and is often compounded, with care leavers at risk of poor outcomes post-transition. While governments and community service organisations support young people to plan to leave OOHC, this transition to independence occurs significantly earlier than in the general population and with less support. Previous research has identified the reasons behind poor post-care outcomes but there is a knowledge gap concerning how transition planning could be improved.

A scoping review of the Australian and international empirical grey literature (non-commercial or academic publications) was conducted with the aim of identifying the key factors that enable smooth transitions from OOHC, including for Indigenous populations. The search strategy involved (1) targeted searches on Google and child welfare organisation websites, (2) a child welfare database and (3) consultation with content experts. Empirical literature published in English from 2018 onwards was included. Following the screening process, 45 reports were included in the review. There were 16 reports from Australia, 13 from the United States of America, 6 from Canada, 4 from New Zealand, 4 from the United Kingdom, one international and one multi-national African study.

Seventeen key themes outlining factors that contribute to smooth transitions from OOHC were identified in this review. Themes common to all care leavers (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) included: tailored, long-term and comprehensive case management; active and meaningful involvement of young people; access to affordable housing; supportive social relationships; supportive relationships with professionals; access to post-care support; cross-sector collaboration; system factors; extended care in line with social norms; OOHC policy; individual strengths of young people; quality and stability of placements; and education and employment. Themes

unique to Indigenous care leavers included: culturally appropriate support; Indigenous-led services; connection to culture; and suitable placement location. The findings of this review have implications for research, policy and practice and provide much-needed guidance for the advancement of effective transition pathways for young people living in OOHC.

Introduction

Young people in out-of-home care (OOHC hereafter) are recognised globally as a group living with vulnerability who are more likely to experience poor health, education and social outcomes due to adverse childhood experiences (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2022; Sacker et al., 2021; Smales et al., 2020). Adding to this disadvantage, young people living in OOHC are typically expected to leave their care arrangements and live independently on or before their 18th birthday. This transition to independence occurs significantly earlier than for young people in the general population, and with less support (Munro & Simkiss, 2020). Australian research suggests many care leavers are not developmentally ready at 18 years to live independently and often have limited ongoing participation in education. They often exit care directly into homelessness and/or endure ongoing housing instability, or spend time in the youth justice system and later the adult criminal justice system or become young parents who are likely to experience child protection interventions (Mendes & McCurdy, 2019). Many have forms of cognitive disability. Australian research suggests that care leavers with disability are at particular risk of long-term social and economic exclusion. For example, a qualitative study based on interviews with leaving care workers from 10 non-government agencies and 15 care leavers with disability aged 18–26 years in Victoria reported poor transition planning processes that contributed to problematic housing outcomes (Snow et al., 2016). Another study of care leavers with disability in NSW, based on consultations with key stakeholders, similarly found that the provision of safe and affordable housing was critical for advancing successful transitions (Ainsworth, 2021).

In Australia, all eight jurisdictions (states and territories) have introduced forms of extended care programs in recent years whereby youth are able to retain financial support from government authorities beyond their 18th birthday. Yet, major variations remain between these jurisdictions in terms of the placement types covered, the levels of support and funding, and the terms and language used to describe their programs (Mendes, 2023). While governments and community service organisations are tasked with preparing young people to leave care and supporting this process, care leavers are still at risk of experiencing social, health, financial and wellbeing inequity following their transition (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; O'Donnell et al., 2020). Several studies have reported that many care leavers experience homelessness after exiting care. For example, McDowall (2020) reported that 30% of young people experience homelessness in the first year after their transition from OOHC. This is a problem that does not seem to improve over time. Similarly, the Victorian linked data study found that 54% of youth had experienced homelessness in the four years after leaving care (Martin et al., 2021). Extensive research has identified the policy and practice reasons behind post-care outcomes of social exclusion, poverty, homelessness, mental ill-health, low educational attainment and unemployment (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2023; Moslehuddin, 2012; Munro & Simkiss 2020). Research has also identified significantly poorer outcomes for Indigenous care leavers, who are over-represented in OOHC systems in colonised countries including Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the US (Gatwiri et al., 2019; Krakouer et al., 2022). However, many care leavers also demonstrate resilience and achieve positive outcomes, and why that is the case is not well understood. There is a knowledge gap concerning the factors that advance smooth and successful transitions from care (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Hence, the aim of this scoping review was to address this gap in knowledge for both non-Indigenous and Indigenous young people transitioning from OOHC in Australia and internationally.

Methods

We conducted a scoping review to broadly map and synthesise the factors enabling smooth transitions from OOHC as described in the Australian and international grey literature. Grey literature refers to materials produced outside of traditional commercial and academic publishing channels and is generally not peer reviewed. Grey literature tends to be highly accessible and produced by a broad range of sources, including government and non-government organisations and research centres.

This review builds on a separate analysis of peer reviewed literature conducted by the authors that mainly identified international as opposed to Australian literature. Reviewing grey literature presented the opportunity to uncover rich insights from authoritative, non-academic sources to inform OOHC research, policy and practice, with a greater focus on the Australian context.

The description of our methods has been informed by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Scoping Review guidelines (Peters et al., 2020). This is a framework for conducting scoping reviews that involves: formulating a population, concept, context (PCC) research question; a structured, systematic search strategy; engaging stakeholders in the review process where able; and clear reporting of the review in line with the PRISMA – Scoping Review guidelines (Peters et al., 2020).

Identifying the research question

This scoping review was guided by the following two PCC research questions, with the second developed in consultation with a partnering Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation to ensure the experiences of Indigenous care leavers were captured:

1. What are the factors that enable smooth transitions from OOHC in Australia and internationally?
2. What are the factors that enable smooth transitions from OOHC for Indigenous young people in Australia and internationally?

Identifying relevant studies

This review included publicly available empirical grey literature. The search was limited to studies published from the years 2018 to 2024, to enable the identification of the most recent and relevant literature. The search was also limited to literature written in English. Studies were included if they discussed any factors that supported young people to smoothly transition from OOHC.

Study selection

A comprehensive grey literature search strategy was adapted from Godin et al. (2015) and searches were conducted in November 2023. No formal databases were used, instead the search involved targeted Google searches, a search of the Child Welfare Information Gateway, and searching the websites of child welfare organisations and government departments that were identified from the first two strategies. The searches all included the following terms: transition planning; out-of-home care; transition to independence factors; smooth transitions; positive transitions; enablers. Members of the broader ARC Linkage Grant research team, including a content expert, an Aboriginal researcher and a care-experienced person who has contributed to recent research on similar topics, were consulted to ensure that key Australian and international grey literature publications were identified.

The search results were imported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and duplicates were removed through automatic functions. The spreadsheet was used to record the screening decisions for each reference (Godin et al., 2015). The two-stage screening process was conducted by authors SGM, HW and DN. Firstly, where available, the executive summary was single screened for inclusion, based on whether the publication was an empirical study of transitions from OOHC. Where an executive summary was unavailable, the full text was screened (Godin et al., 2015). Included reports from the first stage were then full text screened by one reviewer, where articles that discussed factors enabling smooth transitions from care were included in the final review. As is standard for scoping reviews, no formal assessment of research quality was conducted (Peters et al., 2020); however, a summary of the descriptive characteristics of included studies is provided below.

Charting the data

The initial search identified 132 results. Following the screening process, 45 grey literature studies were included in the review. This final sample included 16 studies from Australia, 13 from the United States of America (US), 6 from Canada, 4 from New Zealand, 4 from the United Kingdom (UK), one international and one multi-national African study. The publication types included in the study ranged from research reports (n = 24), program evaluations (n = 7), briefing reports (n = 7), inquiry reports (n = 5) and cost–benefit analyses (n = 2). The included studies were all empirical, with most using a mixed-methods approach (n = 28), followed by qualitative methods (n = 12) and five studies used quantitative methods. Eighteen studies included a specific focus on Indigenous young people as a care leaver group, and 11 of these were Australian studies.

Given the large number of qualitative and mixed-method studies in this sample, and that none of the publications have been peer reviewed, the causal evidence for factors enabling smooth transitions from OOHC is limited. However, the sample consists of publications produced by recognised government and non-government organisations and consulting firms and is the best available, and most up-to-date, representation of non-academic evidence within the OOHC sector concerning factors that support young people to have smooth transitions from care.

Collating, summarising and reporting the results

Data extraction was split between authors SGM, HM and DN, with each paper single coded by one reviewer. Data on authors, institutions, country, year, Indigenous population and publication type were extracted into a bespoke Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (Godin et al., 2015; Pollock et al., 2023). Factors relating to smooth transitions from OOHC were extracted and thematically analysed through inductive coding into themes on a shared document, with factors from Australian literature highlighted within each theme to remain distinguishable. Once extraction was complete, the themes were refined through discussions between the reviewers, with any discrepancies resolved and factors recoded as needed. The themes were then separated into those relevant to all care leavers, and those specific to Indigenous care leavers. Following this process, seventeen key themes relating to factors enabling smooth transitions from care for young people were identified, including four discrete themes relating to smooth transitions for Indigenous young people. Once consensus on themes was reached, authors SGM, HM and DN shared simple descriptive synthesis of the themes in line with JBI recommendations (Peters et al., 2020). The synthesis was reviewed and refined as a team, with author SGM then compiling the completed synthesis into a manuscript.

Results

The following themes emerged in relation to factors enabling smooth transitions from OOHC as described in the grey literature.

Findings common to all care leavers (non-Indigenous and Indigenous)

Tailored, long-term and comprehensive case management

Australian literature

Six Australian studies emphasised the importance of early and comprehensive transition planning by case managers. Two studies recommended starting transition planning early (Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), 2020; Martin et al., 2021), and although no specific age was recommended, CCYP (2020) suggested post-care planning should begin 'as early as possible' (p. 51). CCYP (2020) also advocated for extending the Better Futures program (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 2024) to support young people from age 16, because starting at 17.5 years is too late to establish meaningful support. Duff et al. (2022) described the need for strengthening independent living skills through adolescence into emerging adulthood. Practical support and developing emotional readiness are also crucial in transition planning (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), 2021; McDowall, 2020). Transition planning should integrate therapeutic support for mental health and wellbeing, including the development of behavioural support plans to help carers understand and address young people's needs

(CCYP, 2021; McDowall, 2020). Additionally, such supports are crucial to help sibling groups stay together or reunify while in care, particularly for larger groups in kinship care (CCYP, 2021).

International literature

Nine international studies emphasised the importance of tailored, long-term and comprehensive case management. Three reports underscored that planning should begin early, at least one year prior to leaving OOHC, to allow time for the gradual development of life skills, social support networks and service connections because this can improve resilience and readiness for independent living (Kelly et al., 2020; OECD, 2022; Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, 2018). Two studies recommended flexible and creative approaches to case management and planning tailored to individual needs (Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, 2021; Munro, 2022). The role of case managers is critical in helping young people feel heard and emotionally supported and ensuring adequate social support networks (Geiger et al., 2022; OECD, 2022). Providing life skills training, such as self-care, budgeting, cooking and cleaning, and financial education as early as possible is crucial for preparedness and confidence in independent living (Geiger et al., 2022; OECD, 2022; Welsh Parliament, 2023). A UK study found that a multidisciplinary approach to case management contributes to smooth transitions from care, particularly when a team is skilled in delivering psychologically informed practice (Dixon et al., 2020). Similarly, a Canadian study emphasised the need for integrated, holistic support, where young people can access services to meet basic needs first, followed by aspirations and life goals (Rampersaud & Mussell, 2021).

Active and meaningful involvement of young people

Australian literature

Six Australian studies emphasised the importance of young people being actively involved in the entire transition planning process. Meaningful input from young people was described as key to effective transition planning because it improves communication and supports successful transitions into stable housing (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2020; Duff et al., 2022; Muir & Hand 2018). AHURI (2021) also emphasised young people's involvement at all stages, including at regular plan reviews. Similarly, Martin et al. (2021) stressed involving young people ensures plans reflect their needs and adhere to the principle of 'nothing about us, without us' (p. 27). Care teams should empower young people to direct their support and understand available options (Martin et al., 2021). McDowall (2020) similarly emphasised the importance of care leavers being central in decision-making processes that shape their lives to support smooth transitions from OOHC.

International literature

Four international studies support the importance of involving young people in transition planning. The OECD (2022) found that young people's participation builds resilience, self-efficacy and service engagement, which gives them control over their lives. The US CalYOUTH study linked young people's involvement in planning meetings to higher satisfaction and successful transitions from care, highlighting the significance of goal setting and decision-making (Courtney et al., 2023; Powers et al., 2020).

Another US study found that meaningful involvement in the transition process can empower young people to plan effectively for their future (Ball & Belseth, 2021).

Access to affordable housing

Australian literature

Four Australian studies identified housing-related factors as critical to smooth transitions from care. An evaluation of the COMPASS program in Victoria found that providing direct access to affordable and stable accommodation prevented homelessness and supported transitions from OOHC (Urbis, 2022). CCYP (2020) heard from young people that pathways to safe housing were crucial. Affordable, stable housing near supports and public transport was found to enable young people to pursue social, educational and employment goals post care (AHURI, 2021; Muir et al., 2019). Additionally, securing supported housing with longer tenancies and case management provides greater stability compared with private rentals or public housing (Muir et al., 2019). Appropriate accommodation and ongoing support offer stability and emotional security that can support the transition from OOHC to independent living (AHURI, 2021).

International literature

Eight international studies identified similar factors related to housing. Safe, stable and affordable housing is a necessity (OECD, 2022) and a basic human right for care leavers (Rampersaud & Mussell, 2021). Having adequate housing enabled young people to engage in education (Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, 2018) and employment (Lansing et al., 2021). A US study found that relationship-based housing initiatives enhanced stability, supported young people to achieve academic and employment goals and improved mental health (Rampersaud & Mussell, 2021). A Welsh study found that young people benefit from a 'pathway plan' from age 16 that outlines steps for a smooth housing transition and includes an option to return to previous placements if needed (Welsh Parliament, 2023). Such supports mirror the mainstream path to independence where young people return to live with their parents when needed (Evans-Whipp & Prattley, 2023). The US CalYOUTH study identified that case worker perceptions of housing availability affected youth pathways, stressing the need for more government-funded housing for care leavers (Courtney et al., 2019, 2023).

Supportive social relationships

Australian literature

Two Australian reports emphasised the importance of social support in facilitating smooth transitions from OOHC. The Beyond 18 study found quality social relationships are crucial for smooth transitions from care, and can aid positive employment, education, housing and wellbeing outcomes (Muir et al., 2019). Similarly, CCYP (2020) found that young people who had smoother transitions from care acknowledged the 'strength and importance of social supports around them including carers' (p. 19). Mentoring from unpaid, trusted adults was also found to support the development of community connections and promote smoother transitions from OOHC (CCYP, 2020).

International literature

Five international reports described social support as a factor in smooth transitions from OOHC. A New Zealand study described connected relationships with family and friends as a strong enabler for care leaver success (Sharrif et al., 2023). An earlier report from this study highlighted that positive connections with caregivers and community provided security and supported cultural identity for young people leaving care (Schroder et al., 2021). A US study also stressed the importance of community-based social supports, youth employment and leadership experiences for fostering belonging and resilience for care leavers (Layton et al., 2021: p. 26). A UK Evaluation of the 'House Project', a community-based program assisting young people to transition into their own tenancies post-care, emphasised the role of supportive relationships in facilitating positive transitions from care. The project's 'strong focus on group work, peer support, and relationships' (p. 8) fostered friendships, support networks, social skills, belonging and assurance (Dixon et al., 2020). The OECD (2022) found that peer and non-peer mentoring aids transitions from care because it offers unique relationships beyond usual support networks.

Supportive relationships with professionals

Australian literature

Five Australian reports identified supportive relationships with welfare professionals as enabling smooth transitions from OOHC. Ongoing engagement and positive relationships with workers and carers can create a sense of security for care leavers and influence transition outcomes (McDowall, 2020; Purtell et al., 2019). AHURI (2021) found that reliable and trusting relationships with a key worker who can act as an advocate can enable help-seeking behaviours for care leavers. The Beyond 18 Study highlighted how supportive, consistent relationships with key workers aided service access and emotional security, with care leavers valuing workers who provided support beyond their professional roles (Muir et al., 2019). An evaluation in Western Australia found youth workers operating independently from child protection were crucial for care leavers' short-term success because they provided tailored, non-judgmental support (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2020). Additionally, they had small caseloads, strong communication skills and delivered trauma-informed practice (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2020).

International literature

Three international reports highlighted the importance of relationships with child welfare professionals in supporting young people leaving care. A New Zealand study found that transition staff can positively enhance young people's wellbeing and confidence, aiding in essential life skills development, facilitating access to financial assistance for household needs and securing post-care accommodation (Malatest International, 2021). A UK evaluation found that trusting and genuine relationships with workers gave young people a sense of belonging and stability and supported their post-care wellbeing and progress (Dixon et al., 2020). Similarly, a US evaluation of youth practitioners supporting at-risk youth from child welfare backgrounds found that building trusting relationships with workers led to positive outcomes and engagement in transition from care planning, through workers offering one-on-one support and advocacy (Keith et al., 2021).

Access to post-care support

Australian literature

Four Australian studies highlighted the importance of post-care support. Flexible and sustained care models that provide ongoing support post-care are necessary for positive outcomes (CCYP, 2019, 2020). During the transition period and beyond, young people should be provided with material and emotional support, guidance and safety nets when required (Duff et al., 2022). Muir et al. (2019) highlighted that effective post-care support should blend emotional, practical and financial support from case managers, who can boost young people's self-confidence and goal achievement.

International literature

Four international studies also emphasised the importance of ongoing support post-care. The OECD (2022) emphasised that young people should have ongoing access to existing supports as well as specialised leaving care services as needed. UK researchers found that having long-term access to mental health services was a key factor in smooth transitions to independent living (Munro et al., 2022). Two studies identified that ongoing post-care support aided young people in feeling more secure and connected (Geiger et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2020) Additionally, maintaining contact with caregivers and residents post-care was important to young people's sense of belonging (Kelly et al., 2020).

Cross-sector collaboration

Australian literature

A Western Australian evaluation described effective collaboration between OOHC providers, government and young people as essential to successful transitions, because it fosters open communication and continuous improvement (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2020).

International literature

Three international studies discussed the role of cross-sector collaboration in supporting successful transitions from OOHC. A US study found cross-sector collaborative efforts across public service, community organisations and private businesses were effective in preventing homelessness among care leavers (Keith et al., 2021). Another US study found that case worker satisfaction with collaboration between education and child welfare systems correlated positively with young people's educational attainment and participation in transition planning (Courtney et al., 2019). The Children's Aid Foundation of Canada (2021) evaluated a care leaver education and employment program, noting that connectivity across partner organisations and with youth facilitated goal achievement for young people transitioning from care.

System factors

Australian literature

Four Australian studies identified system-level factors that enable smooth transitions from care. Martin et al. (2021) identified several system factors that improve care leaver outcomes, including persistent engagement, integrated coordination across services and the role of advocates in raising awareness of available supports. Staff capacity was also identified as critical in young people's transition from care, with committed and well-trained workers offering high-quality and responsive support (McDowall,

2020; Urbis, 2022). Additionally, technological solutions can support transition planning, including digital reminders to update plans and features for managerial oversight and practitioner support (CCYP, 2021).

International literature

Five international reports identified similar system-level factors that contribute to smoother transitions from care. A US housing program evaluation found that lower caseloads facilitated regular and accessible support, which built trusting and positive relationships between youth and staff (Dixon et al., 2020). Courtney et al. (2023) found that greater availability of services, including housing, positively correlated with young people's participation in transition planning. A Canadian study identified that service providers require proper training to engage and support young people effectively, with peer support structures crucial to reducing staff burnout and turnover (Shewchuk et al., 2020). The US CalYOUTH studies found that case worker satisfaction with service availability was correlated with positive education and health outcomes, highlighting the importance of case worker perceptions and discussions in planning (Courtney et al., 2019; Torres-Garcia et al., 2019).

Extended care in line with social norms

Australian literature

Four Australian studies advocated for young people to have gradual needs-based transitions out of care in alignment with the norms for young people not in OOHC: when they are ready, with consistent support and an option to return. Experts agree that age-related transitions need to be removed, because the prospect of losing support and housing is anxiety inducing for young people, regardless of age (Deloitte Access Economics, 2018, 2020; Martin et al., 2021; McDowall, 2020). Cost–benefit analysis reports prepared for the Home Stretch campaigns in New South Wales and Queensland revealed several benefits when young people remain in care until 21, including improved outcomes in education, employment, physical health and relationships, and lower rates of homelessness, early pregnancy, hospitalisation, mental illness, smoking, justice system involvement, intergenerational disadvantage and alcohol and drug dependency (Deloitte Access Economics, 2018, 2020). Similarly, McDowall (2020) found that young people in extended care are more likely to be employed and less likely to be involved with the justice system. Readiness to transition out of care should be determined based on the readiness of young people, rather than their age (Deloitte Access Economics, 2018).

International literature

Six international reports also called for age-related transitions to either be extended or removed so that young people can transition from care when they have the necessary skills, maturity and supports in place (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019; Courtney et al., 2018; Munro et al., 2022; OECD, 2022; Rampersaud & Mussell, 2021; Welsh Parliament, 2023). When young people have the option to remain in care, their eventual transition is more successful (Munro et al., 2022). A Canadian report by Rampersaud and Mussell (2021) emphasised that young people require positive support networks and community well beyond age 18, arguing that governments must take their parental responsibilities seriously. The OECD (2022) asserted that youth transitioning from

OOHC require the same time and space as their peers to mature and achieve independence, advocating to raise the transition age to at least 21 to facilitate gradual and prepared transitions. Similarly, the Welsh Parliament (2023) argued that all care leavers should receive support until the age of 25. A US study showed that each extra year in extended foster care boosts the chances of high school completion, higher education enrolment, employment, professional support and financial stability for youth (Courtney et al., 2018). It also reduced the odds of economic hardship, reliance on public food assistance, homelessness, early parenthood and arrest (Courtney et al., 2018). For extended care to be effective, governments must provide adequate funding to carers and community service organisations, and young people should be allowed to remain in care for as long as necessary (Munro et al., 2022).

OOHC policy

International literature

Three international studies identified additional policies supporting transitions from OOHC. A US study found that policies including extending education initiatives to age 26, tuition waivers and supporting higher education applications contribute to successful transitions and education completion for care leavers (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). A UK study highlighted government actions to improve transitions, including increasing financial support in line with inflation, higher welfare payments, free bus travel, rent guarantors, improved mental health support and tailored financial guidance (Smith, 2023). A Canadian study identified that extending government benefits provides care leavers time to focus on pursuing life goals and securing housing (Rampersaud & Mussell, 2021).

Individual strengths of young people

International literature

Six international studies identified the individual strengths of young people that can contribute smoother transitions from care. A UK study found that care leavers' desires for freedom promoted smoother transitions (Munro et al., 2022). A US and a Canadian study both highlighted that the life experiences of young people fostered a self-determination to achieve positive post-care outcomes and contribute to society through education and employment (Goodman et al., 2018; Layton et al., 2021). In New Zealand, young people were found to rely on their own strength and determination to advocate for access to safe and stable independent living when lacking supportive relationships (Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, 2018). Individual strengths, such as resilience, social skills and caregiving abilities, were found by Schroder et al. (2021) to be crucial for successful transitions. Similarly, an African study associated successful transitions with attributes like hard work, self-discipline and effective communication. The study emphasised that support from community networks and services to foster these individual strengths can lead to the greatest success post-care (Kelly et al., 2020).

Quality and stability of placements

Australian literature

Four Australian reports highlighted the crucial role of quality and stability in OOHC placements, including care team quality. CCYP (2019, 2020) emphasised that continuous and stable placements are vital for young people's development and transitions from care because the stability fosters life skills, relationships and resilience. Additionally, CCYP (2021) identified that well-functioning care teams with strategies to minimise placement changes enables effective, future-focused planning and stability. McDowall (2020) highlighted placement stability and safety as enabling successful OOHC transitions. Care leavers who were consulted about placement changes reported higher satisfaction as did those with fewer placements during their time in care (McDowall, 2020).

International literature

Three international studies reported similar findings. Both Munro et al. (2022) and Geiger et al. (2022) emphasised the importance of a safe and stable placement for successful transitions from care. Geiger et al. (2022) specifically highlighted the significance of high-quality placement settings in supporting young people's transition from foster care. A New Zealand study found daily aspects like regular meals, safe sleeping spaces, attentive staff, tailored support and access to health care supported young people in achieving post-care goals (Schroder et al., 2021).

Education and employment

Australian literature

Three Australian studies highlighted the importance of a focus on employment and further education during transition planning, and factors that enable success in this domain. CCYP (2020) found that having good pathways into work or education is important to young people leaving care. Carers and friends are also crucial for school support, along with homework help, mental health support and financial aid (McDowall, 2020). The Beyond 18 study described care leavers' intrinsic motivation for education and employment, ranging from making a difference in the community to seeking employment opportunities and social status, underscoring the need for staff to understand and use these motivations in supporting their transition (Muir et al., 2019).

International literature

Seven international studies also highlighted the importance of advancing pathways to education and employment. The OECD (2022) identified the need to start education and employment preparation early and for carers to provide the practical (i.e. transport) and emotional support to enable engagement. An African study found youth and staff both highly valued education, and young people appreciated staff efforts in skill-building for future potential (Kelly et al., 2020). A US study found that finishing high school and pursuing college enabled care-experienced youth to overcome challenges and exercise greater independence (Layton et al., 2021). Similarly, a UK study found that, to address inequalities among young people who leave care, there should be support for education, employment and training (Munro et al., 2022). Dworsky (2020), in the US, noted that a program offering financial scholarships per semester facilitated higher education attendance among care leavers. Similarly, post-secondary education funding increased school attendance and fostered positive learning attitudes, instilling care and investment in young people's futures and enhancing social, housing, health and employment outcomes (Children's Aid Foundation of Canada,

2018). Lansing et al. (2021) further emphasised the importance of funding technology resources and transportation in enabling care-experienced young people to secure and sustain employment.

Findings specific to Indigenous care leavers

Culturally appropriate support

Australian literature

Two Australian reports described the importance of culturally appropriate support for Indigenous care leavers. McDowall (2020) advocated for focused and culturally sensitive support to address specific challenges, such as increased absence from placement, post-care youth-justice contact and youth pregnancy, to achieve smoother transitions from care. AHURI (2021) highlighted the role of high-quality cultural plans and cultural and social affiliation for supporting Indigenous care leavers' transitions.

International literature

Two international reports identified culturally appropriate support as an enabler for smooth transitions for Indigenous care leavers. A Canadian study reported that connecting with an Indigenous organisation during the transition processes introduced young people to their culture and supported spiritual and cultural identity development (Doucet, 2018). The study recommended culturally appropriate placements and culturally competent workers for Indigenous children in care to foster connection to spirituality, cultural identity and community (Doucet, 2018). A New Zealand study found that Māori young people in care wanted support from Māori services and staff who had similar values and worldviews to their own to support them to transition from care (Malatest International, 2021).

Indigenous-led services

Australian literature

Three Australian reports highlighted the importance of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) having a leadership role in the leaving care process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leavers. The Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023) highlighted improved outcomes for Aboriginal young people leaving OOHC under ACCO oversight. ACIL Allen Consulting (2020) noted the role of ACCOs in facilitating engagement with appropriate supports for Aboriginal care leavers. Collaboration with ACCOs was also found to enhance the skills and capabilities of non-Indigenous service providers working with Indigenous care leavers (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2020). Additionally, CCYP (2021) found ACCO-run programs to be successful in supporting Aboriginal youth with various needs, including housing, education, employment, mental health, family connections, sourcing identity documents and life skills development.

International literature

A Canadian report underscored the positive influence of Indigenous-led services on transitions for Indigenous care leavers, prioritising identity-building based on Indigenous values. These efforts led to improved mental health, education and employment outcomes, with Indigenous agencies pioneering developments in various critical areas across practice and policy for positive outcomes (Conference Board of Canada, 2023).

Connection to Culture

International literature

Three reports emphasised the importance of cultural connection for Indigenous youth transitioning from OOHC. In New Zealand, cultural ties enabled successful transitions for Māori youth, supporting identity, education, housing and health (Schroder et al., 2021). In Canada, cultural programs and kinship care placements were vital for peace, mentorship, belonging and mental health among Indigenous youth (Conference Board of Canada, 2023; Doucet, 2018).

Suitable placement location

International literature

A Canadian report found that placement location relative to supports, such as education, health care and employment services, can positively impact transitions from care for Indigenous young people. Smoother transitions from care and enhanced wellbeing for Indigenous young people can be achieved when they are placed in locations that facilitate access to supportive services (Conference Board of Canada, 2023).

Discussion

This paper is the first to identify factors enabling a smooth and positive transition from OOHC as described in empirical grey literature from Australian and international sources. The findings from this review demonstrate that smooth transitions from OOHC to independence involve a complex interplay of factors that collectively contribute to positive outcomes for care leavers. The most common theme among the grey literature, particularly from Australian sources, was the need for tailored, long-term and comprehensive case management in the lead up to, and throughout, the transition process. Studies emphasised that effective transition planning must begin early and gradually shift from a high level of support to increased independence. Previous peer-reviewed Australian literature has similarly identified the importance of person-centred, wrap-around transition planning for care leavers (Malvaso et al., 2016), that includes gradual and incremental development of life skills to ensure a smooth transition from care (Mendes et al., 2023).

Another commonality across the literature was the influence of cross-sector collaboration on positive outcomes for care leavers, with studies finding effective collaboration among OOHC providers, government and young people is crucial for successful transition planning. This aligns with earlier research emphasising inter-agency collaboration and multidisciplinary case management approaches as best practice to support care leavers (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Malvaso et al., 2016; Rahamim & Mendes, 2015).

Access to affordable housing and the active and meaningful involvement of young people through centring them in decision making throughout the transition planning process were also strongly emphasised as key factors enabling smooth transitions across the literature. A previous analysis of peer-reviewed literature similarly identified the provision of safe and low-cost government housing as an enabler of smooth transitions from care, relieving need for crisis and homelessness services post-care and allowing care leavers to focus on other needs during their transition (Chavulak & Mendes, 2022).

Among the Australian literature, the role of supportive relationships with professionals was highlighted as offering emotional security, advocacy, stability and a sense of belonging for young people leaving care. Peer-reviewed Australian research has also found that continuous and consistent relationships with workers is important for young people as they transition out of care, particularly in supporting the mental health of care leavers (Mendes et al., 2023) and maintaining community connections (Rahamin & Mendes, 2015).

Themes that were significantly less prevalent in the Australian literature compared with the international literature were education and employment goals, individual strengths of young people and extended care in line with social norms. Previous studies have highlighted the lack of research into the educational experiences of care leavers from Australian compared with international sources, despite similarities in poor post-care educational achievement for this cohort globally (Harvey et al., 2015; McNamara et al., 2019; Mendes et al., 2014). While state-level programs such as Raising Expectations in Victoria provide a leading example of the positive impact of tailored support for care leavers on higher education outcomes (Raising Expectations, 2024; Wilson et al., 2019), there is no national strategy for supporting care leaver access to higher education, which McNamara et al. (2019) argued may be contributing to a lack of data collection and research on this topic. In contrast, Australia is recognised as a global leader in extended-care policy reform, with every state and territory agreeing to provide some form of extended care as of 2022 (Mendes, 2023). However, there is limited research on how this approach can be effectively and appropriately implemented, particularly with reference to different groups of care leavers (van Breda et al., 2020).

For Indigenous care leavers, both the Australian and international literature has found that smooth transitions from OOHC require culturally appropriate support provided by Indigenous-led services. High-quality cultural plans ensure that Indigenous young people receive sensitive placements and support from culturally competent organisations, fostering connections to spirituality, cultural identity and community. Indigenous-led services, such as Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), are crucial in leading the leaving care process, offering tailored support that mainstream services may lack. There is a noted lack of literature on best practice to support Indigenous care leavers (Mendes et al., 2021); however, previous Australian research has similarly highlighted the role of ACCOs and culturally appropriate support in enabling successful transitions for this cohort (Mendes et al., 2021, 2022).

Conclusion

Limitations

This review contains some methodological limitations. Only literature in English was reviewed. The literature was only single screened for inclusion. As this was a scoping review, there was no formal quality assessment conducted on the included literature. Furthermore, as only non-peer-reviewed grey literature was included, there were no findings based on causal evidence included in the study. However, all the included literature followed an empirical methodology and was published by government departments, recognised organisations and consulting firms,

representing the best available evidence in the OOHC sector. Searching for grey literature also presented challenges in taking a systematic approach because there was limited availability of databases, and the sources used for this search varied in their retrieval methods and features. The searches on Google may have been influenced by personalised search features, thus introducing bias based on location or topic. The reproducibility of the search may also be impacted by grey literature documents not being archived long-term or changes in website domains and URLs.

Implications for policy, practice and future research

This review contains several implications for improved policy and practice to advance smooth transitions and achieve positive outcomes for young people leaving OOHC. Primarily, all jurisdictions should seek to provide ongoing support for care leavers and extend care arrangements to at least 21 years of age. Policies to support access to housing, education and employment post-care should also be universally implemented. Transition planning needs to occur early, and organisations supporting transitions must ensure that young people are meaningfully involved at every stage of the process. For care leavers from an Indigenous background, the transition process needs to be culturally appropriate, Indigenous-led and ensure ongoing connections to kin and culture.

Our scoping review suggests that there is a need for further research on the role of social relationships, quality and stability of placements and individual strengths of young people as enablers of smooth transitions from care, particularly within the Australian context. Future Australian research should also seek to identify best practice in supporting access to education post-care and the implementation of extended-care policies. Furthermore, there is a lack of grey literature with a specific focus on the factors enabling smooth transitions from OOHC for Indigenous young people. Given the limitations of our methodology as a scoping review, future research should seek to take a more systematic approach to sourcing grey and peer-reviewed literature on this topic, with a view to highlighting the gaps within empirical research on enablers of smooth transitions from OOHC and to inform policy and practice in this area in Australia and internationally.

Conflict of interest

None.

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