Taking Control and 'Moving On': How Young People Turn around Problematic Transitions from Out-of-Home Care.

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1 Introduction

Young people transitioning from out-of-home care are arguably one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. The social and economic costs associated with the failure to provide leaving care and post-care supports to care leavers are significant both for the individuals involved and the broader community. Care leavers tend to make significant, costly, and ongoing demands on income security, housing, health and welfare, substance abuse services, criminal justice, and other crisis intervention systems (Mendes et al. 2011; Stein 2012).

One of the toughest challenges facing care leavers is securing safe, secure and affordable accommodation which is a crucial component in the transition from care to independent living, and also closely linked to positive outcomes in health, social connections, education and employment (Johnson et al 2010). Numerous reports and studies have found a high correlation between state care and later housing instability, transience and homelessness (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008; Scutella, Johnson, Mocschion, Tseng and Wooden 2013). While variation in the extent of homelessness reported among care leavers stems from different methodological approaches and different ways of defining homelessness, the overall picture suggests that compared to their non-care peers care leavers are at much greater risk of homelessness (Courtney & Hughes Heuring 2005; Stein 2004).

This paper draws on an Australian study that examined the housing experiences of 77 young people who had been in care. The study found substantial differences between those who experienced smooth housing transitions from care (n=18), and those whose transitions were volatile (n=59). In this paper we focus specifically on the circumstances of the 59 young people who experienced a volatile transition from care. By volatile, we mean a problematic transition which involved acute housing instability and/or outright homelessness. The paper starts by reviewing the policy and research literature on care leavers. Next our analytic and sampling approach is described. Following this we present our empirical data. Among the 59 young people who had a volatile transition from care we distinguish between those whose circumstances have improved considerably over time (n=32) and those whose circumstances remain the same (n=27). We refer to each group as 'moving on' and 'stuck' respectively. The paper then details and analyses the key factors and indeed 'turning points' which influenced the positive changes among those moving on**, and enabled them to overcome the negative impact of earlier traumatic experiences**. The paper concludes by drawing a link between these turning points, and the importance of policy and legislation that ensure ongoing support post-18 years for care leavers beyond the initial transition from care.

2 Leaving care

There are currently over 39,000 children and young people living in out-of-home care (OHC) in Australia, of whom approximately 93 per cent live in home-based care (either foster or kinship care), and 5 per cent in residential care. It has been estimated that 3034 young people aged 15-17 years were discharged from OHC in 2011-12, and the figure for Victoria was 857 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013, p. 77). Some of these young people stay in existing foster or kinship care placements, others return to their family of origin, and many appear to move into independent living. Because Australian jurisdictions do not monitor the progress of care leavers, there are no precise figures as to how many young people fall into each category. All states and territories provides some formal post-care support to care leavers, but there is significant differences between jurisdictions (Mendes et al. 2011).

A number of studies show that many young people experience an abrupt end to the formal support networks of state care. That is, the state as corporate parent fails to provide the ongoing financial, social and emotional support and nurturing typically offered by families. As a result, care leavers between the ages of 16 -18 years of age often face significant barriers in accessing the educational, employment, housing and other development and transitional opportunities that young people of a similar age take for granted (Green & Jones 1999).

The accelerated transition to independence of care leavers contrasts with the experience of most contemporary young people who still live at home until their early 20s, and continue to receive social, practical, emotional and financial support into early adulthood (Flatau et al 2007; Vassallo et al 2009). The typical movement towards independence generally involves a long transition period, during which young people may leave and return home again on average three or more times. There is frequently an intermediate or half-way stage between dependence and independent living, during which young people may reside with extended family, or in a supportive setting such as a college or hostel (Maunders et al 1999).

The key factor here is the continued availability of most family homes as a 'safe haven' to which young people can return over a considerable period of time. Such extended and ongoing support is unavailable to most young people leaving care. They do not have the option of returning 'home' if their initial housing or educational/employment or relationship arrangements break down. As a result of their limited social and emotional, and economic support systems, many care leavers experience a range of poor outcomes including housing instability and homelessness, poor mental and physical health, education and employment deficits, early parenthood, substance abuse, and prostitution (Mendes et al 2011). Particular sub-groups of care leavers appear to be most vulnerable to homelessness and other poor outcomes. They include those young people who leave care early at 16 or 17 years due to a placement breakdown, those who have experienced placement instability, those who have mental health problems or are involved in substance abuse, and those who transition from care whilst in youth justice custody (Stein 2012).

Young peoples' experience of leaving care and transitioning to independence do however, vary enormously. Some do well, but others do not. UK researcher (Stein, 2012) suggests that care leavers tend to fall into three categories. The first he terms the 'moving-on group' (p.170). Young people in this group are likely to have experienced secure and stable placements, be highly resilient, welcome independence, and be able to make effective use of leaving and aftercare supports. The second group he terms 'survivors' (pp.171-72). They have experienced significant instability and discontinuity. Outcomes for this group tend to reflect the effectiveness of aftercare supports provided. The 'strugglers' (p.172) are the third group.

They are more likely to have had the most negative pre-care experiences, and are most likely to experience significant social and emotional deficits. After care support is unlikely to alleviate these problems, but is still viewed as important by them.

Other studies have found similar patterns in young people's transition from care and created their own typologies (Raman et al. 2005). A common feature of these typologies is that the experiences and biographies of those who make a successful transition from out-of-home care are very different from those who do not. But typologies have their limitations. Leaving care and the transition to independence is a dynamic process and young people's circumstances, and indeed their trajectories often change. It may well be that the young people Stein describes as moving on experience significant disruption in the future, just as some survivors may well start to move on. While a poor transition from care is often a pathway to life-long disadvantage, it is not pre-determined what will happen to young people who have poor transitions. What is often missing from the literature is sensitivity to change; an awareness and understanding of how young people whose transition from care is poor manage to turn their lives around. We need to know more about the events and institutions that influence or initiate these changes. We also need to better understand how young people as active agents capable of reflecting on their circumstances, connect these turning points with their biographical experiences. In this paper we examine the experiences of 32 young people who, despite having a volatile transition from care had started to turn their lives around.

3 Approach
In 2009 a team of researchers were awarded a grant by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute to undertake a study into the housing pathways of young people leaving care (Johnson et al. 2010). The project was driven by a concern with the poor housing outcomes of care leavers, so well documented in the literature (Wade & Dixon 2006). In that study we conducted 77 in-depth interviews with young people aged between 18-25 who had been in care. The interviews focused on the participants' housing histories, but also covered their employment experiences, relationships, education and their experiences before, during and after care. The interviews were recorded with the participant's consent, and were then transcribed and coded.

The participants were recruited from welfare agencies located in the inner city, suburban and regional locations in two Australian states, Western Australia and Victoria. Given our sampling strategy targeted welfare agencies it is highly likely that the sample was skewed towards those who had poor transition experiences, but given the focus of the original study, such a sample was suitable for our purposes.

In the original study we distinguished between young people who had a smooth transition from care and those who had a volatile transition from care. There was not a great deal of difference between these two groups with respect to the proportion who had been in residential care. In the smooth group, 56% had been in residential care (n=16, 2 cases no answer), while it was slightly higher among the volatile pathway (63%, n=49, 10 cases no answer).

Compared to those who had a relatively trouble free, or smooth transition from care, young people who had a volatile transition from care left at a younger age, and often in crisis. Most had experienced numerous placements while they were in care and had little trust in the Child Protection system or in other people. Since leaving care all had been homeless at some point. Yet, despite the depressing familiarity of these statistics many of the young people we

interviewed had started to turn their lives around. There was a notable improvement in the housing circumstances of 32 of them (Table 1) and we also observed improvements in their employment, education and training activities. We classified this group as 'moving on'. In contrast, the other 27 care leavers who had also experienced a volatile transition from care remained 'stuck' in precarious and often damaging social circumstances.

Table 1: Housing circumstances, by classification (moving on or stuck)

Current housing	Moving on (n=32)	Stuck (n=27)
Secure housing	25	-
Longer term temporary , supported housing	7	-
Short term accommodation—e.g., refuges	-	7
Homeless	-	20

Although the current circumstances of those who were 'moving on' and those who were 'stuck' were profoundly different, Table 2 shows there was little difference between the two groups – just under half were female, their average age was identical (21 years), they came into care at the same age, the amount of time they had been out of care was the same but the proportion who had been involved with Juvenile Justice and who had been in residential care was substantially higher among those who were stuck compared to those who were moving on. Among those classified as 'stuck', 83% (n=25, 2 cases no answer) had been in residential care. In contrast, 44% of those who we classified as 'moving on' had been in residential care (n=25, 7 cases no answer).

Overall, 19 people in our sample had been in the Juvenile Justice system at some point in time. There was a substantial difference between the two pathways. About five times as many on the volatile pathway (33%, n=55, no answer 4 cases) had been in the Juvenile Justice system compared to 7% of those on the smooth pathway (n=15, 3 cases no answer). Further, two thirds (67%) of those who had been in the Juvenile Justice system, had also been in residential care at some stage.

Nonetheless, the similarity between the two groups begs the question of how some care leavers managed to overcome a poor transition from care, when others in similar circumstances and with similar biographies had not. In the following sections we use qualitative material to identify those pivotal moments that appear to have had a decisive influence on re-orientating the participants' life trajectories.

Table 2: Selected characteristics, by classification (%)

Characteristics	Moving on (n=32)	Stuck (n=27)
Current age	20.7	20.3
Female	44	48
Average age came into care	8.7	8.8
Years out of care	4.5	5.0
Education attainment – Yr 10 or below	56	59
Ever evicted	63	59
Report mental health condition (ever)	38	48
Report abuse (ever)	44	56
Ever in Juvenile Justice	22	41
Ever in residential Care	34	74

4 Moving on

A notable feature of those young people who were moving on was their agency. The positive focus and direction of their agency was underpinned by a strong desire for a better life. Some young people who were moving on displayed determination, persistence and resilience and turning their lives around was something they were very proud of. John told us that he saw:

"... a lot of people just sitting back and waiting for things to happen, waiting for it to be handed to them on a silver platter. And I'm one that you've got to go out there and work for it… You throw me in any situation and I can deal with it, I think I'm just one of those types of people that, okay, it doesn't matter how bad it is, I'll come out the other end" (John, Victoria, currently living with foster family).

But, for others moving on was fuelled by a very different set of emotions. For these young people moving on was driven by a deep sense of anger. Indeed, for some young people, such as Bill, this tangible sense of anger was a powerful source of personal motivation:

"Strangely enough, people say anger's a useless emotion. My anger was what has driven me to get this far. Being so angry at the system, being so angry at my mother, and being so angry at public housing…" (Bill, Victoria, post care supported accommodation.)

While the motivation and emotional impact of moving on varied we identified a number of pivotal moments or experiences that encouraged young people to actively seize control over their lives and their circumstances. Other studies have also identified specific catalysts for change among disadvantaged young people such as the birth of a child (Bessant 2003) or the death of a close friend (Johnson et al 2008). However, the extent to which young people in our sample were able to exercise meaningful agency and move on was dependent upon broader circumstances, in particular the opportunity to access appropriate external resources.

We identified four factors that stood out among those whose housing (and other) circumstances were improving—addressing substance abuse; improved family relationships; establishing meaningful relationships with professional support; and finding work. As the subsequent section shows, the four factors are often interlinked, but the key point is that whatever the catalyst(s), the resulting turnaround in the participants' lives was pronounced.

5   Addressing problematic substance use

International research suggests a disproportionately high rate of substance abuse among care leavers. For example, a number of quantitative studies with adolescents transitioning from care have been undertaken in the US. In a sample of 406 care leavers Vaughn et al (2007) found that 35 per cent had a substance use disorder. Another American study which conducted 603 interviews with 17 to 18 year olds preparing to leave care found that 21.3 per cent had experienced either drug and alcohol abuse or dependence, and that rates of accessing substance abuse treatment were more than five times that of the general population. The same group were then followed up eighteen months later. Despite policy differences in this multi-site study, which resulted in half the population remaining in care, while the other half had left care, they found that those who had left care had higher rates of substance abuse and dependence than those still in care (Courtney & Dworsky 2006). Three large UK-based studies also reported high levels of illicit drug use (McCrystal et al 2008; Newburn & Pearson 2002; Ward et al 2003).

Roughly two-thirds of our participants' reported they had a substance abuse problem at some point in their lives. Substance abuse was identified as a key factor that created problems maintaining their housing and social relationships. Addressing problematic substance use was the most instrumental factor that enabled young people who had experienced a volatile transition from care to move on.

While there was rarely a single defining moment that resulted in young people abstaining from drug use, it was equally clear that there had been a significant shift in their attitudes towards drug use. Research shows that people with substance abuse problems often have a strong focus on the here-and-now (Snow and Anderson 1993). This present orientation makes it difficult to think about the future and consequently things like housing, work and education are often neglected. Young people identified a number of catalysts that influenced their decision to address their substance addictions - in some cases it was because they were worn out by the transitory, predatory and often violent circumstances associated with street life; sometimes it was because of the damage they had witnessed to their friends and this often included seeing people they were close to dying. However, the most common factor the participants' identified was a concern about what the future might hold if they continued down the current path they were travelling. For instance, the big motivation for Shana to address her lifestyle of substance abuse was a fear of prison:

"I'd breached a suspended sentence at that stage, so therefore I thought I better get my shit together, otherwise I'm going in" (Shana, Victoria, public housing.).

Kelly also recognised that if she did not address her drug use her life would be miserable:

"Heroin makes you so sick. . . . You're just going down this path and I didn't, I don't want that for the rest of my life" (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.).

While fears about what the future may hold informed the decision to abstain from drug use, it was no guarantee of successful abstinence. Relapse is a common experience, particularly among young people and those with little social and economic capital to draw on. Successfully moving on from problematic drug use occurred only when there was access to appropriate resources - among young people who had substance abuse problems this involved access to both drug and alcohol services as well as housing.

With respect to drug and alcohol services, there are only a limited number of services and care leavers are forced to compete with other young people. When young people want to address their substance abuse problems and try to gain access to services but miss out, not only is this a lost opportunity, but it often results in further frustration and anger and day-to-day life typically spirals out of control once again. Without access to the services they need, when they need them, not only does it become more difficult and costly to assist young people with substance abuse problems, but they often remain 'stuck' for many years.

However, a lack of access to drug and alcohol services is only one issue. Another is the nature of the services provided. Young people who had moved on spoke favourably about services that provided intensive, flexible, long-term support and that had clear links to, and a focus upon housing. Finding the right services often marked a significant turning point in the lives of care leavers that had moved on. Kevin had been with his drug and alcohol worker for four years and while there had been many ups and downs, the relationship provided an important point of stability and security in his life—a cornerstone that enabled Kevin to move on. The service was flexible and Kevin could go to them for 'whatever reason' he liked. Importantly, his long term housing (public housing) was 'all organised' well in advance of his move out of transitional accommodation.

The link between support and housing is crucial as care leavers' biographies are often characterised by multiple forms of extreme disadvantage. Addressing the physical impact of drug addiction is important, but it takes a relatively short amount of time. However, addressing the social and psychological impact of prolonged drug use is more complex and takes considerably longer. Trying to address problematic drug use in isolation from care leavers' social and economic context can result in relapse and this can reinforce a sense of failure. This highlights an important point. For young people who have experienced profound and often long periods of social and economic exclusion, 'moving on' is a process that varies significantly depending on the individual's circumstances and experiences. Furthermore, moving on is often an arduous process where numerous obstacles and setbacks have to be overcome. When support is sensitive to individual circumstances and has the capacity to 'hang in there', the chances of care leavers successfully moving on is considerably higher. Indeed, rather than fuelled by their anger at the system, their past experiences are often re-evaluated as something they can draw from. Faith summed up what many care leavers were feeling once they started to move on with their lives:

"Right now it's good. I'm looking into private rentals at the moment and I've got like some positive feedback so like it's good now because I'm going into a social work course and I can go, cool, I've had that experience, I understand now what's going on. So it absolutely sucked at the time and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone, but right now I'm glad I have that experience" (Faith, W.A, currently residing in post care supported accommodation.).

When people address their substance abuse issues and experience continuity, stability and good support there is a noticeable improvement in other areas of their lives. There was an

obvious improvement in their self-esteem and confidence. Kelly noted how her self-esteem had grown since she had been 'off the gear'. This gave her the confidence to tackle other issues in her life, such as trusting other people, having other people trust her, and, importantly beginning to trust herself. Trust is the foundation upon which relationships with others is built (Courtney et al. 2010) and trusting, reliable relationships are often the most common thing missing in care leavers' lives. When care leavers begin to trust themselves and others, building positive social relationships are much easier. Kelly found that after years of using drugs:

"So many people stop trusting you . . . I didn't trust myself for years . . . now I've sort of come out of that" (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.).

This gave Kelly the confidence to think and act more positively about the future. She had been in private rental for six months and her hopes were to 'remain clean and have stable housing and possibly a job'. Eighteen months ago such thoughts were far from Kelly's mind.

Once stable and 'clean', the progression of care leavers with substance abuse problems mirrored the smaller number of people without substance abuse issues who were also moving on. While 'getting off the gear' represented a pivotal juncture in the lives of many young people in our sample, what was instrumental in assisting these young people was finding the right support. Overall, most respondents acknowledged the central role of support in successfully resolving their housing and substance abuse problems. Bill summed it up when he said that:

"… the only people that I ever do see pull themselves up, have got someone pushing them, and making them do it. And it's really rare for someone to be able to do it on their own" (Bill, Victoria, currently in accommodation supported by a post care support agency.).

6   Improved family relationships

Moving on was always underpinned by an individual decision to change, but the capacity to enact meaningful change was almost always contingent upon the support of others. However, the precise nature of meaningful support differed between care leavers. For some it was professional support and yet for others it was signified by an improvement in family relationships. Family relationships are very important for all young people in their attempt to successfully navigate a route to independence. Family members including extended kin such as brothers, sisters, aunts, nieces, nephews and grandparents and also partner's families can be a key source of support (Sinclair et al. 2005; Wade 2008). Those young people who are able to establish positive relationships with their family in care and/or when transitioning from care are more likely to enjoy a positive self identity and self-confidence, and overall better outcomes. However, for care leavers family relationships are often problematic, and poor or non-existent family links may contribute to feelings of anger and rejection (Mendes et al. 2012).

For many of those who had a difficult transition from care but who were now moving on, it was notable that relationships with their families had gradually improved and this in turn was having a positive impact upon their lives. Rachael reflected on the fact that, unlike the past, she could now rely on her family to provide her with assistance should any problems emerge:

"Mum, at one stage I didn't want any contact with her, but now my relationship with Mum is she's there for me and I'm there for her but … when I was younger I just didn't want that

added stress, because that's what it was, it wasn't support it was more stress" (Rachael, Victoria, private rental.).

Of course, this is not to say that all family problems and difficulties had necessarily been resolved. On the contrary, the background for many young people from care is one of strained and often innately difficult family relationships. Many of the respondents recognised that there were limits in how far family relationships could be improved. John told us that:

"I still will never forget the stuff that's gone on and I'm just still very careful in what I say and how much contact I have with them because when it gets to a point where there's a lot of contact that's where shit still continues to happen so I just take it as it comes really, take it as it comes" (John, Victoria, currently living with foster family.).

Yet, despite his history John's relationship with his family had gradually improved, which, in turn, had been critical in enabling John to move on:

"That's progressively building up … Mum is a bit bizarre [laughter] I never understood where she comes from. But on dad's side of the family it's been a positive step. This year I'm going with them for Christmas day and things like that so it's progressively like as I've got older and we've spoken about a lot of things that happened in the past and what not" (John, Victoria, currently living with foster family.).

What may appear to be fairly small improvements in family relationships often have a significant impact upon young people's ability to successfully navigate their way towards independence. Indeed, the importance of improved family life for offering support and instilling greater stability came through clearly, even if positive family experiences were sometimes with their partner's families:

"I had a boyfriend for a while who was really supportive and his family was really supportive and his mum sort of just took me under her wing and was really kind and she showed me, like, I don't know it's the first house I've ever lived in where there wasn't yelling and arguments and hits and fights and screaming and things getting thrown, and she showed me just that life doesn't need to be like that, you know what I mean?" (Rachael, Victoria, private rental.).

Of course, for a variety of reasons, not all young people from care were able to enjoy improved relationships with their biological families. For some this meant a key source of meaningful support was often professional support workers, who were sometimes even seen as akin to family. As Ryan said:

"I talk to her more than I talk to my own family. She pretty much classes me as her son and I know her network of people and they're really helpful…. it's easy because if you have the relationship then you pretty much can talk to them about anything" (Ryan, W.A, public housing.).

7   Professional support
Research suggests that trusting, reliable relationships play a crucial role in how young people view themselves, and how they think others see them. Along with their impact on personal identity relationships offer a range of emotional and practical social support including advice

regarding concerns and fears, assistance in a crisis, participation in leisure activities, physical affection, and help with health problems (Courtney et al. 2010).

Participants received assistance from a range of professionals including social workers, youth workers and others based in either child and youth welfare or homeless services agencies. But a particularly strong feature of their narratives was the numerous examples where professional support was inappropriate, insufficient, inflexible or judgmental. Not surprisingly many were angry at a system that they thought had failed them and had failed to understand why their circumstances were as they were. Kelly had a strong dislike of social workers who:

"… come across like they're better than [their] clients. It just makes me so angry because to me it's by the grace of god thing" (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.).

Yet, through a combination of good luck and their own persistence and determination, many eventually found support that was appropriate for them. A characteristic of good support relationships was the agencies' and workers' willingness to 'hang in there'. Agencies that 'hang in' there, that prioritise persistence often in spite of official requirements, implicitly recognise that moving forward is a process characterised by steps forward and the occasional step backwards. Where agencies 'hang in there' during both the good and bad times, the possibility of overcoming distrust and anger and developing meaningful relationships is considerably higher. Many of the participants who had good support noted that concrete, practical assistance was important. Kelly told us that her support worker was:

"… very helpful and she's very practical . . . there's none of this emotional stuff, she just gets it done" (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.).

Similarly, Sandra noted that her support worked because the worker was both 'persistent and consistent in trying to help'. In addition, assistance to secure and maintain appropriate housing was consistently emphasised in the participants' narratives—workers who had a strong knowledge of the housing market, who knew how to provide assistance with applications, and who also knew what resources were available to young people, received regular mentions. Sandra's statement illustrates the experiences of many who had moved on:

"I have a great housing worker . . . she helped me apply for $1,600 rent assistance, [and] a $1,000 setting up expenses" (Sandra, W.A, public housing.).

Having had comprehensive and appropriate assistance to secure housing, Sandra reflected on the difference that having a stable, affordable home had made to her life:

"It made my life better, having the house I have now has made my life better" (Sandra, W.A, public housing.).

While stable housing was a critical element in moving onwards and addressing their difficulties, employment was also an important component in progressing onwards.

8 Finding work

There is a positive correlation between good career outcomes for care leavers, stable placement experiences and delayed transitions from care, and continuing stability including secure housing after care (Dixon et al 2006). The relationship between homelessness and unemployment is a complex and multi-dimensional one - without stable housing it is difficult

to even apply for a job, but without an income it is often difficult to find a place. Kelly succinctly summed up the tension between housing and employment:

"Yeah, that was always when I was having trouble and growing up it was always about it, there was always a chicken in the egg like I haven't got anywhere to live, I haven't got a job, and I've got all these court cases and I've got all this other stuff, and you just don't know where to start" (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.).

Kelly also asserted the importance of having a place to call her own:

"Having somewhere to live has always been the most important part . . . 'cause then you can apply for jobs cause you've actually got an address" (Kelly, Victoria, private rental.).

Others saw the problem differently. The nuanced links between homelessness and employment have been examined elsewhere (Wade & Dixon, 2006; Parkinson & Horn, 2002; Grace and Gill 2008), and it was very clear from our interviews that unemployment was a crucial constraint for some care leavers in being able to access affordable housing, especially in the face of stiff competition within the private rental sector. Amy believed that unemployment was one of two reasons why she kept on missing out on properties:

"Unemployment, I think that was a big one, so they were the two reasons [young age and unemployed], because I was competing with doctors, lawyers, families" (Amy, W.A, currently in private rental.).

Ironically, even for those young people who were able to secure employment in the first place, housing difficulties often detrimentally impacted upon their ability to maintain a job. Danny, who was living with his foster family, told us that after problems with his flatmates his:

"housing started getting a bit screwed up, and that's why I left the job because I was stressed about housing and I lost my temper at a worksite … I quit and I just thought, 'oh who cares', I wasn't in that frame of mind" (Danny, Victoria, living with foster family.).

The care experience itself was also identified by some respondents as undermining the necessary skills and attributes needed to obtain and maintain a job, such as self-esteem. Indeed, some argued that additional help and assistance with finding employment was crucial for young people from care:

"I think there should be, like, motivational helpers, like helping them with self-esteem to get the job, because often people who have been fostered out have very low self-esteem … and I think it makes it harder for them to get a job because their self-esteem is low" (Claire, W.A, in public housing for 12 months.).

Whatever the damaging impact of the care system and poor housing upon their employment prospects, securing employment was a key turning point for some care leavers. While finding work brought financial rewards, it also provided benefits, such as stability and self-esteem; a feeling of being part of the mainstream community rather than an outsider.

"Employment keeps you sane I reckon, like at one stage when life was getting tough the only thing that got me out of bed was work. When you work full time it keeps you out of trouble, it gives you something to do, gives you a reason to be good at night time and not go out and do

certain things during the week. And it also does make your weekend more appreciable because you work so hard during the week. I suppose when you spend your money you feel better as well because it's your money, you worked for that money. So, yeah, employment is huge I reckon, my personal opinion" (Rachel, Victoria, private rental).

Of course, the reality of life for many care leavers is that available employment is often low skilled and poorly paid. Nonetheless, for some young people moving on, it was notable that they viewed these jobs as means to an end, or as a vehicle for moving onwards, conscious that even poor jobs have the potential to lead somewhere more positive:

"As far as I am now, I am trying to work up in it (a job in a fast food takeaway)… When you're at the bottom it's really crap… but I'm trying to go up in it, so I can do part time management while I'm studying for the good management salary" (Bill, Victoria, currently in accommodation supported by a post care support agency.).

Coupled with increasing self-confidence and an improved sense of self, many care leavers were starting to flourish. Care leavers lives can be turned around if they have access to the right resources. While each individual's motivation to change will vary, we were struck by how many aspired to a normal life, a job, an education, a family but without access to the sort of resources their peers often take for granted, they often did not know where to start.

9   Discussion

Our findings reinforce the importance of flexible after care supports that address both relationship issues and structural assistance in areas such as income and housing for care leavers. Ongoing supports seem to be particularly vital for those young people who have problematic transitions from care. This reflects messages drawn from life course theory which emphasize that transitions to independence vary according to the diversity of life experiences, and that care leavers should not be expected to conform to normative ideals of maturation and timing (Horrocks 2002). The evidence presented in this paper suggests that effective after-care interventions can facilitate 'turning points' that enable young people to overcome the adverse emotional impact of earlier traumatic experiences (Wade & Munro 2008. p. 219).

For example, those young people in our study who successfully addressed problematic substance use only did so when they were developmentally ready to move into adulthood, and able to access suitable specialist supports. Similarly, improved family relationships took time to build, and are likely to be assisted by ongoing monitoring and support from post-care workers. Positive professional relationships were of value to care leavers particularly when workers were willing to persist over time. And assistance with securing employment was significant in promoting successful transitions from care. Additionally, our study identified the central need for ongoing assistance with housing. For example, care leavers could be provided with a Secure Tenancy Guarantee that subsidised rent payments until they were 25 years of age.

As important as all of these things are, what struck us was the way that individual actors desire for change and for a better life was a central theme in 'moving on'. Agency, or more specifically a positive focused agency, is an important point upon which change hinges and ultimately flourishes. The young people in our study had experienced many traumatic events and they had been denied opportunities that their peers takes for granted. Yet despite these experiences they had not lost the desire for a better, more normal life. While effective after-care interventions can indeed facilitate 'turning points' it was young people who created and

drove change. By focusing on 'turning points', our study emphasises the interaction between structural and individual factors, and the important point that if either is absent, then the likelihood of 'moving on' is severely diminished.

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