

More support to keep youth care leavers out of criminal justice system

September 25 2014



Few young people transitioning out of state care at 18 are ready to live independently and more support is needed to keep them from entering the youth justice system, according to a new Monash University report.

Launched today by the Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People, the report identifies a number of approaches to keep those who have been in state care from entering the [youth justice system](#).

The report is based on the findings of a three-year study investigating offending and youth justice involvement among young people leaving

state care in Victoria.

The study by Associate Professor Philip Mendes and Susan Baidawi, Department of Social Work, and Associate Professor Pamela Snow, Department of Psychiatry, involved interviewing 77 key stakeholders from across Victoria, and conducting in-depth interviews with 15 Victorian care-leavers who had entered the youth justice system.

Associate Professor Mendes said the study originated from a long-standing concern from welfare and legal agencies that young people in, or leaving, care were disproportionately involved in the youth justice system.

"We have identified a number of limitations in the Victorian leaving care system, including that funding for post-care support is discretionary and poorly resourced, and care leavers are not provided with guaranteed and secure housing," he said.

"The study has also shown that very few young people transitioning from state care in Victoria are developmentally ready to live independently from 18 years of age, often lacking a supportive safety net of family, professional and community networks. Some also directly exit care into homelessness."

Associate Professor Mendes said the researchers have recommended there needs to be holistic case management for all care leavers, which would involve consistent case manager involvement that commences well prior to the leaving care process and continues over a period of years into the mid-20s.

"This would replicate the kind of support that young people typically receive in intact families, as well as the legislative extension of care until the age of 21 for those who need ongoing care," Associate Professor

Mendes said.

"At the very least, we have recommended that a legislative amendment be introduced to make post-care support mandatory rather than discretionary. The development of a range of new and guaranteed housing options for care leavers is also a high priority."

Associate Professor Mendes said the study findings suggested that offending behaviour among young people in state care stemmed from trauma-related causes.

"We also need to incorporate a trauma-informed approach to prevent the over-representation of young people in state care entering the youth justice system," he said.

"This involves helping young people recover from a trauma, including supporting physical, emotional and psychological safety for young people across all systems. We also need to ensure that young people's experiences in the care system does not further exacerbate existing trauma."

The report presented the results of the third and final phase of the Leaving Care and Youth Justice project funded by the Helen McPherson Smith Trust, which aimed to generate a more in depth understanding of the involvement of care leavers in the youth justice system.

"We hope that whichever side of politics is in power after the November Victorian state election will act on the findings and invest appropriately in the welfare of these [young people](#)," Associate Professor Mendes said.

"Specifically, we urge child protection, youth justice, education, mental health and drug and alcohol services to work together more effectively to progress improved transitions for care leavers."

Provided by Monash University

Citation: More support to keep youth care leavers out of criminal justice system (2014, September 25) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-09-youth-leavers-criminal-justice.html>

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