RESEARCH ARTICLE

Where Is the Village? Care Leaver Early Parenting, Social Isolation and Surveillance Bias

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Abstract

Young people transitioning from out-of-home care (termed care leavers) are known to be a relatively vulnerable group. One example is their over-representation in early pregnancy and parenting. This paper presents findings from a study of care leaver early parenting in the Australian state of Victoria. Sixteen service provider staff working with care leavers who had become young parents were asked, via focus groups and interviews, for their perspectives on the factors that influence the high prevalence of early parenting amongst care leavers, and the key support services that are available and necessary to assist both care leavers and their children. Service providers raised multiple issues common to the existing leaving care literature concerning the lack of support provided to young people being exited from state care as potentially leading to both early parenting and parenting challenges. Service providers also expressed concern about what many studies of care leaver early parenting have termed 'surveillance bias'. There was a clear consensus that young people transitioning from care face unique challenges and social isolation due to their difficult experiences pre-care, in-care and post-care. Those experiences place them at risk of disadvantages that impede their ability to demonstrate the practical, physical and financial means to safely raise children. At the same time, they are under greater scrutiny than other parents by being known to child protection already. Service providers argued in favour of greater support for young care leaver parents to prevent their children's engagement with child protection systems.

Keywords Out-of-home care · Young people · Early pregnancy and parenting

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Introduction

Until recently, in most parts of Australia, young people who had been placed into the care of the government were routinely discharged from the accommodation, financial and other supports provided by child protection services at the age of 18 years or earlier. In contrast, young Australians in the general community typically rely on family and social networks for financial, emotional and housing support, into their early and mid 20s. Rates of homelessness for care leavers in their first year after leaving care are consistently reported to be around 30% nationally (McDowall, 2020). Affordable housing in Australia is rare with a recent study reporting 'just three percent of all properties for rent were affordable and appropriate for households on government income support payments. For households on minimum wage it was 22 percent' (Anglicare Australia, 2020). Despite the clear challenges for young people leaving care, this cohort appears to have far higher rates of early parenting than other young Australians. Early parenting amongst care leavers presents a high risk of poverty and child protection involvement. Recent research also points to high risks of child maltreatment in families where parents were themselves maltreated as a child (Armfield et al., 2021; Wall-Wieler et al., 2018). The popular adage 'It takes a village to raise a child' suggests that care leavers, many of whom have few supportive relationships, may be lacking in the supports that other young or older parents can rely on through family, social and community networks. It is therefore important to examine care leavers' experiences of parenting their children within the context of the impacts of their pre-care, in-care and post-care experiences and the supports they have available to them. This article explores the experiences of care leavers who become parents during transitions from out-of-home care according to the perspectives of service providers working with this cohort.

Australia's welfare system is divided between federal and state government responsibilities. Child protection services are the jurisdiction of Australian states and territories. The federal government is responsible for income support payments, and so whilst it is not formally responsible for child protection matters, it does incur the significant costs of support for young people exited from care who lack social or financial resources to live independently (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2021). Similarly, it is the federal government who provides parenting payments where parents are otherwise unable to support their children financially. Young parents are typically a disadvantaged group having their secondary, further or higher education or employment options limited by parenting duties (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2017). Those that rely on government income support are often portrayed by government and media as a 'drain' on taxpayer funds, and have in recent years been required to participate in a mandatory 'pre-employment' programme called Parents Next.

A federal Senate inquiry into the programme has made some damning claims about the programme's activities and outcomes:

> The committee considers that placing overly onerous limitations on the rights to social security and an adequate standard of living for parents and their young children is unacceptable. No parent should need to live in fear of being

unable to feed their baby because of potential compliance actions against them (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019).

This punitive approach to welfare supports creates significant difficulties for young parents. Another recent federal Senate inquiry, this one concerning income support payments, has found that the rate of payments forces recipients into poverty and that flaws in the mutual obligation systems recipients are required to navigate create significant barriers to gaining employment (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). Little attention has been paid to how these issues may be compounded for young people transitioning from care as a distinct group of young people, or indeed young parents. Australian research shows that young people transitioning from care who are well supported by carers, partners, family or services fare better whilst those who are isolated or lacking in supports fare worse (Acil Allen Consulting, 2020; Muir et al., 2019).

Literature Review

Research literature concerning care leaver early parenting has identified a number of complex and contentious issues. Implications for policy and practice depend heavily on the interpretation of research findings. There is clear evidence that care leavers are having children whilst teenagers and young adults at higher rates than the general population but the reasons for this remain unclear. Similarly, there is clear evidence of high rates of child protection involvement with children of care leavers; however, it is unclear whether the risk posed to children is related to parents' resources or their behaviour. Key issues identified in the literature concern:

- High prevalence of care leaver early parenting across multiple countries
- Lack of access to sex education for many care leavers due to educational disruptions
- Loneliness and isolation leading care leavers to want to start a family
- Poorer outcomes associated with higher rates of early parenting
- High level of surveillance and parenting oversight by statutory authorities, but few services or supports to provide basic needs to prevent poverty and disadvantage
- Social isolation limits parents' ability to participate in education or employment
- Care leavers vulnerable to abusive relationships

Prevalence of Care Leaver Early Parenting

Global research indicates that care leavers are disproportionately represented in statistics of early pregnancy and parenting. For example, a longitudinal study in the state of Victoria reported at the final wave of data collection that 31% of survey respondents had been pregnant or caused a pregnancy, and 19% had given birth by around age 21 (Muir et al., 2019). In Sweden, a whole generation study of care leavers found that 16–19% of females and 5–6% of males had become parents before

turning 20 years old (Vinnerljung et al., 2007). A major longitudinal study in the USA found that 23.5% of female and 11.5% of male care leavers had become parents by 21 years (Courtney et al., 2007).

There is some evidence that extending care until 21 years old lessens the risk of early pregnancy and parenting. For example, a major study in CA, USA, reported that extending care reduced the pregnancy rate for 19 year olds by approximately 10% (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). However, a more recent study of young people in extended care in California reported that 53% of females and 24% of males had children at age 23 (Courtney et al., 2020). This study found strong evidence that pregnancies were not accidental. Forty-four per cent of this group of females reported either probably or definitely wanting to get pregnant, with 34% of the males also either probably or definitely wanting the pregnancy (Courtney et al., 2020).

Pathways to Early Pregnancy and Parenting

The literature has provided many possible explanations for high rates of early parenting amongst care leavers. Placement instability and disrupted schooling can adversely affect access to sex education in schools. Peer groups who exert a negative influence and early sexual activity have also been identified as contributing to care leaver early parenting (Connolly et al., 2012). An earlier review of research literature found that previous abuse and neglect could cause issues for young people in safely navigating intimate relationships and motivate a belief that sex was the same as love and affection (Mendes, 2009). Biehal and Wade (1996) found that exits from care forced accelerated transitions to adulthood and young people often sought partners and families to avoid the loneliness they feared post care. A meta-synthesis of qualitative studies of young mothers in care found that some care leavers were motivated to have children to fill an emotional void left when attachments and meaningful relationships were missing in their lives (Connolly et al., 2012). Wade (2008) identified placement instability, criminal offending, substance misuse, absconding from placement and labour market non-participation histories as statistically significant predictors of early parenthood in his study's follow-up sample of 101 care leavers in England.

Poverty and Disadvantage

Dominelli et al. (2005) have argued that the welfare system adopts a punitive approach to teenage parents and this compounds their disadvantage. The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) reported that young parents can lack support from families or partners, face low educational attainment and low incomes, and experience stigma from professionals (AHRC, 2017). They also have great difficulties accessing safe and affordable housing, and appear to experience abuse and family violence more than other young people (AHRC, 2017). It does appear that in many jurisdictions child protection services may be unable to assist when protective concerns are largely poverty related. A Welsh study of leaving care services found that authorities removed 26% of care leavers' children and child protection supervised a further 34% (Roberts et al.,

2019). Workers from these services stated that care leavers required housing and other practical supports which the service was unable to provide. Their duty of care to children meant that concerns about a child's welfare had to be reported. Workers struggled with this dual role as it impacted their ability to build trust with their clients (Roberts et al., 2019). It is commonly understood that new parents require support, regardless of their relative socio-economic standing. Leaving care research clearly indicates a critical lack of support for young people transitioning from care.

Social Isolation

Eastman and Putnam-Hornstein (2019) studied child protection involvement amongst a group of 2094 young women who gave birth to children whilst still in care in California between 2009 and 2012. They found that child protection involvement with these young women's children was unevenly distributed across three groups. Young women with less stable placement histories tended to experience mental illness and had higher rates of sexual abuse histories (Eastman & Putnam-Hornstein, 2019). Sixty-eight per cent of this group were reported to child protection and 35% had children removed (Eastman & Putnam-Hornstein, 2019). On the other hand, young mothers with more stable placement histories tended to have their children later, could call on the support of previous carers or the child's other parent, and were less likely to experience mental illness. Thirty-six per cent of this group were reported to child protection; however, only 5.8% had their children removed. Of a third group of mothers who had been in care for less than a year, 55% of these mothers were reported to child protection and 19.6% of them had children removed (Eastman & Putnam-Hornstein, 2019). For the mothers with more stable care histories, there appears to still be a high rate of reporting to child protection, but a lower rate of removal, which suggests that with support many are quite capable of looking after their children.

The Beyond 18 longitudinal study in Victoria found that young people transitioning from care who were able to stay on with kinship carers or foster carers (thus never really 'leaving care') were most likely to progress to full-time employment and further education (Muir et al., 2019). Eastman and Putnam-Hornstein (2019) argue that extra support from carers and partners may provide the respite care that many parents need, as well as child care assistance to enable their participation in employment and/or study. This kind of family and community support is closer to the normative experience of young people who grow up in their families outside of child protection interventions. Grandparents and family friends may be available to provide baby-sitting, advice out-of-hours, and financial and emotional support whereas child protection social workers can provide little in material aid and must maintain professional boundaries.

Protective Interventions or Surveillance Bias?

Concerns about care leavers' vulnerability and high-risk, as well as reliance on a range of social services means that a range of services closely supervise pregnancies and parenting. In the state of Victoria, child protection services are required to complete an incident report and speak to their supervisor about reporting an

unborn child to child protection when the mother is in care. The police must be consulted if the young woman is under 16 years of age (Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Research has shown that care leavers are very likely to experience child protection involvement with their own children—though there is debate about whether surveillance bias or a higher risk for children of care leavers is the cause (Armfield et al., 2021; Wall-Wieler et al., 2018). Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2013) found that a cohort of teen mothers in Los Angeles County were twice as likely to be reported to child protection authorities if they had had reports made to child protection about themselves as children. Another large sample study in Wisconsin compared the child protection involvement of three groups of young parents ($n = 36,475$) experiencing adversity as teenagers. The first group received food stamps between 14 and 17 years old, the second group had been reported to child protection but not placed in care, and the third group were placed in care (Font et al., 2020). Only 10% of both males and females in the food stamps group experienced child protection intervention with their own children compared with 25% of fathers and 33% of mothers who had been placed in care (Font et al., 2020).

These findings can be interpreted in any number of ways. The authors note that parents who were not in care had children later, and therefore did not come to child protection authorities' attention until their children were in their care. They could also indicate higher risk for children of parents who have been in care, or surveillance bias. The study also found that 73% of reports made about parents who had been in care concerned their partners, not themselves (Font et al., 2020). Thus, it is possible that care leaver parents are vulnerable to abusive partners who pose a risk to their children. Cashmore and Paxman (2006), in a longitudinal study of care leavers in the Australian state of NSW, found that 11 of the 16 young women in their study, who had had children in the 4 to 5 years after leaving care, had been involved in violent relationships—none of the women without children was currently in violent relationships and only one woman reported experiencing family violence.

Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a broader PhD study addressing the research question: What are the key factors explaining care leaver early parenting?

Following an extensive narrative literature review combining general leaving care studies with care leaver early parenting literature and ambiguous loss theory (Purtell et al., 2020; Boss, 2010) the following key themes concerning care leaver early parenting were identified:

- Pathways to early parenting
- The 'emotional void' motivation to parent
- Increased scrutiny of care leaver parents or 'surveillance bias'
- Poverty and disadvantage amongst care leavers
- Care leavers 'turning their lives around'

These themes were developed into an interview schedule to gather service providers' and care experienced young people's perspectives on these issues. To decrease the possibility of researcher influence, the themes were developed into the following broad topic areas:

- Factors influencing decision/s to have a child/children
- Expectations of and confidence with parenting responsibilities
- Informal support networks—have family or friends been supportive?
- Nature of relationships between parents
- Child protection involvement with own children
- Support services for care leaver parents

Findings from three focus groups and two interviews consulting sixteen practitioners in total have been divided across two articles. In this article we examine the key factors explaining care leavers' experiences of transitions from care and of becoming parents during this transition period. Reasons for the phenomenon of care leaver early parenting are covered in another article to accommodate word length requirements for publishing (Purtell et al., forthcoming). The researchers hoped to ascertain the degree to which participants agreed or disagreed with the evidence in the literature concerning care leaver early parenting. The study was designed to first ascertain service providers' perspectives before speaking to care experienced young people, both parents and non-parents. This article reports on interviews and focus groups with service providers only.

Participants were recruited through the Victorian non-government child welfare peak body leaving care practitioners' network. A one-page flier with details to contact the student researcher for full details and to receive the explanatory statement was distributed via email across the state-wide leaving care network. Details were also included in the child welfare peak body's e-newsletter which happened to be forwarded to child protection services by a senior public servant.

Respondents typically attempted to organise several staff from the service or region to participate in a focus group. Three focus groups of approximately 90 min each were conducted. On most occasions some participants were unable to be part of the research on the day owing to crisis intervention work or other unforeseen responsibilities. Consequently, two focus groups ended up instead becoming individual interviews of around 60 min. A range of services and staff roles were represented in the study including:

- non-metropolitan leaving care services working with young people from residential and home-based care ($n = 2$),
- non-metropolitan and metropolitan intensive parenting support services for care leavers and parents with disability ($n = 10$),
- non-metropolitan alcohol and other drug (AoD) services with experience with care leavers ($n = 1$),
- non-metropolitan home-based care worker with experience working with young people from residential care ($n = 1$) and

- non-metropolitan family support services with experience working with care leavers ($n=2$).

The student researcher conducted all interviews and focus groups. A semi-structured approach meant that participants were not directed to address the topics in a predetermined order, rather the researcher ensured that each interviewee or group member was given the opportunity to comment on each of the issues in the interview schedule. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee approved this research.

The data were coded using the themes identified in the literature review. Where new themes were identified, these were coded as emerging themes and grouped together under new sub-codes. Table 1 shows the coding distribution for all data collected from service providers.

The findings concerning young people's reasons for having children early and associations between a lack of support when leaving care and wanted pregnancies are covered in another article (Purtell et al., forthcoming). This paper analyses the codes and sub-codes in Table 2.

Limitations

Care experienced young people's perspectives could not be combined with the results discussed in this article as recruitment was hampered by system-wide reforms in leaving care services, major bushfires and a global pandemic. System-wide reforms meant that practitioners were under more pressure than usual and young people were receiving less support than usual so participation in research was not seen as a high priority. Again, with 5 months of unprecedented bushfires in Australia in 2019–2020 followed by the COVID pandemic, participation in research was not a high priority for young people when this research was being carried out. The results are indicative of the practitioners' perspectives on their work and experiences and their work with young people and their children. They cannot be regarded as representative of the experiences or perspectives of most workers in this field.

Results

Care Experiences and Social Isolation

Practitioners commonly believed that in-care experiences of more placements, or placement 'instability', led to poorer outcomes for young people. Participants in this study believed that this also led to pregnancy and early parenting amongst care leavers.

> Yeah, and look international research has shown any young person who has experienced five or more placements actually steps into a higher risk category, and that's only five placements, and as you said, we know kids who have had

Table 1 NVivo count of themes coded in entire data collection

Times theme is coded in study	Code	Sub-code	Sub-sub-code	No. of focus groups/interviews identifying theme
14	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Protective interventions and 'surveillance bias'		4
10	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Services to assist young people with leaving care and/or parenting		4
6	Emerging themes	Risks posed by parents' birth families		4
6	Pathways to early pregnancy and parenting	Filling an 'emotional void' with children or a family		4
5	Prevention of early pregnancy and parenting	Deliberate and wanted pregnancies		3
5	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Protective interventions and 'surveillance bias'	Loss and grief	2
5	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Transitions from care-specific factors		3
5	Emerging themes	Abortion and adoption		3
5	Emerging themes	Expectations of parenting		4

Table 2 NVivo count of themes coded that are covered in this article

Times theme is coded in study	Code	Sub-code	Sub-sub-code	No. of focus groups/ interviews identifying theme
14	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Protective interventions and 'surveillance bias'		4
6	Emerging themes	Risks posed by parents' birth families		4
5	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Protective interventions and 'surveillance bias'	Loss and grief	2
5	Emerging themes	Expectations of parenting		4

forty. You know, and the more placements a young person experiences, the higher the risk level of them becoming pregnant (Non-metropolitan post care programme staff).

Residential care (i.e. a facility where young people are supervised by paid rostered staff) is often associated with placement instability. This is because of known and unknown staff continually coming and going from the home which makes relationship development difficult for both staff and young people. Changes in residents also add to the regular changes in home dynamics.

I'm just going to say … residential care. Yep. The lack of family, the lack of consistency of people who care, staff coming and going, there is … you know, and young people being in residential care from a younger age, and being in there for a long period of time, I think it significantly increases their desire to have a baby at a younger age (Non-metropolitan post care programme staff).

Participants reported other challenges commonly associated with residential care experiences, such as negative peer networks engaging in substance abuse. When young people in residential care were a part of such social networks and became pregnant, parenting risks were heightened. If young parents maintained these social networks, they would be exposing their children to unsafe environments, and therefore enhancing the risk of having their children removed. However, without contact with these social networks, young people were often completely isolated.

Thinking about this particular group, they do all have other people around, but most of the ones who I've written down, …the social networks around them are not great, and they're pulling them back into some of those behaviours that weren't positive (Non-metropolitan parenting programme staff).

Service providers felt that young people in residential care lacked positive social supports, engaged in higher risk behaviours, and were more likely to have children early and to have those children placed in care.

Negative Feelings Towards Care and Disengagement

Discussion in focus groups and interviews frequently turned to young people's negative feelings about being in care and their desire to be free of statutory services, thereby becoming more isolated from positive social and community networks.

Some of the kids that I work with, the ones that are between 15 and 18, all they talk about is wanting to exit care. They think that when they turn 18 and they're not in the care of DHS [Department of Human Services], life will be better (Non-metropolitan home-based care programme staff).

There was some indication in this study that this disengagement was often associated with returning to the families from whom they had been removed. This pull of family was said to be very strong for many young people despite the risks that saw them placed in care to begin with.

I mean, at all ages, all children in care that … it doesn't matter what the reasons, what most of the time, it doesn't matter what the reasons were that a child was put in out-of-home care, they always want to go back to their … you know, they want to go back to their parents and they think they have a view of them as being good parents, so … and that lasts for many kids in out-of-home care up until the end of care and after they've left care (Non-metropolitan parenting programme staff).

Indeed, even the experiences of being in care and having statutory authorities making decisions for young people without their active participation were discussed as other pathways to early parenting.

Yes, and it could be … it very much seems as though they've had that such little control over their lives and who's in them and where they're allowed to be and who they're allowed to be with, has been dictated to them their entire life and this is something that no-one can control but them. They think, well, while they're pregnant it is something that no-one else can control, you know, there's nothing workers can do … (Non-metropolitan post care programme staff).

For young people, disengagement from services and/or return to family of origin whilst pregnant or parenting was seen as a significant risk for the child in some instances. Whether young people exited care to family or elsewhere, participants discussed their lack of positive parenting models as a major impediment to their own parenting skills.

[Focus group member 1]: And that's definitely where we get into real strife, because the lack of any parenting role model becomes evident really early on. And these young parents go, I actually don't know how to do this, at all, and become completely overwhelmed and intimidated by that.
[Focus group member 2]: It's very tragic. It's awful, to watch it play out (Non-metropolitan post care service staff).

The lack of professional support provided to young people post 18 years old as they transition from care to early adulthood was described as a risk factor outside of parents' control that jeopardised their ability to parent safely and well.

I guess the key point has become her history of care, becomes the risk factor. Ironically, this young person has grown up with the guardian which is the state and all of a sudden, her age changes and they are no longer responsible for them, and that's the concern, that's the protective concern (Non-metropolitan post care service staff).

The main pathways to early pregnancy cited in the research literature all exist in and appear to be exacerbated by placement instability and placement in residential care. Placement instability and relationship disruptions associated with residential care were also associated with social isolation which could increase if young people disengaged from services according to study participants. Participants felt that young people often wanted to live with families they were removed from, that they wanted more agency in making decisions about their lives, and that they thought

having a child would provide them with the care of a family. This suggests that the out-of-home care system should attempt to ensure young people are actively involved in decision-making about their own lives to prevent disengagement and increase social connectedness. Increasing agency and social connectedness, as well as access to supports and resources was thought likely to both avert early parenting by young people who could not safely raise their children and to increase young care leavers' parenting capacity and improve outcomes for them and their children.

Greater Supports and Trauma-Informed, Relationship-Based Practice

Participants in this study were in favour of greater supports for young people transitioning from care generally, and recommended that specialised services for those becoming parents adopt a trauma-informed approach with an understanding of how a parent's care experience could affect their particular circumstances. Where intensive parenting support programmes or services were not available, participants spoke about how other service systems might not be as effective in response to this particular cohort.

> …there are a lot of young mums out there who are not getting our service and so therefore they're then being referred to either more general services, like family services, and or they're being referred to more shorter-term services, like [family service] or [parenting service] that are six week [interventions]. So instead of having the four years with a specific worker who knows all about young people, and pregnancy and parenting, they might have a general family service program that you might be able to be with for a year or they're given a six-week intensive thing and then, off you go, that should fix you (Non-metropolitan parenting programme staff).

More intensive support was felt to engender greater trust. An ongoing relationship with a service and/or worker promoted more productive working relationships.

> …that's the thing when I think of our mums that we're working with, they don't have one person in their life that can give them …that can give them that emotional attunement [sic]. I was thinking when we were talking – it feels like these young people don't have a secure base, if we think about security, they don't have somebody to go back to that's safe...
> Because we can work with them for up to four years, that really gives them the opportunity to like, build their trust and actually get below the surface.
> [Interviewer]: Does that take a long time?
> It can, yeah, yep. Some people … out-of-home care goes either way. Either really closed or they just divulge like way too much (Metropolitan parenting programme staff).

The benefits of relationship-based practice in a consistent service are thought to be able to prevent entry to care, or alternatively to facilitate family reunification.

> But quite truly, it is a great program because it's long, it does allow that time to really, like, work on the trust of some of the young people you're working

with and the complexities and stuff, so while Child Protection is just going, oh, [intensive parenting support service] is not available, we'll have to shunt them off to these services – they're not getting the best services and therefore they, yeah, it's quite possible that they'll return later or they'll have children removed earlier than necessary and they might not have as great a chance of getting their children back, because there's not many services (Non-metropolitan parenting programme staff).

Surveillance Bias

There was general consensus amongst participants that care leavers were under more scrutiny from child protection and other services than other members of the community. Whilst service providers felt that children of care leavers were at higher risk generally, much of what they reported about interventions with care leaver early parents suggested that this monitoring and supervision of their parenting could be harmful to both parents and children. One example of surveillance bias is the ability of protective services to review the child protection file of a parent who was in care to make assessments about their suitability as parents. This issue was discussed in two of the focus groups.

[Interviewer]: So do you think that that would be allowable under policy and regulations that Child Protection is able to read the files of people who they're investigating as parents, files of their childhood?

[Parenting service provider]: Yeah, I think they should. Definitely. Because of family of origin kind of connections. It's like finding out what is the history, why is this person like this in this situation? So it gives you a clearer picture. It definitely helps with working with them, knowing their needs analysis and stuff. And particularly when or if they're considering kinship assessment I think it's really important for the worker to have read the file and understand how this young person was placed in out-of-home care and does that preclude that person who was supposed to be their care giver from being assessed now (Metropolitan parenting programme staff).

Well, they definitely have access to entire histories. They shouldn't use things that are too far back or that shouldn't really be having an impact. They shouldn't use those in current assessments, but they will use, like, as in the criteria for [intensive parenting support program], they will use the fact that they've been in out-of-home care and they've had these experiences to inform them that these are possibilities as well (Non-metropolitan parenting programme staff).

In contrast, protective services are not able to access the details of other parents' highly sensitive life histories if they did not have any previous involvement with child protection.

At the same time, the lack of supports available to young people transitioning from care has been well documented in research. Participants in this study explained that there may be many services and workers involved with a care leaver and their

child or children, but without any general increase in practical resources to meet a parent and their children's basic needs, like food and shelter.

> …when every day is taken up with appointments or people popping in, and that can be Child Protection, Enhanced Maternal and Child Health, referrals from [intensive parenting support program], God there could be anything else, like Centrelink [government income support] appointments to financial counselling, you name it. Like, in the space of a week, it becomes a case of … so when does this young person make an appointment for her mental health ... And then that becomes a risk factor. They're [seen as] not prioritising their own mental health throughout all of this, so on it goes, round and round (Non-metropolitan post care programme staff).

With this increased scrutiny, care leaver parents may have to cope better with parenting than others in the community, with less resources available to them. Normative parenting stresses of sleep deprivation, coping with new responsibilities, hormonal changes and other issues play out under statutory supervision for many care leavers.

> [Focus group member 1]: … you know, young care leavers have their babies, they might have their babies with them for a period of time but during that period of time, there are so many workers involved, not really any support for the mum. It's all monitoring and telling them what it is they need to achieve, you know. Like a young person who has left care, who is having a baby, will be monitored to the nth degree by every program basically. There'll be multiple workers and we know what needs to happen, but at the same time it's a level of scrutiny that any other young mum with parental support wouldn't ever necessarily experience.
> [Focus group member 2]: And it doesn't allow for the normal bumps in the road of early parenting where you under-sleep, you're emotional, you're not being rational, you're saying things that are outrageous. You're saying you're not coping, you're wanting to chuck the towel in, all completely normal early parenting experiences for completely middle class etc mothers.
> [Focus group member 1]: That's right, but it's taken as serious and acted upon, by professionals, but there is also that duty of care, where the baby, once that baby is born, it must come first. And you know, you do sit with that risk. Like, no one wants a baby to die on their watch. No worker wants that (Non-metropolitan post care programme staff).

Balancing risks to children against parents' potential was reported to be highly complex in the existing service system where risks could be significant, and support was difficult to access. One respondent made a further argument that the experience of multiple interventions does not teach anyone how to raise a family in a 'normal' way, and this can ingrain reliance on professional services instead of supporting community connectedness.

> But I guess I wonder whether it's services that make better parents at all, or whether it's services that continue to perpetuate these cycles, that the young

people are in. I guess I would sort of argue too that kind of getting out of all this scrutiny and actually being a functioning member of the community is what is going to make them better parents. (Non-metropolitan post care programme staff).

The Paradox of Care and Protective Interventions

The fear of authorities' surveillance bias was powerful whether the bias existed or not. Service providers reported that a parents' fear of having children removed if they asked for help or support may result in an avoidable risk to a child's health and wellbeing, especially if that young parent is avoiding medical checks for his or her children and/or important services for his or her own health and wellbeing.

And I think for our work, I think we talk about it a lot, about how Child Protection involvement can mean they're not disclosing things or not asking questions and not seeking support because there's an interpretation that asking for help means not knowing, means I'm a bad parent and it's that circular kind of … (Metropolitan parenting programme staff).

Participants gave many examples of how this problem could manifest. For parents living in poverty, an inability to access food security and stable accommodation became a child protection concern for professionals working in services these parents' children attend regularly. Avoiding detection of these parenting risks resulted in missing out on essential services for their children.

[Focus group member 1]: Keeping their kids away from school and day care because they don't have enough food to send them with….
[Focus group member 2]: There's also that, 'I'm not going to send them, because it's going to look bad…'
[Focus group member 1]: And because of those things, some child care [services], if they don't provide lunches and things, they'll have conversations with the mum and that can bring about some shame as well, I think, which is really hard if you're already feeling vulnerable.
[Focus group member 3]: Taking them back to their own childhood as well (Metropolitan parenting programme staff).
I feel like, my other big thing that I feel is missing from all of our clients' lives is having access to stable, long term housing. How can they be able to work on any emotional stuff, how can they ever be able to work on any high level parenting capacity, to be able to plan their next meals, if they don't have stable housing? (Non-metropolitan parenting programme staff).

Participants also explained that access to existing services for material needs could be a challenge as young people transitioning from care could experience a service and stigma fatigue from being overwhelmed when constantly referred to services throughout their lives.

I think it's the stigma that is attached to services. And you know, um these young parents, you know, you're talking specifically about young parents who have been

involved in the system… So reaching out and linking into all these other services that have been a part of their lives for goodness knows how long. You know, just like 'God, just let me be', I know the families that I work with are like, 'I just, I just, I just need to breathe, by myself'. And there's some risk in that definitely, there is. Um you know, but we're all coming from a strengths-based perspective. We also need to give people the opportunity to do, you know, give evidence that you know what, actually maybe they can do some of this on their own as well. You know, maybe they do have more capacity actually than we've given them credit for too (Non-metropolitan youth services).

One service provider highlighted that, within smaller communities when care leaver parents were investigated by child protection, some young people had to visit the same offices that they had themselves been taken to as children and young people following reports of maltreatment by their own families. Entering an office which you had previously been in as a child or adolescent victim of abuse to be investigated as a perpetrator of abuse against your own child could be re-traumatising. If so, this experience may adversely affect the young person's affect and responses to investigators' assessments. It is unlikely to be an environment where an objective assessment of a young person's parenting capacity could be carried out.

It's a very hard situation for those mums. Like, it's hard for anybody that has Child Protection involved, but the ones that have had the Child Protection history themselves, it's extremely distressing and triggering for them and in somewhere like [non-metropolitan town], sometimes they get people turn up to talk to them about their children who removed them from their parents when they were a child, it might be the same individual who actually removed them and that is horrible, obviously (Non-metropolitan parenting support programme staff).

Turning Lives Around

Many participants in this study echoed findings in previous research that suggest that early parenting can in fact be a positive outcome for young people transitioning from care.

It completely changed her focus when she realised she was pregnant and she doesn't allow drug-using behaviour near her infant, whereas that's something she never prioritised for herself (Metropolitan parenting programme staff).
But on the other hand, sometimes some people really get their acts together like they want a better future, for their kids, and you can really see a massive shift (Metropolitan parenting programme staff).

Traumatic Pathways to Early Parenting

Something largely overlooked in much of the research is the impact of histories of trauma on a young person, and their susceptibility to exploitation when exited from services and supports or when employment or income support is interrupted or

suspended. There is very little literature examining the relationship between abusive and coercive relationships and early parenting amongst care leavers. Participants in this study felt that this was one pathway to care leaver early parenting.

> You know, violence is a natural part of their world, by this stage. Yeah, often they themselves have been sexually exploited, especially in relation to drugs and alcohol…
> -In the context of residential care too, sexual abuse.
> That's exactly right. Sexual abuse from client to client within the unit as well. You know, it's very prevalent. So for the most part, you do find young men who leave residential care are generally violent perpetrators in relationships. Which is, you know, sad all round (Non-metropolitan post care service staff).

The literature says little about exploitative relationships and pregnancies that may result. In this sense, it is unclear how many care leaver parents could in fact be dealing with the strains of early parenting at the same time as experiencing complex trauma around exploitation and having a child whose parent abused them. This seems like a significant mental health concern that may not be being addressed at all.

Indirect Pregnancy Prevention Through Educational Attainment

There is emerging research investigating relationships between school disengagement and early parenting—or school completion and delayed parenting. Participants in this study made only a couple of statements on this issue.

> I think education makes a huge difference for all our clients, that have, better life opportunities, better life skills … (Metropolitan parenting programme staff).

Another participant felt that parenting could allow access to a positive sense of adult identity where other options were limited by a lack of education or employment.

> And that sense of identity. You know, like, you know, disengaged from school. Who am I in the world? I can be a mother…Because you know, for like other children it may be looking at some sort of career but if you disengage from school quite early, those aren't options for you at that point in time. And if your role models around you are not employed, not engaged in education then that whole side of life is then not something you see as achievable (Non-metropolitan youth services).

Discussion

This study has identified care leaver early parenting as a specific transition from care challenge exacerbated by surveillance without support, and re-traumatising interventions with care leavers' children. A number of service providers in Victoria argue

that young people transitioning from care are critically under-resourced and vulnerable, that many of them want children because of social and familial loss and isolation, and those who have children are under increased scrutiny by child protection.

These findings have major implications for improving policy and practice for this vulnerable cohort. Firstly, sexual education programmes are unlikely to change rates of pregnancy and parenting as there appears to be an emotional motivation to parent, rather than a neglectful approach to sexual relations that results in pregnancy. Secondly, the out-of-home care system has yet to significantly alter the ways that it can cause social isolation for care leavers which appears to directly contribute to experiences of early parenting and difficulties with parenting. Participants in this research were in favour of increased professional supports for care leavers including more intensive, relationship-based and trauma-informed approaches to working with young people that increased their agency in decision-making about their lives. There was also strong agreement that increasing social, familial and community connections is likely to improve immediate and longer-term outcomes for care leavers including preventing pregnancies, and supporting care leavers who do become parents to raise their children in safe and loving families.

The results reported in this paper conform with key aspects of existing theory and knowledge around the factors explaining care leaver early parenting. Participants in this study frequently reported that it was usually the most vulnerable care leaver cohorts such as those leaving residential care, often becoming involved with negative peer groups, substance abuse and sexual exploitation, who were electing to become pregnant and have children (Mendes et al., 2011; Wade, 2008). There were some reports, however, that exploitative relationships were responsible for these decisions, and that young people were vulnerable to exploitative relationships having been exited from care and supports at 18 years or earlier (Purtell & Mendes, 2020). Service providers also discussed the patterns of disengagement from services and supports in the lead up to leaving care (Malvaso et al., 2016). Extreme anxiety and fear of homelessness in the lead up to either turning 18 or their care order expiring could provoke this disengagement (Purtell & Mendes, 2020). These issues are consistent with findings in an earlier Canadian study that highlighted the government's failing as both corporate parent and corporate grandparent (Dominelli et al., 2005; Rutman et al., 2002).

There is evidence that young parents transitioning from care are reported to child protection at higher rates than other disadvantaged young people (Eastman & Putnam-Hornstein, 2019) and that protective workers have access to more detailed personal histories of care leavers than other populations. It is also clear though that young people transitioning from care face a myriad of challenges linked to their exits from care, such as unstable housing and disrupted or strained social and familial relationships and weak community connections. This lack of resources can impact their ability to provide for children in their care. As Roberts et al. (2019) observe, there may be many services and workers involved with a care leaver and their child or children, but without any improvement in the young parent's access to core material needs such as food and housing. This is an issue highlighted in most of the care leaver early parenting research and empirically investigated in a number of studies (Eastman & Putnam-Hornstein, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019).

On the other hand, many participants in this study echoed findings in previous research that early parenting can influence positive changes in the behaviour of care leavers motivated by an overriding concern to advance the wellbeing of their child (Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Mendes, 2009). For many, parenting can provide a meaning and purpose in life that had previously been absent. Participants only minimally discussed care leavers who did not have children (many participants only worked with parents), but some commented that young people with normative family experiences of stable relationships and placements were not tending to have children and instead finished school and progressed to university and work. Brannstrom et al. (2016) similarly identified a clear relationship between girls' school failure and early parenting in a whole population study of child welfare clients. Ohene and Garcia (2020) found that educational attainment was linked with connectedness to carers and residential care staff and a positive sense of self. There is a need for more interdisciplinary research across intersecting disadvantages faced by young people transitioning from care to elucidate complex interconnections between pre-care, in care and post care experiences and longer-term life trajectories for care leavers. Further research exploring factors explaining disengagement from schooling may assist in identifying pathways to delayed parenthood.

Conclusion and Implications

Increased supports to care leavers and the continuation, or expansion, of existing intensive and/or holistic supports to young people transitioning from care may serve to address the risks that some early parents pose to children's safety. Parents' social isolation and lack of resources can be adequately addressed when other safety risks are not present allowing children to remain with parents who love and care for them as best they can. This may then curb the tide of increasing entries into out-of-home care. What this study makes clear is that some child protection practices involving care leavers parents are not trauma-informed and may, perhaps unintentionally, re-traumatise them whilst also undermining care leaver parents' capacity to enhance and consolidate their parenting skills and secure attachments with their children. Their fear of surveillance bias, whether felt or real, could have very real impacts on young peoples' help seeking behaviours. Feeling extremely distressed because they fear the removal of their child may deter young people from accessing services that are set up to assist and support all parents and children. These services could be particularly helpful to parents who have suffered trauma, but they need to be easily and safely accessed and perceived as a positive support, rather than a potential threat, especially to disadvantaged but caring parents wanting to be the best parents that they can be.

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