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Indigenous Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) in Victoria, Australia: The Perspectives of Workers in Indigenous-Specific and Non-Indigenous Non-Government Services

Philip Mendes
Monash University, Australia, philip.mendes@monash.edu

Bernadette Saunders
bernadette.saunders@monash.edu

Susan Baidawi
susan.baidawi@monash.edu

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Abstract

Indigenous children and young people are overrepresented in the Australian out-of-home care (OOHC) system. To date, specific research has not been undertaken on workers' perspectives regarding the Indigenous-specific and non-Indigenous supports and services available to Indigenous young people exiting the system. This exploratory research involved focus group consultations with workers from seven child and family welfare agencies to examine the current support services available to Indigenous young people who are in or will be leaving out-of-home care in the State of Victoria. Findings suggest that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) play a positive role in working with non-Indigenous agencies to assist Indigenous care leavers. Participants identified some key strategies to improve outcomes, such as facilitating stronger relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous services, and improving the resourcing of ACCOs.

Keywords

out-of-home care, foster care, child protection, cultural support, Indigenous, Aboriginal

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Indigenous children and young people are overrepresented in the child welfare systems in a number of jurisdictions, including New Zealand, Canada, and the United States (Thoburn, 2008; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). For example, an analysis of provincial and territorial data in Canada suggested that the rate of First Nations children in out-of-home care (OOHC) is 3 to 7 times higher than that of the general population. Identified risk factors include substance use, poverty, limited housing, family violence, lack of social supports, and the caregiver's own history of time spent in state care (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013; Sinha et al., 2011). Similarly, a New Zealand study found that Maori children comprised 51.7% of those in OOHC in December 2012, despite totalling only 15% of the general population (Fernandez & Atwool, 2013).

The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the Australian child welfare system is particularly high. They are far more likely to be the subjects of substantiated child abuse and neglect, and also far more likely to be under care and protection orders. As of June 30th, 2014, Indigenous children and young people were estimated to comprise just over one third ($n = 14,991$) of the total 43,009 children and young people in OOHC nationwide, despite numbering only 5% of the Australian population up to 17 years of age. They are 9 times more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to be in OOHC, and their rate of placement has doubled over the past 10 years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2015; Productivity Commission, 2015).

OOHC in Australia is the responsibility of the community services or child welfare department of each state and territory, and each has its own legislation, policies, and practices. Consequently, in-care or leaving-care standards are not uniform across the states and territories—although the national out-of-home care standards, introduced in December 2010, suggest minimum benchmarks (such as the requirement for each care leaver to have a transition out of care plan commencing at 15 years of age) (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA], 2010).

Various systemic factors have been identified as causes of the ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the Australian child welfare system, including the consequences of past policies of forced removal of Indigenous children from their cultures and communities, intergenerational trauma arising from these policies, and the resulting socio-economic disadvantage (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015; Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2015; Lonne, Harries, Featherstone, & Gray, 2016). These factors are often reflected in instances of substance misuse, violence, and mental illness within the family. Another contributing factor appears to be the child welfare system's overreliance on issuing statutory child protection orders and associated OOHC placements rather than offering preventive family support services—especially given that neglect (often linked to poverty and poor housing) is the most common type of substantiated abuse that Indigenous children experience. Additionally, there seems to be a lack of "cultural competence" within child protection services concerning Indigenous family dynamics, cultures, and traditions (Community Affairs References Committee, 2015; Fejo-King, 2015). This study uses Tong and Cross' understanding of cultural competence as "a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system,

agency, or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (cited in Libesman, 2004, p. 15).

Leaving care is formally defined as the cessation of the state's legal responsibility for young people, between 15 to 18 years of age, who are living in OOHC. In practice, however, leaving care is both a major life event and a process that involves transitioning from dependence on state accommodation and supports to self-sufficiency (Cashmore & Mendes, 2015). It has been estimated that 3,124 young people aged 15 to 17 years were discharged from Australian OOHC from 2013 to 2014, with the figure for Victoria at 857 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2015). Some of these young people remain in existing foster or kinship care placements, others return to their families of origin, and many appear to move into independent living.

This study was carried out in the state of Victoria, which has legislated via the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic) for the provision of leaving care and after-care services for young people up to 21 years of age. The *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* appears to oblige the government to assist care leavers with finances, housing, education and training, employment, legal advice, access to health and community services, and counselling and support, depending on the assessed level of need. It also requires consideration of the specific needs of Aboriginal young people. For young people transitioning from care, the government has established:

- Mentoring programs;

- Post-care support and placement services;

- Specific supports for Aboriginal young people;

- Specialist programs, known as Springboard, for young people leaving residential care; and

- Housing supports.

In principle, these services are intended to meet the needs of all care leavers in the state of Victoria but, in practice, they remain discretionary rather than mandatory, and many care leavers experience difficult transitions in key areas such as housing, access to health care, education, and employment.

Because Australian jurisdictions do not officially trace or monitor care leavers' progress, precise figures indicating how many young people fall into each identity category are elusive. Indigenous young people appear to form 13% of all care leavers in Victoria (approximately 111 of a total of 857) (Cummins, Scott, & Scales, 2012). Furthermore, Indigenous care leavers seem to face particular challenges, including poor educational experiences, disproportionate levels of involvement with the youth criminal justice system, high levels of early pregnancy, varying levels of connection to their cultures and communities, and a loss of identity (Baidawi, Mendes, & Saunders, 2013; Baldry, Trofimovs, Brown, Brackertz, & Fotheringham, 2015; Commission for Children and Young People, 2015). Policies introduced in Victoria to address these deficits include the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACPP). This policy advocates placing Aboriginal children according to following hierarchy:

1. The child's extended family,

2. The child's Indigenous community,

3. Other Indigenous people, and

4. Non-Indigenous people, as a last resort (Monohan, 2002).

This principle aims to protect Indigenous children's right to be raised within their culture, and acknowledges the importance of family and kinship networks in the lives of Indigenous young people (Monohan, 2002). In accordance with the placement priorities of ACPP, national data indicated that, in 2014, 67.4% of Indigenous children in out-of-home care were placed with relatives or kin, other Indigenous caregivers, or in Indigenous residential care (AIHW, 2015). However, significantly, in 14.8% of these cases, Indigenous children and young people were in the care of non-Indigenous relatives or kin (AIHW, 2015).

Additional policies include:

a. A requirement for cultural support plans that identify strategies for maintaining connections with family, community, and culture.

b. The Aboriginal Leaving Care Support Initiative, which funds an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) in each region to support Indigenous care leavers.

c. The appointment of a Victorian commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people who is undertaking an audit of all Indigenous children in care.

d. The establishment of partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous child and family welfare agencies (Baidawi et al., 2013; Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2015).

To date, there has been no research addressing either Indigenous-specific or non-Indigenous supports and services that are available to Indigenous young people as they transition from care.

Methods

Purpose

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the current leaving care and post-care supports that are available to Indigenous care leavers, including the inter-relationship and consultation process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies delivering services to this group, as well as differences in approach or service delivery between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaving care and post-care services and processes.

Other aims of this study were:

- To expand on existing knowledge regarding Indigenous care leavers' backgrounds, care experiences, and post-care trajectories, including differences in the needs and experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers.

- To understand the access of Indigenous care leavers to leaving care and post-care services.

- To identify any barriers or hindrances to accessing supports and services.

- To enhance existing knowledge of current and potential programs or strategies that assist Indigenous care leavers so that it can be translated into changes in policy and practice.

This paper reports on Phase One of the study, which involved focus groups with individuals from Indigenous specific and non-Indigenous services working with Indigenous young people in and transitioning out of OOHC. It examines the strengths and limitations of existing services, and the extent to which they address young people's cultural supports and connections. Phase Two of the study involved individual semi-structured interviews with Indigenous care leavers, conducted with an aim to understand their experiences of out-of-home care, leaving care, and their post-care outcomes—including their experiences of cultural connection or disconnection.

Partnership and Ethics

This exploratory research project involved a partnership between Monash University and a consortium of child and family welfare agencies. A partnership was formed between researchers at Monash University and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), the lead statewide Aboriginal child and family welfare agency. Additionally, five non-Indigenous child and family welfare organisations were also partner agencies in this research project: Wesley Mission, Jesuit Social Services, Berry Street, MacKillop Family Services, and the Salvation Army Westcare. In line with national guidelines for research with Indigenous peoples (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012), ongoing collaboration and consultation with Indigenous partner agencies occurred throughout the study. VACCA collaborated with the researchers on the development project's design from its outset and allocated a representative to provide ongoing feedback in both the project governance committee (comprised of the researchers and staff from VACCA) and the broader project advisory committee (comprised of the researchers, and staff from VACCA and other partner agencies). Additionally, the inaugural Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People was a lead partner for the project, hosting the meetings of the advisory committee and providing feedback concerning various components of the study's findings (questionnaires, for example). The Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee approved this research.

The researchers advertised the study to partner agencies and other organisations, who invited staff to be involved in semi-structured focus groups, which were lead by the researchers. Data were gathered around seven key issues relating to Indigenous care leavers:

- The strengths and limitations of leaving care and post-care systems;

- The strengths and limitations of collaboration and consultation mechanisms between Indigenous and non-Indigenous services;

- The use and relevance of the ACPP with Indigenous care leavers;

- The strengths and limitations of cultural support plans and planning;

- Strategies for improving connection to communities and to one's sense of identity, as well as challenges faced in this area;

- Post-care outcomes; and

- Experiences and ideas about, and good practice in relation to, Indigenous care leavers.

These topics were developed based on a review of the existing literature (Baidawi et al., 2013) and a consultation forum attended by both the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People and 16 representatives from two Indigenous and 10 non-Indigenous child welfare agencies. Existing literature notes that focus groups are an effective method for qualitative data collection in social work research (Linhorst, 2002). This study's methodology aimed to stimulate discussion among agency staff about key issues in order to generate responses that individual participants may not have previously considered outside of a group setting (Alston & Bowles, 2003). The focus groups were recorded (audio only) and transcribed, and the data were then entered into NVivo10 for coding. Thematic analysis was conducted by categorising recurring ideas within the transcript data (specifically instances wherein a response or concept was raised on three or more occasions) in order to identify key themes. Multiple coding by two members of the research team was utilized to check inter-rater reliability of the coded themes on a selection of transcripts. These methods have been suggested for enhancing rigour in qualitative data collection and analysis (Barbour, 2001; Mays & Pope, 1995).

A total of 32 individuals from seven agencies participated in seven focus groups during the data collection phase. All agencies involved deliver child and family services, primarily in the out-of-home care and leaving care sectors. One of these agencies was an ACCO. The remaining agencies were mainstream child and youth welfare services. The focus group participants held a range of positions, such as caseworkers, support workers, case managers, program managers, team leaders, and regional directors. The majority worked within the out-of-home care and leaving care sectors including in kinship, foster, and residential care programs, as well as lead tenant and post-care services, leaving care housing and mentoring, and youth justice support programs. While participants were not asked about their Indigenous status, during the focus group consultations a total of four participants (two from the ACCO and one from each of two other focus groups) voluntarily identified as Indigenous.

Participants also had experience in a variety of past roles that had brought them into contact with Indigenous care leavers, including work in kinship, foster, and residential care, lead tenant and post-care services, adult and youth justice, Aboriginal specific programs, Aboriginal legal services, employment services, alcohol and other drug services, housing programs, and delivering individual and family counselling.

Results

Nature of Systems and Processes

The focus groups did not identify any major differences in the leaving care services delivered by ACCOs and mainstream child welfare agencies in terms of supporting Indigenous care leavers. It appears that both types of service providers adopt a voluntary model and support Indigenous care leavers in identifying their needs. The service providers attempt to access appropriate supports and resources to meet these identified needs primarily through post-care services (such as housing, for example).

Many respondents from mainstream services were not aware of any specific programs available to Indigenous care leavers, nor were they aware of any differences in leaving care and post-care processes and services available to Indigenous care leavers. However, it should be noted that, in some of these services, respondents had not worked with Indigenous care leavers as clients in their programs. One participant, for example, explained:

> So we [agency] are not an Indigenous-specific service. However, from time to time we do have Indigenous clients. I have to say that, even as the [manager], I'm actually not familiar [with] any specific Indigenous care leaver programs. My understanding is that it's all the same, so I would be interested to see with the . . . outcomes of this research, if there is something different that we don't know about. (Focus Group 4, Participant 1)

Other participants indicated that secondary consultation with ACCOs (for example, accessing ACCO specialist advice in care teams and case planning processes) would ideally occur for Indigenous care leavers, and that this was the main difference between leaving care planning for Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers—at least from the perspective of mainstream services. However, it was not clear whether secondary consultation with ACCOs was standard practice for mainstream services in situations where Indigenous care leavers opted to not to be directly involved with ACCOs. In areas where ACCO service provision was available, Indigenous care leavers could opt to receive leaving care and/or post-care services either from an ACCO or a non-Indigenous service.

Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACPP)

When discussing the ACPP, focus group participants pointed out the shortage of Indigenous carers (particularly in Metropolitan Victoria). Furthermore, they noted the difficulty in balancing the principle of placing sibling groups together with the priority of finding an Indigenous carer or placement, as the following caseworkers' comments indicate:

> We have such a small proportion of Indigenous people who identify as Indigenous living in our area . . . That we probably have six or seven Indigenous kids on our list, but only one Indigenous carer . . . there's a disconnect. Because there's so many children who are Indigenous in care, and [they are] five times as likely to be in care, but then you don't have any of the foster carers. (Focus Group 3, Participant 2)

You have your Best Interests Framework, which [means] kids should be placed together in a sibling group. Then you've got the Indigenous framework. They have to be placed with an Indigenous carer. When you've got three siblings, you just find whatever you can get to keep them together. If there was an option for an Indigenous carer, [and] she only had capacity for one child, I wouldn't be putting one child in there and splitting up with the others. It's sort of like what . . . you can find. (Focus Group 3, Participant 2)

The first thing you're thinking when you're on duty . . . is where can I put these kids? Where can I keep them together? Where's closest to their school? So there's all these competing priorities of where the location is, [and] can they keep doing their extra-curricular activities? Because unfortunately if they want to play basketball, that sits higher than, for them, sometimes their culture. So it's finding all these things. It's just not realistic that you find an Indigenous carer when you're factoring in all these other things. It's just impossible. (Focus Group 3, Participant 2)

In the leaving care and post-care periods, respondents commonly reported that finding any placement or housing option for young people was the most pressing priority, rather than placement with Indigenous carers or within Indigenous communities. Some participants also pointed out that although the ACPP continues to guide practice in the leaving care and post-care periods, there is not a legislative requirement to consider these issues after a young person leaves care.

A Strong Value Placed on the Work of ACCOs

The other major theme to emerge from mainstream agencies regarding relationships with ACCOs was a strong value placed on the work of ACCOs, including both consultation and direct work with Indigenous young people. This appreciation of these services was articulated alongside frustration about the perceived under resourcing of ACCOs:

I'm just really aware that they are pretty under the pump, and understaffed and overworked and have . . . all of Victoria to cover. So that's a really difficult sort of environment to be working in and . . . it's been my experience that that's been a real sort of impediment to doing the good work. And I think that yeah, in my experience, [ACCO] workers have been absolutely fantastic. (Focus Group 5, Participant 3)

They barely come to a case plan, really. You're lucky to see them at a case plan, but then they don't know the kid, because they've got a caseload of like 60 or something, you know? You can't get onto them. They don't respond to emails. (Focus Group 3, Participant 1)

The main strength that workers identified in current leaving care and post-care systems for Indigenous young people was the availability of ACCOs to provide specific services for Aboriginal young people in out-of-home care. Dedicated workers in the leaving care and post-care service system were also seen as a key asset in these systems—both mainstream staff and Indigenous staff working in either mainstream agencies or Indigenous-specific services. Two participants noted:

Many of our Aboriginal staff . . . work 24/7. It just so happens we pay them between 9 and 5. (Focus Group 2, Participant 5)

> If our [Indigenous] staff didn't have a job tomorrow, they would still be doing things through obligation. (Focus Group 2, Participant 3)

Our study's findings concerning cultural support planning have been reported elsewhere (Baidawi, Mendes, & Saunders, 2016).

Increasing Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity

Though acknowledged as a work in progress, participants of some mainstream agencies identified as a key strength the increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity of their organisations in their work with Indigenous communities, organisations, and young people. This included basic initiatives such as the provision of cultural training for agency staff and, in a minority of cases, the hiring of Indigenous staff to work in mainstream services. Actions taken at a strategic level were also cited as examples of these organisations' cultural awareness and sensitivity. Participants, for example, mentioned organisations issuing formal apologies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the development of strategic plans concerning reconciliation and working with Indigenous communities. Two participants explained their organisations' efforts invested in such work:

> One thing that our agency here does is that they do offer, I think it's once or twice a year through [an ACCO] they run . . . an Indigenous cultural awareness one-day training. And I've done a couple of them through here, and that's where actually I've sort of learnt more about the history, and then my own sort of research. (Focus Group 4, Participant 3)

> So one of the things that we're doing at the minute, and I'm not sure about the model, but the intent I think is a good thing, is around the idea of putting together a reconciliation action plan. And really, the question in regard to this is not just about the issue of young Aboriginal people leaving care. It's about our experience of care and about our experience of family systems, and what we consider to be the solution, and how you marry that with where Aboriginal people are at in that respect as well. So you can't build relationships, and you can't build trust unless you're prepared to put your own cultural values on the line as well. (Focus Group 2, Participant 3)

One focus group participant indicated that a young Indigenous client had become aware of the agency's public apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

> That was really important as well. Because this young person knew about that, had read about it in the paper and we got to talk about that. She was like, "Oh, [the agency] apologized!" (Focus Group 5, Participant 3)

However, all focus group participants did not espouse this positive perspective. Some believed that their workplaces' cultural sensitivity and awareness initiatives were somewhat tokenistic:

> I know at [Agency Office] . . . probably about three years ago I approached someone to put up some [Indigenous artwork] . . . there was no Indigenous artwork anywhere. And the person, well two people I sort of approached just went, "Oh God, he's one of those." It's like, well, "Nah, I'm not 'one of those' but it would be nice to see some Indigenous art in here." So just to please me they went and got on the Internet and Googled some Aboriginal flag, printed it off and

laminated it and stuck it up, and there you go. And I was just like, "Really?" To me . . . that says to me a lot about their attitude towards Indigenous culture. (Focus Group 3, Participant 4)

Limitations of Leaving Care and Post-Care Systems

Six key themes emerged when respondents were asked to identify any limitations of leaving care and post-care services for Indigenous care leavers. The main theme that emerged from mainstream services was that the limitations of leaving care and post-care systems for Indigenous care leavers were largely similar to those experienced by non-Indigenous care leavers, and that these arose from these system's general shortcomings. In particular, the limited human and financial resources available to support care leavers in the post-care period were acknowledged, alongside the compressed and early transitions to independence that is expected of care leavers. Respondents highlighted some care leavers' lack of developmental readiness to negotiate, with limited supports, the tasks expected of them, including the capacity to engage with a voluntary post-care service system. The inflexibility and limited resources of "overwhelmed" leaving care and post-care systems were seen as a limitation for all care leavers, regardless of their Indigenous status.

Most leaving care and post-care services were seen by participants to be equally accessible to Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers. Although access to identity documents is a central concern for all care leavers, focus group respondents in non-metropolitan locations noted, anecdotally, that a high proportion of Indigenous care leavers may not have birth certificates or a registration of birth, and many had arrived from other locations, including interstate, which thus complicated the process of obtaining these documents. This in turn created difficulties for care leavers seeking to access services such as support payments.

A second identified limitation of leaving care systems expressed by participants of the focus groups was that many Indigenous young people were believed to leave or abscond from care prior to becoming eligible for leaving care supports. This theme was mainly raised by respondents in non-metropolitan areas, who gave anecdotal evidence of Indigenous young people, who had been in care for many years, either absconding from placements to a homeless situation (for example, couch-surfing), or returning to kinship placements deemed as stable prior to age 16. Participants observed Indigenous young peoples' orders lapsing after being placed in kinship arrangements that later broke down, or after absconding from placements after the age of 15. Participants explained that such situations created challenges to the engagement of young people in leaving care planning and service provision. For example, some young people became ineligible for leaving care services if they were not under a care and protection order, as per legislative stipulations, or if they could not be located to engage in leaving care planning. Respondents observed these young people returning to youth services via homelessness or youth justice service pathways when their circumstances degenerated, and they were identified as care leavers through these services. Participants also noted that it could be difficult to access proof of a young person's eligibility for leaving care services under these circumstances.

The third theme that emerged concerning limitations of leaving care and post-care systems centred on the observation that cultural considerations were not a priority in the leaving care and post-care period. Many Indigenous care leavers, particularly those transitioning from residential care or lead tenant

placements, were perceived as facing immediate concerns (most prominently housing and financial issues) which took precedence over cultural considerations. One participant noted:

> A significant number of young people that approach post-care are in crisis. And I think that when a young person is in crisis they don't have any space for their cultural needs. They're focusing on "I have nowhere to sleep tonight," or "I can't pay my bills and I'm about to be evicted," or "my relationship has broken down" or "I'm experiencing family violence." (Focus Group 5, Participant 1)

A fourth theme centred on the limitations of child welfare systems to facilitate connections with families. Participants believed that Indigenous care leavers would benefit from systems that were better able to facilitate connections with their extended families and communities, and to encourage family work, even in situations wherein children had been removed from their families:

> But it's interesting because we've had referrals where workers have said, "Don't go near the Mum," you know, "She's really dangerous, and just don't have anything to do with her," whereas we tend to always work with the families. And in both those situations the workers have engaged with the Mum, and it's turned out really well. (Focus Group 2, Participant 5)

A minority of respondents embraced a broader worldview, and their remarks comprise the study's fifth theme. They observed that out-of-home care systems (and their post-care extensions) are underpinned by principles, definitions, and understandings that are at times antithetical to Indigenous traditional practices, understandings, or value systems:

> When you take a culture and a people outside of their own systems, so family and community, and no matter how well-intended we are in terms of trying to provide . . . foster situations or Aboriginal-specific out-of-home care circumstances, those young people still are in a system that's alien to their own family and extended family systems . . . We fail in the primary acknowledgement, which is to acknowledge individual Aboriginal people in a family system. And in a family system that has an extended framework that promotes solutions that our system doesn't look at. (Focus Group 2, Participant 2)

Respondents gave various examples illustrating this theme in relation to the ACPP. Difficulties were described in balancing this principle with other Best Interests principles in out-of-home care, including keeping sibling groups together and prioritising placement permanency. In other examples, various participants raised the idea that Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures understood the concept of family differently:

> "Where are you from?" is the question, more than "Who are you?" So I belong in Swan Hill. So someone from Swan Hill will have a connection to you that's nothing to do with attachment—they don't know you, they may never have met you . . . The system's not good at facilitating those familial pathways in the same way as more traditional family, which is all about person and emotion and connection. (Focus Group 5, Participant 2)

A further notable example offered by participants was the concept of "leaving" or transitioning from care:

> In a sense that really illustrates the difference around, you know [the] service system that's mainstream, even if it is Aboriginal people running that, there is a leaving component. Whereas if you're an Aboriginal person, and you live in this community, you always care, and you're always interested in what happens to your people. So there's no leaving anything. (Focus Group 2, Participant 3)

Another example concerned financial management post-care, which is often only regarded from an individualistic perspective when considering economic outcomes for care leavers:

> Often for young people there's a responsibility or an expectation by community . . . that their funds are pooled. So you know, part of our process when we're looking at approving applications for young people leaving care is, "What is their contribution?" So they might say we need a household set up. Well, you know, "What is the young person's income? What are their expenses? Are they able to contribute towards something? What's a reasonable cost?" But for some young people, all their money is pooled. And so they don't have the resources, you know, like you go, "Oh well . . . they've got a part-time job" or "they've got Youth Allowance" or whatever. And they should be able to afford such and such. But often we'll get feedback from the [ACCO] worker that the young person is supporting their extended family or, you know, this is post-care, so they haven't got any money. Even though they might have an income, their income is . . . being guarded by . . . or they're helping to support their younger brother or whoever. (Focus Group 5, Participant 1)

Related to this was the sixth and final theme, which concerned limitations in cultural competency among mainstream child welfare agencies. This limitation was primarily recognized by agency staff who were concerned about their level of knowledge and their capacity to work with Indigenous young people and agencies. Additionally, although it was recognized as a key asset, some respondents identified difficulties in recruiting and supporting Indigenous staff to work within mainstream non-government agencies.

Indigenous Care Leavers' Transitional Needs and Experiences

Many respondents believed there were few differences between the transitional needs and experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers. Others did note differences, particularly concerning some Indigenous care leavers' identity confusion and the development of their sense of self. Respondents noted that this could be particularly challenging for young people with weaker connections to their culture.

> The needs of Aboriginal children leaving care are the same, but then I think the negotiation of your identity and some of the things that we've, when I say we, the system's done to children in terms of not knowing who they are, in a worse way, from coming into a substitute family . . . And then really hard to engage with the services, because the services also [question], "Who are you? You're now a White girl. We used to know you, you used to be a family name that we know." Do you know what I mean? And now it's a whole process of reconnection with that, which is

nothing that other cultures have to negotiate. Now leaving care's hard enough, it seems to me that that's a layer and a dimension that's an added. (Focus Group 5, Participant 2)

While the parents of non-Indigenous young people were also commonly noted as having had involvement with child protection as children, respondents indicated that the added dimensions of history and culture resulted in a different experience of these transgenerational effects when working with Indigenous young people, particularly those living in non-Indigenous placements:

We had [a young girl] in the residential setting, and I remember dealing with her family, her mother specifically. And it was very different. It was very different dealing with her than dealing with, say, kids that you know aren't Aboriginal. And there were a number of comments that she made over the time that the young girl was in care, around racism and, you know, being White and I guess, maybe reverse racism, as in being White and . . . not understanding the culture. (Focus Group 4, Participant 1)

Other barriers to engagement with culture and community and Indigenous-specific services were noted for Indigenous care leavers. Most commonly, participants reported that some Indigenous young people did not want to engage with culture and community for various reasons, including culture not being a priority to them, and a general lack of experience and familiarity with traditional culture. Speaking of one Indigenous youth in care, a participant noted:

We would encourage him. But we sort of found that this wasn't something that his parents, like he was Indigenous but his parents hadn't actually sort of . . . he'd never done these things before. So we started introducing this to him, and he was like, "Oh this . . . this isn't me. This isn't . . . you know I might be Indigenous, but that doesn't mean that I want to do this Indigenous service that you've then, you know, now recommended that I do." (Focus Group 4, Participant 3)

Some young people preferred to fit in or identify with non-Indigenous carers' culture, or actively avoided reconnection with their Indigenous cultures due to previous, negative experiences of community, or concerns about engaging with their birth families. Additionally, in some cases, carers lacked knowledge, support, or the willingness to assist Indigenous young people to engage with their own cultures. Focus group participants from mainstream services reported a need for greater support, knowledge, and guidance in helping Indigenous young people to connect to their cultures and communities, and participants from ACCOs similarly recognized a need to resource activities promoting cultural connection.

In terms of post-care outcomes, respondents observed that many Indigenous children (similar to their non-Indigenous counterparts) return to their family post-care. Reunion was often seen to fail, however, in the absence of any interim family work or support to negotiate these attempts at re-connection.

They go back to family in the end sometimes anyway, and yet there still hasn't been that building of capacity for family for them to go back. It's just remove them, artificial supports in place for 10 years, and then, "Oh crap, you've got nowhere to go." Put them back into family and let them go. And that's not going to work. (Focus Group 2, Participant 1)

After leaving care, Indigenous young people were often seen to take on caring responsibilities for siblings, parents, and their extended families. Whether by choice or due to cultural expectations, these responsibilities were seen to place additional stress on care leavers, including on their post-care accommodation and finances, as the following two participants explained:

> We housed one boy who was leaving care with youth justice . . . His older partner moved in, his older partner's sister moved in, her partner moved in, and Mum moved in. So we housed one Indigenous leaving care boy and we ended up supporting four other people, ranging from the age of 53 down. And there was another brother in [regional town] that used to come over and stay for extensive periods of time as well. So you don't just look after one, you look after everyone. (Focus Group 7, Participant 1)

> We've got a young couple that have been, she was in care, he actually wasn't, but they quite successfully had their first child and they're doing really well. But the only time they access our service is when they've got family staying with them, because often it's an elder that will be staying with them. They will not ask them to contribute financially [for] being in their property. They will feed them . . . everything is provided for the older aunty or you know cousin whatever. They will provide for them, and they won't ask them to contribute to the support of themselves. So you know two young people on parenting payments with a small child may have three elder relatives staying with them. They can become responsible for feeding them, and caring, like providing for their needs for whatever period of time they're staying there. So they can be doing really well with . . . because you say to them, "Do you need a hand with your budget?" "Oh no. We do really well, but Aunty Mary's down from Canberra and she's staying with us." "Well maybe Aunty Mary could buy a couple of meals?" "Oh no we can't do that. You can't do that. You just can't." (Focus Group 7, Participant 1)

Although it is common among the leaving care population broadly, focus group participants often remarked on homelessness as a common post-care outcome for Indigenous care leavers. A number of focus group participants also commented on many Indigenous care leavers' poor educational outcomes. A further post-care outcome, noted in focus groups, was the disproportionate number of Indigenous care leavers having involvement in the youth and adult justice systems. At the same time, multiple respondents spoke about Indigenous care leavers who demonstrated high levels of resilience and experienced positive outcomes with regards to housing, education, and relationships.

Recommendations for Improving Outcomes for Indigenous Care Leavers

Focus group participants generated a number of recommendations for improving Indigenous care leavers' outcomes. The most prominent suggestion was to have a cultural support worker in the care team. A second recommendation was to match Indigenous care leavers with mentors throughout the leaving care period from 15 to 17 years, whether from Indigenous communities or not, as an added layer of support. The value of staff training within non-Indigenous child welfare agencies was also strongly endorsed by participants. Training was not only seen to benefit staff in working with Indigenous children, young people, and families, but also in working in partnerships with ACCOs. Others suggested that the format of training should be regular, and could include participation in relationships and partnerships with ACCOs, Indigenous communities, and activities. A fourth recommendation was to

increase the resources targeted at Indigenous young people (both in-care and post-care). Additionally, participants emphasized engaging in family work, both prior to and to support reunification attempts—including supporting connection with extended family members. Strengthening the partnerships between ACCOs and mainstream child welfare agencies was also put forward as a potentially helpful strategy for improving outcomes for Indigenous care leavers.

Discussion

This study's initial phase involved exploratory consultations with the staff of mainstream and Indigenous child and family welfare agencies in order to understand the relationships between these agencies, the nature of services delivered to Indigenous care leavers, as well as the experiences and needs of Indigenous young people transitioning from care. The focus groups uncovered a number of findings, some of which were consistent with previous literature, and others that enhance previous understandings in this area. In terms of systemic issues, the findings point to a degree of inconsistency in the working relationships between mainstream and Indigenous services delivering services to Indigenous care leavers in Victoria.

The rapport between individuals and agencies appeared strong in some cases, but other consultations revealed limited connection between services in terms of trust, understanding of roles and services provided by other agencies, and collaborative practice. Effective relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous child welfare agencies form a critical component of the overall system's aim to support Indigenous young people in care, as identified in previous Victorian literature (Bamblett & Lewis, 2007; Halcrow, 2014). This is equally true of current Victorian leaving care policy pertaining to Indigenous care leavers (e.g., the Aboriginal Leaving Care Support Initiative), which largely relies on collaborative relationships between these services for the delivery of culturally-appropriate support to this group of young people. There is therefore a primary need for ongoing attention to the relationship between services. Similar to prior reports, the respondents suggested that attention to these relationships at the strategic level, as well as cultural training for staff of mainstream agencies, and improved resourcing of ACCOs were helpful approaches to enhance the agencies' capacity to work collaboratively with Indigenous care leavers (Bamblett & Lewis, 2007; Halcrow, 2014; Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Community Service Organisations [VACCOCSO], 2013).

It is interesting to note that some respondents from mainstream agencies did not perceive any differences in the service delivery approach to, or the experiences and needs of, Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers. These respondents generally expressed the view that the most profound difficulties inherent in leaving care and post-care systems (for example, limited services and housing options, and the voluntary nature of services) applied equally to all care leavers regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, considerations of cultural identity and connectedness were not seen as a priority in transitioning from care, whereas other issues (particularly access to affordable housing) appeared to dominate respondents' concerns. It is unclear whether such findings are reflective of few differences between these groups, however, or whether such impressions are the result of staff having had limited experience with Indigenous care leavers.

In contrast, other respondents saw the broader OOHC system as being inherently inappropriate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, primarily owing to its operation from a largely Western

individualistic paradigm. Such observations reflect findings of previous Australian and international reports that draw attention to this cultural dissonance (see for example Bennett, 2015; Halcrow, 2014; Higgins et al., 2005). Notably, Carrière and Richardson (2009) described cultural connectedness and identity as more appropriate than attachment theory for guiding practices with Indigenous young people in care. Attachment theory describes the instinctive need of infants to form intimate emotional bonds, or attachments, with a primary caregiver (or attachment figure) as a function of psychological and biological survival (Bowlby, 1988). Child and family welfare practice primarily guided by attachment theory is at risk, for instance, of prioritising a child's connection to a foster parent over enhancing connections to their Indigenous community, if the two needs were to come into conflict. Respondents' insights enhanced this finding by providing examples of how conflicts between Indigenous people's understandings and the non-Indigenous leaving care systems approaches manifest in the leaving care and post-care periods. For example, current systems tend to consider housing and income as belonging to an individual, while some Indigenous cultural understandings may view these as shared family resources.

In the area of leaving care and post-care support, respondents from mainstream services again suggested that the main shortcoming of current systems supporting Indigenous care leavers was the under-resourcing of ACCOs, which limits their capacity to offer direct service delivery and secondary consultation (for example, involvement of ACCOs in care team meetings). Echoing previous suggestions from Australian Indigenous peak bodies (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care [SNAICC], 2011), earlier leaving care planning commencing at age 14 was also identified by participants as potentially useful, particularly given anecdotal reports of Indigenous young people leaving care at a young age. The potential utility of family work for Indigenous young people transitioning from care has also been raised in previous studies (Higgins et al., 2005). These two points are further highlighted by another of the study's key findings: Whereas previous leaving care research has emphasized that many care leavers can call on little, if any, support from family, and some care leavers will have children of their own, this study has raised anecdotal information that Indigenous care leavers adopt caring and helping roles within their extended families. Indigenous care leavers' cultural obligations or expectations regarding sharing and pooling finances and other material resources, caring or providing for siblings and elders, and travelling to visit community and family (including attendance at funerals) were all discussed in the focus group consultations. Yet the systems aiming to support care leavers are broadly targeted towards supporting individuals, rather than seeing care leavers within their broader family contexts.

Finally, the findings relating to the involvement of Indigenous care leavers in the youth justice system are supported by previous research, which indicates that Indigenous young people involved with youth justice are more likely to have had child protection involvement or a state care background than non-Indigenous young people involved in youth justice (AIHW, 2012). Some of the recommendations of a previous Victorian study focusing on care leavers dually involved with youth justice and child protection are also applicable to the current study, such as focusing on trauma-informed and family-based therapeutic approaches to practice (Mendes, Baidawi, & Snow, 2014).

While participants were unanimous in their declaration of the need for, and value of, cultural support and connectedness, a subtle though noteworthy divergence in belief systems emerged among participants. The majority of participants from non-Indigenous organisations appeared to espouse the

view that cultural connectedness and support is *one of many hierarchical needs* of Indigenous care leavers, but not necessarily the primary need. Conversely, the alternative position that many ACCO workers, and some non-Indigenous staff from mainstream agencies, described is that cultural connectedness is *a primary and fundamental need* of Indigenous care leavers, through which their other needs may be fulfilled.

Native American child welfare expert Terry Cross (2007) elegantly discussed this discord, reinterpreting Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) through an Indigenous lens. Interestingly, Maslow's work was apparently informed by time spent with the Blackfoot Indians of Canada (Blackstock, 2011), though these understandings were interpreted through his own male, Eurocentric perspective (Cross, 2007). In contrast to Maslow's hierarchical structure, beginning with physiological needs, Cross (2007) described a more holistic approach that considers physical, physiological, and other needs to be met *through* spirituality and relationship rather than independently of these. He stated:

> When I grew up I was taught that if I maintained a proper relationship with the Creator, I would eat. So that came first. I was also taught that if I maintained a proper relationship with my family I would eat. So that came first as well. Then come food and water, shelter, all of those things that emanate out of my proper relationships. Safety and security come out of my proper relationships, out of my spirituality. Self-actualisation comes from role and service, giving back to the community, and that's where my esteem and my identity come from; from my relationships, from my service. (p. 43)

This difference is perhaps a point of distinction between Indigenous and many non-Indigenous conceptions of leaving care and post-care support. Yet, the perspectives of the study's key stakeholders seemed to suggest that both approaches are helpful to supporting Indigenous care leavers, and need not be conceptualised as incompatible.

Implications

The findings of this initial phase of the study suggest a need for ongoing reconciliation and relationship-building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous child and family welfare services and systems so they might more fully recognize and embrace their different ways of thinking (Fejo-King, 2015). More importantly, the findings raise questions about if and how leaving care and post-care services and programs could be modified to better suit Indigenous care leavers' needs, particularly in terms of being able to better promote care leavers' connectedness and belonging to their communities and cultures. These findings appear to suggest that many Indigenous care leavers may receive the same leaving care services as non-Indigenous young people, thereby leading to an inadequate level of attention to the development of cultural identity and connection. It seems that more effective responses are likely to be achieved by better resourced ACCOs leading service design and delivery for Indigenous care leavers. The enhanced allocation of resources and stronger emphasis upon connection to culture, family, and community are likely components of a more effective, supportive approach to Indigenous care leavers. Future research could examine the longitudinal trajectories of a large group of Indigenous care leavers from 16 to 21 years of age. It would be beneficial for such a study to examine the experiences of young Indigenous people who have experienced a range of out-of-home care backgrounds (for example, foster, kinship, and residential care) and various post-care outcomes.

Our future consultations with individual care leavers will enable our better understanding of the nature of their connections to culture and community during their time in care and post-care, and the factors that facilitate and influence these connections. Furthermore, such consultations facilitate a more detailed awareness of post-care outcomes for Indigenous care leavers, particularly any caring and helping roles undertaken, and how these might impact their transitions out of care.

Limitations

The study has some methodological limitations. The respondents were drawn from a non-representative sample, and were primarily from non-Indigenous child and family welfare services. Unfortunately, there was limited representation of ACCOs in the data collection. The findings must therefore been seen to mostly represent the views of non-Indigenous practitioners and stakeholders. Further, jurisdictional differences in policy and practice, and cultural differences among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, mean that findings cannot be generalized to other states and territories, though they could present a useful basis for comparative studies. It will be beneficial for further research to include Indigenous care leavers' perspectives, including some comparison of the outcomes for those young people who receive culturally appropriate support to those who do not.

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