

Forgotten Australians Still Searching for 'The Road Home'

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The Homelessness White Paper, *The Road Home*, has been hailed as a historic step forward in the delivery of a whole-of-government approach to homelessness. Of note, a long overdue commitment to stem the flow of young people exiting state protective care into homelessness is outlined; a phenomenon recognised at least as far back as the Burdekin Report, *Our Homeless Children* (1989).¹ Less heartening is the lack of cohesion between state and federal policy drivers to meet the needs of the so called 'Forgotten Australians'; a population comprising half a million people who grew up in orphanages, children's homes and foster care in 20th century Australia.²

In 2004, the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee released *Forgotten Australians: a report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children*, which found that the "unsafe, unlawful and improper care of children", including "failure of duty of care," and "serious and repeated breaches of statutory obligations" was "widespread" nation-wide.³ Types of abuse documented include unlawful medical experimentation, child slave labour, and psychological, physical and sexual abuse, some of which lawyers argue constitutes torture.⁴

Whilst *Forgotten Australians* chronicles some remarkable tales of extraordinary resilience, more typically the terrible impact which abuse and neglect in so called 'care' has upon life chances in all areas is documented.⁵

Large numbers of 'Forgotten Australians' (or older care leavers as they prefer to be known) have experienced primary homelessness.⁶ Many more continue to experience both secondary and tertiary homelessness.⁷ Without a home, growth and functioning in all endeavours is markedly curtailed.

In 2007, a staggering 42% of Australia's homeless youth were found to have a 'protective care' history.⁸ It has also been reported that subsequent to entering the juvenile justice system, 90 % of 'protective care' clients will graduate to the adult criminal justice system.⁹

¹ Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission, *Our Homeless Children* - Report of the National Inquiry Into Homeless Children, February 1989., (Chairman Mr Brian Burdekin), pp.109-117.

² Now regarded as a conservative estimate, this number is made up of 7,000 to 10,000 child migrants, 30,000 to 50,000 Aboriginal stolen generations children and the 450,000-plus "Australian born non-Indigenous children" raised in institutional and out-of-home care. Senator Andrew Murray, *Governor-Generals Speech, Address-in-reply speech*, Senate Hansard, 13.3.08.

³ Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out of home care as children*, August 2004 p 126.

⁴ Ibid p. xix and pp. 113-114. Sdrinis, A. *Letter to the Premier*, the Hon Steve Bracks, 17th May, 2007 (unpublished).

⁵ Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out of home care as children*, August, 2004, p 145 -170.

⁶ CLAN *Care Leaver Survey* July 2007. Primary homelessness defined as "living on the streets".

⁷ Primary homelessness means 'sleeping rough'. Secondary homelessness includes use of emergency accommodation services and staying with others temporarily. Tertiary homelessness is characterised by rooming house and caravan park accommodation which lacks security of tenure provided by a lease. These definitions of homelessness were developed by Chamberlain, C. and MacKenzie, D.

(1992)'Understanding Contemporary Homelessness: Issues of Definition and Meaning', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 27(4), 274-297

⁸ Chamberlain, C. Johnson, G. & Theobald, J., *Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the Challenge*, Centre for Applied Social Research, RMIT University, February 2007.

⁹ Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry, Committee Hansard, 4 February 2004, p.30 cited in Senator Andrew Murray and Dr Marilyn Rock, *The Impact of Childhood Trauma Across the Lifespan: Historical Denial – Current Challenges*, September, 2005.

Moreover, “young people leaving the care system have very poor outcomes in terms of education, social connections and support ...and are often reliant on government support services and income support...”¹⁰ To minimise the social and economic costs associated with *not* addressing this issue *The Road Home* highlights a ‘turning off the tap’ approach to children leaving state care as one of a number of “social inclusion priority areas” which targets “children at greatest risk of disadvantage.”¹¹

What about older care leavers though, who exited out-of-home care decades ago and continue to experience the full gamut of homelessness? Where is their ‘road home’? As one might expect, the experience of ‘Forgotten Australians’, who exited care prior to the introduction of the *Children and Young Persons Act 1989*, is not much different to that of their younger counterparts.

Data collected in 2006 from a sample of 291 Forgotten Australians revealed the following:

- 23% had ‘lived on the streets’
- 29% reported sexual assault by either a staff member or ‘carer’ of the facility where they resided
- Of these,
 - 77% experienced depression
 - 48.4% experienced post traumatic stress disorder
 - 23.4% experienced borderline personality disorder
- 53% reported physical assault by a ‘carer’ while in ‘care’
- 33% had attempted suicide
- Fewer than 4% completed secondary school to year 12 or equivalent
- Fewer than 8% completed an undergraduate university degree
- 34% had been ‘in trouble with the law’
- 53% were income support recipients
- Of these, 25% were on a disability pension ¹²

The divide between younger and older care leavers is, of course, arbitrary. Due to the absence or reduced capacity of viable ongoing family support, most care leavers remain unable to return to the family home during periods of transition or life crisis, for the same reasons which led to statutory child protection intervention in the first place.

Clearly, care leavers of *all ages* need access to safe, secure and affordable housing. Their ability to access this, however, particularly in the private rental and home ownership markets, is reduced by offender status, substance abuse, mental illness, educational deficits, and the combined impact which these issues have upon the capacity to access and maintain meaningful employment. Consequently, homelessness amongst care leavers tends to be recurring and more entrenched than that which affects other populations.

¹⁰ Raman, S. and Scobell, K., Care Pathways to Career Homelessness, *Parity*, Volume 21, Issue 8, p. 18.

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, 2008 p 27.

¹² CLAN Care Leaver Survey July 2007.

Whilst *The Road Home* acknowledges that people affected by these issues require long-term support to break the cycle of homelessness, it fails to recognise the correlation between these issues and the marginalisation of 'Forgotten Australians'. Recognition of this link is critical to address the systemic disadvantage of older care leavers, who are most at risk of experiencing 'career homelessness'.

Almost five years have passed since the Senate's *Forgotten Australians* Report recommended that the "Commonwealth and States commit through the Council of Australians Governments to implementing a whole of government approach to the provision of programs and services for care leavers across policy areas such as health, housing, welfare and community services ..." ¹³ Omission of 'Forgotten Australians' as a diverse population requiring targeted services in *The Road Home*, was therefore disappointing (to say the least).

In 2008, 'Forgotten Australians' were at long last acknowledged in Victorian state policy with the announcement of \$7.1 million for the development of a care leaver support service. ¹⁴ Whether or not a component of the service will include access to a range of low cost social and public housing options, or initiatives to increase home ownership amongst care leavers, is yet to be ascertained. Certainly this was recommended to the Department of Human Services which undertook sector consultation regarding the proposed care leaver service. ¹⁵ Similar recommendations have been made to the current Senate Inquiry into the Implementation of the Recommendations of the *Lost Innocents* and *Forgotten Australians* reports. ¹⁶

Notwithstanding that 'Forgotten Australians' ought to have been recognised from the outset in *The Road Home*, much can still be done within its tapestry of initiatives to remedy the systemic disadvantage which impacts this population. The following initiatives are recommended:

- Inclusion of care leavers of *all ages* as a population requiring a targeted approach to remedy homelessness in the detailed Implementation plans of each National Partnership on Homelessness between the Australian Government and each State and Territory.
- Identification of 'Forgotten Australians' and their younger counterparts as a population with complex needs requiring access to wrap-around support which may involve a number of services to break the cycle of homelessness.

¹³ Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out of home care as children*, August, 2004, Recommendation 33, p xxvi.

¹⁴ *A Fairer Victoria: Strong People Strong Communities*, State of Victoria, May, 2008, pp. 42, 44.

¹⁵ Marian, C. *Justice for Victorian Survivors of Abuse in Care: a care leaver service is no substitute for a compensation / redress scheme*. Submission to Victorian Sector Working Party on Forgotten Australians, August, 2008.

¹⁶ Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, *Lost Innocents: righting the record*, 2001, is the report of the Inquiry into Child Migrants. See http://www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/committee/clac_ctte/recs_lost_innocents_forgotten_aust_rpts/submissions/sublist.htm for submissions to the current inquiry.

- Establishment of effective linkages between care leaver support services in each state and territory and housing service providers to facilitate access to a range of specialist supported accommodation, low cost social housing, and public housing for care leavers at all stages of the life span in accordance with the ‘no wrong door’ approach to people seeking assistance for homelessness.
- Research into homelessness amongst ‘Forgotten Australians’ and their younger counterparts under the proposed “national homelessness research strategy”. Research initiatives must take a national approach to data collation and analysis; this is critical to inform the development of linkages with ‘wrap-around support services’.
- Development of incentives to boost home ownership amongst care leavers of all ages as an initiative of the National Affordable Housing Agreement.
- Delivery of professional development training regarding ‘Forgotten Australians’ to staff in mainstream services (eg Centrelink, Personal Helpers and Mentors Program, Supported Accommodation Assistance Program) such that the impact of historical institutional abuse and neglect is recognised, and responded to appropriately.

Commonwealth, state and territory governments must work together to tackle the systemic disadvantage which impacts ‘Forgotten Australians’ in all areas of life chances. Initiatives outlined in *The Road Home* present a golden opportunity for this work to begin in earnest. The omission of older care leavers from the outset in *The Road Home* may have added insult to injury in this most shameful chapter of Australia’s history, but fortunately, it’s not too late to remedy the oversight and remember our ‘Forgotten Australians’.

About the author: Cherie Marian works as a volunteer advocate with a range of key stakeholders to lobby the Victorian Government to establish a redress scheme to deliver compensation to survivors of historical abuse in institutional and out-of-home care. Cherie has 16 years of experience in the community sector working in a range of youth work, social work and community development roles.