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Voices of Care Leavers: Ageing with Dignity after Childhood Institutionalisation

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THIS STUDY SOUGHT TO BETTER UNDERSTAND AUSTRALIANS, WHO AS CHILDREN, SPENT TIME IN ORPHANAGES, INSTITUTIONS, CHILDREN'S HOMES, GROUP HOMES OR FOSTER CARE BETWEEN 1950 AND THE LATE 1980S.

MANY OF THESE INDIVIDUALS SUFFERED ABUSE AND NEGLECT DURING CHILDHOOD AND INTO ADOLESCENCE, WHICH IN TURN HAS IMPACTED THEIR OUTCOMES AS THEY PROGRESS THROUGH ADULTHOOD.

THE RESEARCH TEAM STRIVED TO UNDERSTAND THEIR NEEDS AS THEY AGE AND CONSIDER ACCESSING AGED CARE SERVICES. THIS COULD NOT HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED WITHOUT THE PARTNERSHIP WITH CARE LEAVERS AUSTRALASIA NETWORK.

CLAN offer support to people who have grown up in Orphanages, Children's Homes, Missions, Foster Care and other Child Welfare institutions in Australia and New Zealand.

ACKOWLEDGEMENT

The research team wishes to sincerely acknowledge all those who contributed to this study particularly –older care leavers, care leaver advocates, key advocacy groups, fellow researchers, peak bodies, and sector leaders. We are especially grateful to those who generously shared their stories, offering deep insights into the enduring impact of childhood institutionalisation across their life course.

More than 500,000 children spent all or part of their childhood in foster care, orphanages, children's homes, and other institutions run by churches, charities, and governments across Australia between the 1930s and the 1990s. Approximately 7,000 of these were child migrants from the United Kingdom and Malta, arriving between 1912 and the late 1960s.

Many children were removed from their families due to poverty, abuse, or the absence of adult guardians. Their accounts reveal systemic harm: exploitative and dangerous labor, severe neglect, and widespread physical, psychological, and sexual abuse.

These institutions were fundamentally unsafe. When children spoke out, they were too often dismissed or disbelieved by those in power, their suffering denied or ignored.

We acknowledge the profound trauma experienced by so many and recognise the lifelong consequences that continue to shape the lives of survivors today.

We honour their voices.
We will not forget.

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WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO
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THE RESEARCH TEAM

This project is affiliated with **The National Centre for Healthy Ageing in Melbourne, Australia** and receives funding from **The Commonwealth Government of Australia** through the **Community Health and Hospitals Grant Scheme**.

- Professor Philip Mendes, internationally renowned expert on the experiences and needs of care leavers.
- Dr Susan Baidawi, who has over 10 years of research focused on young people in the child protection system, as well as the needs of older people in the criminal justice system.
- Lena Turnbull, research assistant
- Sarah Morris, “care” experienced researcher
- Care Leavers Australasia Network, key collaborators in co-designed process

EMBEDDING LIVED EXPERIENCE INTO THE RESEARCH

This project is co-designed with the **Care Leavers Australasia Network:** a national, independent, peak membership body which represents, supports and advocates for care leavers. Their contribution to the project ensures that the voices of care leavers are embedded into every stage the research.

This team also has a key “care” experience researcher, Sarah Morris.
Sarah is a Research Fellow within the Department of Social Work.

THE PROJECT

Key project outputs were:

1. Scoping review of key global literature to establish best practice in existing service provision.

2. Quantitative survey of care leavers to establish key priorities for aged care services development.

3. Interviews and focus groups with care leavers, family and support people, to advance deeper understanding of the lived experience of care leavers, and those aspects of their experiences that influence specific needs within aged care services and settings.

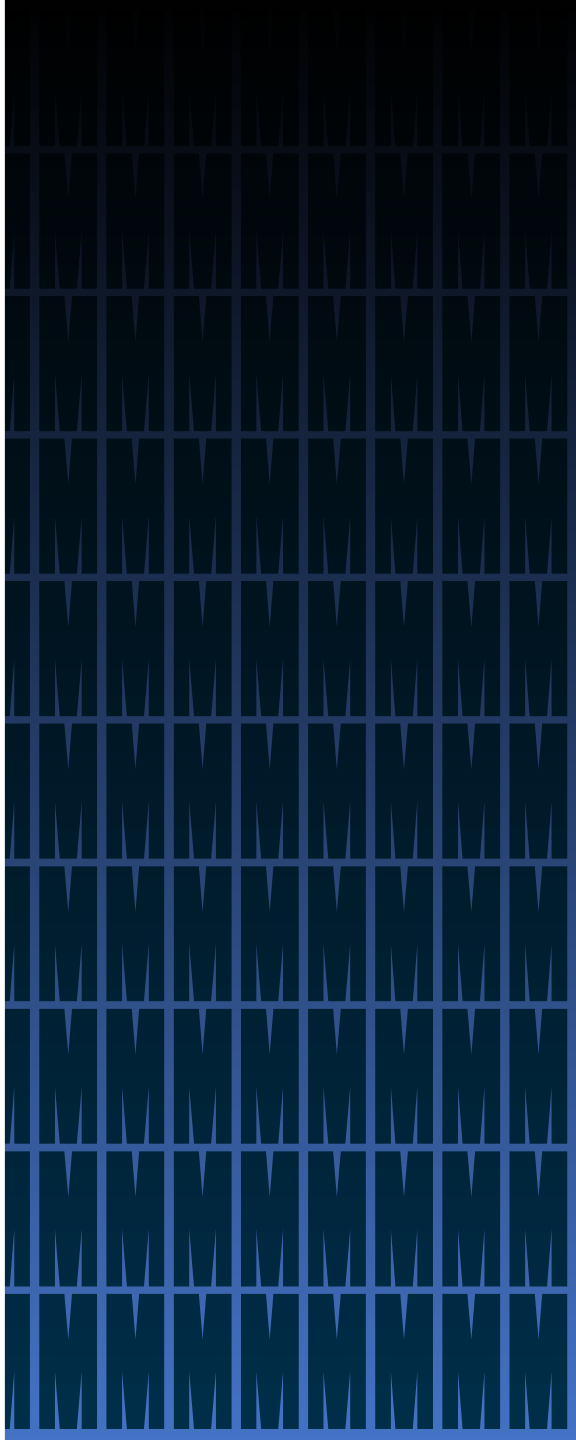
4. Interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders in policy, practice and service provision to deepen understanding of existing practice, what works, what doesn't, as well as ideal practice.

5. Roundtable discussion with all key stakeholders: care leavers as end users, policy makers, service providers, to establish an integrated community of practice that progresses best practices policies, programs and systems.

THE SURVEY

A total of 105 participants responded to the survey.
Aged between 50 and 87 years, with 41% aged 60–70. The majority were women (75%) and Australian-born (95%), with 13% identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Participants came from five states, most commonly Queensland (34%). Participants reported having spent between 6 weeks and 21 years in state care (mean: 9 years), typically in multiple placements. Most had been placed in orphanages or children's institutions, followed by boys' and girls' homes, and group homes. Some had also lived in foster care, detention centres, or mental health/disability institutions.

Socioeconomic outcomes, 84% were reliant on government pensions, 48% lived in public housing, and 59% had not completed secondary school. While 91% had worked in paid employment, 61% reported ongoing financial hardship. Participants also reported high rates of incarceration (21%), diagnosed mental illness (65%, compared to 14% in the general population), psychiatric hospitalisation (38%), disability (53%), homelessness (61%), and significant health issues (79%).



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KEY MESSAGES

MOST PARTICIPANTS DO NOT CONSIDER AGED CARE TO BE AN OPTION FOR THEM, AS A RESULT THIS LED TO SOME SHORT-ANSWERED SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS

"I would rather live in the bush in a tent"

"I'd rather be pegged out in the desert over an ants' nest and be eaten alive."

"I'd rather die in my home."

"I will never be put into another institution."

"I'd rather take an ounce of lead to the forehead."

"I would rather go to jail than be locked up in aged care"

"Don't put me in a home, I'd rather shoot myself"

"I would rather be euthanised"

"I would rather be found dead in my own home, hopefully the neighbours find my body before the stench finds them"

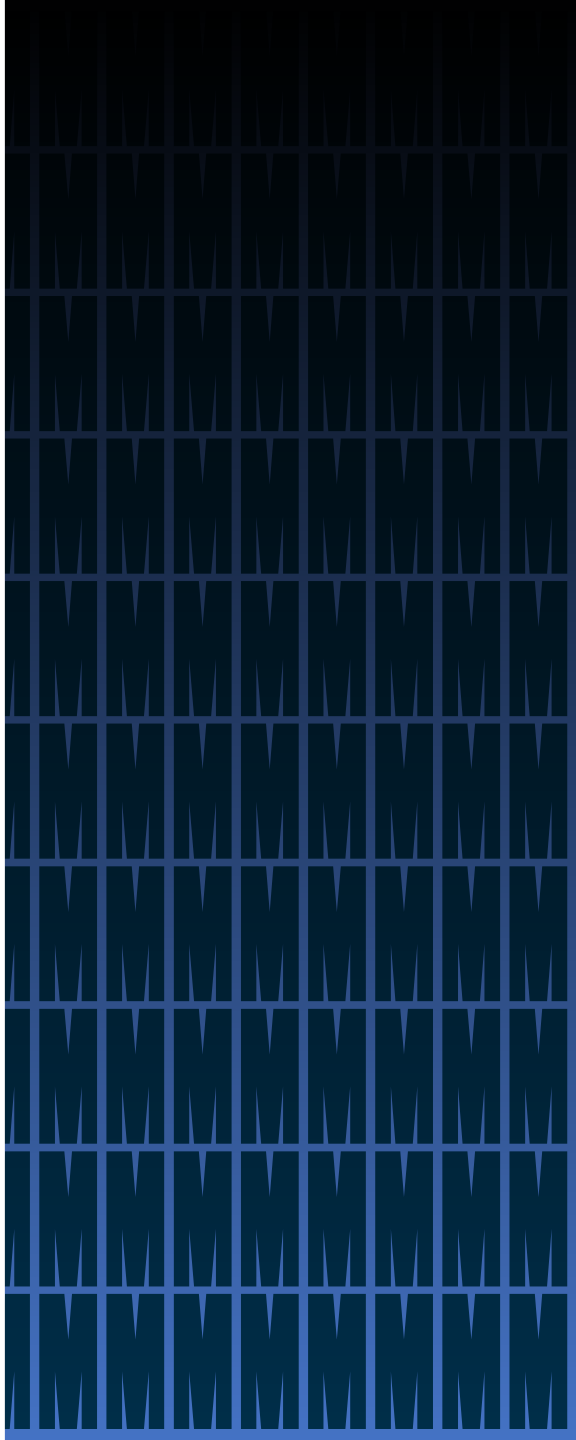
THE ABOVE ARE JUST SOME OF THE QUOTES TAKEN FROM PARTICIPANTS ABOUT THEIR THOUGHTS ON ENTERING AGED CARE

KEY FINDINGS

1. Care leavers would prefer to remain in their home and many would rather die than go into residential care.

2. Care leavers are forever shaped by the harms they experienced in childhood, carrying the impressions of these experiences throughout adult life and into old age.

3. Systems are not equipped to provide adequate care for this group, including aged care systems.



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The ultimate outcome is to **improve the quality of care** to this group of older Australians, in light of their childhood experiences

SUMMARY OF RECOMENDATIONS

Our Healthy Aging Study in collaboration with older care leavers, advocacy groups and other stakeholders, has developed 12 recommendations that are centred on advancing affirmative action in aged care, which aims to compensate for the life-long neglect of people for whom government took on parenting responsibility.

These recommendations are broadly intended to support:

1. Prioritising home-based aged care services
2. Delaying the need for aged care
3. Supporting access and choice
4. Embedding trauma-informed care in aged care services, that is specific to the unique needs of aging care levers.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Trauma-Informed Aged Care as the Foundation

Trauma-informed aged care for older Care Leavers means recognising the lasting impacts of institutional childhood abuse and neglect, ensuring services are safe, relational, flexible, and respectful, and embedding practices that reduce retraumatisation. It requires sensitive identification, meaningful choice, long-term trust with workers, and training co-designed with Care Leavers and Care Leaver agencies - so that care is not only delivered, but delivered in ways that uphold dignity, autonomy, and safety.

Priority Access & Identification (Gold Card)

Expand priority access to essential services that allow Care Leavers to age in place, including in-home aged care, medical and dental care, housing, and mental health supports.

Expand the Care Finder Program

Ensure older Care Leavers can navigate systems and access information in ways that build trust and reduce overwhelm.

De-Institutionalise Aged Care & Develop Specialist Residential Alternatives

Reform should be guided by the principle of de-institutionalising aged care for Care Leavers: shifting resources away from large, institutional settings and towards home-based, community, and small-scale alternatives that uphold autonomy, dignity, and safety.

Strengthen the Role of Care Leaver Agencies

Provide stable, long-term funding to expand the role of Care Leaver support agencies.

Embed Lived Experience & Advocacy in System Reform

Ensure Care Leaver voices are central to aged care policy and service design.

Strengthen and Stabilise the Workforce

Address workforce instability so services are safe, consistent, and relational.

Standalone First Nations Response

Develop a First Nations–led response for Stolen Generations Care Leavers, recognising their distinct experiences shaped by colonisation and intergenerational trauma.

PUBLICATIONS

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THANK YOU

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Please get in touch!
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