Leaving care is formally defined as the cessation of legal responsibility by the state for young people living in out-of-home care. However, in practice, leaving care is a major life event and process that involves transitioning from dependence on state accommodation and supports to self-sufficiency. Young people leaving out-of-home care are arguably one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. Compared to most young people, they face particular difficulties in accessing age-appropriate developmental and transitional opportunities. Care leavers have been found to experience significant health, social and educational deficits, including homelessness, involvement in juvenile crime and prostitution, mental and physical health problems, poor educational outcomes, inadequate social support systems, and early parenthood (Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Community Affairs References Committee [CARC], 2005; Maunders, Liddell, Liddell & Green, 1999).

Employment outcomes for care leavers tend to be particularly poor, which leaves many of them reliant on income security payments and living in acute poverty (Beihal, Clayden, Stein & Wade, 1995; Hai & Williams, 2004; Raychaba, 1988; Stein, 2004; Stein & Carey, 1986; Wade & Dixon, 2006; Wade & Munro, 2008; West, 1995). A 1998 UK survey of 2,905 care leavers found that 11% were working full-time, 4% were in part-time employment, 28% were involved in training or further and higher education, and 51% were unemployed. The 51% figure was two and a half times the average unemployment figure (19.5%) for young people as a whole in that age range (Broad, 1999).

The introduction of the Children Leaving Care Act 2000 led to some improvements in English policy and legislation, including the setting of specific targets for increasing the participation of care leavers in employment, education and training (Broad, 2005a; Dixon, 2007). However, results have continued to be relatively disappointing. For example, a 2003 study of 36 young people leaving care in Yorkshire found that 33% were unemployed, 11% were carers, 14% were in full-time education, and only 42% were either in employment or training. One year later, 36% were unemployed, 12% were carers, 4% were in full-time education, and only 48% were in employment or training (Allen, 2003).

A large-scale survey of 6,953 care leavers from local authorities in England and Wales in 2003 found some improvement, particularly in regard to the percentage of care leavers engaged in further education. However, 29% remained unemployed (Broad, 2005b). A later study of 106 young people in seven English local authorities found that only 10% were in full-time employment one year after leaving care. A total of 56% of the group were not in education, employment or training (Dixon, 2007). A national survey suggested that overall participation by care leavers in England in education, employment or training at 19 years of age had risen from 49% in 2002–03 to 63% in 2006–07.

Young people transitioning from state out-of-home care
Jumping hoops to access employment

Philip Mendes
Factors that contribute to poor employment outcomes

The poor employment outcomes for care leavers can be attributed to a range of pre-care, in-care and post-care experiences. Many care leavers have experienced and are still recovering from considerable physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect prior to entering care. These traumatic experiences can negatively affect attachment and brain development, and lead to long-term problems in social functioning, relationships and economic participation. Associated challenges include coping with separation from natural families and the accompanying anger, loss and grief; making peace with their biological families; relating to new families; and establishing connections with other significant adults in their social environment (Maluccio, Krieger, & Pine, 1990).

These experiences of trauma, separation and rejection may contribute to ongoing social, emotional and psychological disturbances, developmental delay and significant behavioural difficulties, compared to children and young people from a supportive family background (Mudaly & Goddard, 2006). Unless this “legacy of disadvantage” is sufficiently addressed by in-care supports, it may undermine the life chances and particularly the employment prospects of many young people in or leaving care (Dixon, 2007).

The quality and stability of the in-care experience is also highly significant. Many young people have experienced inadequacies in state care, including poor-quality caregivers, and constant shifts of placement, carers, schools and workers. Some have also experienced overt abuse, including sexual and physical assault, and emotional maltreatment. This lack of stability, continuity and consistency undermines their social and educational/training opportunities, and hinders their capacity to make a successful transition towards independence following discharge from care (Broad, 2007; Cashmore & Paxman, 1996). Conversely, children who experience supportive and stable placements, including an ongoing positive relationship with significant adults in their social environment, are far more likely to overcome the adversities resulting from their pre-care and in-care experiences, and prosper when they leave care (Allen, 2003; Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Dixon, 2007).

There needs to be a greater emphasis on providing career advice within the leaving care planning and review process in order to facilitate an early assessment of strengths and aspirations, and enable skill deficits to be addressed earlier.

There is a strong correlation between educational experiences and career opportunities. UK research suggests that around 5% of young people in care departed school in 2002-03 without formal qualifications, compared to only 5% of other school leavers. And only 1% of care leavers attended university, compared to 38% of the general population (Dixon, 2006; Wade & Dixon, 2006). Similarly, an Australian study, based on interviews with 41 care leavers in NSW, found that 12 months after leaving care only just over a third had completed Year 12, and one in five had not even completed Year 10. A further interview conducted 4–5 years after leaving care found that 30 out of the 41

Australian research on leaving care outcomes is comparatively limited. It tends to be based on small-scale studies of care leavers in particular states or territories that are mostly descriptive and exploratory in nature rather than focused on examining causal relationships or the effectiveness of programs (Cashmore & Mendes, 2008). Nevertheless, the findings are consistent with those of international studies.

For example, a longitudinal New South Wales study initially interviewed 47 young people three months before they left care. Only a few of these young people had enjoyed successful long-term employment, and 36% were formally unemployed (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996). A further interview 4–5 years after they left care found that only one in four of the young people were in full-time employment, full-time education or both part-time employment and education, compared to over 70% of 20–24 year olds in the general population. Overall, 44% of the care leavers were either unemployed or not in the labour force (Cashmore & Paxman, 2007).

Similarly, a survey of 60 care leavers in Victoria—consisting of 30 young people who had experienced positive outcomes (having supportive social support networks and outcomes) and 30 young people who had experienced negative outcomes (lacking social connections and relying heavily on income, housing and other health and welfare support services)—found that just 14 of the young people were employed, and only three of these were in full-time employment. A massive 71% of respondents were unemployed (Raman, Inder & Forbes, 2005). A recent qualitative study of 20 care leavers aged 18–25 years in Victoria found that only five of the young people were engaged in paid employment or apprenticeships, two were working on a casual basis, and 13 of the 20 were unemployed and reliant on Centrelink payments (Mosleuddin, 2009). In addition, a national study of 1,234 care leavers who had received assistance from the Transition to Independent Living Allowance Scheme between June 2003 and March 2005 found that 56% were either registered as unemployed, or not in employment, education or training (Morgan Disney & Associates, 2006).

US studies also suggest an over-representation of care leavers among the unemployed (Foster Care Work Group, 2004; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003). For example, a 2004 study of young people who had left foster care 2–4 years earlier found that only half had attained regular employment (Casey Family Programs [CFP], 2004). And a Midwest evaluation of 603 young people who had left foster care one year earlier reported that while 92% had accessed some paid work, most were unable to secure regular employment, and only 40% were currently employed (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). A follow-up interview at age 21 with the same cohort found that 70% had worked at some point since the last interview, but 50% were currently unemployed (Courtney et al., 2007).

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young people had at least undertaken some further education. But most had completed short-term limited vocational courses rather than longer term qualifications (Cashmore, Paxman, & Townsend, 2007).

Those young people who achieve educational qualifications are far more likely to attain good employment outcomes and higher earnings (Leigh, 2007). Conversely, many young people in care struggle academically due to learning and behaviour problems, lack of continuity in placements and schools, and low expectations from social workers, teachers and carers. Thus, these young people are far less likely to attain satisfactory employment in a competitive youth labour market (Allen, 2003; Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Crawford & Tilbury, 2007; Dale, 2000; Dixon, 2007).

Another important factor is the age at which young people leave care, and the accelerated nature of the transition to independence. Many young people currently experience an abrupt end to the formal support networks of state care at 16–18 years of age, and transition directly into homeless services. That is, the state as corporate parent fails to provide the ongoing financial, social and emotional support and nurturing offered by most families of origin. This ending of support crucially coincides with either the final years of schooling or the beginning of attempts to gain employment (Ward, 2008).

Research suggests that this transition needs to be less accelerated, and instead become a gradual and flexible process based on levels of maturity and skill development, rather than simply age. Those who leave care at an older age—preferably 18 years or over—are more likely to participate in education and employment because they are provided with greater ongoing social and economic support. Conversely, those who leave care at 16 or 17 are less likely to participate (Wade & Dixon, 2006; Dixon, 2007).

There has been recognition of this argument by many Australian state and territory governments. As early as 1996, New South Wales introduced both legislative and policy supports for young people leaving care. Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria have also made significant recent progress in this direction. Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory are all currently developing service responses (Create Foundation, 2008).

Post-care experiences and supports also have an impact on employment outcomes. The attainment of stable post-care accommodation is a key prerequisite for pursuing career opportunities. However, many care leavers experience housing instability or outright homelessness. This reflects the high mobility of many young people while in care, the unplanned and unprepared nature of many departures from state care, the absence of sufficient life skills required to live independently, and the lack of an option to “return home” if the initial independent living arrangements do not work out. Housing insecurity makes it very difficult for them to focus on career plans, and to meet employer expectations that they can be reliably contacted via a regular address or phone number (Allen, 2003; Dixon, 2007; Morgan Disney & Associates, 2006). For example, a number of care leavers in a Victorian study were enrolled in apprenticeships and other training courses, but were unable to complete their training due to a lack of stable accommodation (Moslehuddin, 2009).

In addition, care leavers often lack the social support networks typically utilised by young people as they transition from child welfare dependence to adult independence. For example, most young people participate in casual or holiday work experiences, and are likely to access career opportunities through family, extended family, family friends and religious, sporting or cultural associations. In contrast, care leavers may not have access to any of these community connections or supports (Department for Education and Skills, 2007; Smith, 2008).

Some care leavers also experience significant personal problems. For example, the emotional effects of physical, emotional and sexual abuse often predispose young people in care towards psychological disruption, depression and even suicide. Care leavers are also more likely to use, and occasionally abuse, drugs and alcohol. Such behaviour often serves as a form of escape from past childhood abuse and any associated emotional disturbance (Maunders et al., 1999; Stein, 2004). In addition, these young people tend to be over-represented in the criminal justice system due to a number of factors, including inadequate accommodation or homelessness, poor educational experiences, underlying anger and resentment towards the state care system, and the absence of effective legal advocacy and support (CARC, 2005). And some care leavers have significant intellectual or physical disabilities, including learning deficits, that may further hinder their motivation and ability to secure employment (Allen, 2003; Biehal et al., 1995; Dixon, 2006, 2007; Ward & Pearson, 2003; Wells & Zunz, 2009).

Two specific groups of care leavers face additional challenges. One is the significant number who become teenage parents. Many in this group lack family supports and
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They have small sample sizes and lack comparison groups or long-term analyses of outcomes. Nevertheless, despite these methodological limitations, the studies cited below do provide some evidence of what works in promoting better employment outcomes for care leavers.

United Kingdom

The UK Department for Education and Skills argues that corporate parents—organisations that have an ongoing obligation to offer everything that a good parent would—have the same responsibility as natural parents to assist young people to search for and attain employment. Consequently, a number of specific work experience or training programs have been established by local authorities in the UK to improve the employment opportunities of care leavers (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, 2007). Most of these programs include a needs assessment that considers the young person’s particular skills and learning needs, and a job readiness course that covers introductory or refresher workshops in IT skills and basic literacy and numeracy. Other examples of targeted career support include work experience placements within a local authority, guaranteed interviews for care leavers who apply for council jobs, and matching care leavers with training providers (Daniel, 2002; Dixon, 2006).

Some of these programs appear to be associated with positive outcomes (Department of Health, 2002; Dutton, 2006). For example, Broad (1999) conducted a national survey of leaving care projects in England and Wales to assess the impact of legislative changes on outcomes for care leavers. He found some evidence of achievements in the area of employment and, specifically, described the activities of the London Borough of Lewisham in providing career planning and training to care leavers. Since the implementation of the program, there had been a reduction in unemployment among the 325 young people involved in the borough,
Dixon (2007) argued that existing programs should be extended to ensure that all care leavers have access to work experience placements and opportunities for employment within the local authority. There could also be greater utilisation of partnerships with local businesses that are willing to train and potentially employ care leavers. Most recently, the UK government announced a plan to fund the National Care Advisory Service to organise work experience, training and mentoring programs for care leavers with a range of national employers, including Norwich Union, Serco, Reed and BAA. It is intended that individual career plans will be developed for care leavers, covering a period of 2–8 years, and the National Apprenticeship Service will offer all care leavers an apprenticeship place from September 2009. This initiative will be piloted in nine local authorities in 2009–10, extended to half of England’s councils by 2010–11, and then expanded nationwide (Vanderkar, 2009).

North America

In the USA, funding emanating from the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 has been used to support the job prospects of young people transitioning from foster care (Michael, 2005). For example, the Job Corps program has been used to provide youth employment support over an extended period of time. This program provides 12 months of employment and support services, including housing. It appears to have produced good outcomes in education and housing, and led to less offending and reliance on public assistance among care leavers. Similar positive outcomes appear to have been achieved by the Children’s Village Work Appreciation for Youth (WAY) Scholarship program, which works with young people in residential care or who have left (Dale, 2000).

Housing insecurity makes it very difficult for them to focus on career plans, and to meet employer expectations that they can be reliably contacted via a regular address or phone number.

Another successful model, operated by the Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, is a traineeship program for care leavers that aims to improve their long-term employment outcomes. The program supports participants to develop greater self-confidence and self-esteem, independence skills, behaviour and attitudes that will facilitate gaining long-term employment, a strong work ethic, and a viable career plan. Internal feedback from young people and service managers suggests that participants have enhanced their employment skills and career prospects, but no external evaluation has been conducted (Pugh, 2008). Similarly, the City of Islington’s Career Start program offers care leavers employment support activities such as work shadowing, work experience, short-term and long-term contract employment, apprenticeships and permanent jobs. To date, the program has provided 119 opportunities for 74 care leavers in these areas over a three-year period, with 46 of them having accessed more than one opportunity. Many of the young people involved present with considerable personal disadvantages, but have been assisted to overcome these barriers in order to successfully access employment and training opportunities. Feedback has been provided by both young people and employers, but there does not appear to have been any independent evaluation (Smith, 2008).

Given their prior disadvantages, many care leavers need to be assisted via a structured supported employment program and work placement program in order to successfully pursue their career goals, and access the labour market.

Dixon (2006) undertook a commissioned evaluation of the Starting Blocks Project, which aimed to establish a supported work placement scheme for care leavers in York. She argued that the program was successful in providing a viable work placement model that enhanced the self-confidence, employment skills and work readiness of participants. However, only three young people were involved in the project.

from 46% in 1993 to 26% in 1996. Dixon (2006) undertook a commissioned evaluation of the Starting Blocks Project, which aimed to establish a supported work placement scheme for care leavers in York. She argued that the program was successful in providing a viable work placement model that enhanced the self-confidence, employment skills and work readiness of participants. However, only three young people were involved in the project.
Towards better employment outcomes

Given their prior disadvantages, it is apparent that many care leavers need to be assisted via a structured supported employment program and work placement program in order to successfully pursue their career goals, and access the labour market (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Dworsky, 2005). Such programs would ideally incorporate a number of key components.

Initially, there needs to be a greater emphasis on providing career advice within the leaving care planning and review process in order to facilitate an early assessment of strengths and aspirations, and enable skill deficits to be addressed earlier. This will help to provide care leavers with a positive career direction, so as to prepare them for work and training. This component would need to include more intensive targeted support for those with specific behavioural problems or learning deficits (Dixon, 2007; Reilly, 2003; Stein, 2004; Stein & Wade, 2003; Wade & Dixon, 2006).

Many young people in care struggle academically due to learning and behaviour problems, lack of continuity in placements and schools, and low expectations from social workers, teachers and carers.

In addition, care leavers need ongoing vocational assistance to explore career options, develop career plans and goals, and access employment opportunities (Allen, 2003; Wade & Dixon, 2006; Wade & Munro, 2008). One Victorian study (Raman, Inder, & Forbes, 2005) suggested a potential model for a targeted job search and employment support program for each care leaver. The projected program would cost $15,867 per care leaver over a 7-year period, but this outlay would result in substantially higher savings if the young person was assisted into long-term employment instead of becoming reliant on income support payments.

The proposed employment support programs would arguably work best as one part of a holistic leaving care framework, so that potential personal and social barriers to employment are addressed. That framework would address both personal issues, such as emotional trauma and self-esteem and availability of supportive relationships, and structural issues, such as access to stable accommodation, health care and adequate financial support (Department of Child Safety, 2008; Dixon, 2006; Dixon, 2007; National Leaving Care Advisory Service, 2004).

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