



FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR SOCIAL HOUSING IN NSW: SERVICE IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

OUTCOMES AND ECONOMIC EVALUATION

**DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES AND
JUSTICE**

**VOLUME 1: FINAL EVALUATION
REPORT**

3 MAY 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands across Australia and pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded, and we stand together with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders of today and tomorrow.

This work was completed with the assistance of Matthew Fusarelli, Danika Koop and Ella Creet from Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research and the Department of Communities and Justice. We are grateful for their efforts in obtaining access to data, brokering relationships with many stakeholders and providing constructive feedback on reports. We are also grateful for the advice of the Evaluation Management Group, including Nefley Hetherington, Sarah Greenlees, Despina Karlsson, Megan Nicholson, Didier Silarsah, Raquel Carvajal, Maria Kevin and others, which met monthly throughout the duration of the evaluation and provided feedback on our emerging findings.

We are deeply grateful for the wisdom of our Aboriginal Reference Group, whose insight has shaped our consultation with Aboriginal people, and our understanding of the implications of our findings for Aboriginal people, policies and practice.

We also thank the peer reviewers for their fresh insights and feedback on the methods that were used in the evaluation. Their considered and detailed feedback over the last three years has improved the substance of the evaluation.

Our gratitude also extends to the longitudinal case study participants, who met with us numerous times during the evaluation and generously shared their personal stories and experiences of the housing and homelessness service system with us.

ARTD: Andrew Hawkins, Emily Yorkston, Simon Jordan, Paula Shaw, Cheryl Jackson, Holly Kovac, Imogen Williams, Lia Oliver, Sue Bertram, Jasper Odgers, Ken Fullerton, Kerry Hart, Merrick Powell, Mitchell Rice-Brading, Thaher Gaiyasudeen, Jessica Nimmo, Jiya Manwar, Cheryl Jackson and Bernie Coates.

Taylor Fry: Hugh Miller, Laura Dixie, Dennis Lam, Thomas Zhou, Meg Stockwell and Stacey Lin.

Inform Economics: David Marchant.

Social Ventures Australia: Nick Perini, Anna Ashenden and Caleb Heard.

Finally, we acknowledge the talent and artistry of Emma Walke, who designed the artwork for our report cover page. The design shows a story of connection to Country and people, representing the breadth of work we do with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia. The colours represent the land, and the lines in between represent the water that connects us all.

CONTENTS

Foreword.....	x
Executive summary.....	xii
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1. Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW.....	1
1.2. Service Improvement Initiatives.....	2
2. Evaluation approach and methods.....	18
2.1 Evaluation design and methods.....	18
2.1 Limitations.....	21
2.2 Governance.....	22
2.3 Ethics.....	23
2.4 This report.....	23
3. Case studies.....	24
3.1 A common history of trauma.....	24
3.2 Adequacy of formal and informal social supports.....	26
3.3 Hope for the future, but resignation to disadvantage.....	28
3.4 Housing independence and stability are difficult to predicT.....	31
3.5 In their words: Clients' stories.....	33
4. Rent Choice: Detailed findings.....	55
4.1 How well is Rent Choice reaching and engaging its target population?...	61
4.2 Implementation.....	70
4.3 What works for whom?.....	78
4.4 Personal wellbeing.....	82
4.5 Recipients' experiences.....	86
4.6 Achievement of intended outcomes.....	90
4.7 Sustainability and variability of outcomes.....	111
4.8 Cost-benefit analysis.....	118
5. Opportunity Pathways: Detailed findings.....	123
5.1 Reach and engagement.....	128
5.2 Implementation.....	130
5.3 What works for whom?.....	134
5.4 Personal wellbeing.....	137
5.5 Participants' experiences.....	139
5.6 Achievement of intended outcomes.....	140
5.7 Sustainability and variability of outcomes.....	153
5.8 Cost-benefit analysis.....	156
6. Youth Development Scholarships: Detailed findings.....	160
6.1 Reach and engagement.....	164
6.2 Implementation.....	168
6.3 What works for whom?.....	169
6.4 Recipients' experiences.....	171
6.5 Achievement of intended outcomes.....	171
6.6 Variability of outcomes.....	176

6.7	Cost-benefit analysis.....	177
7.	Aboriginal community engagement	179
7.1	Strengthening formal partnerships and shared decision making	179
7.2	Building the Aboriginal community-controlled sector	182
7.3	Transforming government organisations.....	183
8.	Conclusions and recommendations	185
8.1	Service Improvement Initiatives	185
8.2	Rent Choice	188
8.3	Opportunity Pathways	191
8.4	Youth Development Scholarships	194

TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLES

Table 1.	Summary of Rent Choice products	4
Table 2.	Summary of Rent Choice delivery locations, by product	7
Table 3.	Eligibility criteria for Youth Development Scholarships program.....	12
Table 4.	Key evaluation questions for the overall evaluation of the Future Directions Service Improvement Initiatives.....	18
Table 5.	Answers to key evaluation questions for Rent Choice	56
Table 6.	Reach of Rent Choice products, 30 June 2016 – 30 June 2021	61
Table 7.	Reach and uptake of Rent Choice products relative to applications processed 30 June 2016 – 30 June 2021, by District.....	63
Table 8.	Reach and uptake of Rent Choice Start Safely relative to applications processed 30 June 2016 – 30 June 2021, by client demographics.....	66
Table 9.	Reach and uptake of Rent Choice Youth relative to applications processed 30 June 2016 – 30 June 2021, by client demographics.....	67
Table 10.	Reach and uptake of Rent Choice Assist relative to applications processed 30 June 2016 – 30 June 2021, by client demographics.....	68
Table 11.	Proportion of Rent Choice approvals that meet the guidelines, by product	72
Table 12.	Proportion of Rent Choice approvals that meet guidelines, by demographic group	72
Table 13.	Rent Choice taper events after 12 months for recipients who activated their subsidy, by District	74
Table 14.	Rent Choice Start Safely taper events after 12 months for recipients who activated their subsidy	75
Table 15.	Rent Choice Youth taper events after 12 months for recipients who activated their subsidy	75
Table 16.	Rent Choice recipients' personal wellbeing, 2019, 2020 and 2021	83
Table 17.	Rent Choice recipients' personal wellbeing, before and after subsidy activation, 2019–2020.....	85
Table 18.	Rent Choice recipients' personal wellbeing, before and after subsidy activation, 2020–2021.....	85

Table 19.	Rent Choice recipients' satisfaction with DCJ, 2019, 2020 and 2021.....	87
Table 20.	Rent Choice recipients' satisfaction with DCJ before and after Rent Choice subsidy activation, 2019 and 2020	88
Table 21.	Rent Choice recipients' satisfaction with DCJ before and after Rent Choice subsidy activation, 2020 and 2021	88
Table 22.	Short-term outcomes specified in the program logic and measurable in the linked administrative dataset.....	91
Table 23.	Changes in income support and CRA payments over one and two years for Rent Choice Start Safely recipients and a comparison group	99
Table 24.	First-year outcomes for the Rent Choice Start Safely recipient group compared with a matched comparison.....	101
Table 25.	Second-year outcomes for the Rent Choice Start Safely recipient group compared with a matched comparison.....	102
Table 26.	First-year outcomes for the Rent Choice Youth recipient group compared with a matched comparison.....	108
Table 27.	Second-year outcomes for the Rent Choice Youth recipient group compared with a matched comparison.....	109
Table 28.	Housing service use before, during and after Rent Choice, for recipients whose subsidy finished before 30 June 2020	112
Table 29.	Housing service use following Rent Choice, for Rent Choice recipients who finished their subsidy before 30 June 2020, by demographic groups.....	115
Table 30.	Housing service use following Rent Choice, for Rent Choice recipients who finished their subsidy before 30 June 2020, by service use groups.....	116
Table 31.	Housing service use following Rent Choice, for Rent Choice recipients who finished their subsidy before 30 June 2020, by District	117
Table 32.	Summary of CBA results for Rent Choice with a discount rate of 7% applied (\$ million)	120
Table 33.	Transfer payments for Rent Choice with a discount rate of 7% applied (\$ million)	121
Table 34.	Summary of CBA results for Rent Choice with a discount rate of 7% applied (\$ million), per recipient	121
Table 35.	Transfer payments for Rent Choice with a discount rate of 7% applied (\$ million), per recipient.....	122
Table 36.	Answers to key evaluation questions for Opportunity Pathways	124
Table 37.	Opportunity Pathways referrals and enrolments, by DCJ district	128

Table 38.	Proportion of Opportunity Pathways clients with a completed TEHP to 30 June 2020.....	132
Table 39.	Opportunity Pathways participants' personal wellbeing, 2019, 2020 and 2021	138
Table 40.	Short-term outcomes from the program logic and linked administrative data measure	140
Table 41.	Demographic characteristics of people who commenced Opportunity Pathways (Participant group).....	142
Table 42.	Outcome model for the Opportunity Pathways participant cohort.....	143
Table 43.	Percentage reduction in income benefit payments for Opportunity Pathways participants, by contracted service provider	155
Table 44.	Summary of results of CBA for Opportunity Pathways, discounted at 7% (\$ million)	157
Table 45.	Transfer payments for Opportunity Pathways, discounted at 7% (\$ million)	158
Table 46.	Summary results of Cost Benefit Analysis per Opportunity Pathways participant, discounted at 7% (\$ million).....	158
Table 47.	Transfer payments per Opportunity Pathways participant, discounted at 7% (\$ million)	159
Table 48.	Answers to key evaluation questions for Youth Development Scholarships	161
Table 49.	Distribution of eligible Youth Development Scholarship applications, by scholarship receipt 2017–2021	164
Table 50.	Distribution of eligible Youth Development Scholarship applicants, by scholarship receipt and District, 2017–21.....	165
Table 51.	Proportion of Youth Development Scholarship recipients returning for multiple years.....	168
Table 52.	Linked outcome model results for the Youth Development Scholarships program, 1 July 2016 – 30 June 2021	173
Table 53.	Summary of Youth Development Scholarship costs (\$ million)	177
Table 54.	Summary of costs per Youth Development Scholarship recipient.....	178
Table 55.	Suggestions for strengthening policy- and place-based partnerships between DCJ and Aboriginal people, organisations and communities.....	181

FIGURES

Figure 1.	Summary of Future Directions in Social Housing in NSW key strategies.....	2
Figure 2.	Summary of the implementation status of each of the Future Directions Service Improvement Initiatives	3
Figure 3.	Opportunity Pathways providers and sites, by DCJ district.....	9
Figure 4.	Overview of the Early Childhood Education Services program in Mt Druitt and Moree.....	15
Figure 5.	Outcomes Framework	19
Figure 6.	Summary of evaluation methods, by evaluation stage.....	20
Figure 7.	Reach of Rent Choice Start Safely and Youth, 30 June 2016 – 30 June 2021	63
Figure 8.	Proportion of all applications approved for Rent Choice that are activated, compared to median market rents in 2021	64
Figure 9.	Uptake: Rent Choice Approvals and activations for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal applicants.....	69
Figure 10.	Apparent average number of Rent Choice taper events for all products... 76	
Figure 11.	Proportion of the Initial Rent Choice Start Safely and Youth subsidy remaining over time.....	77
Figure 12.	Total Rent Choice payments for all products, by financial year in which the subsidy began.....	78
Figure 13.	Rent Choice recipients' personal wellbeing over time	84
Figure 14.	Vacancy rates in NSW (2016–2022).....	90
Figure 15.	Rent Choice recipient group sizes, by product	92
Figure 16.	Expected and actual proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients and comparison group in community housing.....	97
Figure 17.	Expected and actual proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients and comparison group in public housing	98
Figure 18.	Expected and actual proportion of Rent Choice Youth recipients and comparison group in community housing.....	106
Figure 19.	Expected and actual proportion of Rent Choice Youth recipients and comparison group in public housing	106
Figure 20.	Proportion of Rent Choice recipients continuing to receive a subsidy, by duration since first subsidy.....	111

Figure 21. Opportunity Pathways referrals and enrolments, by major referral source	129
Figure 22. Summary of Opportunity Pathways participant demographics	130
Figure 23. Age and housing status distributions for Opportunity Pathways participants	142
Figure 24. Proportion of Opportunity Pathways participants presenting to SHS	144
Figure 25. Observed and expected proportion of Opportunity Pathways participants receiving income support	145
Figure 26. Observed and expected quarterly Income benefit (\$) for Opportunity Pathways participants	146
Figure 27. Proportion of Opportunity Pathways participants with a sustained employment outcome (13 weeks or 26 weeks)	146
Figure 28. Opportunity Pathways enrolments in vocational education and training (National Centre for Vocational Education Research data)	148
Figure 29. Proportion of Opportunity Pathways participants achieving a 12-week or 26-week employment or education outcome, 1 March 2019 – 30 June 2021	149
Figure 30. Opportunity Pathways participants' use of ambulatory mental health	149
Figure 31. Proportion of Opportunity Pathways participants with a public hospital admission	150
Figure 32. Court finalisation rate for Opportunity Pathways participants	151
Figure 33. Proportion of Career Pathways participants in social housing tenancies, by year	152
Figure 34. Proportion of Career Pathways participants receiving income support, by year	153
Figure 35. Age distribution of Youth Development Scholarship recipients, 2017–2021	166
Figure 36. Demographic characteristics of Youth Development Scholarship recipients, 2017–2021	167
Figure 37. Housing status of Youth Development Scholarship recipients, 2017–2021	167
Figure 38. Relationship between the Youth Development Scholarships standardised selection score and education outcomes, 2017–2021	174
Figure 39. Relationship between Youth Development Scholarships standardised selection score and health outcomes, 2017–2021	176

FOREWORD

This evaluation benefited from the insights of many people who are committed to understanding the value of the Service Improvement Initiatives (SII) for people in need of housing assistance in NSW.

It had unparalleled access to linked quantitative administrative data from NSW and Australian Government agencies, and community housing providers. This has been achieved with strict privacy safeguards and has allowed, for the first time, a view of the housing, health, education, employment, crime and justice experiences and outcomes of social housing clients.

It also worked hard to incorporate clients' voices. Over two years, we built trusted relationships with a random sample of 19 housing service system clients. We had numerous, long conversations with these people, and they generously told us their personal stories and experiences of the housing service system. Our Aboriginal Reference Group brought the perspective of 76 Aboriginal people across five locations, who helped us understand how the SII met the communities' need for housing support and assistance. It also benefited from the wisdom of practitioners, policy makers and community representatives, who shared their perspectives, experiences and insights on the effective provision of the SII.

Despite all of this, it is not easy to find a simple answer to the question of 'What works?'

This evaluation shows that people who need housing assistance come from a wide range of backgrounds. They also have a diversity of needs, which may be temporary and straightforward, or ongoing and complex. And so, the evaluation focused on answering: 'What works for whom, and under what circumstances?' Even these answers have been hard won and have required substantial reflection on the SII's power to effect outcomes.

The SII were implemented in different ways in different contexts and are likely to have different results with different people. The attitudes that people – both the intended beneficiaries and the service providers themselves – hold likely have a large effect on the outcomes. The same initiative can cause different impacts based on how the recipient interprets the support on offer (for example, the same private rental subsidy may be considered an opportunity for independence, a stopgap for someone with social housing as their intended destination, or a threat to social housing stability).

Nor do the initiatives exist in a vacuum, where what happens during the initiative is unaffected by a person's history and current circumstances. Persistent personal issues will manifest as problems for different government agencies: for example, alcohol misuse is a problem for road safety but is difficult for a transport agency to solve; family dysfunction is a problem for school attendance but is not something an education agency can solve. These underlying problems will also often manifest as a need for housing assistance but are not things a housing agency can solve on its own. The central place and challenges for housing policy in developed democracies has led to widespread discussion of 'the housing theory of

everything.’¹ This points to the lack of affordable housing as the most pressing issue for policy makers in modern western capitalist democracies.

While the evaluation provides some insights about the role of complementary housing supports and services, we are far from having a complete understanding of the interaction between intended beneficiaries, the initiatives and the broader social housing and economic system. That is, it is difficult to fully understand how the psychological agency of intended beneficiaries (manifested as self-efficacy and self-esteem) and the decision making of staff (for example, whether to direct or offer an initiative to an individual) interact with the opportunities these create in the service system (for example, rental subsidies, education, and employment assistance) and broader society.

Evidence-based policy is about using evidence and logic to inform judgement about the value of a course of action.² In the social sciences, evidence-based policy is not about easily defined solutions that ‘work’ to address complex problems.³ There are no silver bullets. A deeper and more holistic understanding of the interactions between the social housing and broader welfare system and the needs, aspirations and psychology of those who inhabit it will provide necessary evidence for more efficient and effective policy. ‘Simple’ and easily specifiable interventions to address housing need are unlikely to provide sustainable solutions when the causes of that need are many and varied and include factors such as lack of access to and progression through education; poor mental and physical health; ongoing caring responsibilities; or experiences of discrimination on the basis of gender, race or socioeconomic circumstance. Time also plays a role. For example, an intervention that meets a person’s housing need in the short term may lead to their norms and expectations changing, meaning they continue to need housing assistance.

In this sense it is unlikely that evaluation will ever definitively settle the question of ‘what works’ or even ‘what works for whom under what circumstances’. Evaluation (or determining the value of a proposed course of action) in a complex adaptive system such as society must be built on a sound understanding of the nature of a problem, the logic and evidence that supports a proposed course of action, and real-time feedback on how the system, and the relationships between parts of that system, are responding to any efforts to improve outcomes.⁴

The evaluation team has done considerable work to explore the mechanisms, costs and outcomes of the SII. We hope the outcomes demonstrated as arising from the SII and the insights provided in this report are useful for the further development of evidence-based policy to meet the need for housing assistance.

¹ Myers, J., Southwood, B., Bowman, S. (2021). *The housing theory of everything*. Works in Progress. [Issue 05](#).

² Cartwright, N., & Hardie, J. (2012). *Evidence-Based Policy: A Practical Guide to Doing It Better*. Oxford University Press.

³ Pawson, R. (2013). *The Science of Evaluation: A Realist Manifesto*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

⁴ Patton, M. Q. (2020). *Blue Marble Evaluation: Premises and Principles*. Guilford Publications.






EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT

ARTD, in partnership with Taylor Fry, Social Ventures Australia and Inform Economics, was contracted by the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to evaluate the five Service Improvement Initiatives (SIIs) being implemented as part of its *Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW* (Future Directions) investment.

The evaluation was conducted over three years, beginning in late 2019. Individual and overall evaluation plans were approved in January 2020. We delivered a baseline report in March 2020, which focused on implementation and data quality issues. The interim report (July 2021) focused on implementation and early outcomes. This is the final report of the evaluation.

It is focused on the outcomes and economic benefits of the SIIs. It focuses on Rent Choice and Opportunity Pathways as the two most substantive initiatives for which linked administrative data and counterfactual outcomes measurement, longitudinal case studies and economic analysis were conducted. Youth Development Scholarships is also featured. The Place Plans and Early Childhood Education Services programs have concluded, and we have described the associated outcomes in earlier reports.

<p>Rent choice</p> <p>Supports households to gain access to safe and affordable housing in the private rental market. It provides a time-limited, tapered private rental subsidy for up to 3 years and facilitates access to support, training and employment opportunities needed to sustain independent housing, without the need for ongoing government assistance.</p> 	<p>Supports:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start Safely - people leaving an unsafe relationship • Youth - young people aged 16-24 years • Veterans - former members of the permanent ADF • Transition - current social housing tenants who wish to obtain housing independence in the private market • Assist - low income households that have experienced a financial shock and agree to not be included on the NSW Housing register.
<p>Opportunity Pathways</p> <p>Assists social housing applicants, tenants and their household members, and Rent Choice subsidy recipients, who aspire to and have capacity to, with the appropriate support, find or increase their employment.</p> 	<p>Youth Development Scholarships</p> <p>A scholarship of \$1,000 to be used for educational and support related expenses. Supports vulnerable young people to stay at school and remain engaged with their education by enabling them to purchase relevant equipment/ pay to attend excursions.</p> 
<p>Place Plans</p> <p>Place-based approach designed to work in partnership with communities to develop and implement place-building activities and initiatives in social housing communities experiencing significant levels of disadvantage.</p> 	<p>Early Childhood Education Services</p> <p>Aimed to engage children living in social housing in affordable, accessible, and high quality early childhood education and care, and to improve school readiness, especially in the year before primary school.</p> 

When the evaluation began in 2019, the SII were a suite of five initiatives (see Box above). Now, only Rent Choice is currently being provided as it was in 2019. Opportunity Pathways was recontracted from 1 July 2022 following a review of program design and operational performance in August 2020. The Youth Development Scholarships program (formerly the Scholarships and Mentoring program) had the mentoring component removed in 2018–2019. Place Plans and Early Childhood Education Services were not extended beyond their original funding allocations (2019 and 2021, respectively).

METHODS

This was a mixed method evaluation. **Quantitative data** was drawn from a comprehensive linked dataset, which included variables from NSW and Commonwealth Government administrative datasets mapped against the NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework (Outcomes Framework). It also drew on the DCJ Housing Outcomes and Satisfaction Survey (2019, 2020 and 2021).

The linked dataset was used to compare the pattern of outcomes in a quasi-experimental design for three SII: Rent Choice, Opportunity Pathways and Youth Development Scholarships. There are different challenges in forming a comparison group for each SII, so the design was distinct for each:

- **Rent Choice:** Compared applicants who established or 'activated' a private rental tenancy between 1 July 2016 and 30 June 2019 with a comparison group of similar applicants for housing support who did not receive Rent Choice. The comparison group was formed using propensity score matching.
- **Opportunity Pathways:** Examined changes over time for participants who were referred to and began the program between 1 April 2019 and 30 June 2021. There is no equivalent population from which to draw a comparison group, so the comparison was made between the outcomes achieved and those projected/expected based on participants' own history prior to joining the program. This was strengthened by a simple comparison of differences before and after participation using a stepped wedge regression model (with random effects).
- **Youth Development Scholarships:** Compared outcomes for the group of scholarship recipients between 1 July 2016 and 30 June 2020 with applicants who met the program's eligibility requirements but were unsuccessful. Characteristics affecting selection for a scholarship were controlled for through regression.

Qualitative data was drawn from two rounds of interviews with stakeholders (n=75) and longitudinal case studies (n=19) of Rent Choice and Opportunity Pathway participants (n=19) who were interviewed up to five times over two years. To safeguard the integrity of the findings, great care was placed on ensuring participants were selected randomly and that their participation was not revealed. We used this data to test the causal impact of theoretically important conditions (not visible in quantitative datasets) on the outcomes of housing stability and housing independence using **Qualitative Comparative Analysis** (QCA).

We also consulted with 76 Aboriginal people across five locations (Redfern, Campbelltown, Bateman's Bay, Kempsey and Dubbo), who helped us understand how the SII met their communities' needs for housing support and assistance.

A **Cost-benefit analysis** (CBA) was undertaken for each of the three SIIs for which linked data was available: Rent Choice, Opportunity Pathways and Youth Development Scholarships. This drew on the outcomes and costs identified from the linked administrative dataset and benefit values from the Benefit Database of Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research (FACSIAR). A detailed explanation of how costs and benefits were identified, estimated, and valued is set out in the Appendices (Volume 2). This approach to CBA aligns with other CBAs conducted by DCJ and NSW Treasury.

LIMITATIONS

The administrative data was found to be of reasonable quality and suitable for the analysis performed, despite some errors within individual datasets that limited linkages. There were minor limitations to the analysis of each initiative due to availability and qualitative data. We are confident the findings provide a sound evidence base for decision making.

GOVERNANCE AND ETHICS

The evaluation was conducted with the guidance of three governance groups: the **Evaluation Working Group** and **Data Working Group** (both chaired by FACSIAR), and the **Aboriginal Reference Group** (chaired by ARTD).

Ethical approval for the components of the evaluation involving consultation with communities and stakeholders was granted in March 2020 (Approval Reference 1607/19) by the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AHMRC) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

DCJ also made separate applications to the AHMRC, the NSW Population and Health Services Research Ethics Committee (PHSREC), and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) HRECs for the quantitative analysis of the linked administrative dataset. These were all approved by September 2020, facilitating the linkage process. The data linkage was completed by the Centre for Health Record Linkage (CHeReL) and the AIHW.

KEY FINDINGS

The Service Improvement Initiatives are broadly directed at people who require housing assistance and support; however, the emphasis of each program was different. Early Childhood Education Services, Youth Development Scholarships and Place Plans were all focused on improving clients' experience of social housing. Opportunity Pathways was focused on supporting people to exit or avoid the need for social housing, and Rent Choice sets out to divert people from social housing and towards housing independence.

The quantitative and qualitative data shows people who have been supported by Rent Choice, Opportunity Pathways or Youth Development Scholarships have experienced a range of life events and circumstances that have given rise to their need for housing assistance and support.

Analysis of the linked administrative dataset indicates almost two-thirds (69%) of people under 25 years who interacted with Rent Choice and/or Opportunity Pathways had experienced traumatic life events, including removal from their family of origin, culture or

country; domestic and family violence (DFV) (often both in childhood and adult relationships); involvement in the child protection or out-of-home care systems; or homelessness.⁵ Not all people will be traumatised by experiencing a distressing or traumatic event.⁶ Further, while we cannot presume that the individuals who self-reported or were administratively flagged as having experienced a traumatic event would meet the clinical threshold for a diagnosis of trauma, it is reasonable to assume that the prevalence of trauma – ranging from simple to complex and persistent – is substantial within the cohorts targeted by housing and homelessness programs like the Service Improvement Initiatives.

There are clear implications for policy and practice, given the strong and often mutually reinforcing relationship between the experience of homelessness and the experience of trauma: psychological and physical trauma underlies many people's experiences of homelessness, and a traumatic event might precipitate homelessness. This is likely to be particularly relevant to key population groups, including Aboriginal people, people leaving care or custodial arrangements, and women and children escaping domestic and family violence.

Extensive consultation with Aboriginal people, communities and organisations across five locations revealed the opportunity to strengthen the way housing supports and services – and the SIs specifically – are provided to Aboriginal people. Fundamental to this is a need for meaningful consultation and shared decision making between the Department and Aboriginal people, organisations and communities to ensure policies and programs meet communities' needs, looking to the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to provide specialist supports and services, and continuing to strengthen the Department's Aboriginal workforce at all levels.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS




1. **Shift the culture of social housing provision to include a central place for supporting people to access the private market.**
2. **Advocate for broader whole of government policy to improve the affordability and experience of people renting in the private market. This includes investments in Affordable housing, build to rent schemes and review of tax and transfer policy settings that distort incentives for low-income households to exit social housing.**
3. **Continue to invest in trauma-informed training and other professional learning opportunities to ensure all staff understand the causes and consequences of trauma, particularly how it shapes behaviour that can lead to long term dependence on social housing.**

⁵ We did this by creating a trauma 'flag' where people who had a child protection history with notes relating to domestic violence or sexual assault; a period of out-of-home care within the child protection system; or a SHS presentation, with trauma or related needs (DFV or family issues) flagged.

⁶ Cash, R., O'Donnell, M., Varker, T., Armstrong, R., Di Censo, L., Zanatta, P., Murnane, A., Brophy, L., & Phelps, A. (2014). The Trauma and Homelessness Service Framework. Report prepared by the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health in collaboration with Sacred Heart Mission, Mind Australia, Inner Southern Community Health and VincentCare Victoria.

4. **Review current policies to embed trauma-informed principles and ensure a balance between therapeutic and punitive responses. For example, policies that respond to antisocial behaviours in public housing could include increasing support options as an alternative to or alongside increasing consequences for antisocial behaviours.**
5. **Review caseworker resourcing and oversight, and participant communication strategies to:**
 - **enable all participants to have a positive one-on-one relationship and contact with a supportive caseworker when they need it.**
 - **empower participants with clear, appropriate and reiterated communications about how the SII they are receiving works and what to expect – for example, how Rent Choice tapering is applied or the supports available through Opportunity Pathways.**
6. **Consider ways of ensuring specialist counsellors or trauma practitioners are available to support clients to develop their capability, capacity and motivation for housing independence, which may include partnerships with the non-government and Aboriginal community-controlled sectors.**
7. **Continue to strengthen inter-agency collaborations and partnerships with external providers of specialist services, and development of referral pathways.**
8. **Continue to strengthen the organisational commitment to recruiting and retaining an Aboriginal workforce at all levels, but particularly frontline workers. Support increased Aboriginal employment by:**
 - **sharing examples of good recruitment and development practices**
 - **sponsoring Aboriginal mentoring and professional development initiatives**
 - **sponsoring traineeships**
 - **mandating Aboriginal employment practices.**
9. **Explore ways to partner with specialist organisations and the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to ensure Aboriginal people – particularly Aboriginal women who have experienced violence and members of the Stolen Generations – are not traumatised by the experience of seeking housing assistance.**
10. **Explore opportunities to partner with and connect SII participants who are escaping DFV to organisations providing legal advice and advocacy, counselling and other therapies, and financial counselling.**
11. **Co-design responses to ensure people in need of housing assistance can develop long-term positive support relationships and informal social networks. This may range**



from peer support networks through to formal psychological therapy for people with experiences of trauma.

RENT CHOICE

Overall, it appears that Rent Choice has significant value as a diversionary product to assist more people to meet their housing needs without reliance on social housing. While the product does not divert all recipients from social housing over the longer term it appears to have positive results when implemented as intended. The cost benefit analysis suggests an expansion of Rent Choice could assist more people in housing need at a lower cost than would be incurred by the construction and maintenance of additional social housing for the target group currently being assisted with Rent Choice.

The Department has commissioned further analysis of the linked administrative datasets, which ARTD and Taylor Fry are currently completing. The results reported in this chapter are current at the time of publication but should be considered alongside the additional analyses provided when that project is completed, in May 2023.

HOW WELL IS RENT CHOICE REACHING AND ENGAGING THE TARGET POPULATION?

Over the five years from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021, there were 15,230 approvals for a Rent Choice subsidy, relative to a total of 510,415 applications for housing assistance. This represents around 33 approvals per 1,000 applications. The actual size of the target audience (and whether this is adequate 'reach') is difficult to measure given the number of 'unobservable characteristics', such as 'motivation to rent in the private market', that determine whether a person is suitable for Rent Choice. The Rent Choice concept appears to be very well received by staff, stakeholders, and clients in the service system. This has been well established by previous evaluations.

In the current evaluation, evidence is available that Rent Choice participants have higher levels of satisfaction with DCJ than other clients that were not assisted with Rent Choice. This effect is statistically significant and substantial as measured in the DCJ Housing Outcomes Survey (HOSS), particularly in 2019 and 2020.

Over the five years from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021 there were 9,822 people who activated their Rent Choice subsidy, that is, established a private rental tenancy (64% of the 15,230 people approved). Approval for Rent Choice is the result of a determination by one or more DCJ staff members that an eligible person is suitable to rent in the private market. This entails a judgement that short term financial assistance will be sufficient for a person with the motivation and capacity to establish a tenancy and then pay market rent within three years. However, one third (36%) of clients judged suitable were unable to establish a tenancy. This may indicate additional guidance is required for staff responsible for determining suitability.

Recipients' pathways into Rent Choice and the private market vary. Some recipients establish their tenancy with relatively little support, while others, especially young people, receive substantial case management support. Once approved, the key factor as to whether a person

can establish a private rental is whether they can find an affordable private rental tenancy, and whether their rental application is approved by a real estate agent and lessor. Stakeholders observe the critical role of Private Rental Specialists to advocate for and support Rent Choice recipients in their initial and ongoing interactions with real estate agents. The Department may provide additional assurances on behalf of prospective tenants, including Bond Loans and Bond Extra.

A common experience in the longitudinal case studies was of great initial support that was not always sustained or available when needed in the future. The analysis of these case studies over almost two years of interviews reveals the incredible complexity of the lives of people participating and the destabilising effects of unwanted and unpredictable life events. In most instances the randomly selected participants demonstrated high levels of resilience and motivation for self-improvement, and participation in education and employment that is not always apparent in people in receipt of housing assistance.

WHAT OUTCOMES ARE BEING ACHIEVED BY CLIENTS?

Rent Choice Start Safely recipients have large reductions in urgent requests for housing assistance (24%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group), moderate reductions in rates of living in social housing (15%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group), and small reductions in presentations to Specialist Homelessness Services (9%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group) within one year of subsidy receipt. Within one year of receiving Rent Choice, there were also very small reductions (1 percentage point) in court finalisations and days as an admitted patient (decrease of 1 day for Start Safely recipients, versus 0.2 days for the comparison group), large increases in Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments (increase of \$1,151 compared to an increase of \$119 for the comparison group) and smaller increases in Commonwealth income (increase of \$1,899 compared with \$828 for the comparison group). Increases in Rent Assistance suggests successful renting while income support amounts may be affected by positive engagement in study as well changes in ability to work when establishing an independent household. These patterns were largely consistent in their second year with a slight reduction in effect sizes across most outcomes.

Over two years the impact has been to reduce entries to public housing by 15 percentage points and to community housing by 8 percentage points relative to the comparison group.

Rent Choice Youth recipients achieve large reductions in urgent requests for housing assistance (18%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group), and moderate reductions in rates of living community or public housing (8% and 9% -point net reduction relative to the comparison group respectively), and in homeless presentations to Specialised Homelessness Services (21%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group)⁷. There was also a large increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments associated with establishing a private rental tenancy (increase of \$1,465 compared to an increase of \$415 for the comparison group) but no changes in income support. There were no significant differences in justice or health outcomes. These patterns were largely consistent in their second year with the addition of a small increase in days as an admitted patient relative to

⁷ While the percentage point change is larger than for urgent requests for housing assistance the effect size is smaller because the starting percentages are larger – for technical results see **Error! Reference source not found.**)

the comparison group. Over two years the impact has been to reduce entries to public housing by 9 percentage points and to community housing by 5 percentage points relative to the comparison group.

WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE TO CONFIRM HYPOTHESES ABOUT KEY MECHANISMS?

The evaluation suggests that Rent Choice can be most effective early in a person's housing assistance trajectory, whether that person is younger, or they are reasonably early in the process of resolving the crisis that sparked their contact with the social housing system. It was considered that Rent Choice can prevent people from becoming reliant on social housing.

Many of the causal mechanisms identified in the program logic and the contexts in which they are leveraged by Rent Choice defy direct empirical testing in large scale datasets. We have attempted to test these causal mechanisms in the longitudinal case studies. The results suggest that client circumstances and contexts in the case study sample were too complex and varied to identify stable causal relationships between a person's patterns of participation in Rent Choice and their other characteristics and circumstances. Individual people interpret the supports on offer in different ways.

Any mechanisms or 'push' factors, such as increased choice and amenity in accommodation type in the private market, need to exceed the 'pull' factors created by current policy settings and conditions of social housing. For example, the increased taxation associated with additional income from employment could incentivise potential participants to instead pursue a goal of relatively affordable and secure social housing accommodation for which the rent is calculated as 25% of their income, rather than being set by market forces.

WHAT FACTORS PREDICT IF A CLIENT IS LIKELY TO AFFORD THE RENT DURING THE SUBSIDY PERIOD?

Rent Choice is generally only provided to a client when they have the prospects of improvements to their income from employment. This is based on the judgements of staff which appear to be largely effective – it is not possible to predict the occurrence of destabilising life events or radical changes to rental markets. The ability to obtain, sustain and increase employment was considered a key factor in ensuring a person was able to maintain their private rental tenancy, as was access to informal and formal support networks to navigate unexpected and potentially destabilising life events.

WHEN AND FOR WHOM DOES THE SUBSIDY PERIOD LEAD TO SUSTAINABLE PRIVATE RENTAL TENANCIES?

Not all clients approved for Rent Choice are able to establish a private rental tenancy. This outcome relates to the interaction of the supply of affordable rental properties with a client's incentive and motivation to rent in the private market. The cost effectiveness of Rent Choice would increase if the ratio of people approved to those activating a subsidy was improved beyond the average rate over the last five years of around 60%. This is in part a result of the ability of staff to develop effective relationships with real estate agents. The need to strengthen these relationships is considered particularly important in the case of Aboriginal clients.

It is difficult to fully unpack the impact of tapering as this is applied within program guidelines but at the discretion of housing staff. It appears that the application of tapers is not associated with recipients' ability to sustain a private rental tenancy.

HOW DO CLIENTS EXPERIENCE THE PROGRAM?

Rent Choice clients tend to be deeply grateful for the supports on offer from Rent Choice and report enhanced satisfaction with DCJ compared to other clients with similar characteristics.

WHAT IMPLICATIONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE OUTCOMES?

Overall, it appears that Rent Choice has significant value as a diversionary product to assist more people to meet their housing needs without reliance on social housing. While the product does not divert all recipients from social housing over the longer term it appears to have positive results when implemented as intended. Greater outreach in culturally and linguistically diverse communities and with Aboriginal communities may increase reach and uptake without any expectation of a decrease in outcomes. The pattern of activation shows that higher activation rates can occur in higher rent markets and that higher activation rates tend to occur in locations where the Rent Choice is being used the most. These findings may suggest that the experience of staff with Rent Choice and the networks established are important in increasing activation rates.


WHAT HAVE BEEN THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF ASSISTING RECIPIENTS?

The estimate of the overall benefit-cost ratio (BCR) for Rent Choice based on DCJ guidance for calculating costs and benefits was 0.9 with a net present value (NPV) of negative \$29.5 million (excluding the opportunity cost of capital associated with placing a person in social housing). The present value of quantifiable costs was estimated at \$251.5 million and the present value of quantifiable benefits at \$222.0 million.

The benefits included \$186.9 million in reduced use of social housing, \$22.6 million in reduced use of health services, \$8 million in reduced use of homelessness services and \$4.4 million in reduced costs to the criminal justice system.

Rent Choice is a cost-effective diversionary product that clearly reduces the need for long term social housing assistance. The results of the evaluation suggest it is far more cost effective to provide Rent Choice than social housing for low to moderate income people with unmet housing need that have the capacity, motivation, and incentive to engage in education and employment. Including the cost of providing social housing in the cost benefit analysis increases the BCR and NPV for Rent Choice to 4.4 and \$864.3 million respectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Use current Rent Choice products to divert people on low incomes from social housing. Rent Choice is more cost effective than social housing for current clients.**
2. **Expand Rent Choice as the product of choice for people on low to moderate incomes with unmet housing need who have the capability, capacity and motivation to engage with education and employment.**
3. **Increase focus on improving the experience of renting in the private market. This requires a broader consideration of the overall incentives, as well as costs and benefits of different products and services to meet housing need in the private market in the immediate and longer term. Any mechanisms or 'push' factors, such as increased choice and amenity in accommodation type in the private rental market, need to exceed the 'pull' factors created by current tax and transfer policy settings and as well as costs and conditions of social housing.**
4. **Support a culture of private rental assistance as a core part of social housing assistance through key performance indicators. For example, a district level indicator focusing on numbers of suitable people supported into Rent Choice as well as the proportion of clients engaged in education and employment have the potential to drive a major cultural change that supports private rental assistance as legitimate form of cost-effective short term of social housing assistance.**
5. **Recognise that providing private rental assistance is a specialist skill different to assessment and demand or tenancy management. All efforts need to be made to recruit staff with the appropriate skill sets – which must extend to an understanding of how real estate agents operate. Ensuring all staff engage with the objectives of Rent Choice as a short-term assistance and increasing opportunities for mentoring and sharing information between the Rent Choice officers is critical to ongoing success.**

See also 'Overall Recommendations.'

OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS

Opportunity Pathways is providing valuable assistance to clients to achieve education, training and employment outcomes that will help them towards financial independence.

It was provided though a contracting for outcomes approach, and in most cases, employment targets were not being met, and has now been reformulated as a social impact investment that is outside the scope of the evaluation. The current evaluation suggests that the program was providing value for money despite a lower than expected performance.

HOW WELL IS OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS REACHING AND ENGAGING THE TARGET POPULATION?

Between 1 March 2019 and 30 June 2021, program data suggest a total of 5,264 people were referred to Opportunity Pathways, of which 3,471 people were determined to be suitable and enrolled. This equates to an enrolment rate of 60%, which has been fairly stable over time. The referral and enrolment rates vary substantially across Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) districts, which is likely to reflect factors including the extent to which the program was promoted across the referral network, and the strength of the providers' referral networks. Both these factors are likely to reflect the relative experience of the program providers in the employment services sector.

Young people are the largest Opportunity Pathways recipient group (37% aged 16–25 years), but there are substantial numbers of older participants (13% aged 46–55 and 5% aged 55+). Most clients were female (61%) and aged between 16 and 35 years (61%). One quarter (26%) of clients were Aboriginal. Most clients were living in social housing (42%) and on the Housing Register (29%). Approximately one quarter (27%) of Opportunity Pathways clients were living in a private rental property and also receiving Rent Choice.

WHAT OUTCOMES ARE BEING ACHIEVED?

In comparison to outcomes prior to participation (including regression controls to account for natural changes over time) data show a significant improvement in three of the seven Outcome Framework domains: home, economic and justice.

Participation in Opportunity Pathways is associated with a substantive and statistically significant reduction in SHS presentations ($p < 0.01$). We estimate that there is a 45% reduction in SHS presentations in the year following participation in Opportunity Pathways. However, this may be confounded by participants' housing situation stabilising around the time of referral. For example, participants seek SHS support, and this triggers government support, which stabilises their housing situation, after which they become eligible for and are referred to Opportunity Pathways. There is no significant impact for people being in public or community housing, which suggests that people are not transitioning out of social housing as a result of participating in the program.

In terms of independence from income support, the data show that 18% of Opportunity Pathways participants are off benefits after two years, compared to 13% who were expected to be. The reduction in payments increases in the first 18 months after referral, then stabilises to a reduction of around \$292 per quarter. The reduction is due to a combination of participants coming off income support entirely or receiving a reduced amount due to increases in earned income.

At the end of June 2021, 37% of participants who had been in the program for at least half a year had achieved a 13- or 26-week employment, education or training outcome. Rates were not markedly higher for those who had been in longer than a year, although these participants would have been more affected by COVID-19-related lockdowns in 2020 (outcome rates may have been higher for earlier entrants otherwise).

More than half (60%) of participants worked 20 or more hours per week, suggesting that most participants who achieve outcomes sit well above the minimum target. For those who gained employment while in the program, more than half (54%) achieved casual employment, another quarter (25%) achieved permanent part-time employment and one in five (18%) achieved permanent full-time employment. A very small number of clients (12 people) sustained unpaid work for 13 weeks.

A very small proportion (3.4%) of the Opportunity Pathways clients who started the program in the last 12 months have education outcomes, compared to almost one in five (16%) of the clients who started more than 15 months ago achieving education outcomes (mostly within the first six months of the program). This is likely to be the result of factors external to the program (including changes in the employment market) and internal to it (including changes to the program design).

There were no statistically significant changes in health outcomes as the result of participating in Opportunity Pathways. Participation is associated with a significant reduction in court finalisations, estimated at 12%.

WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE TO CONFIRM HYPOTHESES ABOUT KEY MECHANISMS BY WHICH THE PROGRAM WORKS?

The evaluation suggests that Opportunity Pathways is effective because it provides a sufficient quantum of support to participants who have a 'voice' in setting goals and objectives.

The key causal mechanism is the motivation of potential participants. This requires delivery mechanisms that are adept at identifying and referring appropriate clients.

Extensive analysis of patterns in linked data and across the case studies using Qualitative Comparative Analysis did not confirm any specific hypothesis about whom is more or less able to be assisted by Opportunity Pathways beyond the most basic casual mechanism. Interestingly, the results do indicate those on longer term benefits were relatively more likely to reduce their reliance on income support. We tested the inclusion of income support duration of greater than two years as a main effect, as well as an interaction with the program effect. This gives an estimated reduction of \$310 per quarter for longer duration participants, compared to a reduction of \$70 per quarter for shorter duration participants (on benefits for less than two years). However, the baseline estimate for the longer duration participants was also \$1,510 more per quarter than for the shorter duration participants.

HOW DO PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCE THE PROGRAM?

Opportunity Pathways participants tend to report high levels of satisfaction – although there are substantial gaps in program data exit surveys. When participants are satisfied, it is because they obtained enough support from a person who sought to understand their goals and aspirations rather than focus on short-term employment outcomes. Program data quality issues preclude direct testing of the relationship between the quantum of support provided and satisfaction with case plan goals and employment outcomes.

WHAT IMPLICATIONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE OUTCOMES?

Overall, Opportunity Pathways can work for people who are motivated to work, and for whom other obstacles to finding employment can be overcome.


People who have been unemployed longer term may benefit to a greater degree than the short-term unemployed. This is likely to reflect the more 'client-centred' and long-term focus of Opportunity Pathways in comparison to the shorter-term focus of Commonwealth employment services.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF ASSISTING PARTICIPANTS WITH THE PROGRAM?

The estimate of the overall benefit-cost ratio (BCR) for Opportunity Pathways based on DCJ guidance was 1.4 with a net present value (NPV) of positive \$14.6 million. The present value of quantifiable costs was estimated at \$32.9 million, and the present value of quantifiable benefits at \$47.5 million.

The benefits included \$23.4 million in additional income to NSW citizens (net of additional rent payments to the NSW Government) and \$5.5 million in additional lifetime earnings for NSW citizens arising from enrolments in vocational education. Benefits also included \$7.8 million in additional rental payments to the NSW Government, \$4.9 million in reduced use of SHS, \$3.9 million in reduced costs to the criminal justice system and \$2.2 million in reduced use of health services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop assessment processes and tools that support identification of eligible and suitable (motivated) clients, including those who are long-term unemployed. 2. Strengthen the connection between Opportunity Pathways and Rent Choice. <p>See also 'Recommendations to enhance program monitoring' and 'Overall Recommendations.'</p>
---	---

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE PROGRAM MONITORING

It is outside the scope of this evaluation to provide an extended discussion of best practice in program monitoring. However, given the consistent problems with the Opportunity Pathways monitoring data, we have provided some specific suggestions for improving performance monitoring.



1. Ensure any metrics are accurate (reliable). Some Opportunity Pathways providers did not know if their clients had achieved 13- and 26-week employment outcomes because these outcomes are not (unlike for Commonwealth employment programs) automatically reported to providers. This means the data on employment outcomes may not be reliable.
2. Review performance metrics to ensure they provide a 'valid' measure of performance, that is, represent the value being delivered. It is possible that value and an economic return is being obtained despite performance metrics not being achieved. This is what happened with Opportunity Pathways.
3. Review performance targets to ensure they are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound (SMART) or, if no targets are set, focus on improvements over time. In Opportunity Pathways, providers were responsible for outcomes, meaning their performance was measured against the outcomes they themselves selected. This is the basis of commissioning for outcomes. Here the logic may be that providers should focus on outcomes not performance, as there is an assumption that outcomes are the product of good performance irrespective of factors outside providers' control. This is neat in theory, but the history of performance metrics being applied to public policy for vulnerable groups shows many perverse outcomes; for example, providers choosing clients or locations where there is low need, and outcomes are reasonably assured or likely to have happened without the provider's efforts.⁸
4. Review and test performance monitoring systems from a user-experience and implementation perspective to ensure they are used and updated consistently. This may include removing data reporting on fields that are not necessary for decision making; and ensure buy in from users. Performance monitoring systems must not only be technically adequate, but also attend to human factors in design and implementation. It is important to carefully consider what is mandated and used rather than simply asking for everything, just in case. This can make it difficult for providers to understand the value of individual data points, and how they contribute to program delivery.
5. Incentivise accurate data collection, including by showing providers how the data will be used and reported on. For example, develop a report for providers on the proportion of clients who have completed their satisfaction survey. Note that in this example, the incentive is to drive up the response rate, not report a level of satisfaction based on a low sample size from a few clients. This rewards those who put in the effort to include people that are satisfied and not satisfied rather than those who ensure a few happy clients do a survey. Performance in the first instance is getting the surveys done; only after a good response rate is achieved can analysis of actual satisfaction be achieved. Thus, a performance metric might be the percentage of clients having completed an intake and exit survey. Another one might be the

⁸ See Muller, J. (2018). *The Tyranny of Metrics*. Princeton University Press.

actual levels of satisfaction. A third may include the proportion that obtain 13- or 26-week outcomes – but as this is a product of design, context *and* performance it may be invalid as a single metric of performance. Providers should feel the consequences of not obtaining the data and see how the data are being used, or they will reason that it is not that important, and therefore that they will not do it.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS

There is no empirical evidence in the linked administrative dataset that Scholarship recipients are more engaged in school or achieve better education related outcomes as a result of the scholarship. While many stakeholders hold a positive attitude towards the scholarship, at this stage, it is unlikely that awarding a scholarship activates the mechanisms of change identified in the program logic.

No quantifiable educational or health outcomes have been identified from the linked administrative data analysis to date (the linked data analysis was limited to the domains of health and education as these were the two domains where the program logic expected to see positive outcomes).

The estimated overall BCR for Youth Development Scholarships is therefore zero.

Given there is no evidence of outcomes, the Department may wish to consider the future of the Youth Development Scholarships program.

HOW WELL IS YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS REACHING AND ENGAGING THE TARGET POPULATION?

Between 2017 and 2021, there were 4,614 eligible applications for Youth Development Scholarships, leading to the award of 2,264 scholarships. The program was broadly supported by stakeholders who participated in the evaluation. Key stakeholder interviews indicate that the number of eligible applications (that is, the applicant meets the criteria and submits a complete application) has increased over time. As noted in the process evaluation report, DCJ made substantive efforts to streamline the application process and the application form itself.

Applicants from South Western Sydney (12%) and the Hunter Central Coast (11%) districts make up nearly half of all successful Scholarship recipients. This is likely to reflect both the potential size of the applicant pool (that is, the number of social housing tenancies in each district) and the extent to which the program is promoted by the districts to social housing tenants. The applicant success rate also varies across districts. Western NSW (79%), New England (78%) and Mid North Coast (73%) have the highest rates of successful applicants. Northern Sydney (20%) and South Eastern Sydney (21%) have the lowest rates of successful applicants.

On average, scholarship recipients are 16 years old. Female students make up 57% of successful applicants and 55% of unsuccessful applicants. Reflecting DCJ's deliberate

prioritisation of vulnerable young people, among those awarded a scholarship, there are proportionately more Aboriginal young people (41% of those awarded a scholarship compared to 13% of those unsuccessful), young people with disability (11% of those awarded a scholarship compared to 5% of those unsuccessful), recipients in out-of-home care (17% of those awarded a scholarship compared to 8% of those unsuccessful), recipients living in social housing than not (41% of recipients are living in public housing and 10% in community housing). A further 22% of recipients are living in households receiving private rental assistance (8%) or on the NSW Housing Register (14%).

Two out of three (66%) return for a second year, and half (47%) for a third year.

WHAT OUTCOMES ARE BEING ACHIEVED BY RECIPIENTS?

There is no empirical evidence in the linked administrative dataset that Youth Development Scholarship recipients are more engaged in school or achieve better education related outcomes (improved school completion rates or higher education) or health related outcomes (improved self-esteem, resilience, social competency or wellbeing).

Stakeholders shared a range of anecdotal evidence about the difference a scholarship has made for young people whose families were experiencing hardship; however, the quantitative analysis found no statistically significant outcomes for recipients in the education or health domains (improved self-esteem, resilience, social competency and wellbeing).

Many stakeholders consider that scholarships are an important determinant of a young person's ongoing engagement with education, but only 16% (32 students out of 197 valid exit survey responses) said they would have disengaged from school without the scholarship.

WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE TO CONFIRM HYPOTHESES ABOUT KEY MECHANISMS BY WHICH THE PROGRAM WORKS?

The academic evidence base for scholarship programs indicates the main predictor of 'success' is likely to be the young person's intrinsic motivation. The factors that motivate young people are likely to vary from person to person. The causal mechanisms are not observable in administrative datasets and while they were explored in interviews with key stakeholders, they could not be tested directly in the linked dataset.

HOW DO CLIENTS EXPERIENCE THE PROGRAM?

The evaluation did not seek direct input from young people. It may be appropriate to explore young people's motivation to apply for the scholarship, as captured in their long-form written responses on the application form, or to consider direct engagement with young people to understand their motivation for applying for the scholarship and the impact of receiving it on them and their family – particularly around the positive or negative aspects of winning the scholarship.

WHAT IMPLICATIONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE OUTCOMES?

There is no empirical evidence in the linked administrative dataset that Youth Development Scholarship recipients are more engaged in school or achieve better education related outcomes as a result of the scholarship. While many stakeholders hold a positive attitude towards the scholarship, it is unlikely that awarding a scholarship activates the mechanisms of change identified in the program logic.


WHAT HAVE BEEN THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF ASSISTING PARTICIPANTS WITH THE PROGRAM?

No quantifiable educational or health outcomes have been identified from the linked administrative data analysis to date (the linked data analysis was limited to the domains of health and education as these were the two domains where the program logic expected to see positive outcomes).

The estimated overall benefit-cost ratio for Youth Development Scholarships is therefore zero.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following actions are recommended should the initiative continue in its current form.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review the program logic to ensure that it accurately reflects the outcomes that are possible for a financial payment (scholarship) in the absence of mentoring support. 2. Review the process for collecting Personal Wellbeing Index data from young people at entry and exit. In particular, ensure that young people are responsible for completing this data, rather than their parents/guardians/support workers. 3. Include an assessment of motivation on entry (through the application form) and exit (through the exit survey). 4. Consider ways of engaging meaningfully and deliberately with organisations, including Aboriginal service providers and community-controlled organisations, that support young people who are not engaged with school. This may strengthen the Youth Development Scholarships' reach to and uptake by young people who are motivated to further their education but are currently not engaged with school for reasons including financial hardship or caring responsibilities. 5. Explore opportunities to link scholarship recipients with Rent Choice Youth, Opportunity Pathways and/or NSW Government mentoring programs to help them achieve their future aspirations. 6. Consider ways to easily collect expenditure data, such as via an app or text message service, that do not add substantial administrative burden for students, schools or DCJ. These data would be useful for developing an understanding of 'what works' for students, in what circumstances.
---	---

1. INTRODUCTION

The NSW Government is transforming the current social housing system to break the cycle of disadvantage experienced by many individuals and families in NSW. The social housing system was developed in the 1940s for working families with low incomes. Today, the social housing system supports a different cohort of people, who are often some of the most vulnerable people in the community.

1.1. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR SOCIAL HOUSING IN NSW

In January 2016, the NSW Government launched its new vision for social housing over the next 10 years, *Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW*. Future Directions considers the whole housing continuum – from homelessness through to social or supported housing and the private rental market.

Future Directions aims to address current challenges within the social housing system, including the availability and quality of social housing stock and assisting social housing clients to gain financial independence and, for those who are able and willing, to positively transition out of social housing and into the private housing market. It provides focused support to help people avoid long-term social housing tenancies, while also recognising the role stable housing plays in the lives of people who are not able to live elsewhere.

Future Directions is underpinned by three **strategic priorities**.

1. More and better quality social housing.
2. More opportunities, support and incentives for people to avoid and/or leave social housing.
3. A better experience for social housing clients.

It is intended that Future Directions will achieve the following **outcomes**.

- Increase successful transitions out of social housing by 5%.
- Increase the proportion of young people who successfully move from specialist homelessness services to long-term stable accommodation by 10%.⁹

By 2025, Future Directions aims to transform the social housing system in NSW from one that is dominated by public sector ownership, control, financing of assets and provision of services, and in which tenants live in circumstances that concentrate disadvantage and have little incentive to achieve greater independence, to a dynamic and diverse system characterised by:

- greater involvement of private and non-government partners in financing, owning and managing a significantly expanded stock of social and affordable assets
- expanded support in the private rental market, reducing demand on social housing and the social housing waitlist

⁹ NSW Government. (2016). *Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW*.

- more competition and diversity in the provision of tenancy management services through the expanded capacity and capability of community housing providers
- housing assistance being seen as a pathway to independence and an enabler of improved social and economic participation for tenants living in vibrant and socioeconomically diverse communities.

There are four key Future Directions strategies (see Figure 1). Social housing clients are expected to engage with, and benefit from, more than one program or initiative. Together, and individually, they are expected to contribute towards DCJ's goal of improving clients' wellbeing.

FIGURE 1. SUMMARY OF FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN SOCIAL HOUSING IN NSW KEY STRATEGIES



1. Communities Plus (C+): A program to significantly expand and redevelop housing stock through partnerships with private sector developers and finance.



2. Social Housing Management Transfers (SHMT): An initiative transferring significant tenancy management responsibility to non-government housing providers



3. Social and Affordable Housing Fund (SAHF): A program implementing innovative approaches to private and non-government sector contributions (in the form of financial investment or land) to grow the stock of social and affordable housing



4. Service Improvement Initiatives (SIIs): Wraparound services to support tenants to build their capabilities and take advantage of the economic opportunities in our strengthening economy.

1.2. SERVICE IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

The five SIIs are a mix of new, existing and expanded initiatives aimed at improving social housing clients' living experiences, as well as their education, training, employment opportunities and/or access to affordable, independent housing (Figure 2). The SIIs, which are each at different stages of implementation, align with and contribute to the Future Directions objective of providing more opportunities, support and incentives for people to build their housing independence.

The SIIs are relatively small and agile pilots, collecting evidence to inform bigger decisions about Future Directions in housing assistance. The SIIs also reflect that, under Future Directions, providing social housing is one part of an innovative and holistic approach to breaking the cycle of disadvantage for social housing clients that includes health, education and employment support.

FIGURE 2. SUMMARY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION STATUS OF EACH OF THE FUTURE DIRECTIONS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES



1.2.1 RENT CHOICE

The Rent Choice initiative consists of a suite of PRA products that support households to gain access to safe and affordable housing in the private rental market. It provides a time-limited, tapered private rental subsidy for up to three years and facilitates access to support, training and employment opportunities participants need to sustain independent housing, without the need for ongoing government assistance. Participants may also be eligible for Opportunity Pathways and the Youth Development Scholarships programs.

Rent Choice is the most substantial form of PRA available for eligible people at risk of homelessness in NSW. It complements other private market assistance products and services such as Tenancy Facilitation, Rent Start bond loans and Bond Extra. Rent Choice products are designed to provide options and incentives for households who are eligible for social housing (or who meet other needs-based eligibility criteria) to choose to resolve their housing needs in the private rental market.

There are currently five Rent Choice products targeted to specific cohorts: Start Safely, Youth, Assist, Transition and Veterans. These are delivered and supported as stand-alone products with their own policy framework and operating guidelines, including different eligibility criteria, income thresholds and product features (Table 1).

TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF RENT CHOICE PRODUCTS

Products	Target cohort	Availability
Start Safely	People who do not have a stable and secure place to live due to domestic and family violence (DFV). The product supports people who have already left or who need to leave an unsafe relationship by helping them to find a safe and affordable place to rent; paying a proportion of the rent for up to three years and assisting with education and employment options to support financial independence.	Statewide since 2019; Specialist Homelessness Service trial (September 2017 to June 2020) in St Vincent de Paul in South Western Sydney and Supported Accommodation and Homelessness Services Shoalhaven Illawarra Inc. in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven areas.
Youth	Young people aged 16–24 years who need to find a place to live (in a private rental unit, flat or home). The product supports young people to get approved for a lease, pay the rent for up to three years or stay in a current rental if it is affordable and they need help to pay the rent. Young people are also linked with a support worker to help them make and work towards study or job goals in order to become financially independent.	Statewide
Assist	Low-income households that have experienced a financial shock, such as loss of employment or illness, and need some assistance to either maintain their current tenancy or access affordable	A trial product offered in Blacktown, Campbelltown, Hurstville and Newcastle/Lake

Products	Target cohort	Availability
	accommodation in the private rental market. Households must agree to not be included on the NSW Housing Register or be willing to opt out.	Macquarie. Available to up to 200 households in the trial locations.
Veterans	Former members of the permanent Australian Defence Force. ¹⁰ The product supports eligible veterans and their families to find a rental property, get a lease or stay in their current accommodation, pay the rent for up to three years, and gain skills and work opportunities to support financial independence.	Statewide
Transition	Current social housing tenants who wish to obtain housing independence in the private rental market.	Western Sydney, South Western Sydney, Illawarra, Hunter and Murrumbidgee. From July 2019, eligible tenants from other areas are be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Each product is delivered and supported as a stand-alone product with its own policy framework and operating guidelines, including different eligibility criteria, income thresholds and product features.

All Rent Choice products incorporate the following core activities/components:

- recruiting eligible, motivated, and capable participants
- supporting participants to secure and maintain a private rental tenancy
- supporting participants to work towards achieving full housing independence, most likely through engagement in education, training, and employment – based on initial needs assessment and subsequent support planning and monitoring
- brokerage, subsidy, and tapering components.

TARGET GROUPS

Each Rent Choice product is targeted at specific cohorts. Eligibility for each product varies dependent on its target cohort but the products have some common eligibility requirements. To be eligible, applicants must be:

- a citizen or have permanent residency in NSW
- homeless or at risk of homelessness
- not own any assets/property that can be used to resolve their housing need
- have low to medium support needs.

¹⁰ Previously, the eligibility criteria required veterans to have been on active service during wartime and/or operational areas, including peacekeeping operations, after 1 August 1990.

Specific eligibility criteria for the different Rent Choice products include:

Rent Choice Start Safely

- escaping domestic or family violence
- express a commitment to sustaining a tenancy while receiving Rent Choice and to sustaining their independence after Rent Choice ends
- commit to engaging with the review process and working towards meeting support plan goals, and
- willing to receive and continue with support services where relevant.

Rent Choice Youth

- aged between 16 and 24 years of age
- able to live independently with appropriate support in place
- engaged with a support service that has been approved by the Partnership Facilitation Group (PFG),¹¹ and
- willing to engage in training, education, or employment during the period of the subsidy.

Rent Choice Assist (pilot)

- at least 18 years of age, and
- part of a household living in a private rental that has suffered a destabilising event.

For the purpose of the pilot, eligibility in the Sydney region is limited to those with low incomes.

Rent Choice Veterans

- at least 18 years of age, and
- a former member of the permanent Australian Defence Force – naval, military or air force.¹²

Rent Choice Transition (pilot)

- at least 18 years of age
- be a current social housing tenant
- be within the moderate household income limit
- be in stable employment
- demonstrate ability to sustain and afford a tenancy at the end of the subsidy period
- have a satisfactory tenancy history
- be willing to find a private rental within 3 months of approval for the program.

Not all Rent Choice products are delivered across the state and using different referral pathways (Table 2). For example, Rent Choice Youth, Veterans and Assist rely on partners (contracted service providers) to refer eligible people.

¹¹ The PFG is a group of youth-specific service providers in each relevant DCJ district, which meets regularly to coordinate the supports provided to young people receiving Rent Choice Youth.

¹² Previously, the eligibility criteria required veterans to have been on active service during wartime and/or operational areas, including peacekeeping operations, after 1 August 1990.

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF RENT CHOICE DELIVERY LOCATIONS, BY PRODUCT

Product	Delivery location
Rent Choice Start Safely	Statewide
Rent Choice Youth	Hunter New England and Central Coast: Armidale, Moree and Narrabri, Newcastle, Tamworth and Wyong Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains: Parramatta, Blacktown and Mount Druitt and Penrith Northern NSW and Mid North Coast: Coffs Harbour and Lismore South Eastern Sydney, Northern Sydney, and Sydney Districts: Inner City Inner West, North Sydney, St George, and Sutherland Shire South Western Sydney: Liverpool Illawarra Shoalhaven and Southern NSW: Goulburn/Yass, Queanbeyan/Eurobodalla, Wollongong Murrumbidgee, Far West and Western NSW: Albury, Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange, Wagga Wagga
Rent Choice Assist (pilot)	Hurstville, Blacktown, Campbelltown, Newcastle/Lake Macquarie
Rent Choice Veterans	Statewide
Rent Choice Transition (pilot)	Western Sydney, South Western Sydney, Illawarra, Hunter and Murrumbidgee. From July 2019, where eligible tenants from other areas express an interest, applicants will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Rent Choice recipients are expected to find an affordable property. This ensures they have the capacity to sustain the tenancy at the end of the subsidy period. To calculate what participants can afford, DCJ uses the combined total of 50% of the gross household weekly income plus 100% of the Commonwealth Rent Assistance that the client is eligible to receive. In certain cases, deeper subsidies are approved to make it feasible for a client to find an affordable property.

Clients who receive Rent Choice Youth, Veterans or Start Safely and are approved to receive a deeper subsidy are required to have an Independence Support Plan (ISP). This is a person-centred approach to providing wraparound services to support clients to build their capability to transition to housing independence. It aims to assist clients to develop realistic goals and to identify the support they will need to achieve them. Effective support planning is seen as critical for managing support service provision, and for broader training and employment opportunities. An ISP is completed by both the client and either DCJ, community housing provider (in SHMT locations), or the client's support provider. If the client receives Rent Choice Youth, it needs to be endorsed by the Partner Facilitation Group.

Clients receiving a Rent Choice product are required to have their subsidy assistance tapered. Tapering of the client's rent will generally commence on the 12-month anniversary of the first subsidy payment. The subsidy amount should then be gradually reduced at six-monthly intervals based on a standard formula until the person is paying full market rent.

INTENDED OUTCOMES

The intended program outcomes align with the Outcomes Framework. The key intended outcomes are as follows.

1. **Home:** Rent Choice clients have capacity to independently secure and maintain private housing.
2. **Employment:** Rent Choice clients have improved employment status and reduced dependence on welfare-related income.
3. **Education:** Rent Choice clients have improved education levels.
4. **Health:** Rent Choice clients have improved personal wellbeing.

PROGRAM LOGIC

DCJ has developed a program logic (see Appendix 1) to describe how Future Directions and Rent Choice will achieve outcomes in alignment with the Outcomes Framework (Figure 5). The logic is underpinned by the theory that independence is achieved through greater economic participation; by accessing education, training and employment opportunities.

The logic describes several key mechanisms.

- Selection of suitably motivated and capable clients will increase the likelihood of successful engagement, outputs, and outcomes.
- One-on-one access to a support worker fosters a trusting relationship between client and support worker and increases the likelihood of clients remaining engaged in the program.
- Clients receive targeted and relevant supports to improve their identified needs, which optimise their likelihood of achieving housing independence.
- The targeted support and financial assistance reduce barriers to training/workforce participation, which improves the likelihood of clients achieving housing independence.
- Providing housing support to clients assists them to access suitable housing to transition to housing independence.

1.2.2 OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS

Opportunity Pathways is a support program to assist social housing tenants and their household members, approved social housing applicants and Rent Choice subsidy recipients who aspire to and have capacity to, with the appropriate support, find or increase their employment. It assists people to overcome barriers to education and employment; increase their economic participation through gaining, increasing or retaining employment; and to facilitate participants to make positive exits from social housing and/or achieve their housing independence goals.

There are six principles underpinning the program.

1. **Voluntary:** It is not mandatory and is aimed at individuals who demonstrate a willingness to participate and who are motivated to improve their economic situation through education and employment.
2. **Person-centred:** Case plans and holistic services are built around the aspirations, needs and personal circumstances of each participant.
3. **Strengths-based:** The program adopts an open approach, focusing on a person's skills, strengths and capabilities.
4. **Flexible:** Support addresses a range of personal goals and individual barriers to education and employment, scaling up or down as a participant's situation changes.
5. **Long-term:** It is focused on developing career paths and upskilling to achieve each participant's longer-term employment and housing aspirations, as well as helping clients secure a job in the short-term.
6. **Localised:** Support services are delivered in partnership with local service providers and employers, connecting people to local work opportunities.

In line with the NSW Government's Commissioning and Contestability Policy,¹³ implementation and operation of the Opportunity Pathways program was the responsibility of eight contracted service providers across the 15 DCJ districts (Figure 3). It was the providers' responsibility to design a service that would deliver the contracted performance targets.

Alongside Opportunity Pathways, a separate trial in two locations directly linked ongoing renewal of public housing leases to meeting education and employment requirements established with the tenant at the start of the program. For 20 properties, the lease term was limited (six months for a maximum of three years) and renewal was conditional on ongoing program participation. This was designed to test how public housing could be used to build tenants' capacity to transition into the private rental market.

FIGURE 3. OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PROVIDERS AND SITES, BY DCJ DISTRICT

Service provider	Service delivery district	Sites	DCJ District groups
BEST Employment	New England	Tamworth, Inverell. Outreach to Gunnedah, Quirindi, Narrabri, Wee Waa, Moree, Armidale, Glen Innes, Tenterfield	Mid North Coast, Northern NSW and New England Districts
Social Futures	Northern NSW	Tweed Heads, Lismore. Possible outreach to Clarence Valley	
Wesley Mission	Mid North Coast	Taree, Port Macquarie, Bowraville, Coffs Harbour, Kempsey	

¹³ NSW Treasury. (2016). NSW Government Commissioning and Contestability Policy: Policy and Guidelines Paper, TPP 16-05, www.treasury.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf/TPP16-05_NSW_Government_Commissioning_and_Contestability_Policy_-pdf.pdf.

Service provider	Service delivery district	Sites	DCJ District groups
	Hunter Central Coast	Dungog, Cessnock, Muswellbrook, Westlakes, Newcastle West, Charlestown, Raymond Terrace, Blue Haven, Gosford, Tuggerah, Woy Woy, Wyoming, Wyong	Hunter and Central Coast Districts
	Illawarra Shoalhaven	Wollongong (including Towradji trial site location), Shellharbour, Nowra, Ulladulla	Illawarra Shoalhaven and Southern NSW Districts
Mission Australia	Southern NSW	Goulburn, Queanbeyan, Batemans Bay, Moruya	
	Murrumbidgee	Wagga Wagga, Albury, Griffith	Murrumbidgee, Far West and Western NSW Districts
Housing Plus	Western NSW	Dubbo, Bathurst, Orange. Outreach to Parkes, Central West, Cowra, Mudgee, Broken Hill	
	Far West		
MAX Solutions Pty Ltd	Sydney	Sydney, Burwood, Campsie, Lakemba (servicing trial site location in Punchbowl), Marrickville, Rockdale, Sutherland, Maroubra	South Eastern Sydney, Northern Sydney and Sydney Districts
	South Eastern Sydney	Chatswood, Brookvale, North Ryde	
	Northern Sydney		
Settlement Services International	Western Sydney	Parramatta, Mount Druitt, Auburn, Merrylands, Blacktown	Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains Districts
Evolve Housing	Nepean Blue Mountains	Penrith, Windsor, Katoomba. Outreach to Springwood and Lithgow	
	South Western Sydney	Campbelltown, Macquarie Fields, Fairfield, Bankstown, Liverpool	South Western Sydney District

TARGET GROUP

To be **eligible** for Opportunity Pathways, people must be:

1. 17 years or older and meet the school leaving requirements, as outlined by the NSW Government, and
2. living in public, community or Aboriginal housing, or
3. receiving a Rent Choice subsidy, or
4. an approved social housing applicant on the NSW Housing Register.

To be **suitable** to participate in the program, potential participants must demonstrate their willingness to participate (as the program is voluntary), display motivation and be able to commit to a mutually developed Training, Employment and Housing Plan (TEHP) to work towards their training, employment and/or housing independence goals.

INTENDED OUTCOMES

Opportunity Pathways is designed to help people receiving social housing assistance to access education, training and work with the goal of supporting those with the capacity to exit social housing or avoid the need for social housing. The intended program outcomes align with the Outcomes Framework (Figure 5). The key intended outcomes are as follows:

1. **Economic:** Participants achieve and are engaged in employment in a field or industry identified in an agreed TEHP.
2. **Education and skills:** Participants have improved skills through training or education and improved work readiness.
3. **Empowerment:** Participants improve their confidence and have increased self-esteem and hope for the future.
4. **Social and community:** Participants role model a working lifestyle to family and peers.
5. **Health:** Participants have improved physical and mental health and wellbeing.
6. **Home:** Participants achieve housing independence, where appropriate; that is, they exit social housing or avoid the need for social housing.

PROGRAM LOGIC

DCJ developed a program logic to describe how Opportunity Pathways (see Appendix 1) was expected to achieve outcomes in alignment with the Outcomes Framework (Figure 5). The logic is underpinned by the theory that independence is achieved through greater economic participation; by accessing education, training and employment opportunities.

1.2.3 YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS

The Youth Development Scholarships (formerly Scholarships and Mentoring) program (2017–2023) is offered to eligible young people across NSW and provides a scholarship of \$1,000 to be used for educational and support related expenses.

It draws together elements of previous programs, including the Youth Scholarships program (2007–2016) and the Grants for Graduation and Tools for Success demonstration programs (2014–2015). Building on lessons learnt from these programs, it now provides more scholarships, which are available to younger students over a sustained period. It also has a simpler application process and an objective assessment process to ensure equity.

The purpose of the scholarships is to support vulnerable young people to be able to stay at school and remain engaged in their education by enabling them to purchase relevant equipment or to pay to attend excursions. From a social housing perspective, the Youth Development Scholarships program is the only SII that proactively targets young people (as opposed to the family unit they are part of).

Given evidence from previous evaluations,¹⁴ which shows that scholarship funds are most effective when combined with mentoring and other supports, DCJ trialled an expansion of the Scholarships program to include mentoring for a small cohort of students.

The **Mentoring program** began as a trial in 2017–2018 at James Fallon High School and Murray High School in Albury, with a cohort of 30 students. In addition to the scholarship, eligible and successful students in Years 10 to 12 received 30 hours of one-to-one mentoring over 30 weeks, with a mentor from the local community. A formative evaluation found that all 12 mentoring students for whom the evaluation had data self-reported that their wellbeing had improved as a result of participating in mentoring.¹⁵ The evaluation also reported that a considerable number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who participated in the program were likely to, at the very least, improve their job readiness by completing Year 12. The program was extended in 2018–2019, with 15 more students becoming involved at each school.

In 2019–2020, the DCJ began piloting the Universal Screening and Supports (USS) program in Albury. The Mentoring program was integrated into the USS program, and the mentoring component of Scholarships ended in 2018–2019.

TARGET GROUP

Eligible students are those living in social housing or on the Housing Register. Students are eligible to apply in Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12 (or when doing a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship, or VET program). The program is committed to achieving continuity of support for students; those students who receive a scholarship can reapply for an additional scholarship every year for up to seven years (for those who received a scholarship in 2017).

The eligibility criteria are summarised in Table 3.

TABLE 3. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS PROGRAM

Criterion	Details	Verification
Living arrangement	One of: Living in social housing (public, Aboriginal or community) in NSW or on the NSW Housing Register, receiving NSW PRA or in crisis/support accommodation	Search of DCJ internal records, Public and Community Housing databases or verification with Aboriginal or community housing providers

¹⁴ The Miller Group. (2019). Evaluation of FACS' Scholarship and Pilot Mentoring Program for Students Living in Social Housing.

¹⁵ Ibid

Criterion	Details	Verification
	Living in transitional, crisis or supported accommodation	Verified with the accommodation provider. Applicant must register on NSW Housing Register and be referred to a Specialist Homelessness Service or Homelessness Youth Assist Program
	Living in out-of-home care	A copy of the Children's Court Care Order, Confirmation of Placement Letter or letter from DCJ/Out of Home Care designated agency
Citizenship	An Australian citizen or permanent resident	
Education	Year 10, 11 or 12 students (school or HSC equivalent at TAFE), those completing a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship, or school students doing a VET subject at an NSW institution, or home school applicants	Acceptance to Study Letter or Confirmation of Enrolment letter (returning tertiary students only) Certificate of Home Schooling Registration (home schooled students only)
Age	There is no age limit. It is open to young people and mature aged students.	

There are additional selection criteria, which are weighted to ensure selection of candidates who have the strongest desire to complete high school, despite the disadvantage they face. The selection criteria also prioritises students in disadvantaged schools and/or in disadvantaged areas of the state.

As part of the application assessment, students are first matched against the eligibility criteria and then the selection criteria. Even students who meet both the eligibility and selection criteria may not necessarily receive a scholarship; there are more applicants than scholarships available. The highest priority cohorts include young people who identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, who have a disability, who are refugees, who live in out-of-home care or are exposed to DFV, or who have previously been in custody. Other, but lower, priority is given to applicants studying via distance education, from non-English speaking backgrounds, single or young parents or carers, applicants living in overcrowded conditions, those experiencing ongoing physical or mental health problems, those who have regularly moved schools, or applicants who have experienced a traumatic event (for example, a death in the family).

1.2.4 PLACE PLANS

The Place Plans program (Place Plans) was an evidence-based, place-based approach designed to work in partnership with social housing communities experiencing significant levels of disadvantage to develop and implement place-building activities and initiatives in those communities. Place Plans aimed to build opportunities, strengthen communities and improve client outcomes and standard of living, helping to break down disadvantage in social housing areas.

The Place Plans were delivered by 16 project teams across 20 disadvantaged social housing areas in NSW between 2015 and 2018 and have now been concluded.

The Place Plans approach was developed to address disadvantage in housing estates where major asset redevelopment is not viable or prioritised. It was grounded in a strong evidence base and informed by practice wisdom. It emphasised the need for sustained and coordinated effort in partnership with residents, services, the private sector and government agencies to drive positive intergenerational change. Implementation and delivery were strongly focused on local feedback, learning and measuring impacts.

Place Plans sought to achieve outcomes that aligned with the Outcomes Framework (Figure 5).

- **Employment.** In all estates there was a need to address intergenerational unemployment and welfare dependency, as well as to overcome barriers to employment, such as racism, stigma, lack of transport and lack of access to training.
- **Education and engagement.** The program built life skills, education and training and provided opportunities for residents to contribute to their community.
- **Children and young people.** The program engaged children and young people in education and other activities, with a focus on increasing school attendance and building and facilitating aspirations. There was a need to support families, especially single parent families, to address issues that impact on children's school attendance, learning and development.
- **Aboriginal communities.** The program addressed Aboriginal people's experience of intergenerational disadvantage, trauma and racism, which underpins other outcomes – for example, child wellbeing, education attainment and employment participation.¹⁶
- **Safety and cohesion.** The program addressed the high crime rates and community factors that made residents and workers delivering services from the estate feel unsafe – this reduced the level of services available on the estate and affected residents' physical health, mental health and employment prospects.
- **Physical environment.** The program improved the physical condition of the estates and homes, including reducing vandalism and arson. It engaged councils to address the amenity of the environment and to build and maintain infrastructure such as street lighting.

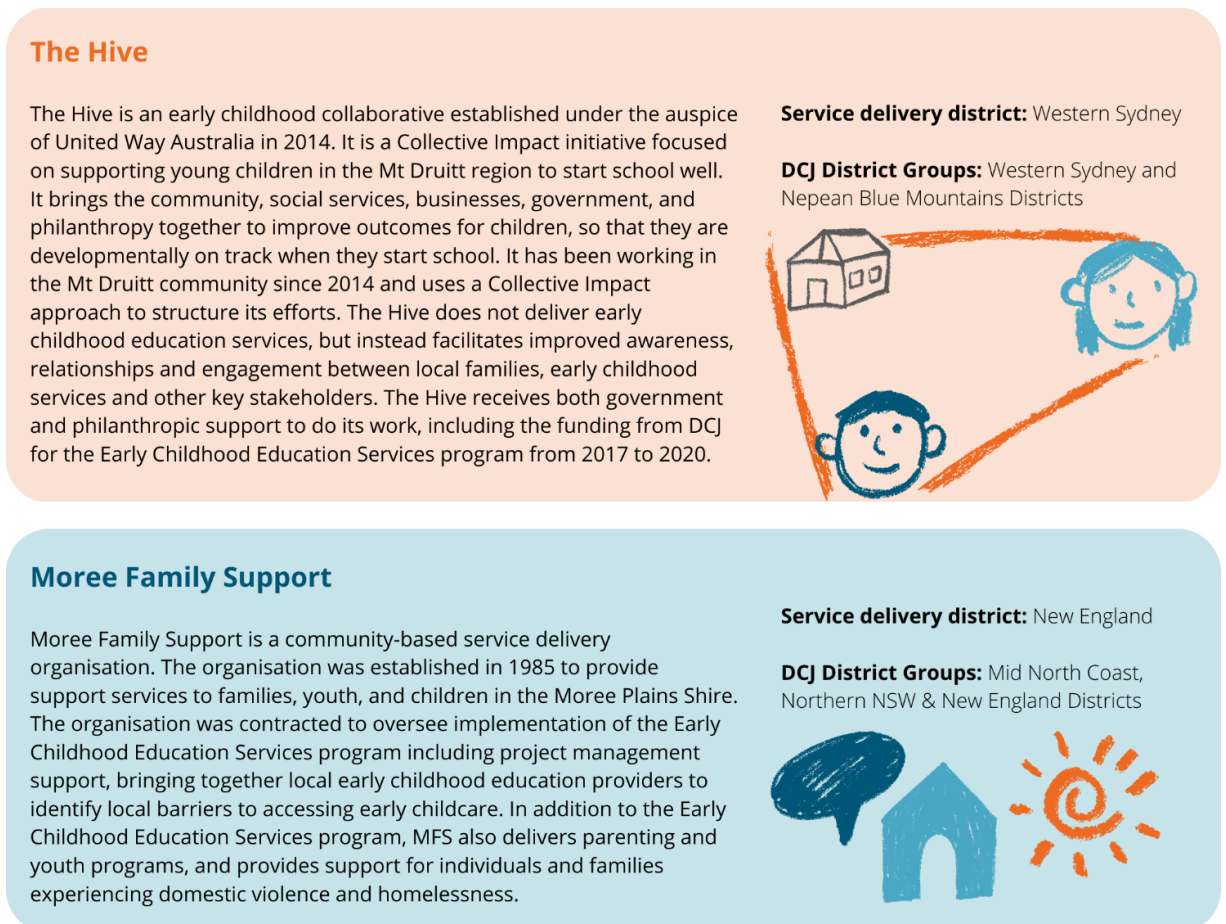
1.2.5 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SERVICES

DCJ funded the Early Childhood Education Services program in two districts: Western Sydney (Mt Druitt) and New England (Moree). The program was not extended beyond its original funding allocation (2020–2021) and has now concluded.

DCJ engaged two providers to implement the Early Childhood Education Services program in the two districts. Key characteristics of the two providers, The Hive (Mt Druitt) and Moree Family Support (Moree), are outlined in Figure 4.

¹⁶ The Place Plans Aboriginal Impact Statement says 'Aboriginal people will directly see new assets being built, by being engaged in local program consultative groups where they will hear about where the agreed strategies are up to and will experience training, working, and other improvements as they are realised.'

FIGURE 4. OVERVIEW OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SERVICES PROGRAM IN MT DRUITT AND MOREE



A core component of the program was extensive community engagement with the targeted populations and communities. Through engagement, the providers could identify families' barriers to participating in early childhood services within the context of the communities' needs, and appropriately adapt the program's response. A key part of the response was offering tailored training and support to local support services, with the longer-term aim of strengthening local skills and capacity.

The program brought together a range of stakeholders including the NSW Government, Aboriginal services, and non-government and private organisations who provide early childhood education, or who have substantial contact with families in social housing.

The Early Childhood Education Services program supported statewide initiatives including the NSW Department of Education *Start Strong* initiative (a \$115 million investment in early childhood education aimed at supporting disadvantaged children to achieve 600 hours of preschool or long day care before starting school) and the universal Preschool Funding Model.

TARGET GROUP

The Early Childhood Education Services program was targeted to both individuals and communities.

At an individual level, it was targeted to families living in public, community or Aboriginal housing with four- or five-year-old children.

To be eligible for the program, families needed to meet the following criteria. Families had to:

- have a child or children under five years of age (or not yet attending primary school), and
- be the lead tenant in a public housing property, or residing in a public housing property where a family member was the lead tenant, or
- be the lead tenant in a community housing property, or residing in a community housing property where a family member was the lead tenant, or
- be homeless or receiving transitional or crisis accommodation or receiving supported accommodation through a specialist homelessness service, or
- be receiving a DCJ PRA product (for example, private rental subsidy, bond loan or tenancy guarantee), or
- be on the NSW Housing Register.

The program did not set targets for individuals' access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) because it was not known how many children in the target group were already accessing early childhood education and care or at what level.

INTENDED OUTCOMES

The Early Childhood Education Services program aimed to engage children living in social housing in affordable, accessible and high-quality early childhood education and care, and to improve children's school readiness, especially in the year before primary school.

The program aimed to increase families' access to early childhood education and care, both through increasing the number of children enrolled and increasing participation (hours of attendance per week).

PROGRAM LOGIC

DCJ developed a program logic aligned with the Outcomes Framework (Figure 5) to describe how the Early Childhood Education Services program would achieve outcomes. It describes several key outcomes at both the individual and community level. These include:

- intensive engagement activities, including outreach activities designed to demonstrate the importance of families engaging with ECEC
- improving community understanding of the benefits of ECEC to increase collective willingness to overcome barriers to engagement with ECEC
- improving children's engagement in ECEC to improve their development and wellbeing outcomes

- educator and staff upskilling to enhance the quality of the available ECEC places
- financial support for families and services to increase the number of ECEC places and/or their affordability for families.

2. EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODS

2.1 EVALUATION DESIGN AND METHODS

The overall Service Improvement Initiatives (SII) evaluation was designed to use rigorous methods to generate evidence that supports decision making, service improvement and delivery. Specifically, the evaluation aimed to collect evidence to answer the following key evaluation questions.

1. Which SSIs work well, in which domains, for whom and under what circumstances?
2. What are the implications for the modification, targeting or redesign of each initiative to improve implementation and maximise outcomes?
3. What are the implications for *Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW* (Future Directions) in housing and homelessness policy and programs to improve outcomes and increase housing independence?

The overall evaluation addresses key questions across the implementation, outcomes, and economic evaluation components (Table 4). These questions have been operationalised as more specific questions for each of the evaluations (see Appendix 2).

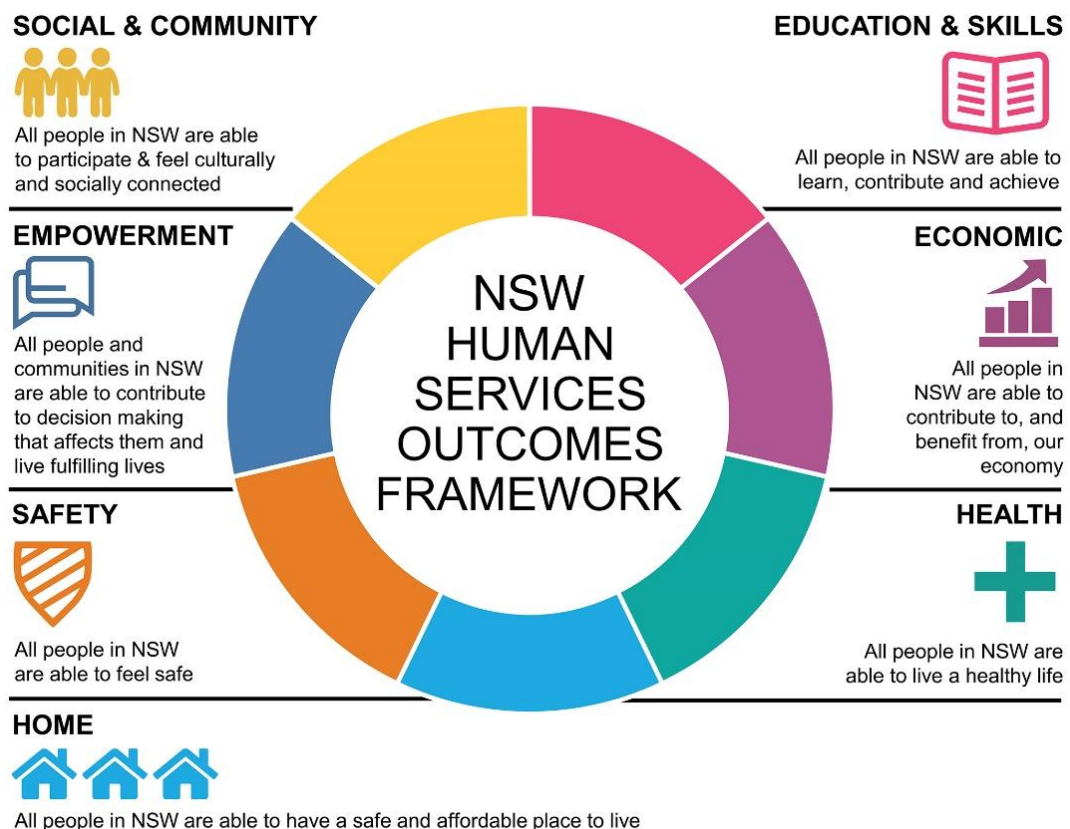
TABLE 4. KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR THE OVERALL EVALUATION OF THE FUTURE DIRECTIONS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

Evaluation component	Key evaluation questions
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well were the programs and initiatives implemented? • Did the programs and initiatives reach their intended target populations? • Did social housing clients find the programs and initiatives they received acceptable and suited to their needs? • What were the barriers and facilitators to implementation? • How well are staff/organisations working together to achieve client outcomes? • What is working well? What is not working well? For whom? • Was the procurement strategy appropriate? • What is the impact of the provider on the success of a program or initiative?
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of the overarching Future Directions strategy for clients across the seven outcome domains identified in the Outcomes Framework? • What is the impact of individual Future Directions programs and initiatives for clients across the seven outcome domains identified in the Outcomes Framework? • What is the impact of Future Directions for the communities in which the programs and initiatives are operating? • How can outcomes be better achieved? What were the limitations to achieving the outcomes?

Evaluation component	Key evaluation questions
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have been the costs and benefits of assisting clients with each initiative in terms of cost to government and broader economic outcomes? • What is the likely cost effectiveness in terms of key housing related outcomes of delivering an initiative to those who most stand to benefit? • Were Future Directions objectives achieved?

The evaluation design was informed by both the Future Directions Evaluation Framework and the NSW Government Program Evaluation Guidelines. It contributed evidence against the seven domains of the Outcomes Framework (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

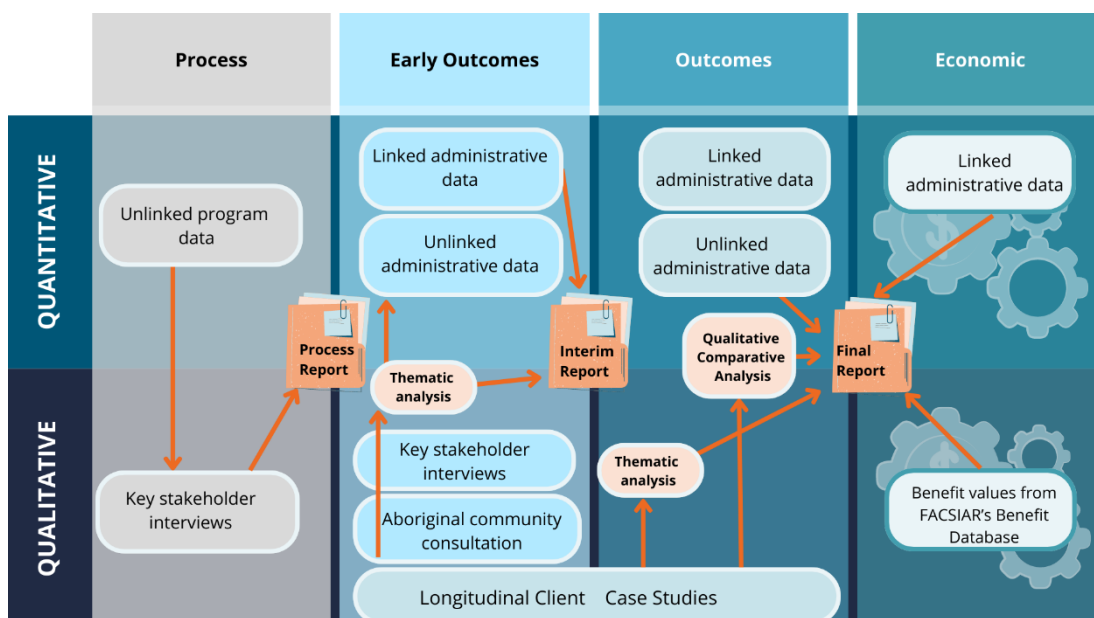


Each individual evaluation drew on a range of tools and instruments relevant to the specific outcomes of the initiative. This was to ensure program stakeholders had sufficient evidence to inform decision making about program design, delivery and improvement.

In summary, the methods fell into one of the following five broad categories (Figure 6).

- **Qualitative methods** included key stakeholder interviews and focus groups with program staff. They focused on identifying issues for program implementation and developing hypotheses about 'what works' for particular client cohorts.
- **Quantitative** methods took a longitudinal perspective, measuring outcomes and testing hypotheses in program and administrative datasets, both linked and unlinked, using a quasi-experimental design where possible.
- **Systems** evaluation focused on the strength of partnerships between contracted service providers, DCJ and the community and the extent to which their collaboration was associated with outcomes for program participants.
- **Consumer and community validation (confirmation or refutation)** involved a series of longitudinal client case studies with people who received Rent Choice or participated in Opportunity Pathways. It also involved consultation with Aboriginal communities to help inform and interpret evaluation findings.
- **Economic** evaluation comprising a Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) for Rent Choice, Opportunity Pathways and Youth Development Scholarships. This drew on the outcomes and costs identified from the linked administrative dataset and on benefit values from the Benefit Database of Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research (FACSIAR). A detailed explanation of how costs and benefits were identified, estimated, and valued is set out in the Appendices (Volume 2).

FIGURE 6. SUMMARY OF EVALUATION METHODS, BY EVALUATION STAGE



2.1 LIMITATIONS

The administrative data were found to be of reasonable quality and suitable for the analysis performed, despite some errors within individual datasets that limited linkages. This was particularly the case for errors in names and birthdates. This reduces the average rate of reported service use. If service use rates are different for records not linked, there can be some small to moderate bias in results. In this evaluation reduced linkage rates for Aboriginal people and Opportunity Pathways by providers with relatively low data quality may be leading to some biases in the results.

Not all hypotheses about what works for whom were directly testable using the quantitative data due to modest sample sizes, the time frames involved and the use of proxy measures. The presence of selection bias is an inherent part of the program. Selection is based on a judgement of not only eligibility, but of 'suitability' – in many respects the evaluation is testing the validity of these judgements.

We also note that some caution is required in interpreting the necessary and sufficient conditions for one or more outcomes of interest used for the Qualitative Comparative Analysis. While they were based on expert judgement, they did not involve the application of clinical scales. The identification of conditions of 'trauma' and 'current safety' in particular cannot be considered to have the same reliability as those derived from using clinical scales or validated tools.¹⁷ This is discussed in greater detail in the Appendices (Volume 2).

Despite these limitations (described in more detail throughout the report), we have triangulated evidence across data sources and methods, and this has provided consistent results. We are confident the findings provide a sound evidence base for decision making.

2.1.1. THE EVALUATION DESIGN REFLECTING THE NATURE OF THE INTERVENTION

The evaluation as a whole was focused on the value of the SII and the way they are delivered. Neither Rent Choice nor Opportunity Pathways or any other SII is provided on a random or even quasi-random basis. These programs are not intended to be applied without a large amount of subjective decision making about suitability. These programs are provided on the expectation that they will work for participants for whom they are deemed suitable, and not all factors that are considered when determining suitability are captured. This means our analysis has been able to test the quality of this decision making by DCJ and other program staff, rather than the causal power of the programs per se.

We reason that this is not a limitation for the evaluation and is entirely appropriate on both pragmatic and realist grounds. While this reality limits the ability to test the causal power of these programs using a scientific method, we do not feel this is a hurdle to high-quality evaluation. On pragmatic grounds it is a feature of the Australian social policy landscape that programs are generally intended to be provided to people based on an understanding of

¹⁷ Crucial to the success of these cases studies was the engagement with the 19 randomly selected participants involved and the exceptionally experienced interviewers who conducted the case studies over two years. The relationships that were developed during these interviews allowed for a large amount of background information to surface.

their specific circumstances and needs, rather than an expectation that a program will 'work' in some general sense. Providers know that the same program activity will work for some people and not others. A realist explanation is that it is understood that programs do not change people: what they do is provide opportunities for people to think and behave differently.¹⁸ Whether people take these opportunities is as much about the person and their context as it is about the value of the activities within the program itself. This means that testing causal hypotheses about the mode of delivery of programs such as Rent Choice or Opportunity Pathways is challenging. We did not expect that programs would 'work' or 'not work' and we understood that these programs are not provided in an indifferent or random manner by DCJ staff, but after due consideration of their perceived appropriateness for each applicant. The question is, were these perceptions and prescriptions accurate? Developing a better understanding of how decisions about suitability are made is important to drive consistency and better targeting.

The quantitative analysis was able to test the value of these decisions to provide support. We spoke to staff about how they provide these programs and on what basis, and through case studies sought to better understand the people who are the intended beneficiaries of this decision making. We reasoned that housing assistance is not just about the specific moment that a person receives support; it needs to consider their full context. We took a whole-of-life approach to try to understand the value of the SIIs in this manner.

The evaluation designs, methods and limitations specific to each SII are discussed in the Appendices (Volume 2).

2.2 GOVERNANCE

The evaluation was guided by three governance groups.

- The **Evaluation Management Team**, chaired by FACSIAR, includes representatives from Strategy Policy and Commissioning (Housing, Homelessness and Disability) and Programs. Meeting monthly, the group has provided updates on policy, program implementation and emerging issues.
- The **Data Working Group**, chaired by FACSIAR, includes representatives from both the Program and Strategy Evaluation consortium (Melbourne Institute, Centre for Evidence and Implementation, Monash University, and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) and the SSIs Evaluation consortium (ARTD and Taylor Fry). Meeting monthly, this group has responsibility for scoping the linked administrative dataset, including securing the relevant Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) clearances, and liaising with data custodians and linkage providers – the Centre for Health Record Linkage (CHeReL) and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).
- The **Aboriginal Reference Group**, chaired by ARTD (Simon Jordan), was convened to support us to implement an evaluation that respectfully gives voice to Aboriginal self-

¹⁸ That is, the causal power that lies within interventions is comprised of abstract or hidden mechanisms that may or not be 'fired' by program activities for certain people in certain contexts – because of the way different people receive and interpret the supports on offer, the same program activities may or may not change the way people think and behave. This limits our ability to test the causal power of interventions given that on a realist understanding, it is the interpretations that have causal power and not the activities themselves.

determination and empowerment, and builds culturally appropriate processes, agreements and ways of doing business across the community engagement fieldwork, analysis and reporting phases of the evaluation. A full list of members is provided in the Appendices (Volume 2).

2.3 ETHICS

We made an application to the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AHMRC) HREC for the components of our evaluation that involved consultation with communities and stakeholders. Our application was approved in March 2020 (Approval Reference 1607/19). DCJ also made separate applications to the AHMRC HREC, the NSW Population and Health Services Research Ethics Committee, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Ethics Committee and the NSW Corrective Services Ethics Committee for the quantitative analysis of the linked administrative dataset. These were all approved by September 2020, facilitating the linkage process, which was completed by CHeReL and the AIHW.

2.4 THIS REPORT

This document is the final findings report for the Future Directions SII evaluation. It explores the extent to which people who participated in, received or were exposed to the SII are achieving outcomes in line with the initiative's intended outcomes. It also answers the key economic evaluation questions.

It builds on our baseline evaluation report (January 2020), our interim outcomes reports (June 2021) and a substantive body of evaluation work completed by DCJ.

In compiling this report, we did not seek to evaluate DCJ's response to COVID-19 for people in contact with the homelessness or social housing sectors, but we have noted where implementation was affected by the pandemic and where elements of coronavirus-adapted service models may be worthwhile additions to usual practice.

3. CASE STUDIES

This chapter summarises the experiences of 19 Rent Choice recipients and Opportunity Pathways participants, as reflected to us over a period of 19 months from September 2020 to April 2022.

We took a stratified random sampling approach to select potential participants, and the resulting sample broadly reflects the profile of Rent Choice and Opportunity Pathways participants.

The potential participants were approached by Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research, rather than by their case worker, to ensure their participation was not revealed and to manage any service bias that may occur as result of their involvement.

Most (84%, 16 people) of the clients we spoke to were women, and more than half (63%, 12 people) were 25 years of age or younger. One-third (32%, six people) identified as Aboriginal and almost half (47%, nine people) had post-secondary qualifications. All but one participant was receiving Rent Choice. Eight participants received Rent Choice Youth, while 10 received Rent Choice Start Safely. Five of the participants who received Rent Choice Youth also received Opportunity Pathways, as did four of the participants receiving Start Safely.

We have written detailed, de-identified case stories for each of the people we spoke to, which provide the life contexts with which the Service Improvement Initiatives and mechanisms were interacting. These are included at the end of this chapter. Direct quotes or aspects of the cases are also included in the chapters specific to Rent Choice (Chapter 4) and Opportunity Pathways (Chapter 5).

The stories reflect a range of key themes, which are discussed in detail in this chapter:

- a likely experience of trauma (not clinically diagnosed) that manifests in a complex and unpredictable need for housing assistance
- resilience and hope for the future counterposed with structural disincentives for self-improvement and destabilising life events
- the value of relationship-driven support tailored to individual circumstances.

3.1 A COMMON HISTORY OF TRAUMA

Common across the case studies was a history of trauma. Trauma is the resulting physical and emotional reactions to a traumatic (often life threatening) event, which can have lasting psychological, behavioural, cognitive and physical affects.¹⁹ Trauma can be the result of persistent fear, terror and feelings of helplessness – its causes may be physical, sexual, emotional or psychological abuse, exposure to domestic and family violence (DFV) or neglect.²⁰

¹⁹ Australian Psychological Society. (2022). Trauma, <https://psychology.org.au/for-the-public/psychology-topics/trauma>.

²⁰ Department of Communities and Justice. (2022). *Casework Practice: Understanding Trauma and Resistance*.

There are varying types of trauma.

Simple trauma: More likely to be the result of an event, such as witnessing a robbery or car accident, and more likely to meet the criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Usually experienced at a single period of time, for a limited duration.²¹

Complex (and chronic) trauma: Results from the experience of multiple traumatic events over time, including ongoing, repeated patterns of trauma such as physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and DFV.²² Its impact is likely to be longer-term.

Developmental trauma: A type of trauma that occurs in the context of a relationship, where the person responsible for providing safety and protection is the person causing harm. Children are one cohort that often experience developmental trauma. This type of trauma adversely affects brain development and its impacts can be seen in maladaptive behaviours, which can attract multiple diagnoses.²³

There are particular groups of people who are more likely to experience trauma, including those who experience homelessness, young people in out-of-home care or under youth justice supervision, refugees, people experiencing DFV, LGBTIQ+ people and people working in certain occupations like emergency services and armed forces.²⁴ Our longitudinal client cohort included people from many of these groups.

3.1.1 DFV

An experience of DFV was common to many of the longitudinal case study participants' stories. Of the nine participants receiving Start Safely, eight participants continue to experience DFV or the persistent symptoms of earlier DFV experiences. Safety remains the greatest concern expressed by some of these participants; for example, one participant needed to move from her private rental tenancy when the perpetrator discovered where she was living. Other Start Safely recipients were still engaged with the Federal Family Circuit Court of Australia or child protection system regarding custody arrangements.

3.1.2 REMOVAL OR DISCONNECTION FROM FAMILY, CULTURE OR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

More than half of the interviewees were raised in single parent households or experienced their parents' separation at some stage during their upbringing. Two participants lived with other family members (grandparents) for most of their childhood. One person reported growing up with a single father with schizophrenia. Four participants (21%) reported being kicked out of home due to fights with stepparents or other family members, and two participants (10%) said they moved out of their parents' home at 14 or 15 years of age. Only two participants (10%) had two parents consistently at home in a family-owned home

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). Mental Health Services in Australia: Stress and Trauma, www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/stress-and-trauma#Trauma%20and%20mental%20illness.

throughout their upbringing, whilst two other participants lived with both parents in other arrangements (for example, in public housing or with extended family members).

One-third (32%, six people) of the people we spoke to identified as Aboriginal. Of these, two in three (66%, four people) were participating in Opportunity Pathways. All Aboriginal participants reported experiencing a traumatic event, including the removal from or death of a parent. All six Aboriginal participants reported an experience of DFV, either as a child or as an adult.

Other experiences of trauma included one person being taken into the child protection system as a child. Two others had traumatic experiences leaving the Middle East to move to Australia, and one of these was in Afghanistan when the Taliban came into power.

3.1.3 EXPERIENCES OF PHYSICAL OR MENTAL ILL HEALTH

Trauma experienced either in childhood or in subsequent interpersonal relationships can impact a person's sense of safety and connection with other people and their ability to develop and maintain social relationships.²⁵ Complex, chronic and developmental forms of trauma can contribute to various forms of mental illness including psychosis, schizophrenia, eating disorders, personality disorders, depressive and anxiety disorders, alcohol and substance use disorders and self-harm and suicidal behaviours.²⁶

More than one-third (37%, seven people) of participants reported ongoing mental ill health, which they said stemmed from their experiences of DFV (25%, five people) or other traumas associated with being an immigrant in Australia (10%, two people).

Some participants (15%, three people) reported physical health issues that were related to their mental health, such as experiencing stress-related illnesses and depression and anxiety related to chronic fatigue. Another two participants (10%, two people) reported physical health issues directly related to their housing situations, such as mould inflaming their asthma or respiratory issues associated with living in a methamphetamine-contaminated property. Other physical health issues included difficulties in pregnancy for two participants, chronic pain from arthritis, as well as auto-immune issues.

3.2 ADEQUACY OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL SOCIAL SUPPORTS

Our longitudinal case study participants had varied, but defining experiences of formal and informal support, which were sometimes sufficient to overcome the barriers to success they faced.

²⁵ Cash, R., O'Donnell, M., Varker, T., Armstrong, R., Di Censo, L., Zanatta, P., Murnane, A., Brophy, L., & Phelps, A. (2014). *The Trauma and Homelessness Service Framework*. Report prepared by the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health in collaboration with Sacred Heart Mission, Mind Australia, Inner South Community Health and VincentCare Victoria, p. 22.

²⁶ Ibid.

3.2.1 CASE MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

A central element of many of human support services programs aimed at changing habitual behaviors is a strong, respectful relationship with a competent and caring professional.²⁷

For case study participants, formal support tended to be from a case manager or another form of service provision (for example, counsellors), and was a valued form of support for some participants. Over half of participants had at least one worker in a formal service provision role whose support they valued and some of these described having a number of support workers who collaborated to assist them.


Interviewees had experiences of both very high-quality case management support, and less effective support. Where case managers assisted them to connect with a range of services and other supports, this was highly valued.

3.2.2 INFORMAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

Family and friends were critical to the wellbeing of most interviewees. One participant was supported by a neighbour who assisted them to leave an abusive home situation and find a room in a refuge. Extended family had also provided important practical and emotional support to many of the project participants (57%, 11 people), ranging from regular phone calls to check on wellbeing and occasional childcare hours to providing interim or even long-term housing. In most cases, this support was reciprocated in kind by participants, for example by doing grocery shopping, cooking or housework. Some participants attributed improvements in mental health to improved family and workplace relationships, seeing a psychologist, new personal relationships and supporting their children.

Three people (16%) started new relationships during the project period, which provided great support and also helped some people be able to afford housing due to having multiple incomes.

Participation in work also provided a source of support for participants. Interviewees relayed a common experience of feeling supported by work colleagues (16%, three people).




"I get support from my partner ... my daughter loves playing with him. He has nice friends too – I have a good group of friends now ... one of them is a really good mechanic and does lots of work on my car for me."

²⁷ Knox, M., Esteban, E. E., Harnandex, E. A., Fleming, M. D., Safaeinilli, N., & Brewster, A. L. (2022). 'Defining case management success: A qualitative study of case manager perspectives from a large scale health and social needs support program', *BMJ Open Quality*, 11(2): e001807.

Work was a consistent source of positivity for seven participants, with two reporting that their work was very understanding with them and their children, and others reporting that the financial freedom or social relationships provided through participation in work were very helpful.

Of those who reported positive experiences with employment, four were in support work (aged care, disability support, assistant nurse) whilst the others were in retail or customer service roles.

Three of the six Aboriginal participants spoke about the support they received from their extended family networks. This support included a range of practical and emotional supports such as providing housing and childcare, access to vehicles and assistance with vehicle maintenance, assistance negotiating with real estate agents and help with finding and inspecting rental properties.



“Everyone who works at my work has some lived experience. We all get it, life happens. Our CEO emailed me the other day and was just checking in. It’s awesome.”

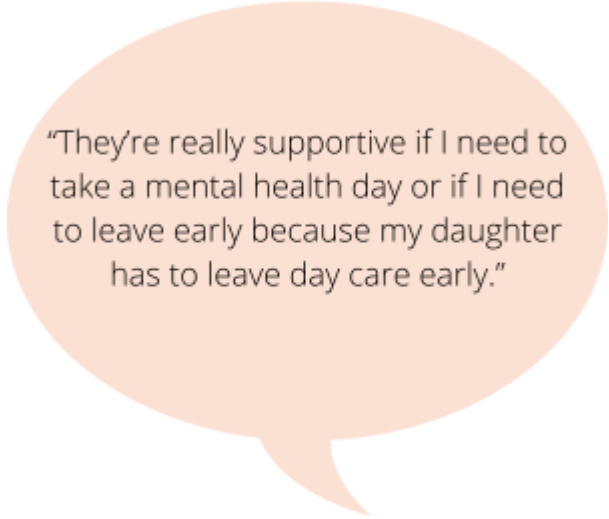
3.3 HOPE FOR THE FUTURE, BUT RESIGNATION TO DISADVANTAGE

Broadly, all the people we spoke to held hope for a stronger future and spoke about their plans to improve their life circumstances through a commitment to further education, training and employment. However, simply holding the desire for improvement appears not to be sufficient for people who receive Rent Choice or participate in Opportunity Pathways. There are a range of practical and structural impediments that each of these people needed to negotiate, within the context of the limited formal and informal support networks described above. Our case studies document lives that are otherwise heading in a positive direction being interrupted by unwanted intrusions (such as violent ex-partners) or recurring obstacles (such as securing a property).

3.3.1 CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

Participants with very young children found it particularly hard to combine their childcare responsibilities with job seeking, finding housing and accessing study. These participants were typically seeking work with sufficient flexibility to allow them to care for their children outside of either available childcare hours or school hours. Where work was able to accommodate parenting responsibilities, this was very highly valued.

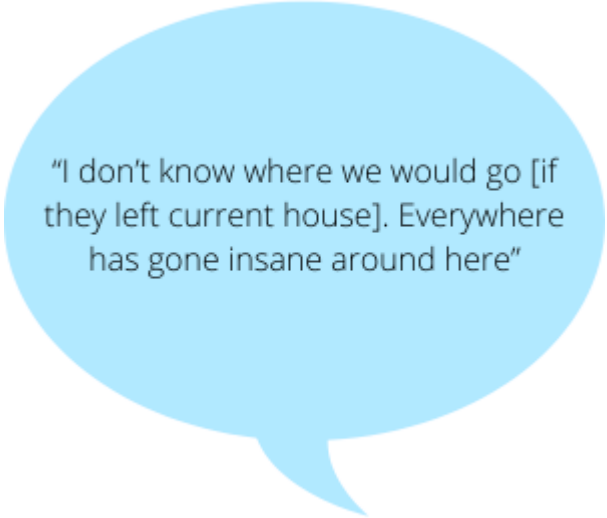
For some participants, being a parent meant being unable to work. For example, one participant reported that she was offered full-time work, but had to decline because she did not have childcare for her son. Other participants held similar concerns about being able to access childcare while they were studying, or concerns about the quality of care available for their children. This challenge was also experienced by participants whose children were of school age, especially where participants were concerned that their children had experienced trauma as a result of witnessing or experiencing DFV. This was exacerbated during COVID-19, where a few interviewees who were parents reported concerns about the risk of exposing children to the virus if they sent them to childcare.



"They're really supportive if I need to take a mental health day or if I need to leave early because my daughter has to leave day care early."

3.3.2 HOUSING AS AN ASPIRATION, BUT CONCERN ABOUT THE PRIVATE RENTAL MARKET

Almost half of the case study participants (42%, eight people) aspired to own their own homes, though many were resigned to this being an unlikely outcome for them. An equal number (42%, eight people) were keen to have their own private rental tenancy. Despite holding this aspiration, many of these people expressed concern about aspects of the private rental market, particularly the escalating costs of rent. This was particularly true for people living in more urban areas.



"I don't know where we would go [if they left current house]. Everywhere has gone insane around here"

Participants were aware of the competitiveness of the market, and particularly aware that in this market they would not present as a 'good prospect' to real estate agents or lessors. Other people were concerned that, even if they did secure a lease on an affordable property, a private rental tenancy would not offer them the long-term housing stability they sought. During the project period, one participant had to move because her rental was sold. When she moved house, it was into an inferior property because rental prices had increased between signing one lease and the next, because it was 'all I could afford'. This participant stated that whilst 'at least I'm not homeless', her new housing was 'not ideal'. Only one participant reported a positive situation where her rental was bought by an investor, and the investor had agreed to provide some security around a longer stay and to not increase the rent.


It was clear that some of the people we spoke to felt disempowered in the private market. Participants raised a range of concerns regarding the appropriateness and quality of their housing. There was a common reluctance to complain to real estate agents because of fear of being kicked out or not being offered a new lease if they complained. For example, one person said they did not want to 'rock the boat' by asking for a different lease, because the lessor 'could easily charge couple of hundred more'.

Common issues amongst participants renting in the private market included:

- **Housing size:** Four participants (21%) felt that their current home was too small; another two (11%) said they did not have a yard for kids or space to have a partner over.
- **Safety:** Three participants (16%) were concerned they were unsafe and had experienced nuisance and annoying behaviours from their neighbours, including criminal behaviours.
- **Health:** Four participants (21%) people reported severe issues with mould that had not been addressed and that caused themselves or family members to have health issues such as asthma. Others were concerned about leaks, asbestos and methamphetamine contamination from the activities of previous tenants. One participant reported that she has to wear 'flip flops' inside her home because she is afraid of stepping on 'sharps' in the carpet.

Some participants were concerned that renting in the private market was their only viable option for housing. Five participants (26%) were open to the idea of living in social housing; one of these participants said they that would prefer to be in public housing, due to the lower cost. However, these participants were also concerned that the wait time to be able to access this form of housing was too long to be viable.

The remaining participants (75%, 14 people) were reluctant to consider public housing, which they perceived as unsafe both in terms of housing quality and the assumed criminality of other residents. One participant stated that if she lived in public housing, she felt the area 'won't be safe or good'.



"There was a massive leak in the kitchen causing mould problems. My daughter and I are both asthmatic, so it was making us really sick. The agent said, 'we'll give you cheaper rent', but they only wanted to do band-aid repairs".

3.3.3 INCREASING INCOME, DECREASING HOUSING SECURITY

It was clear that a safe, secure and affordable home was important to all our participants, And, as described above, many participants understood the link between increasing their education, training and employment and housing stability. However, what people tended to

remember about Rent Choice and Opportunity Pathways was if their income increased too much, they would 'lose' what they had built, and be faced with great uncertainty again.

For example, one Aboriginal Rent Choice recipient had to move back in with their grandmother because their subsidy was 'cut off for earning too much' and her current rent became unaffordable. Another Rent Choice recipient told us that because she received the COVID-19 supplement, her income increased beyond the eligibility limits and her Rent Choice subsidy ceased.

3.3.4 LOST INCOME OR FEAR OF VIOLENCE DUE TO COVID-19

The time span of this project coincided with some unusual social circumstances including lockdown periods associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees told us that this had affected them in a range of ways. Four interviewees who worked in retail, hospitality or support work either lost their jobs or lost most of their shifts due to COVID-19. Interviewees who chose not to be vaccinated experienced substantial impacts because they were not able to be employed for an extended period.

There were other consequences of COVID-19 that had a notable impact for some interviewees. For example, one Rent Choice Start Safely client was concerned during lockdown because her ex-partner's contact with her children shifted from in-person supervised contact to an online video conferencing app. The participant felt unsafe, worried her ex-partner would be able to locate her and was re-traumatised by 'having him in her home'.

Another participant noted that COVID-19 led to disruptions in being assessed for program eligibility and increased the difficulty in communicating with their case worker.

Some interviewees, however, noted the pandemic had a minimal impact. Stay-at-home parents noted that their life was much the same during lockdown as it was normally, whereas others observed that their children were experiencing anxiety or sadness about missing school.

These reflections are time sensitive and may not affect future program delivery.

3.4 HOUSING INDEPENDENCE AND STABILITY ARE DIFFICULT TO PREDICT

The focus of the case studies was to understand how participation in Rent Choice and Opportunity Pathways, in combination with other factors, affected housing stability and housing independence. This was done using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the latter of which sought to understand the casual power of a range of theoretically important 'conditions' that could not be explored in administrative datasets. We used a method for this called 'Qualitative Comparative Analysis' or QCA²⁸ that was informed by a realist approach to

²⁸ Ragin, C. (2008). *Redesigning Social Inquiry: Fuzzy Sets and Beyond*. Chicago University Press, p. 114.

causality – that is, seeking to understand the mechanisms and contexts by which outcomes are generated (see Appendices, Volume 2, for details).

The analysis confirmed an initial hypothesis – that the complexity of factors that lead to housing independence and stable housing cannot be reduced to a small combination of plausible and neat factors that predict success. Each of these factors is themselves a major reduction – social support is not merely present or absent, but highly variable. Consistent casework is about having that support when it is needed, it is not necessary when it is not needed. The implication is there is no reason to think that housing support can be reduced to a formula for success – it is highly personal and requires individual supports. This is both disappointing and encouraging. It is disappointing, given the work taken to confirm that there are no simple answers to housing stability and independence. It is encouraging because it appears to confirm practitioner wisdom about the need for tailored supports and the difficulty of predicting destabilising life events or other factors that affect housing stability.

In technical terms, amongst the people participating in the case studies there were no clear necessary conditions or combination of conditions that was sufficient to achieve either of our two outcomes conditions. We coded, recoded, and reanalysed the dataset a number of times to see if we were missing something. Unfortunately, we could not escape the conclusion that the causes or otherwise of people maintaining housing stability or becoming independent of the need for housing support could not be reduced to any kind of pattern between these theoretically important variables. It is possible that our sample was too small to detect patterns and further analysis with a larger sample may yield reliable causal patterns.

Despite the lack of a necessary condition or causal package that was sufficient for success there was an interesting finding – ***virtually all the participants in the case studies appear to have experienced substantial life trauma***. That is, all but one of our case study participants appear to have experienced substantial trauma in their life as coded by the interviewers – with one case study participant appearing to have experienced trauma not revealed to the interviewer. This finding makes it technically impossible to assess the causal importance of trauma on outcomes in QCA or any other form of analysis. There was virtually no variation in this factor, so we could not assess its causal impact. Technically, we found that trauma was always present when the outcome was present (consistency = 1.0) – but it was also present when then outcome was not present (coverage = .37).

Although there are no clear patterns, it is relevant to consider the variables examined in the analysis in policy responses. The case studies present these lives in a degree of detail rarely seen in a social policy evaluation. The apparent trauma expressed in the case studies may be a deep root cause that, in the absence of protective factors, contributes to the need for housing assistance. Further, the impacts of housing assistance may be blunted if the assistance only treats the *symptoms* of housing instability rather than the deeper causes.

Housing policy for people in housing need is difficult in the same way that education policy for people from vulnerable backgrounds is difficult. Research shows that teaching quality is an important manipulable factor explaining one third (30%) of educational outcomes, but students' personal circumstances and family background explain almost two thirds (60%) of

their educational outcomes.²⁹ In this case, problems at home manifest as problems for departments of education, but the root causes are outside government agencies' control. This is similar for housing: problems in life manifest as problems in housing, but this does not mean that treating the symptoms of these problems, such as by providing a rental subsidy, will treat the root causes of the problems that lead to housing instability and the need for ongoing housing assistance and other social supports.

3.5 IN THEIR WORDS: CLIENTS' STORIES

CASE STUDY 1 – RACHAEL

Age: 35 to 39 years

Gender: Female

Education: Certificate III/IV

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Rent Choice Start Safely

Location: Northern Rivers, NSW

I spent most of my childhood on the Central Coast, but Mum and Dad's relationship was always pretty rocky and volatile. It was a roller coaster of a childhood. Dad would stay for a while and then take off again. My mum was really trying to do her best for us, but she had a lot of trauma from her childhood. She grew up in an orphanage, and she just couldn't ever trust anyone.

I was just starting high school when we moved to Far North Queensland, and it was pretty awful for me. School was tough. I never really made any friends. I met this much older guy when I was sixteen. Part of the attraction was that I felt like he was my ticket out of there. I yo-yoed between my partner in Sydney and my parents in Far North Queensland for a few years and we had a son together. He's 17 now and lives with his dad.

Now I'm living with my two younger sons – just us – in a new townhouse in Goonellabah. It's quiet here and Mum has a little place in same development. It's nice to have her close by and the boys and I get to see her quite a bit. I'd like to stay here and give them a stable home for as long as I can. They've seen a lot of trauma already in their lives, so I am doing my best to keep things calm and stable for them now.

Their dad was abusive and violent, and they witnessed some horrible things. The last time I ended up in hospital, there was a social worker there who connected me with lots of supports, including Rent Choice. I got a really good case worker who helped a lot in the early stages. They helped me with money for furniture and white goods as well as paying rent in advance and the bond. This was all really important because I left my ex-partner with nothing but a few clothes and PTSD.

The Rent Choice meant my rent was \$220 a week instead of \$330. It made a big difference to me while it lasted. I was working some shifts in an aged care home, but I could only work while the boys were at school. The school they're at doesn't have an afterschool care. The school closer to us does have afterschool care, but it's a big school, and rough, and my boys have had too much trauma already. My youngest is still seeing a counsellor pretty regularly. It has taken

²⁹ Hattie, J. A. C. (2003, October). 'Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?', Paper presented at the Building teacher quality: What does the research tell us? ACER Research Conference, Melbourne, Australia, http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2003/4/.

the last couple of years to feel like my children and I are finally safe from their dad. Being in lockdown through COVID, it was really confronting having him doing facetime with the kids and knowing he could see inside our home.

Soon after we moved here, I started studying nursing and I was doing well and really enjoying it. I thought eventually I'd like to be a mental health nurse and make a decent income so maybe I could buy a house. But just the reality of how long the course was, especially studying part-time, and trying to figure out how I could juggle doing the pracs or doing shift work with my two young kids – I just couldn't keep doing it. I had a change of case workers with Rent Choice, and they just made me feel pressured and not secure, so I have worked hard to earn enough to get by without it. I'm doing disability support work now for a few private clients and the money is okay and the work is flexible. But I am disappointed that it just isn't viable for me to pursue further education.

Our home was being sold last year, and I was really worried we were going to have to try to find somewhere else to live, but the new owner is happy for us to stay here, which is a relief. The cost of housing of any kind – just trying to rent, let alone buy around here has really increased, and the situation since the floods is so much worse. There are a lot of people in hardship round here at the moment, and there are a lot of negative vibes around. Unfortunately, my body doesn't cope with a lot of trauma-affected people with their varied reactions. I am exhausted. I'm incredibly sad deep down if I'm honest.

But I am grateful. We didn't get flooded. We have a roof. We have food. I can maintain a small garden with pride and go to the beach and outings close by. I hope I can always have a roof and create little adventures to inspire my children to do the best they can and foster their talents and aspirations. I try do the same with the small circle of people in my orbit. I won't complain.

CASE STUDY 2 – CASSIE

Age: 20 to 24 years

Gender: Female

Education: Diploma

Background: Aboriginal

Program: Rent Choice Youth and Opportunity Pathways

Location: Northern Rivers, NSW

I grew up in the Northern Rivers, but I was here there and everywhere a lot of the time. Mum wasn't in the best relationship, so I'd go and stay with family and friends when it got bad with my mum. When I was 18, I really clashed with her partner and so she kicked me out. From there I went to a women's shelter. I fell pregnant with my daughter soon after. The shelter helped me to connect with a housing provider, who found me transitional housing. My partner and I moved there together, and I had my daughter while we were there. But the relationship got really bad, and I ended up leaving that place to him, because he wouldn't leave. I have lots of family around this area, so I went to live with my aunty for a bit before I found a bedsit at a caravan park for me and my daughter. I didn't like it there much and moved up to Queensland, because I thought maybe it would feel like a fresh start. But I was just in a shelter there and I hated it. I just stayed in my room.

My ex started calling me and I was so lonely, and he was 'whispering sweet nothings'. I really wanted to get out of the refuge, and desperately wanted to have a family life, so I moved back with in with him. We ended up at a bad caravan park in the Northern Rivers. It was full of mould and there were lots of drug users around. I didn't feel safe there and again, I just locked

myself inside most of the time. We were there for five months. My ex used to go out and get drunk all day, every day and would come back and abuse me. One day he grabbed my daughter and then booted me in the face. I ran to my uncle who lived in a caravan park up the road. He called the police. Child protection came. I was really scared they were going to take my daughter from me, but they connected me with the housing provider again. They said the whole housing situation wasn't suitable and found me a transitional house in the Tweed.

When I was there, an old friend said he could get me a job at a fast-food shop. The housing provider said they could hook me up with housing close by if I could secure the job. I did, but all my social supports and networks were now further away, and I couldn't really have my daughter with me because I was working. My mum and grandma were caring for my daughter while I was trying to work, but I didn't really know what to do with myself without my daughter. I knew I wanted to change things. While I was there, I started applying for a private rental. That was around September 2019 and that's when I started with Rent Choice.

The place I got was good for about six months, but then there was a massive leak in the kitchen causing mould problems. I ended up having to get a doctor's certificate saying I needed to leave that place so I could break my lease. My uncle, who's a maintenance man, helped me find another place. That place was really great, and Rent Choice continued there. That's where I was living when I met my new partner. He and his friends are pretty nerdy – they're a good influence on me and my daughter. He moved in with me there, and it was a bit squishy, but it was good for a while.

Then my ex found out where we lived and started threatening us. I didn't like him knowing where we lived and feeling scared all the time, so we moved again. The place we're in now is not much bigger, but because both of us are working now, we can afford it ourselves, without Rent Choice.

I started with Opportunity Pathways through the housing provider. I built a good rapport with my case worker. He left and I was a bit nervous about changing workers; I just wanted to pull out of the whole thing. But I met with the new guy, Andrew, and he was magnificent. He really listened to me. I got to do a couple of really great workshops – like equine therapy. At first, I thought I wanted to do hospitality and cheffing and he took me round to lots of restaurants and he got me a couple of trial shifts. He got me all kitted up with all the cheffing gear. But after the trials, I just felt like it wasn't for me. Andrew was really good about it and didn't get mad at me or anything. We just tried something else.

He helped me line up a business administration traineeship at a NDIS support service. The job started out just two days a week, with the rest of the week for study towards a Certificate III. The employer, and everyone there is really lovely. They let me do my work hours to fit in while my daughter was at day care. They know about my anxiety and depression and have been really kind and understanding. Over the last year and half, I have gradually started working there more and more. I work there four days now and since my daughter has started school, they let me work school hours. They have been fantastic and have really helped me through my study. They were really flexible though COVID and the lockdowns too. They like me, so they've promised me a job there when the traineeship is finished.

Since the floods, I have been trying really hard to help out people who lost their homes, just with basic things, like making them meals. I feel really lucky that I have a home, and a job I like and a kind partner. I really like being able to help my friends and family.

CASE STUDY 3 – TARA

Age: 16 to 19 years

Gender: Female

Education: High school

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Rent Choice Youth and Opportunity Pathways

Location: Northern Rivers, NSW

I'm from a big family – the third of six kids. Mum and Dad home-schooled us all till I was in Year 9. Most of that time we were living out on a big property. We had fun playing football and soccer and riding on dirt bikes. It was a pretty good lifestyle.

When I went to school, a lot of people didn't like me. The group I finally found I could hang out with were the kids who didn't want to be at school. The work was pretty easy though. I was one of the best students in my year at History and I did Advanced English and Maths which I really loved. I also loved PE. I have always liked being active.

I wasn't getting along with mum when I was going to school. I dropped out after six weeks of Year 12. It was pretty tense between me and mum then, so I moved out and got a job. I worked at a fast-food shop and lived at a pub. That was a big lesson. Like honestly, I don't know whether I would ever want to do that again. There were a few paedophiles, a few crackheads, you know, the whole fiesta.

*I moved out of there and into a place with my boyfriend at the time, but that didn't work out very well. He couldn't get his s**t together and we kept getting kicked out of properties. He was always bringing me down; he was pretty abusive really. He really messed me up.*

I eventually got my own place without him, through Facebook. That worked out well and I was with housing then for a couple of years. I did Opportunity Pathways, and can I just say that was one of the best things I ever decided to do in my life. I went there every week or two and got heaps of support. They were going to help me do a course to get me my dream job of being a professional snow boarder, but instead I decided to do a TAFE course in sign language. I might probably still try to go back and finish that.

Since then, I bought a van and went travelling. I did a few different jobs cleaning hotel rooms and working in hospitality and was living in my van. It was mostly okay, and there was a bit of a community of people living in the dunes, but a few times I was a bit scared like when this creepy old dude woke me up in the night. Sometimes it was hard finding toilets and places to shower, but it meant I could save money. I used some of my savings, and I got some help from my Nan, who has always been good to me, to go down to the high country. A couple of friends and I got jobs cleaning at a hostel in the snow, but we all lost our jobs again once COVID restrictions came in. I had a Toyota Corolla then which I slept in. I was living my dream though because I was going snowboarding every day. I worked at a café at night and had like five blankets that I got from second hand shops that I slept under in my car. I don't have any regrets about doing that snow season. I really want to do it again if I can.

When the snow season ended, I came back up here, and I was seeing my Mum and my siblings a bit more and getting along better with everyone. I was trying to get work, but it was really hard because of all the restrictions. I'm not vaccinated, and for a while there no one could employ me because of that. My mum lost her job as a nurse because of that too. I was sleeping just on the street in a sleeping bag most of the time because I'd crashed my car. I went to Queensland for a while because my uncle offered to help me do a traineeship to work in security – I didn't end up doing that. It's kind of complicated.

Things at the moment aren't great. Mum's house got flooded, so she and my little sisters are staying with my older sister in a small apartment. I can visit them, but I can't really stay there. I am just staying at a hostel at the moment and I'm trying to find work so I can get a share house or something with friends. I've got court coming up in a few weeks because I got done for drink driving and my licence is suspended. Ever since then I haven't really been able to stop drinking, it's been a really bad habit for me, I guess. I've been very depressed and angry because I feel like I lost my freedom.

I would like to go to uni and maybe study law. I think I'd be good at it. But first I need my licence so I can get a job and a place. Right at the moment, I feel like I'm not really moving forward in life, and everything has come down and hit me really hard.

I'm really grateful for my Nan. I try to visit her pretty regularly. She and I take care of each other a bit, like we'll cook together and we're kind to each other. We need each other.

CASE STUDY 4 – MARINA

Age: 60 to 64 years

Gender: Female

Education: University degree

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Opportunity Pathways

Location: Northern Rivers, NSW

My parents migrated from Europe in the 50s. We lived on a farm in Victoria that was quite isolated. My mother had four kids and my father, and my brothers and I were doing heavy work around the farm from just about as soon as we could walk. Lifting bales of hay and carrying irrigation pipes. I don't know how we did it, but they just kept yelling at us until we did it. That's just my childhood. Both my parents could be quite abusive, but I just shrugged it off.

We all worked hard on the farm because we were told we had to go to uni. They called me Professor because I had a high IQ, but it was my brother who got put through uni. When I was still in high school, I applied and got into psychiatric nursing. I was the youngest person to qualify and very soon afterwards, I was second in charge of the ward. It was a big ask but I was just used to doing everything, having to be the responsible one. I was being paid less than minimum wage. I had to pass the IQ tests and everything to work there because I wasn't an adult, but I got paid as a child.

I moved out of home when I was 17 and a half. Soon after, my mother left my father and wanted to come and live with me even though I was in a share house with other young nurses. It was crazy. She has always been being conniving and treacherous. Dealing with my parents set me up well for working in psych nursing!

I moved up to northern NSW about eight years ago to try to help with some of my chronic health issues including arthritis. My kids were mostly grown, and they encouraged me to go so I could get well again. Most of my family is still in Victoria, though my son is living in NSW too. I talk to him regularly and he has come to visit me here a few times. He is probably my main support.

I have been living in community housing most of the time I've been here. I had a place for about three and half years, but it wasn't good. There were lots of drug users around and the house was making me sicker. It was not a suitable house at all for someone with my health issues.

I did Opportunity Pathways [OP] because I was applying for jobs but wasn't getting anywhere. The good thing about the Opportunity Pathways worker that I had, he got me into courses and things. I'm a mature and experienced professional – the OP worker was much better at helping me find courses and work than other employment services where they kept making suggestions for jobs that require me to be physically fit, but which don't make use of my skills and experience. I have experience as a psych nurse, in business development and in life coaching, but they'd find me jobs like packing shelves at the supermarket. But since COVID hit, everything has become more difficult. I had a falling out with the worker, and I haven't really had any support from them since.

I moved into my current place about two years ago. It has its problems too, like some neighbours who really don't know how to keep their business to themselves and yell at each other loudly right outside my window, and others who really panic about things like a snake – and they expect me to fix it!

I have started doing a bread run since I moved here. I volunteer to distribute leftover goods from the local bakery to the local homeless people as well as some of the elderly pensioners who live near me. I have seen some things that have made me very concerned for the people sleeping rough. People have been forced to move on, but they don't have anywhere to go. Because of my health issues, I find it takes me a few days after the bread run to recover, but I like doing work that helps vulnerable people.

CASE STUDY 5 – SELINA

Age: 25 to 29 years

Gender: Female

Education: High school

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Rent Choice Start Safely

Location: Northern Rivers, NSW

I grew up in public housing with my mum, my brother and sister. My dad died when I was two, so it was just mum taking care of us. I remember she did a lot of volunteering around op shops and places like that.

I never really liked school. I was bullied the whole time, about not having a dad and about all sorts of other things too. I ended up leaving in Year 10 to take a year off and tried to go back to complete Year 11 at another school, but I only made it six months. The teachers talked too fast, and I couldn't write everything down. I just felt so rushed and couldn't keep up.

When I was about 18, I started working at a fast-food shop, but it was really bad. I wasn't trained properly and was put straight onto the registers, so it was very stressful just not knowing where things were and stuff like that. I only stayed for a couple of months. It was while I was working there that I found out I was pregnant with my eldest daughter.

When I was 20, I had another daughter. When she was pretty little, I broke up with their dad and moved into the place I'm living now. It's a private rental. I was with a new partner, and I fell pregnant with my son. It was a bad relationship. There was DFV and I tried to move house to escape the violence. Eventually, after like three years, I ended up kicking him out of the house. I called the police and was able to get an AVO on the spot. My daughters, because of the DFV situation, had been taken away and my mother-in-law has been their guardian since then. My son lives with me though. I see my daughters every fortnight on a supervised visit. They've been growing up so fast, and I really wish they could be living with me.

I started to get Rent Choice around the same time I kicked my son's dad out of the house. Getting the Rent Choice was a relief. I was really struggling with money but at least I had somewhere to stay. I don't really like the area and the place is pretty small but it's all I can afford at the moment. Aside from the subsidy I also got some counselling, which helped me out. I still see them. I think I was on Rent Choice for a couple of years but then it stopped, which was very stressful. I would love to get a bigger house so I could spend more time with my daughters. I'm currently paying \$420 a fortnight but the bigger houses I've seen cost like \$350 to \$400 a week. That's too much for me living on just the parenting payment. I have reapplied for Rent Choice (Start Safely) and been approved but I'm having trouble finding a suitable place. You have to get accepted for a house by yourself. It's kind of difficult getting a place on just a parenting payment. I was on the lists for public and community housing but cancelled because I'd prefer to get private rental. But I don't know, since the floods, I think it's even harder to find a place.

I don't really get support from my own family – I don't really speak to them anymore. My ex (my daughter's dad) and his family have helped me out a fair bit over the years, but it's a bit hot and cold. Sometimes they're really supportive and other times, I feel like they really don't want to help me. I don't know where I stand with them.

Eventually I'd love to have a place at the coast – nice and big so my daughters could come with me. I have done casual admin work before, and I've been studying on and off to get a Certificate III in business. It's been hard to study while taking care of my son. The parenting payment is my only income now. I'd like to start a small business and I've done courses, so I know what I have to do to make it happen. I hope next year with my son starting preschool that I'll have the time to get my business started.

CASE STUDY 6 – SHANNAE

Age: 20 to 24 years

Gender: Female

Education: High school

Background: Aboriginal

Program: Rent Choice Start Safely

Location: Western NSW

I've always lived here, mostly with my Nan. I did live with Mum for a while in a housing house, but more with Nan and Pop. There was DFV happening with mum and her partner, so it was better with Nan. Sometimes some of my cousins lived with us too. Nan used to work, but she is on a disability pension now because she's almost blind. Pop still works like he always has.

I never liked going to school, and I missed a lot because I had bad anxiety and depression – like I even struggled to get out of bed. I stopped going a few weeks into Year 12. I got a job at a supermarket for a while, which was okay I guess, but then I got pregnant with my son, who is three now. His dad and I weren't really together. He doesn't live in the same town as us anymore, but he's good to his son. Sometimes his mum looks after our son for me, but she works full-time, so it's not very often. But if I really need something, she will help me out.

I got approved for Rent Choice a while ago. I don't know what happened with that really. They just never really gave me much support. I've been trying for nearly four years now to get a place for myself and my son, looking at places and putting in applications, but I've never been successful. It's been really hard to do with my son with me all the time and also, I haven't had a reliable car, so I have been dependent on my Pop or friends to give me a lift so I can get to

inspections. I don't know what happened with the service provider. I have friends who have had lots of support from them, but they never really followed up with me.

It's been a bit uncomfortable at Nan's for a while, especially since my Mum moved in. I mean, we manage to keep out of each other's way, but it does make me want my own place even more. I've already been here way longer than I had planned. I am applying with another provider, which has new clean townhouses in a good area. A couple of my friends have got places through them, and it seems really good.

I did have plans to join the police force and I had got into the Indigenous Police Recruitment Our Way Delivery Program, but I didn't have anyone to look after my boy for the one week in four when there were classes. I also tried doing a community services course at TAFE, but I also found that hard to do while I'm caring for my son. I did get him into childcare, but the first place – I didn't really trust them, and then I got him into an Aboriginal childcare place – the same one I went to as a kid – and I was happy about that. But then COVID lockdowns happened, and I've been a bit hesitant since then. Apart from that, COVID didn't change things too much for me. I mean I am mostly around home looking after my son anyway. And my son has lots of little cousins and friends around, so I'm not too worried about him. He gets lots of social interaction.

I was hoping that this year was going to be a chance for me to get into some study or work, but it seems like that wasn't to be. I found out that I'm pregnant again. At first, I was kind of shocked, but now I'm really excited about having another baby. I would really love to have my own place though. I'm not fussy if it is social housing or a private rental – just my own.

CASE STUDY 7 – PARKER

Age: 20 to 24 years

Gender: Female

Education: High school

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Rent Choice Youth

Location: Western Sydney

I have an Afghan background but lived in Iran until I came to Australia, illegally, with my mother and two brothers at age 12. It took us a year to get to Australia, through different countries and then by boat to Australia. We could have lost our lives on this journey.

In Iran, we lived in a house built by my father. My dad did not come with us and although the idea was that he would join us later, he never did. I remain close to my dad. The hardships in making it to Australia, together with the financial pressures, put a big strain on family relationships. About a month after arriving here, my older brother moved out of home and started renting. While I stayed with mum, we did not by then have a very good relationship and I also moved out of home about a year later, at age 15. My younger brother still lives at home. We originally lived on the North Shore after we arrived, but my mum has family in Western Sydney, so we moved there after a while. But there are a lot of tensions between the Iranian and Afghan communities and the cultural and religious tensions really affected our lives.

I always loved school (in Iran and here) because I was pretty smart, and it gave me friends and some freedom. Education is important in my family because it is seen as the key to a better life. But I had a couple of years out of education (a year to get here and a year to learn English) and when I came back in Year 10, I had lost interest and just wanted to get school finished. I did complete my Year 12, however.

I have been living in a studio in a high rise in Western Sydney for a few years now and I am reasonably happy with it. I received Rent Choice until early this year, and this was important in giving me the financial means and confidence to live independently. I was originally helped into Rent Choice by a housing service. This service was truly amazing, with really helpful, caring staff and I used to love going there. I was not happy with the government housing people I dealt with, who I felt judged me and talked to me disrespectfully. People in this program have real problems they are dealing with, and the staff should understand that and not make it harder for them.

I have been working in retail for a while now and became store manager in early 2021. I am happy with this work but in the longer run, I want to be in my own business. I have done some training courses and may consider university at some point. During COVID, I was out of work for a time (receiving JobKeeper) and since resuming work I have been working more hours and earning more income. As a result, I was told I could lose my Rent Choice payment, but I successfully argued against this, and I was able to keep it.

With a better job and more income, I want to move to a bigger unit with at least one bedroom that is closer to the city. During COVID lockdown, I felt quite isolated and unsupported. As a result, I have decided to concentrate on my work and career and have been reassessing and culling my friendships. For now, I am happy with that. I no longer communicate with my mum and older brother, but I am still in contact, without telling the family, with my younger brother. I am pretty happy with my life overall, right now.

CASE STUDY 8 – ADAM

Age: 20 to 24 years

Gender: Male

Education: Certificate III/IV

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Opportunity Pathways

Location: Western Sydney

I grew up in the family home where my mum, dad and five siblings still live. Dad was a forklift driver, but he lost his job because of COVID-19 and my stay-at-home mum went out to full-time work in aged care. Growing up, I suffered constant, significant abuse at school and at home and the abuse became worse once I came out as gay. I did not recognise the abuse at first, I just thought it was a form of discipline like everyone else has. At home, my siblings were given permission to hit me, and this became more aggressive over time. It got to the point where I was often locked out of the house and had to sleep in the street or a local park. This made doing schoolwork impossible. I was really stressed at school and used to cry a lot. I started to talk to the school counsellor and that helped, but essentially it was really hard for me to find a place where I could belong. The breakthrough for me happened because a neighbour, who was also a teacher, heard my screams from the abuse and tried to help me. She told me there were places I could go to get away from the abuse. She also reported one of the abusers to the police.

So, I finally moved out of home during Year 12 and went into an emergency shelter. Later I moved into transitional housing and in 2021, I was able to move to the inner city, still in transitional housing. I hope I will soon be able to get my own place with help from Rent Choice. I did finish Year 12 but my real interest, from about age 16, was in becoming a make-up artist. Make-up is the thing that keeps me going. I did a course in make-up after I left home and then, once I moved to the inner city, I undertook a Diploma in Screen and Media so that I can move into doing make-up for film and television.

During COVID, I could not find employment and lockdown was hard. I needed someone to give me a break, but I had no employment history, so it took a while to find a job. During this period, I tried to stay positive and maintain hope for the future. Eventually, I got a casual job at Sephora retailing cosmetics and make-up, and this has given me a good start in my field. I am also hoping to do some freelance work for weddings and such. I am now starting to look for a place of my own to rent and expect to get assistance from Rent Choice.

When I moved out of home into the youth shelter, I did get some support from the people who ran the shelter and from some of the other residents. I also have one cousin who has helped me. Since getting the casual job, I have developed a pretty close relationship with the people at work. Things are also better with my family now and I go out to see them now and again. Most importantly, I now have a close friend who I can talk to, and I still talk to some friends from high school. Although I have been on the Opportunity Pathways program, I have not heard much from them. I feel pretty confident about the future. I have been independent for a while now; I think I'm doing pretty well, and I now have a start in my career.

CASE STUDY 9 – KELLY

Age: 35 to 39 years

Gender: Female

Education: High school

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Rent Choice Start Safely

Location: Western Sydney

I grew up in a public housing estate in Western Sydney. It was a very rough area then with, for example, five drug dealers in just one street. I am the youngest of four kids and we all lived with our mum and dad until they split up when I was about 15. Growing up, mum was a stay-at-home mum and my dad had various businesses. For myself, I would never raise kids in an environment like that old estate – I feel like they would be doomed, set up for failure right from the start.

I was sexually assaulted when I was a child, and this has had a big impact on me. The perpetrator is now dead, but to this day, I have never talked about it to my family. At school, I fell in with the wrong crowd and started drinking and going out to clubs from age 12. I did not do sports and had no hobbies in my school years; 'going out' was what I did. Later, I was drinking very heavily. But I did stay and finished Year 12.

I started to turn my life around when I left home at 18. I started working then and have always worked ever since. I also stopped drinking a long time ago. Most of the crowd of people I hung out with at school are now drunks or druggies, but I feel like I have my gotten my life together. I think of myself as very independent and resourceful. Unfortunately, I married a man about five years ago and, when I was pregnant with our first child, I found myself living in a DFV relationship which continued for a number of years. My husband is from a cultural background where the women stay at home and 'weave mats'. But I am very different from that; I don't need a man to live my life and he found that hard. He also drank heavily. The DFV steadily became worse over time leading to an incident where I called the police and that resulted in him being arrested and having an AVO against him. Eventually, we separated but he continues to be in my and my children's lives, often causing trouble. After separation, my mental health was not good, and I was having trouble sleeping. I have also had other health problems including asthma, a collapsed lung and pneumonia. My health got so bad that I had to take time off work, which stretched to 15 months. I was a mess; I went downhill fast, and my anxiety was out of control.

I have a really good government job, which I really value, and my work has been really good and understanding about my situation. I have two kids under five and it is just really hard being a single parent and also working while dealing with my ex-husband and being in and out of court. I went back to work in early 2020, working two days a week and I have since increased that to three days. I applied for Rent Choice Start Safely after I heard about it through the counsellor at court and it has really helped me to get back on my feet. Without Rent Choice, I probably would have just gone back into the situation I was in before and continued to suffer DFV. It is also excellent that Rent Choice provides up to \$2,000 worth of goods to help you get resettled in a new home. The housing officer I deal with was good, supportive and helpful. She kept checking in with me and seeing how I was getting along.

But I am no longer getting Rent Choice because I was cut off for earning too much money, largely as a result of the COVID supplement. I was not happy about this, because it was meant to taper down, not just stop. During this time, I also received an additional childcare subsidy, which was critical. Rent Choice and the childcare subsidy were really important in helping me through this period.

I live in private rental in Western Sydney. I had to change my housing in late 2020 because the previous property had mould. My agent for the old place, who was quite helpful, helped me get the new place and I am pretty happy there. However, I am thinking, in the future, of moving to Queensland where my best friend lives. Or, if I can, relocating to the country and being able to buy a home. I'd like to return to full-time work sometime, but it depends on my mental health. I am not thinking about studying or training.

I am an independent person and do most stuff for myself. I don't get much family support – we are not a close family. I do see a psych regularly and that has been important. I did seek out help from local agencies in Western Sydney but with childcare and work I don't really have time to go looking for help. I mostly just work it out and do it for myself. My ex-husband continues to cause problems and to breach his AVOs. Recently he threatened to kill himself in front of the kids and I had to call the police. He is on a temporary visa, and it is likely that he will be deported soon. Life was hard during the COVID-19 lockdown with the kids, and my financial situation is very difficult. But my health has improved, and I feel like things are looking up for us.

CASE STUDY 10 – MELISSA

Age: 34 to 39 years

Gender: Female

Education: High school

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Rent Choice Start Safely and Opportunity Pathways

Location: Western Sydney

I grew up in Western Sydney, with mum and dad and two siblings. I was the oldest of the kids and we had a pretty loving and supportive upbringing. We did lots of things as a family and I really can't complain about my childhood. Our parents had stable employment as we grew up; dad was a firefighter and mum was a secretary. Primary school was okay for me, but it got a bit rough in high school. I was sexually assaulted by a family member at 16 and about the same time, my mum developed aggressive cancer. So, this was a difficult period for me. Knowing my mum was going to die was really hard and I was self-harming and attempted suicide at this time. But, despite all this, I managed to complete Year 12 and get my HSC.

Later, as an adult, I was in a DFV relationship for a number of years. As part of that relationship, I committed some crimes in order to help my partner, but this landed me in jail for six years, during which I lost custody of my three kids to my sister. The kid's father is in jail for 15 years. Once I got out of jail, I settled in private rental in Western Sydney with the assistance of Rent Choice Start Safely and I have been steadily building my life back up since then. Before going to jail, I had been blacklisted by estate agents because of a poor credit rating, earned while I was with my ex. Basically, he kept stealing the rent money to pay for drugs. But I found an agent who was prepared to give me a go and I've been able to build my credit rating back up again since then. My goal out of prison was to get custody of my kids back. My sister did not want to give them back and we had a fight through the legal system. But eventually, I did gain custody in early 2021 and that meant moving to a larger rental place. It was hard at first with the kids, learning to be a family again, but I did get some support from my family and the Rent Choices was continued, even though I have a job now. It's hard being a single parent but the kids are settled into their new school and doing well. They get contact with their father in prison by arrangement with my eldest stepdaughter. I am not allowed contact with him because I'm on parole.

I work five-hour shifts in a customer service job, four times a week, and I love it. My boss is really understanding of the pressures I'm under and often goes out of his way to help me out. He says, 'Family comes first'. I got this job through an Opportunity Pathways provider, who was, at first, checking in with me to see how I was getting on, but I've not heard from them lately. My boss is offering to train me so I can move up in the business, but I don't want to go to full-time employment because I want to be there to get the kids off to school and be there when they come home. I also get support through a program which helps vulnerable kids and their families. My middle child has recently been diagnosed with autism, ADHD and anxiety and is on medication. With the meds, he is a completely different boy, so that has really helped. Home is also now a different place and I feel really comfortable there, without the stress.

CASE STUDY 11 – HARPER

Age: 25 to 29 years

Gender: Female

Education: High school

Background: Aboriginal

Program: Rent Choice Start Safely and Opportunity Pathways

Location: North Coast, NSW

I grew up in Western NSW, the third of four girls. After my parents split up, my dad had two more children, both boys, so I am one of six kids. My mum still lives in Western NSW. After the split, I moved with my dad and step mum to the north coast of NSW. I was quite sporty at school, doing footy and soccer, athletics and horse riding but I struggled with schoolwork and was bullied but, in the end, I did okay. I suffered with depression in these years. When I was 16, my step mum wanted me to leave school and get a job, but I wanted to stay at school and go onto university. My step mum was emotionally (and sometimes physically) abusive and, eventually, I was kicked out of home. She put all my stuff in a bag, and I was shuffled off to live with a family friend. I continued with my schooling, completed Year 12 and went on to first year university. At that time, my mental health was not good and after a year of uni, I had to give it up. I think about those years of growing up as quite difficult.

I met my ex-partner at 18 and I lived in a DFV relationship with him for five years. We had a daughter, who is now four. After I managed to leave him, I was homeless for five months, but then, through a contact of my dad's and with the help of a number of agencies, I was able to

get a private rental place on the North Coast, near my dad. This allowed me to start to live independently and to get my life back together. Surviving domestic violence took a big toll on me: the controlling and coercive behaviour, the gaslighting, the violence including having a knife at my throat and the police call outs. He would threaten to kill himself and in one incident, he came and took the baby from me. I tried to take his keys so he couldn't leave, and he wound the window of the car up on my arm and dragged me along the street. When it first began, I did not recognise the DFV because I had not grown up with good role modelling and thought this kind of behaviour was normal. Living with DFV has left me with bad anxiety and PTSD which I am now dealing with, with the help of a counsellor.

I have been receiving Rent Choice which helps pay for the two-bedroom apartment I rent. The level of assistance tapered down over a period and ceased in early 2022. I received good support from the DCJ people, I have not had much contact lately. I also do Opportunity Pathways, but I have not heard much from them lately. I worked one day a week in a supermarket for a while, but recently I've moved to a new job in a local resort doing reception work. I like the job and, post COVID, I have increased my hours there, so that I am working almost full-time.

On top of the PTSD and anxiety, I have also been dealing lately with an eating disorder which has been quite difficult. I was doing a Diploma in Counselling, under the Smart and Skilled program, which I hope will let me work in the counselling field at some point. But with my health and the new job, I have given up the study for now. I have been getting some family support to help with my daughter although that has reduced recently. And I have new partner, who treats me well and I may consider going to live with him soon.

CASE STUDY 12 – ELIOT

Age: 20 to 24 years

Gender: Male

Education: High school

Background: Aboriginal

Program: Rent Choice Youth

Location: North Coast, NSW

I did not grow up in a stable environment. Things were very up and down, and we moved around a lot, living in a motel, caravan parks, staying with family and friends and sometimes in private rental. I have a little brother and sister. We lived a very low-class life and that only makes you feel one way, you know. My mum was mentally unstable and had drug and alcohol problems and my dad was never really in the picture. We lived in Queensland – in Brisbane, and then on the Gold Coast. Growing up, I did not have an environment in which I could have hobbies or play sports seriously. But I left home at 15 because mum had been living with an abusive boyfriend for a number of years and I finally had had enough. She had broken up with him many times and the last time she promised she would not go back to live with him again. But then she put me in the car and pulled up outside his place and I just said 'Nuh, I'm not doing this'. So, I went to live with my girlfriend and never went home after that. I give myself props for doing that. Even at that young age, I was mature enough to make a decision for myself. At that time, I had a lot of friends who were into crime but, when I left home, I just decided to stay away from all that.

I wasn't too bad at school but, even so, I left in Year 10 and got a job. I then worked full-time, in a lot of different jobs until I was 22. Over this period, I was able to work my way to the top, in each role. My mum occasionally had jobs, but she mostly lived off Centrelink benefits. And until I was an adult myself, I never appreciated how tough it was for her. I could talk forever

about all the negative things that have happened in my life, but I think it just comes with the territory. I come from a big family, but I choose not to be around them much, because they live on drama, they thrive on it, and I just want to stay away from all that. And I also know that it's basically up to me to get myself into a better place.

A few years ago, I moved to the North Coast, and I really like the vibe of the place. I now care full-time for my two young children since I split with their mother. I've been doing that for a couple of years and it's tough, but I feel like I'm doing better now. I accept that this is my life now until the kids are 18. I live in a two-bed apartment on the top floor of a three-storey block. Rental places are really hard to get on the North Coast, so I am grateful for what we have, even though it is not ideal with all the stairs and no yard. My mum now lives an hour away, but I don't see her often and she does not provide much support with the kids. I didn't really have close friends growing up, but I am developing friendships here. But as a single parent it is hard to spend time with them. They will come over and say, 'Let's go to the pub', but then they remember I have kids. In any case, what I get from the girls is so much more than I would get at the pub.

Rent Choice has been really helpful and the staff there were awesome. They went above and beyond to help, and they deal with all the things you can't, so that is really nice. I also got good support from an agency when I was homeless. They provided temporary accommodation and put me onto the Rent Choice program. I am pretty amazed at the range of agencies who provide assistance to people like me in this town. But mostly I rely on myself. I do want to develop a career over time, rather than just work. I have quite a lot of ideas but haven't settled on anything yet. I will look into what TAFE courses are available when I can. But my priority right now is to look after the kids.

CASE STUDY 13 – LLOYD

Age: 20 to 24 years

Gender: Male

Education: High school

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Rent Choice Youth and Opportunity Pathways

Location: Western Sydney

I had a pretty normal upbringing, up until my parents split up when I was about nine. My parents were a bit strict, but okay. I grew up in Western Sydney and I was the oldest of four kids. After the breakup, it was stressful with mum being a single parent. I clashed with her a lot just because I had different opinions to her. I also saw it as my job to protect and be a big brother to the other kids. We still saw our dad every other week. But over time, my relationship with mum deteriorated and I was disappearing and running away a bit. Eventually I was kicked out of home. When that happened, I talked to the school, and they referred me to agencies who could help me out.

I did well at school, although the work was pretty tedious and because it was easy, I tended to play up a bit and not pay attention in class. I also experienced a lot of bullying at school although I also made good friends there. Once I was kicked out of home, I spent about six months in a youth refuge and then moved into semi-independent housing. But I did not much like the area; I thought it was not safe and, after a year there, I went back into the original refuge in Western Sydney. By then, I was old enough to get my own place, which I did. It was a studio in an apartment building, and I was there for over a year and a half. Recently, I moved again, into a two-bed granny flat with support from Rent Choice. I have been on JobSeeker for a while, but I now have a job in a fast-food place and I'm also looking at a job in retail.

I feel like I have really been getting my act together lately. In fact, I think I've been hitting it out of the park. I'm getting on better with mum and my siblings, and I feel like their attitude is changing which is good. I'm working which is great and I've been making more friends by taking part in shared interest activities. My friends have been really supportive, helping me get my life on track, understand what to do and how to go about things. I also get some support from some other agencies – they helped me get housing, helped with the moving and continue to provide counselling and case management. The Opportunity Pathways people were also really helpful, offering various training courses. I feel like my life is pretty stable right now. I was thinking about joining the Army, but now that I've got a job, I am not thinking about that as much. I'd like to do a training course at some point.

CASE STUDY 14 – ANGELA

Age: 40 to 44 years

Gender: Female

Education: Degree

Background: Aboriginal and European

Program: Rent Choice Start Safely

Location: North Shore, Sydney

I was born in Europe and grew up in South Australia. I became an Australian citizen in September 2020. My dad is Aboriginal, and my mum is French. My parents were blue-collar workers. My mum was very abusive to me as a child, and I don't have any contact with my parents. I left home at 14, and put myself through school and university, working two jobs.

I have a Bachelor's degree in Commerce, and I started studying law online but have deferred for the moment. I'm currently doing a Graduate Certificate in Human Resource Management.

In early 2019, I moved into private rental, subsidised by Start Safely. I didn't like the area, and didn't fit in, but I was forced to take it because I was assaulted by my ex-partner, and this was all I could afford. I would have liked to move to Bondi and was happy to pay more to live near the beach but Start Safely wouldn't cover the rent if I moved. I found the house myself through a real estate agent. I didn't have a caseworker while in the Start Safely program.

I had my daughter removed from me as a result of the domestic violence. I lost weight because of the stress of losing my child. It's mind-blowing to lose your child, and it caused me mental pain and anguish. When I talk to people, I lie and don't tell them that my child is in care, as I'm embarrassed. I will feel like a whole person when I get my daughter back. My daughter is living with her father, and I see her sometimes.

In December 2020, I got a notice of termination to leave the Start Safely property because I was in arrears, and I went to court to challenge the notice. I had to leave the property. I was put on the Priority Housing list, but I didn't want to be in the public housing system as I feel it makes you seem unfit to get your child back. I moved in with my friend in Canberra and I still live there. I get cheap rent so I'm saving heaps of money. I plan to live there until I save enough for a house deposit, then I'd like to apply for the 'Family Home Guarantee'.

Since I've been in Canberra, I've worked for the federal government in different contract roles. I'm also a recording artist. During COVID I got a couple of grants from Support Act. I've also had gigs as part of the Fringe Festival.

The friend I'm living with in Canberra has helped me get on the right track. I feel I've become a better person through experience and learnt not to be so naïve; I can't hang out with people who have just come out of jail and expect them to be of good character. I now only mix with people who have good jobs. Over time I've started to feel more assertive and independent, and

I've realised that I'm the only one who can help me. And I've learnt to let go, I used to be so angry about everything. I feel that everything comes down to pre-planning, I would always do things at the last minute, and you can't do that.

I've been seeing a psychiatrist who's lovely, and she will support me to go to court to get custody of my daughter. I can't close the chapter of the domestic violence I experienced until I get my daughter back. I feel that I've been painted as an unfit mother, but I'm clearly not; I have a good government job, I'm stable; I really just want to harness my ability to be a parent.

Even though I'm dealing with a whole lot of things, there's a whole bunch of stuff that is good; I can't complain as it could be worse.

In the future I want to move to the United States; I have entered the Green Card lottery with my Australian passport and my French passport. Moving there will give me a fresh start. Australia is a great country but there is so much trauma associated with it, and I want to move on.

It's good that Start Safely gives you cheap rent, but there is no security of housing once Start Safely finishes, and you could end up homeless. There needs to be an interim step for when it finishes, support of some kind. And I feel that Start Safely should provide case management or counselling for those who need it, and training on financial matters. It would be good if Start Safely did more to help people in my situation who have had their children removed.

I felt that being involved with Start Safely made me complacent and welfare dependent, as it makes you get used to handouts. All you need is a job, now I have a job and financial freedom, my confidence has come back, and I feel I'm valued in the world. Start Safely should include a 'road' to work, like a traineeship, so that you can become more self-sufficient.

CASE STUDY 15 – JO

Age: 20 to 24 years

Gender: Female

Education: Certificate III/IV

Background: Anglo Australian

Program: Rent Choice Youth and Opportunity Pathways

Location: Western Sydney

I grew up in public housing with my father; my dad kicked my mum out when I was six months old, as instead of looking after me she was doing drugs and drinking. I have never met my mother and have no contact with her. My dad was working.

My dad has schizophrenia, and occasionally when I was growing up, I would have to stay with friends as my dad's medication was being stabilised. I remember once I stayed with my neighbour for three weeks, as dad was really bad. My family didn't want me to stay with them.

I liked school until I was in Year 8 and then I started jiggling all the time. I liked my friends at school, and I liked playing cricket and hockey. I didn't go to school for a year and then my school referred me to a school for students with behavioural issues and I finished Year 10 there. I liked this school; you could go out for breaks and have smoke breaks.

In late 2019 when I was living in another part of Sydney, my caseworker suggested I go on the Opportunity Pathways program. I had been homeless for a month and a half and was living in emergency housing, and the caseworker said Opportunity Pathways would help me get a house. I moved to another part of Sydney and a caseworker helped me find this unit and put in the application for it. Since then, me and my partner and my four year old have been living in a two-bedroom unit, that's privately rented. I like where we live because it's near a train station and shopping centre, but there's been a lot of dramas in the area including our garage being

broken into, so I'd like to move. The unit is too small, and I'd like a backyard for my child to play in.

The caseworker helped me with food vouchers and furniture when we moved into our unit and helps with brokerage, which is good if something breaks and we need to replace it. They gave my partner fuel vouchers when he started a new job. They also helped with living skills, and this was useful as being so young out of home it was very helpful to have someone supporting us. They also let me know when Rent Choice rent reviews are coming up.

When you're on Opportunity Pathways you need to be working or studying, or maybe just show proof you've been applying for jobs – I'm not sure. I worked as a casual at a pizza place for six months, but when store management changed around December 2020, all the casuals were fired; that was my first job. Before that job, I volunteered at a kitchen for the homeless for eight months.

In December 2020 I completed a three month Cert III in Retail, and I applied for jobs through Seek. I sent out my resume and went to interviews but no-one offered me a job, I felt like no-one wants me. My caseworker helped me with my resume, they took a while to do that, they sent it out and I got the first job I interviewed for, in retail, in May 2021. I work three to five shifts a week, although some weeks I have no hours. I used to be scared going into interviews, but the caseworker gave me confidence; they bought me interview and work clothes and shoes, as I had nothing. During the COVID lockdown the store was closed and so I didn't work; when the store reopened, I kept getting shifts but then they were taken away from me. In the meantime, I applied for other retail jobs, but once COVID settled down I got shifts again. I got COVID early this year and couldn't work for a week.

I have a good relationship with my partner and my child, and my dad. I see my dad regularly, although this was hard during COVID. I don't have any contact with other family members. My child makes me happy and grateful for everything, she's just very nice. She's in preschool two days a week and starts school next year.

I don't go out very much, but I go to the gym on weekends. I'd like to quit smoking, that would save money, but I don't see that happening, being an adult is stressful, paying bills is stressful ... everything changes once you move out of home. I got my learner's licence recently, and I share a car with my partner.

I'm no longer on Rent Choice as we earn too much. Rent Choice is a lot easier than having to pay full rent, but the full rent is manageable as long as we're both working. But I no longer have contact with the caseworker, and that's a bit overwhelming as you have a lot of support and then it all left; I thought the program included the caseworker support for three years. Having someone to help us when we needed support was good, someone to help us sort things out. The ideal for Rent Choice would be intensive support at the beginning of the program and then gradually taper off the support, and not just cut the ties and go. I'm now with Parents Next, they contact me every six months, but I haven't heard from them in ages, and when they contact me, they only talk for about a minute; I would like a longer conversation with them as they could help me get into a course, get a better job, etc.

In the future I would like to live closer to my partner's family; I'd prefer public housing because it's cheaper than private, but there's a massive, long waiting list. A while ago I contacted Housing, but they never got back to me. Me and my partner are saving for a bond and moving fees and are hoping to move by the middle of 2022. We've been looking at places but there are lots of applicants and rents are really high, I've seen agents asking \$450 for a terrible place. In the future we'd like to own our own home. I'd like to get a better paying job and to work full-time, so I'd get sick leave etc. I want to do Cert 4 in Retail Management but there are no TAFEs nearby that offer it; once we move, I'll look into studying.

CASE STUDY 16 – AMINA

Age: 35 to 39 years

Gender: Female

Education: Diploma

Background: Anglo Australian and Fijian Indian

Program: Rent Choice Start Safely and Opportunity Pathways

Location: Western Sydney

I was born in Fiji. Both my parents worked. My parents rented privately.

From the age of two, I lived with my paternal grandparents and some other relatives. My grandparents were farmers. My five siblings lived with my parents. I used to sometimes stay with my parents and siblings in the holidays and on weekends, but there was always fighting between me and the other members of the family as I didn't know them very well.

Between the age of 16 and 18 I lived with my parents, as an auntie and uncle living at my grandparents' house were not getting on and the auntie was abusing me. Living at my parents' house was still problematic as we were always arguing.

I really enjoyed school and did very well. But after I finished Year 9, my grandmother would not allow me to stay at school. After I left school, I just stayed home.

I moved to Sydney when I was 18, I was married by then.

I separated from my husband in 2019 as I had had enough of domestic violence. I didn't know what to do, I was concerned I would do something to myself. I Googled and found a women's helpline and rang them. They told me that the Family Referral Service would help me with accommodation; the service told me about the Start Safely program and explained that a percentage of my rent would be paid by Housing and that this percentage decreases every few months. It took a long time to apply for Start Safely, because of all the forms you had to fill in. The Family Referral Service rang to see how I was going, and I said I was still waiting to hear from Housing; they rang Housing and found out they had lost my paperwork for the application, so I had to resubmit an application.

When Start Safely was approved, I applied for 27 houses, but because I wasn't working it was hard to get a house. So, I took a real estate agent aside and told him of my problems; and I talked with the Family Referral Service, and they rang the agent and told them about my situation, and I got a unit. I moved into the unit with my two kids, but then it was sold. We moved to another unit around August 2020; it was secure, comfortable, peaceful, my own place. I liked the location, it wasn't too far from the kids' schools, and there was enough space in the unit for the three of us. Housing rang me whenever the Start Safely subsidy was about to decrease. It took a while to get used to having to pay a higher percentage of the rent, as I got used to having a budget and then had to re-budget.

The COVID lockdowns were hard, my kids were fighting, and I found myself crying unnecessarily and thought I just had to get out of the house. I had such a busy lifestyle [before COVID], and with the lockdowns I felt I had been 'locked out'.

Last year I met a new partner, and we had a baby in March this year. It all happened very quickly, and I am so happy. We needed a bigger place for all five of us, and in February 2022 we moved into a new house, with a one-year lease. The house is in a good location, the train station is five minutes away, there's a backyard and a garage, and everyone has their own space. It took a while to find a house and I think this is because we only have one income and real estate agents didn't like that. It is financially hard to afford with only one person working,

but everyone has comfort. I'm not involved with Start Safely anymore as I'm living with my partner. I would like to own my own home eventually.

I have three children, from my baby up to almost an adult. My children get on well with my partner.

Until my recent pregnancy, I worked as a part-time support worker in the disability sector. I had some health issues during my pregnancy and so was not allowed to do any exercise or leave the house or work for most of the pregnancy; I wasn't very happy about this as I'm usually very independent, and I was crying a lot. I loved my job, and I liked that I could adjust my work hours around my kids' school hours.

Recently I completed a Diploma of Community Service. This was such an achievement and makes me happy to think about it. In the future I would like to go to university and study social work.

Three of my siblings live in Sydney but I don't see any of them. I used to see one of my sisters, but since I met my new partner and had a baby, she isn't talking to me as she's not happy that I'm not married. I'm not bothered by this, as I am so happy with my life. My relationship with my mother used to be okay and I used to speak to her a lot by phone, but I have blocked her now as she only talks to me when she wants to. I want her to either stay or go forever.

If I hadn't had help from Start Safely, I don't think I could have moved out [of the family home] as I wouldn't have been financially able to. I didn't know there was this help available – that's why I stayed in the family home so long. Start Safely was very helpful in helping with rent, it meant I could buy things for the house, and I could finish my studies. Start Safely helps you move on, and find support, gives you peace of mind.

CASE STUDY 17 – LAILA

Age: 40 to 44 years

Gender: Female

Education: Certificate III/IV

Background: Anglo Australian and Afghan

Program: Rent Choice Start Safely

Location: North Shore, Sydney

I grew up in Afghanistan. My parents owned their own home – I lived with my mother and father, my siblings, and an auntie. My dad worked for himself; my mother didn't work outside the home. I enjoyed school, particularly biology, and liked playing volleyball. I went to university and studied languages and literature, but when the Taliban came to power, they forbid females to attend school and university, so I had to leave.

I moved to Australia with my husband about 20 years ago, and we got divorced a few years ago. My family members live overseas. I have some contact with them, but I miss them a lot.

I have four children. I encourage them to study; this country gives you a lot and you have to give back to this beautiful country.

I have a few health issues, such as arthritis and chronic fatigue syndrome, and sometimes I feel so tired. Sometimes I feel very down, but I show myself as very strong in front of my kids. Sometimes my heart is beating [fast], I feel like I am nothing – but when I see my kids, especially the little one, I feel better; I have to be strong, they only have me. Life is challenging, and sometimes with teenagers it is not easy. I sometimes feel very lonely, sad and depressed. Sometimes it is too much on me and I feel I can't do it, but seeing my kids gives me energy and makes me wake up again.

I have a close friend who is older, she's very nice and gives me good advice, she's like my mum. When I talk to her, I feel calm and happy. I don't have many other friends; when you divorce everything is put on the woman [it's her fault]. In my culture people don't contact a lonely woman [that is, a divorced woman].

I have a Cert III in Aged Care and I work one day a week as an assistant nurse helping old people with showering, social support and taking them to the doctor. I enjoy my job. During the COVID lockdowns, my work hours got shorter as people didn't like strangers coming into their house. I would like to study in the future to be an enrolled nurse, but my health is getting worse.

I heard about Rent Choice from Housing. Housing told me Rent Choice was for three years; I had to go out and find a house to rent, no-one helped me look. It was hard to find a house in the area I wanted to live in for the rent that Housing was willing to pay – everything was expensive; it took one and a half years to find a house. While I was looking for a house, I lived with my children in the family house, my husband was working overseas. The rent was expensive.

In 2017 I moved into a house through Rent Choice. The house was okay, but it had a lot of mould and was too small for all of us. One of my friends helped me with some furniture. We lived at that house for just over three years.

Rent Choice didn't really change my life, but it gives you financial support – I wasn't earning much. And I also liked that the house was mine for three years. Public housing gives you a roof, and that means a lot to me.

When Rent Choice was about to finish, I asked a caseworker at Link Housing what to do as I couldn't afford to pay full rent in the area that I was living in. The caseworker told me to document my health issues and my circumstances and helped me to apply for priority housing. They said that because of my health issues, which made it difficult for me to work and therefore hard to afford housing, and the fact I had four children, I would be eligible to apply for priority housing. Within three weeks I was approved for Priority Housing. I was overwhelmed, and I was crying. My caseworker is like an angel. I was shown two houses and told if I didn't accept one of them, DCJ will think I don't need it. I was so scared as I thought that if I refused the first house, which wasn't nice and I couldn't live in it, and the second house I was shown wasn't good, then I would miss out on a house altogether. But the second house was good, and at the end of 2020 we moved in. I had a one-year lease, which has finished, but I can stay in this house as long as I like; I pay just under half the rent and Housing pays the rest. There was no suitable social housing available at the time and so we are in a private rental.

The real estate agent is always coming and inspecting the house we're in and saying, 'This carpet is dirty', 'This wall is dirty'. I'm very careful but it's very hard to keep the house clean with four kids; having the real estate checking and saying these things makes me concerned.

I've been looking for another house as this one is too small for all of us. I don't mind if it's public or private housing. At least with this housing provider, I can live for a long time in the same house. But I also like the idea of public housing as it is permanent and house repairs would be fixed for me.

At the end of 2021 I signed a contract for a five-bedroom house, but the owner didn't give it to me because I was in public housing. I have just found a house in a suburb close by, I'm waiting to hear if DCJ approves it, and if they do, we will move in. If we get the house, the real estate agent will give us a long lease. If DCJ doesn't accept the house, I don't know what I will do.

CASE STUDY 18 – CHERIE

Age: 15 to 19 years

Gender: Female

Education: High school

Background: Aboriginal

Program: Rent Choice Youth

Location: Western Sydney

I'm 19. I've lived in a few different places and been to many primary and high schools. I left school in Year 10 to help mum look after my sister and brothers. I was good at school, I loved maths and visual arts; and I loved riding horses.

Dad worked, but mum didn't work as she was busy looking after us kids.

I lived in Sydney until I was 10. I don't remember much of my life before I was about eight years old, but I remember we sometimes lived in public housing. When I was eight or nine, my parents, my sister and brothers and I moved into my grandparents' house.

When I was 10, my family (parents, brothers and sister and me) moved to Queensland. While we lived there, us children were taken into out-of-home care – we were split up into three different houses, and I was with one of my brothers. We were in care for a few months; my brother and I were moved three times. When we went back to our parents, we all moved back to Sydney. We lived in a private rental for about three years, and then we were kicked out of the house because my parents couldn't afford to pay the rent; I was about 14 or 15 years old. My parents had another three children by this time. Mum and us kids moved in with my mum's mum, and there were also two of my cousins and an uncle living there. Dad went to live with his cousin.

I was always arguing with my mum as she wouldn't let me go out, so when I was 15, I moved in with my dad, he had his own house. When I was 16, I got pregnant, I was still at school. Dad wasn't happy about me being pregnant, and he didn't want me living with him, so I moved to the Central Coast and my partner moved to Sydney to live with his dad. I missed my partner so moved to Sydney, and I lived with a friend first and then moved in with my partner. I had a miscarriage at 21 weeks. It was really traumatic as I still had to give birth.

When I was 17, I was living in a refuge, and I got my own place in January 2018; DCJ helped me to find somewhere to live. I was with my partner during this time. Two months after moving into my own place I got pregnant again, and my child is now nearly one. I'm still living in the unit. The rent is subsidised by Rent Choice, I pay 50% of the rent.

I like living in this area as it's close to shops, transport and the hospital. But I've been talking to DCJ as I want to move, as the balcony isn't safe for my child especially as we're on the third floor. I have a case manager at DCJ who I've had for six months but I don't really like or trust them as they know one of my family members and keep talking about them rather than trying to help me. I'm also working with someone at my local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation – they're so nice, they've given me so much for my child, like clothes and toys, and also a blender. They're also helping me find somewhere else to live. I'd like to stay in this area. I don't mind if I live in public or private housing, as long as it's safe for my child.

I work occasionally at a seafood shop. When my child goes into childcare, I want to work part-time. I've been thinking about being a childcare worker, but I'm not sure. My child's dad only sees my child occasionally. I currently have an AVO out against him.

CASE STUDY 19 – LIZZIE

Age: 20 to 24 years

Gender: Female

Education: Certificate III/IV

Background: Aboriginal

Program: Rent Choice Youth and Opportunity Pathways

Location: Central Coast, NSW

I grew up on the Central Coast and lived with my mum, my brother and my brother's father, in private rental; we moved around quite a bit. I haven't had any contact with my birth father since I was five years old. My mother passed away when I was 15, and I went to live with my grandmother.

My stepfather worked, and my mother worked sometimes.

I planned to finish school and then study to become a nurse, but after my mother died, I struggled with school and stopped going when I was 16 and in Year 10. I liked school because of the friends I had there, and I liked PE and science.

After I left school, I started studying Aged Care, and I did a traineeship in the Northern Territory. I was there for just over two months when I fell pregnant and so I moved back to the Central Coast to be closer to a hospital. I was sick through my pregnancy and couldn't work.

When I had my child, I was living in private rental and was there for about six months; then me and my partner and child moved in with my partner's parents. We were there about a year; I get on with my partner's mum really well. Then I got pregnant again, and my partner, my child and I moved into another rental, but we couldn't afford it as we were down to just one income as only one of us was working.

I was referred to Opportunity Pathways by Centrelink. I've been working with the same caseworker for a while, they're really lovely and they help out as much as they can. They help me with any support letters that I need; and they help the mums who are trying to get back to work, they've helped me get fuel vouchers. The caseworker referred me to DCJ one and a half years ago, and then DCJ referred me to Rent Choice Youth. They helped us stay in the place we were already in as we liked it there; they also helped us with the bond, and they paid half the rent. I was in Rent Choice for a year but had to leave the program as we were earning too much money. We had to move out of the place we were in as we couldn't afford the rent without the Rent Choice subsidy.

Rent Choice was helpful, but we still had to pay quite a lot of rent and it was a struggle as I wasn't working at the time. I liked that I could stay in one place for a year and didn't have to keep moving around. I didn't really know how Opportunity Pathways worked except that if you earn too much, you don't get support.

My partner and I and my two kids, aged two and four, have been living with my grandmother at her place for four months. It's just temporary, I'm on DCJ's priority list but while waiting for a place we'll look for private rental, although it's expensive. I don't mind whether we live in public or private housing, as long as we're living on our own without other family members.

Between having my two kids, I went back to studying a Cert III in Aged Care, and I'm on a traineeship at the moment – the traineeship lasts for a year, and I've been on it for two months. It's eight days a fortnight working and two days a fortnight study, so I'm on the road to my goals. I've always wanted to be a nurse for the elderly. At the end of the traineeship, I'm hoping to keep working with the organisation. In the next couple of years, I'd like to be still doing the work I'm doing now and also studying to be [a registered nurse].

4. RENT CHOICE: DETAILED FINDINGS

This chapter answers the key evaluation questions for Rent Choice.

Rent Choice consists of a suite of Private Rental Assistance (PRA) products that support households to gain access to safe and affordable housing in the private rental market. It provides a time-limited, tapered private rental subsidy for up to three years, and facilitates the access to support, training and employment opportunities recipients need to sustain independent housing. Beyond basic eligibility criteria, suitability is indicated by having the financial and personal resources to access and independently sustain a private rental tenancy from when the subsidy is tapered until it ends.

There are a range of Rent Choice products targeted to specific cohorts, including:

- **Start Safely:** People who do not have a safe and secure place to live due to domestic and family violence (DFV).
- **Youth:** Young people aged 16–24 years who need to find a place to live (in private rental).
- **Assist:** Low-income householders who have experienced financial shock, such as loss of income or illness.
- **Transition:** Current social housing tenants who wish to obtain housing independence in the private rental market.
- **Veterans:** Former members of the permanent Australian Defence Force who were on active service during wartime and/or operational areas, including peacekeeping.

Rent Choice products are delivered within the context of Housing Pathways, and have specific frameworks and operating guidelines. This includes different eligibility criteria, income thresholds and product features.

Key evaluation questions are answered in brief in Table 5, and discussed throughout the rest of the chapter.

The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) has commissioned further analysis of the linked administrative datasets, which ARTD and Taylor Fry are currently completing. The results reported in this chapter are current at the time of publication but should be considered alongside the additional analyses provided when that project is completed, in May 2023.

TABLE 5. ANSWERS TO KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR RENT CHOICE

Key evaluation question	Rent Choice
How well is Rent Choice reaching and engaging its target population?	<p>Over the five years from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021, there were 15,230 approvals for a Rent Choice subsidy, relative to a total of 510,415 applications for housing assistance. This represents around 33 approvals per 1,000 applications. The actual size of the target audience (and whether this is adequate 'reach') is difficult to measure given the number of 'unobservable characteristics', such as 'motivation to rent in the private market', that determine whether a person is suitable for Rent Choice. The Rent Choice concept appears to be very well received by staff, stakeholders, and clients in the service system. This has been well established by previous evaluations.</p> <p>In the current evaluation, evidence is available that Rent Choice recipients have higher levels of satisfaction with DCJ than other clients that were not assisted with Rent Choice. This effect is statistically significant and substantial as measured in the DCJ Housing Outcomes Survey (HOSS), particularly in 2019 and 2020.</p> <p>Over the five years from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021 there were 9,822 people who activated their Rent Choice subsidy, that is, established a private rental tenancy (64% of the 15, 230 people approved). Approval for Rent Choice is the result of a determination by one or more DCJ staff members that an eligible person is suitable to rent in the private market. This entails a judgement that short term financial assistance will be sufficient for a person with the motivation and capacity to establish a tenancy and then pay market rent within three years. However, one third (36%) of clients judged suitable were unable to establish a tenancy. This many indicate additional guidance is required for staff responsible for determining suitability.</p> <p>Recipients' pathways into Rent Choice and the private market vary. Some recipients establish their tenancy with relatively little support, while others, especially young people, receive substantial case management support. Once approved, the key factor as to whether a person can establish a private rental is whether they can find an affordable private rental tenancy, and whether their rental application is approved by a real estate agent and lessor. Stakeholders observe the critical role of Private Rental Specialists to advocate for and support Rent Choice recipients in their initial and ongoing interactions with real estate agents. The Department may provide additional assurances on behalf of prospective tenants, including Bond Loans and Bond Extra.</p> <p>A common experience in the longitudinal case studies was of great initial support that was not always sustained or available when needed in the future. The analysis of these case studies over almost two years of interviews reveals the incredible complexity of the lives of people participating and the destabilising effects of unwanted and unpredictable life events. In most instances the randomly selected participants</p>

Key evaluation question	Rent Choice
	demonstrated high levels of resilience and motivation for self-improvement, and participation in education and employment that is not always apparent in people in receipt of housing assistance.
What outcomes are being achieved by clients and what degree of variability are there in these outcomes?	<p>Rent Choice Start Safely recipients have large reductions in urgent requests for housing assistance (24%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group), moderate reductions in rates of living in social housing (15%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group), and small reductions in presentations to Specialist Homelessness Services (9%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group) within one year of subsidy receipt. Within one year of receiving Rent Choice, there were also very small reductions (1 percentage point) in court finalisations and days as an admitted patient (decrease of 1 day for Start Safely recipients, versus 0.2 days for the comparison group), large increases in Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments (increase of \$1,151 compared to an increase of \$119 for the comparison group) and smaller increases in Commonwealth income (increase of \$1,899 compared with \$828 for the comparison group). Increases in Rent Assistance suggests successful renting while income support amounts may be affected by positive engagement in study as well changes in ability to work when establishing an independent household. These patterns were largely consistent in their second year with a slight reduction in effect sizes across most outcomes.</p> <p>Over two years the impact has been to reduce entries to public housing by 15 percentage points and to community housing by 8 percentage points relative to the comparison group.</p> <p>Rent Choice Youth recipients achieve large reductions in urgent requests for housing assistance (18%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group), and moderate reductions in rates of living community or public housing (8% and 9% -point net reduction relative to the comparison group respectively), and in homeless presentations to Specialised Homelessness Services (21%-point net reduction relative to the comparison group)³⁰. There was also a large increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments associated with establishing a private rental tenancy (increase of \$1,465 compared to an increase of \$415 for the comparison group) but no changes in income support. There were no significant differences in justice or health outcomes. These patterns were largely consistent in their second year with the addition of a small increase in days as an admitted patient relative to the comparison group. Over two years the impact has been to reduce entries to public housing by 9 percentage points and to community housing by 5 percentage points relative to the comparison group.</p>

³⁰ While the percentage point change is larger than for urgent requests for housing assistance the effect size is smaller because the starting percentages are larger – for technical results see **Error! Reference source not found.**)

Key evaluation question	Rent Choice
<p>What evidence is there to confirm hypotheses about key mechanisms (including particular products or services) by which the program works? What features or context determine if they work, and for which type of clients do they work best?</p>	<p>The evaluation suggests that Rent Choice can be most effective early in a person's housing assistance trajectory, whether that person is younger, or they are reasonably early in the process of resolving the crisis that sparked their contact with the social housing system. It was considered that Rent Choice can prevent people from becoming reliant on social housing.</p> <p>Many of the causal mechanisms identified in the program logic and the contexts in which they are leveraged by Rent Choice defy direct empirical testing in large scale datasets. We have attempted to test these causal mechanisms in the longitudinal case studies. The results suggest that client circumstances and contexts in the case study sample were too complex and varied to identify stable causal relationships between a person's patterns of participation in Rent Choice and their other characteristics and circumstances. Individual people interpret the supports on offer in different ways.</p> <p>Any mechanisms or 'push' factors, such as increased choice and amenity in accommodation type in the private market, need to exceed the 'pull' factors created by current policy settings and conditions of social housing. For example, the increased taxation associated with additional income from employment could incentivise potential participants to instead pursue a goal of relatively affordable and secure social housing accommodation for which the rent is calculated as 25% of their income, rather than being set by market forces.</p>
<p>What factors³¹ predict if a client is likely to afford the rent during the subsidy period?</p>	<p>Rent Choice is generally only provided to a client when they have the prospects of improvements to their income from employment. This is based on the judgements of staff which appear to be largely effective – it is not possible to predict the occurrence of destabilising life events or radical changes to rental markets. The ability to obtain, sustain and increase employment was considered a key factor in ensuring a person was able to maintain their private rental tenancy, as was access to informal and formal support networks to navigate unexpected and potentially destabilising life events.</p>
<p>When and for whom does the subsidy taper lead to sustainable private rental tenancies?</p>	<p>It is difficult to fully unpack the impact of tapering as this is applied within program guidelines but at the discretion of housing staff. It appears that the application of tapers is not associated with recipients' ability to sustain a private rental tenancy.</p>

³¹ This will include a discussion of both abstract 'factors' or features of context and causal 'mechanisms' as well as concrete 'factors' such as information that may exist in administrative data; for example, in the Application For Housing Assistance form.

Key evaluation question	Rent Choice
How do clients experience the program?	Rent Choice clients tend to be deeply grateful for the supports on offer from Rent Choice and report enhanced satisfaction with DCJ compared to other clients with similar characteristics.
What implications can be drawn from the outcomes, including 'validation' and contextualisation of findings with clients and communities?	Overall, it appears that Rent Choice has significant value as a diversionary product to assist more people to meet their housing needs without reliance on social housing. While the product does not divert all recipients from social housing over the longer term it appears to have positive results when implemented as intended. Greater outreach in culturally and linguistically diverse communities and with Aboriginal communities may increase reach and uptake without any expectation of a decrease in outcomes. The pattern of activation shows that higher activation rates can occur in higher rent markets and that higher activation rates tend to occur in locations where the Rent Choice is being used the most. These findings may suggest that the experience of staff with Rent Choice and the networks established are important in increasing activation rates.
What have been the costs and benefits of assisting clients with the program?	<p>The estimate of the overall benefit-cost ratio (BCR) for Rent Choice based on DCJ guidance was 0.9 with a net present value (NPV) of negative \$29.5 million (excluding the opportunity cost of capital associated with placing a person in social housing). The present value of quantifiable costs was estimated at \$251.5 million and the present value of quantifiable benefits at \$222.0 million.</p> <p>The benefits included \$186.9 million in reduced use of social housing, \$22.6 million in reduced use of health services, \$8 million in reduced use of homelessness services and \$4.4 million in reduced costs to the criminal justice system.</p> <p>The analysis suggests an expansion of Rent Choice could assist more people in housing need at a lower cost than would be incurred by the construction and maintenance of additional social housing for the target group currently being assisted with Rent Choice.</p>

Key evaluation question	Rent Choice
<p>What is the likely cost effectiveness in terms of key housing related outcomes of delivering Rent Choice to those that most stand to benefit (that is, those for whom the outcomes analysis suggests it is most likely to be effective?)</p>	<p>Not all clients approved for Rent Choice are able to establish a private rental tenancy. This outcome relates to the interaction of the supply of affordable rental properties with a client’s incentive and motivation to rent in the private market. The cost effectiveness of Rent Choice would increase if the ratio of people approved to those activating a subsidy was improved beyond the average rate over the last five years of around 60%. This is in part a result of the ability of staff to develop effective relationships with real estate agents. The need to strengthen these relationships is considered particularly important in the case of Aboriginal clients.</p> <p>Rent Choice is a cost-effective diversionary product that clearly reduces the need for long term social housing assistance. The results of the evaluation suggest it is far more cost effective to provide Rent Choice than social housing for low to moderate income people with unmet housing need that have the capacity, motivation, and incentive to engage in education and employment. Including the cost of providing social housing in the cost benefit analysis increases the BCR and NPV for Rent Choice to 4.4 and \$864.3 million respectively.</p>

4.1 HOW WELL IS RENT CHOICE REACHING AND ENGAGING ITS TARGET POPULATION?

Over the five years from 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021, there were 15,230 approvals for a Rent Choice subsidy, relative to a total of around 510,415 applications for housing assistance (Table 6). This represents around 33 approvals per 1,000 applications, which has risen slightly in the last 12 months. The actual size of the target population (and whether this is adequate 'reach') is difficult to measure given the number of unobservable characteristics, such as 'motivation to rent in the private market', that determine whether a person is suitable for Rent Choice.

Rent Choice is only provided when DCJ staff judge it to be a suitable option for an eligible person. This makes it very difficult to estimate the size of the target population, beyond basic eligibility. Staff are keen not to 'set people up to fail' in unaffordable tenancies (and policy tends to prevent this by setting affordability limits and strict rules around deeper subsidies). This means the size of the suitable target population is partly a function of the status of the private rental market in any given location. It is also uncertain how demand is measured and how the budget allocation process is calibrated relative to perceived demand.

There are differences in the scale of the Rent Choice subsidy types (Table 6). Start Safely is the largest subsidy type (78% of all Rent Choice approvals and 78.5% of all activations), followed by Youth (17.7% of approvals and 16.5% of activations). Activation rates also differ across subsidy types, with 65% of approved Start Safely applicants going on to activate the subsidy, compared to 60% of Youth applicants. Rent Choice Assist, Transition and Veterans subsidies, combined, comprise less than 5% of approvals and activations and have been excluded from our analysis of linked administrative data.

TABLE 6. REACH OF RENT CHOICE PRODUCTS, 30 JUNE 2016 – 30 JUNE 2021

	Rent Choice Start Safely	Rent Choice Youth	Rent Choice Assist	Rent Choice Veterans	Rent Choice Transition
Number of people making an Application for Housing Assistance (AHA)	510,415				
Number of applications <i>potentially</i> eligible (approved to the waitlist or	20,010	10,508	60,314	60,314	60,314

	Rent Choice Start Safely	Rent Choice Youth	Rent Choice Assist	Rent Choice Veterans	Rent Choice Transition
for Rent Choice) ³²					
Number of Rent Choice options approved	11,904	2,695	489	65	77
Rent Choice approved relative to AHAs	0.60	0.20	0.01	0.00	0.00
Number of Rent Choice options activated	7,713	1,621	402	45	41
Percentage of offers activated	65%	60%	82%	69%	53%

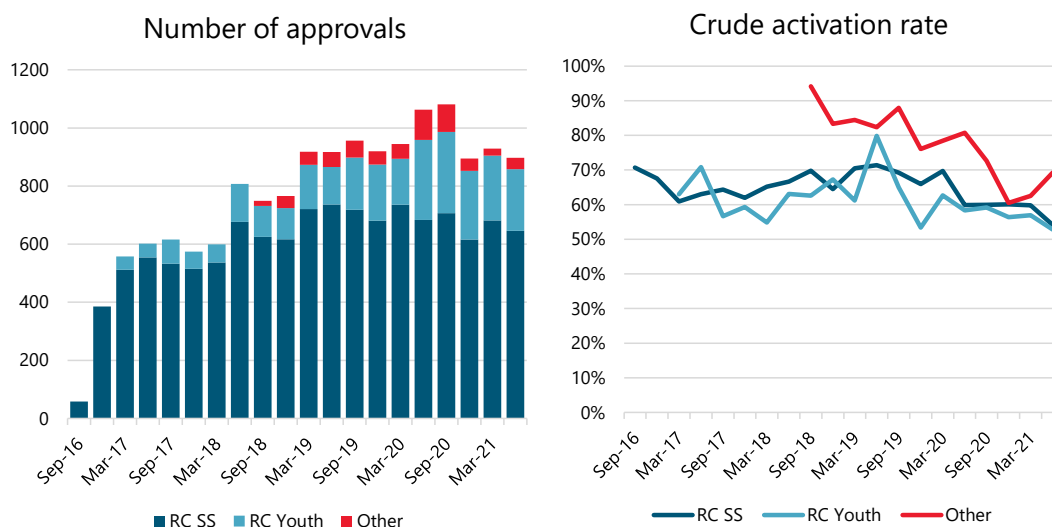
Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Over the period of the evaluation, the total number of approvals and the activation rate have remained reasonably steady, with between 60% and 70% of Rent Choice Start Safely and Rent Choice Youth applicants approved securing a tenancy (Figure 7). The activation rate has started to dip in the last 12 months. This change is occurring in the context of a likely reduction in the supply of suitable rentals; for example, in the last 12 months, Sydney vacancy rates have reduced from 2.6 to 1.7%.³³ In regional areas this is also due to substantial changes in the demand for rental properties as a result of changes in internal migration since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020.³⁴

³² For Start Safely, this is restricted to applications with a current risk of violence or harm recorded. For Youth, it is restricted to applications by people under age 25. And for other Rent Choice products, this is the full pool of AHAs approved to the waitlist or register as we cannot reproduce eligibility criteria from the data.

³³ REINSW. (2022). Vacancy Rate Survey Results July 2022, www.reinsw.com.au/common/Uploaded%20files/2022/08%20August/REINSW-Vacancy-Rate-Result-July-2022.pdf

³⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). Regional internal migration estimates, provisional. ABS 3412.0.55.005.

FIGURE 7. REACH OF RENT CHOICE START SAFELY AND YOUTH, 30 JUNE 2016 – 30 JUNE 2021

Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Most Rent Choice activations are in South Western Sydney and Western Sydney (Table 7), with the two districts accounting for 29% of all activations to date, followed by the Central Coast and Mid North Coast. This reflects the historically higher availability of rental properties in more urbanised areas as well as the relatively larger rents in areas closer to the Sydney CBD that mean there are more applicants.

Despite these trends, the five-year period activation rates appear to be fairly consistent across the districts and activation rates tend to be higher in districts that make most use of the product; that is, districts that raise it as a housing option most often. In addition to the finding above, this may suggest that beyond the basic availability of any affordable rental properties, the experience of staff and history of delivery may be crucial factors in success.

TABLE 7. REACH AND UPTAKE OF RENT CHOICE PRODUCTS RELATIVE TO APPLICATIONS PROCESSED 30 JUNE 2016 – 30 JUNE 2021, BY DISTRICT

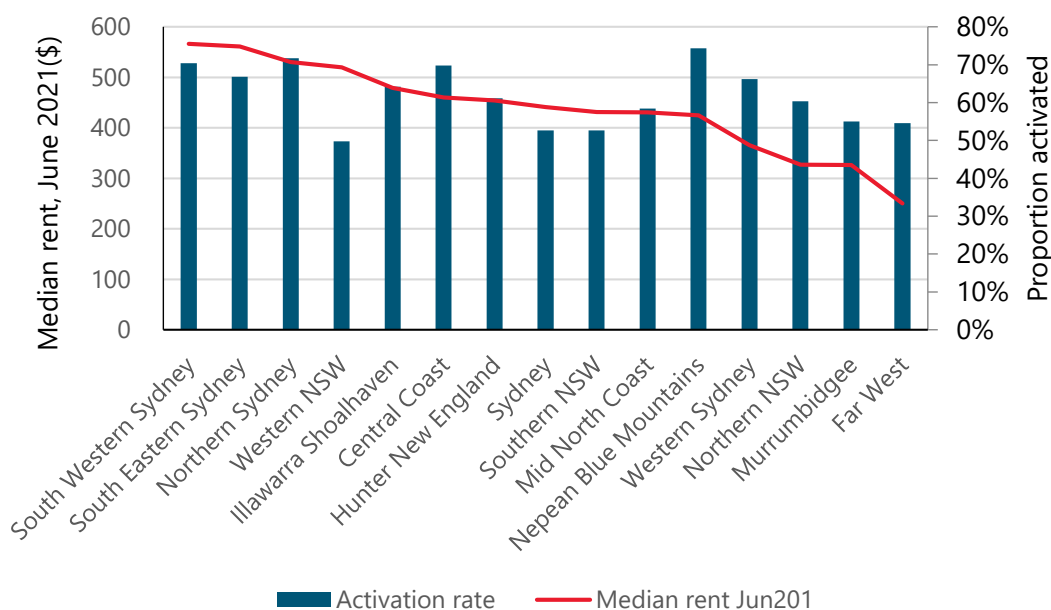
District	AHAs (N)	AHAs approved to the Waitlist	Rent Choice options approved (n)	Rent Choice options activated (n)	Approval rate (per 1,000 AHAs)	% approved that are activated
Central Coast	29,554	1,964	982	685	33	70%
Far West	1,765	177	11	6	6	55%
Hunter New England	80,435	6,383	2,641	1,615	33	61%
Illawarra Shoalhaven	33,150	2,301	1,203	772	36	64%
Mid North Coast	32,318	1,786	1,110	649	34	58%
Murrumbidgee	24,797	2,533	371	204	15	55%

District	AHAs (N)	AHAs approved to the Waitlist	Rent Choice options approved (n)	Rent Choice options activated (n)	Approval rate (per 1,000 AHAs)	% approved that are activated
Nepean Blue Mountains	24,075	2,485	799	594	33	74%
Northern NSW	30,258	1,924	663	400	22	60%
Northern Sydney	12,640	1,996	361	259	29	72%
South Eastern Sydney	23,775	3,176	675	451	28	67%
South Western Sydney	65,983	5,667	2,567	1,808	39	70%
Southern NSW	16,085	1,475	731	385	45	53%
Sydney	37,049	3,930	317	167	9	53%
Western NSW	28,672	2,716	494	246	17	50%
Western Sydney	50,002	4,687	1,442	955	29	66%
Unknown	19,857	1,848	217	138	11	64%

Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Figure 8 shows the proportion of applications raised for Rent Choice that result in a private rental, compared to the median market rent, by DCJ district. There is a visible trend of higher rates of activation in districts with higher market rents. At a minimum this suggests Rent Choice is not only effective in lower rent markets.

FIGURE 8. PROPORTION OF ALL APPLICATIONS APPROVED FOR RENT CHOICE THAT ARE ACTIVATED, COMPARED TO MEDIAN MARKET RENTS IN 2021



The pattern of activations is different across the subsidy types. Start Safely (an 'older' subsidy type) activations are reducing over the financial year to 30 June 2021, with 1,868 activations in FY2020, compared to 1,552 activations in 2021–2022. This is despite a recent Australian Institute of Criminology report showing a substantial escalation of DFV during periods of COVID-19 related isolation that could have driven demand for the product.³⁵ In contrast to Start Safely, and while the numbers are smaller, Rent Choice Youth subsidy activations are increasing, with 335 activations in 2019–2020, compared to 480 activations in 2020–2021 and 537 in 2021–2022 (Table 9).

Women tend to be approved at higher rates, accounting for 98% of all Start Safely approvals and almost three-quarters (69%) of all Youth approvals (0 and Table 9). Men tend to have both lower approval and activation rates across all Rent Choice products. Lower rates of approval and activation are apparent for Aboriginal applicants across all products, with the greatest difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants being for Assist, which has the lowest overall reach of the three Rent Choice products (Table 10).

CALD clients tend to have lower contact with the housing system relative to the size of the CALD population (between 2 and 5% of applications for housing assistance were from CALD clients). CALD clients have lower approval rates for Rent Choice Youth; however, while there are low numbers of these clients, they have the highest activation rates (80%) across any group for Rent Choice Youth (Table 9). The activation rate for CALD clients (66%) is similar for Rent Choice Start Safely (0).

Multivariate analysis of activations and outcomes of Rent Choice for different groups based on hypotheses developed during the evaluation are provided in Chapter 4.6.4. On this analysis it is difficult to identify clear patterns in activation rates as a result of observable characteristics of participants.

³⁵ Boxall, H., Morgan, A., & Brown, R. (July 2020). The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Statistical Bulletin 28*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

TABLE 8. REACH AND UPTAKE OF RENT CHOICE START SAFELY RELATIVE TO APPLICATIONS PROCESSED 30 JUNE 2016 – 30 JUNE 2021, BY CLIENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Characteristic	AHAs (N)	AHAs approved to the waitlist (N)	Rent Choice options approved (n)	Rent Choice options activated (n)	Approval rate (per 1,000 AHAs)	% approved that are activated
Gender						
Male	242,691	19,825	222	135	1	61%
Female	267,724	25,223	11,718	7,578	44	65%
Age (years)						
Under 25	136,358	10,508	3,183	1,959	23	62%
25–44	222,390	15,688	6,734	4,492	30	67%
45+	151,667	18,852	2,023	1,262	13	62%
Indigenous status						
Aboriginal	119,518	10,062	1,979	1,046	17	53%
Not Aboriginal	367,339	33,996	9,759	6,527	27	67%
Unknown	23,558	990	202	140	9	69%
CALD						
Yes	25,471	4,177	1,096	725	43	66%
No	415,770	35,664	9,207	5,916	22	64%
Unknown	69,174	5,207	1,637	1,072	24	65%

Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

TABLE 9. REACH AND UPTAKE OF RENT CHOICE YOUTH RELATIVE TO APPLICATIONS PROCESSED 30 JUNE 2016 – 30 JUNE 2021, BY CLIENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Characteristic	AHAs 16–24 (N)	AHAs approved to the waitlist (N)	Rent Choice options approved (n)	Rent Choice options activated (n)	Approval rate (per 1,000 AHAs)	% approved that are activated
Gender						
Male	53,638	3,338	835	468	16	56%
Female	82,720	7,170	1,860	1,153	22	62%
Age (years)						
Under 25	136,358	10,508	2,695	1,621	20	60%
Indigenous status						
Aboriginal	43,890	3,842	785	432	18	55%
Not Aboriginal	86,769	6,476	1,864	1,164	21	62%
Unknown	5,699	190	46	25	8	54%
CALD						
Yes	2,641	189	35	28	13	80%
No	115,113	8,949	2,160	1,334	19	62%
Unknown	18,604	1,370	500	259	27	52%

Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

TABLE 10. REACH AND UPTAKE OF RENT CHOICE ASSIST RELATIVE TO APPLICATIONS PROCESSED 30 JUNE 2016 – 30 JUNE 2021, BY CLIENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Characteristic	AHAs (N)	AHAs approved to the waitlist (N)	Rent Choice options approved (n)	Rent Choice options activated (n)	Approval rate (per 1,000 AHAs)	% approved that are activated
Gender						
Male	242,691	19,825	220	171	1	78%
Female	267,724	25,223	269	231	1	86%
Age (years)						
Under 25	136,358	10,508	76	60	0.6	79%
25–44	222,390	15,688	221	181	1.0	82%
45+	151,667	18,852	192	161	1.3	84%
Indigenous status						
Aboriginal	119,518	10,062	62	32	0.5	52%
Not Aboriginal	367,339	33,996	417	362	1.1	87%
Unknown	23,558	990	10	8	0.4	80%
CALD						
Yes	25,471	4,177	16	14	0.6	88%
No	415,770	35,664	390	324	0.9	83%
Unknown	69,174	5,207	83	64	1.2	77%

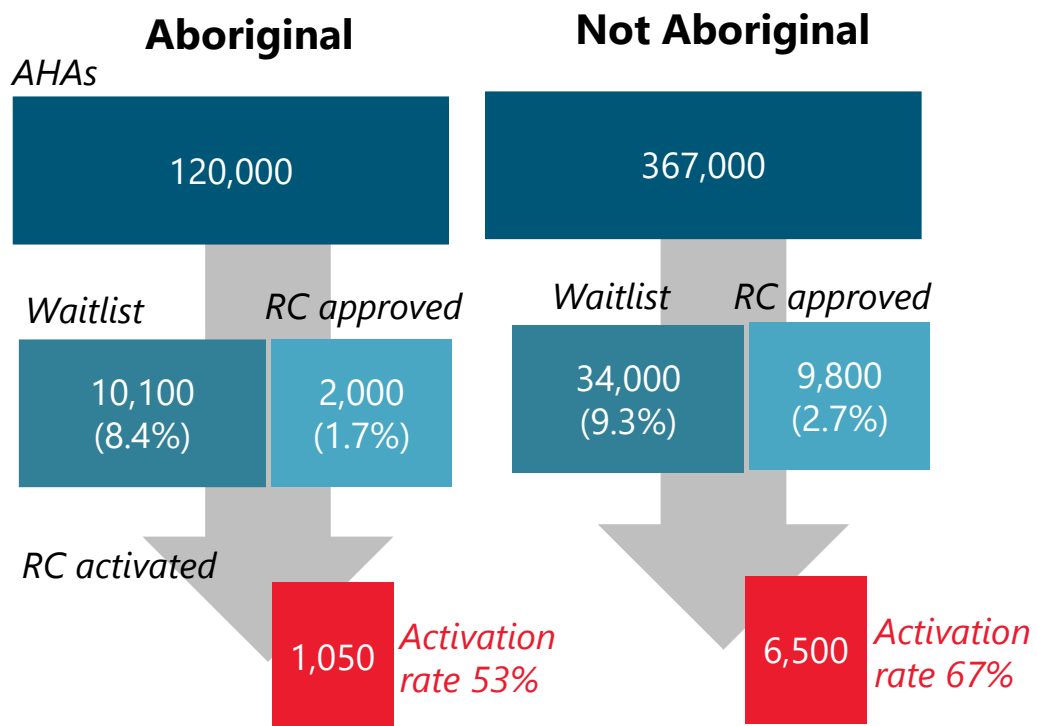
Source: HOMES data 2016–2019.

To 30 June 2021, there were 41 activations of Rent Choice Transition. These recipients were primarily female (32 people, 78%). Most were in the 25–44 age band (25 people, 61%), followed by the 45 and over age band (11 people, 26%) and the under 25 age band (5 people, 12%). The prior duration in social housing is mixed, with 39% (16 people) having been in social housing for all of the prior five years and 20% (8 people) having been in social housing for some of the prior five years. According to the data, 41% (17 people) had not been in social housing in the prior five years. This may be due to incomplete household tenancy information. Prior income support history is also mixed, with 37% (15 people) having received income support for the full five years prior, 41% (17 people) having had some income support in the prior five years and 22% (9 people) having none. In the quarter prior to receiving Rent Choice Transition, 34% (14 people) were receiving a parenting payment,

32% (13 people) were receiving another form of income support and 34% (14 people) were not receiving income support.

As described in the tables above, Aboriginal clients making an AHA are less likely to be approved for Rent Choice relative to both all AHAs and the subset approved for either the waitlist or Rent Choice (the main non-temporary housing options). They are also less likely to activate a Rent Choice subsidy once approved. Of the 367,000 AHAs made by non-Aboriginal people, there were 9,800 (2.7%) approved for Rent Choice; of these, 6,500 were activated or secured a private rental tenancy (1.7%). For Aboriginal people, there were 120,000 AHAs and 2,000 approved for Rent Choice (1.6%) and 1,050 activated or secured a private rental tenancy (0.9%) (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9. UPTAKE: RENT CHOICE APPROVALS AND ACTIVATIONS FOR ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL APPLICANTS



Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

This pattern of uptake corroborates our Aboriginal community consultation, which found that Aboriginal people continue to report experiencing inequality of access to housing assistance, whether through SHS, the Housing Contact Centre or a DCJ Housing office.

As the qualitative case studies show (Chapter 3), people approved for Rent Choice are likely to experience a range of barriers to renting in the private market, beyond their lower income. These include their culture, family size, lack of rental history, or experiences of physical or mental ill health. The qualitative evidence indicates Aboriginal people have lower access to the private market in many areas of NSW, with some real estate agents or property owners being unwilling to rent to Aboriginal people, or rents in some areas – such as inner Sydney – being unaffordable for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. However, community groups

may be unaware of low levels of access by all clients in some locations due to low levels of affordability. We heard that entering into head leasing arrangements or having another person (particularly a non-Aboriginal person) advocate for the potential tenant can support Aboriginal Rent Choice recipients' entry into the private market.

The cultural norms within district offices also have a direct impact on a person's ability to access Rent Choice. We heard a range of descriptions of how Aboriginal people were received when applying for Rent Choice products, with reactions ranging from paternalistic (not recommending an Aboriginal person for Rent Choice on the assumption they will not be able to sustain the tenancy), concerned (not recommending an Aboriginal person for Rent Choice on the basis that real estate agents will not offer them a property), to consciously biased (not recommending an Aboriginal person for Rent Choice on the perception that they are undeserving of it).

It is very difficult to determine whether any such perceptions of bias reflect actual bias or relate to other factors that affect suitability for Rent Choice (for example, income, tenancy history and so on). It is an inescapable feature of Rent Choice that staff make judgements about a potential recipient's suitability. This creates an opportunity for perceptions of unfounded bias even when none may in fact occur. Given the complex interplay of factors that determine success in the private market, it may be impossible for Rent Choice to change from a product based on eligibility and 'suitability' to one based solely on eligibility. With the current policy settings, more structured and consistent approaches to determining suitability may be considered. Further, it is crucial that clear and appropriate reasons are provided when Rent Choice has been raised as a preference by an applicant but is not offered as a housing option. Information about rights to have a decision reviewed should also be provided.

4.2 IMPLEMENTATION

The five Rent Choice products are delivered and supported as stand-alone products with their own policy frameworks and operating guidelines. This includes different eligibility criteria, income thresholds and product features. Some of the subsidies (Start Safely, Youth and Veterans) are available across NSW, whereas others (Assist and Transition) are offered in discrete locations.

4.2.1 STREAMLINING RENT CHOICE

In April 2019, the DCJ Housing and Homelessness Steering Committee endorsed a proposal to develop a consolidated Rent Choice program model. It was expected that the consolidated model would uphold the core principles of Rent Choice, while ensuring DCJ could deliver a streamlined, client-centred program that would be easy for staff to deliver and for clients to access and understand. The consolidated model was expected to include greater flexibility in subsidy amounts and duration, tapering schedules and provision of support. A pause on implementing the consolidated model until further notice commenced in December 2019, and on 26 February 2020 the Housing and Homelessness Steering Committee endorsed the pause. The pause was sought due to significant reductions in the Start Safely and PRA budgets over the forward estimates.

When they were interviewed in October 2020, many key stakeholders were uncertain about how Rent Choice would be delivered going forward. They reiterated concerns about the need for consolidation and also about the consolidation itself, including concerns about the complexity of promoting and maintaining corporate knowledge of the subsidies and their different eligibility criteria and geographic availability across the state.

While streamlining the diverse Rent Choice suite is an attractive idea, this must be balanced with the principles of flexibility and adaptability. As a suite of products, Rent Choice allows DCJ to be responsive to the housing needs of emerging priority cohorts without drawing on its limited supply of social housing. This evaluation supports a policy emphasis on private rental products, such as Rent Choice.

4.2.2 AWARENESS AND UPTAKE OF ASSIST, TRANSITION AND VETERANS

The number of applications and approvals for Rent Choice Assist, Transition and Veterans remain low (Table 6). This likely reflects the limited eligibility (Veteran's), availability (Assist was offered in limited districts) and applicability (Transition). Of these subsidies, the evaluation has greatest visibility of Rent Choice Assist, which was implemented in four districts (Sydney, South Western Sydney, Western Sydney, and Hunter New England) and which, despite its limited availability (200 applicants), was over-subscribed by 50% (300 subsidies were activated).³⁶

As noted above, we did our key stakeholder interviews in October 2020. This followed a summer of widespread devastation from bushfires and, subsequently, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholders noted that the Assist subsidy was a useful response to these events in the areas where it was available, which explains its higher than expected uptake. They also noted it as a potential diversion from longer-term reliance on social housing. The DCJ Access and Demand team members noted that the Assist subsidy gave them 'another string in their bow' when responding to clients in immediate need.

Stakeholders also noted that implementation of Rent Choice Assist had high-level support from the districts, including from District Directors. Implementation was further supported by monthly meetings of a governance group spanning all implementation sites. Stakeholders described the members of this group as strongly engaged, with a desire to share lessons across sites.

4.2.3 APPROVALS WITHIN GUIDELINES

Start Safely recipients have a higher gross weekly household income (between \$600 and \$800), compared to Youth recipients (between \$200 and \$400). These differences reflect the broader range of income support payments available to Start Safely recipients.

Most (86–93%) people are approved within guidelines (Table 11). This is most obvious for Start Safely clients, who typically receive a higher CRA payment because they are supporting dependent children and, therefore, have a higher income.

³⁶ This includes Assist COVID-19, which was not available after 30 June 2021.

TABLE 11. PROPORTION OF RENT CHOICE APPROVALS THAT MEET THE GUIDELINES, BY PRODUCT

	Percentage of approvals that meet the guidelines (50% of income + CRA ≤ market rent)		
	<i>Start Safely</i>	<i>Youth</i>	<i>Assist</i>
Yes	93%	86%	88%
No	1%	8%	9%
Unknown	6%	6%	3%

Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Note: Results are not shown for Veterans or Transition to avoid reporting on small groups as a privacy protection. Where household income information is missing, approvals are counted as 'Unknown'.

4.2.4 LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERED WHEN PROVIDING DEEPER SUBSIDIES

The evaluation did not receive data on deeper subsidies but could make inferences using monthly subsidy payments and income. These indicated about 23% received deeper subsidies. In two-thirds (67%) of cases, the 'deeper' subsidy was less than \$100 per week above than the maximum subsidy amount payable.

There are no substantial differences in the cohorts approved for deeper subsidies: the deeper subsidy patterns reflect the overall pattern of Rent Choice Start Safely and Youth use. For example, 90% of men are approved within guidelines without a deeper subsidy (Table 12).

TABLE 12. PROPORTION OF RENT CHOICE APPROVALS THAT MEET GUIDELINES, BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP

	Percentage of approvals that meet guidelines (50% of income + CRA ≤ market rent)		
	Yes	No	Unknown
Male	90%	9%	1%
Female	96%	2%	2%
<25 years	94%	4%	1%
25–44 years	96%	1%	3%
45+ years	95%	2%	2%
Aboriginal	94%	3%	3%
CALD	98%	2%	1%
Disability	94%	3%	3%
Total	95%	2%	2%

Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Note: We were not provided data on deeper subsidies. The data in this table is based on monthly subsidy payments and income.

The data also reveal that regardless of the subsidy amount, there is a relatively steady rate of decrease in the subsidy over the three-year life of the program rather than a sudden, large drop at three years.

Interviews with key stakeholders indicated that the decision to use a deeper subsidy is not taken lightly—stakeholders are conscious of long-term tenancy sustainability and of not ‘setting someone up to fail’ by putting them in a property with higher rent than they will be able to independently afford. As with most elements of Rent Choice the confidence of staff to anticipate a client’s future engagement with education and employment is key to approving a sustainable subsidy amount. There is no indication in the data that those approved for deeper subsidies are more or less likely to be able to afford their property at the end of the subsidy period. The sustainability of deeper subsidies was further investigated as part of the additional analysis (see Rent Choice: Analysis further to the evaluation).

4.2.5 RENT REVIEWS AND TAPERING

Gradually reducing recipients’ subsidy amount at regular intervals from 12 months, called tapering, is a key mechanism underpinning the Rent Choice program. It is designed to support recipients towards sustaining private rental tenancies and based on the qualitative evidence to date, has broad support from key stakeholders.

In response to earlier evaluations, DCJ reduced the frequency of rent reviews (excluding Rent Choice Youth) from quarterly to half-yearly. Stakeholders broadly saw this as a positive, although our Aboriginal community consultation indicates that regular reviews are important to ensure tenancy sustainability.

Across districts, between one-quarter (22%) and half (51%) of clients receiving a subsidy for more than 12 months have had at least one taper applied (Table 13).

TABLE 13. RENT CHOICE TAPER EVENTS AFTER 12 MONTHS FOR RECIPIENTS WHO ACTIVATED THEIR SUBSIDY, BY DISTRICT

	Clients receiving a subsidy > 12 months (N)	Clients with no tapering applied to date (subsidy amount unchanged) (N)	Clients with one or two tapers applied (N)	Clients with three or more tapers applied (N)	Clients with one or two tapers applied (%)
Central Coast	301	28	146	127	49%
Hunter New England	540	220	189	131	35%
Illawarra Shoalhaven	336	175	88	73	26%
Mid North Coast	234	97	79	58	34%
Murrumbidgee	78	14	37	27	47%
Nepean Blue Mountains	263	148	60	55	23%
Northern NSW	151	75	40	36	26%
Northern Sydney	96	43	34	19	35%
South Eastern Sydney	211	119	47	45	22%
South Western Sydney	847	343	303	201	36%
Southern NSW	149	58	53	38	36%
Sydney	61	14	31	16	51%
Western NSW	88	26	49	13	56%
Western Sydney	412	222	94	96	23%
Missing or Far West	64	6	36	22	56%
Total	3831	1588	1286	957	34%

Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Note: Taper events are based on subsidy payments, and a taper event is categorised as a reduction in subsidy of between 10% and 60% during a period of at least six weeks. Far West district has been grouped with 'Missing' to avoid reporting on small groups as a privacy protection.

Approximately 10% of Rent Choice Start Safely clients had not experienced a taper event after 12 months of subsidy receipt (0). This is the result of staff overriding the policy settings given a concern about the ability of the client to afford the increase. This suggests that in the vast majority of cases staff feel confident to apply the taper as intended.

TABLE 14. RENT CHOICE START SAFELY TAPER EVENTS AFTER 12 MONTHS FOR RECIPIENTS WHO ACTIVATED THEIR SUBSIDY

	Duration > 12 months	Duration > 24 months	Duration > 36 months	Total
Clients receiving a subsidy (N)	3450	2314	1352	7409
Clients with no tapering review to date (subsidy amount unchanged) (%)	10%	6%	2%	41%
Clients with one tapering review (%)	22%	16%	11%	21%
Clients with two tapering reviews (%)	23%	22%	17%	14%
Clients with three or more tapering reviews (%)	44%	56%	70%	23%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Note: Taper events are based on subsidy payments, and a taper event is categorised as a reduction in subsidy of between 10% and 60% during a period of at least six weeks.

One in ten (14%) of Rent Choice Youth recipients went for more than 12 months without a taper, and a small proportion (7%) went for the full duration of the subsidy (three years) without a taper event (Table 15).

TABLE 15. RENT CHOICE YOUTH TAPER EVENTS AFTER 12 MONTHS FOR RECIPIENTS WHO ACTIVATED THEIR SUBSIDY

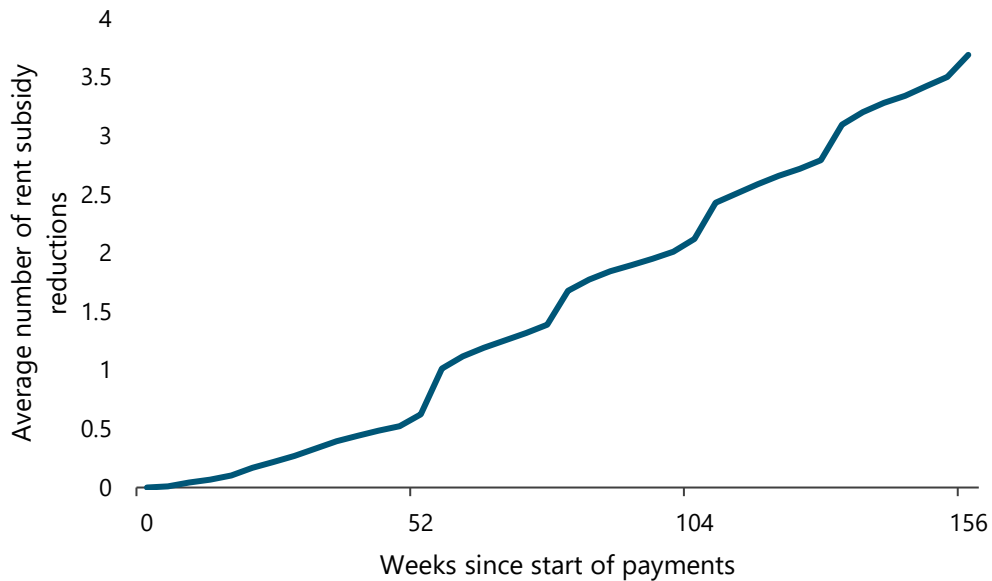
	Duration > 12 months	Duration > 24 months	Duration > 36 months	Total
Clients (receiving a subsidy) (N)	381	197	83	1514
Clients with no tapering review to date (subsidy amount unchanged) (%)	14%	6%	7%	56%
Clients with one tapering review (%)	25%	20%	12%	20%
Clients with two tapering reviews (%)	26%	23%	13%	11%
Clients with three or more tapering reviews (%)	34%	50%	67%	13%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Note: Taper events are based on subsidy payments, and a taper event is categorised as a reduction in subsidy of between 10% and 60% during a period of at least six weeks.

Considered overall, the rate of application of the taper appears to be quite smooth and increases linearly across the sample as a whole over the subsidy period, which is reflected in the smooth pattern of overall payments over time for cohorts assisted in each financial year (Figure 10). Tapering was paused during COVID-19 (and was reinstated in September 2020), although some districts continued to offer it, noting that recipients would be required to ‘catch up’ when the subsidy was reinstated.

FIGURE 10. APPARENT AVERAGE NUMBER OF RENT CHOICE TAPER EVENTS FOR ALL PRODUCTS

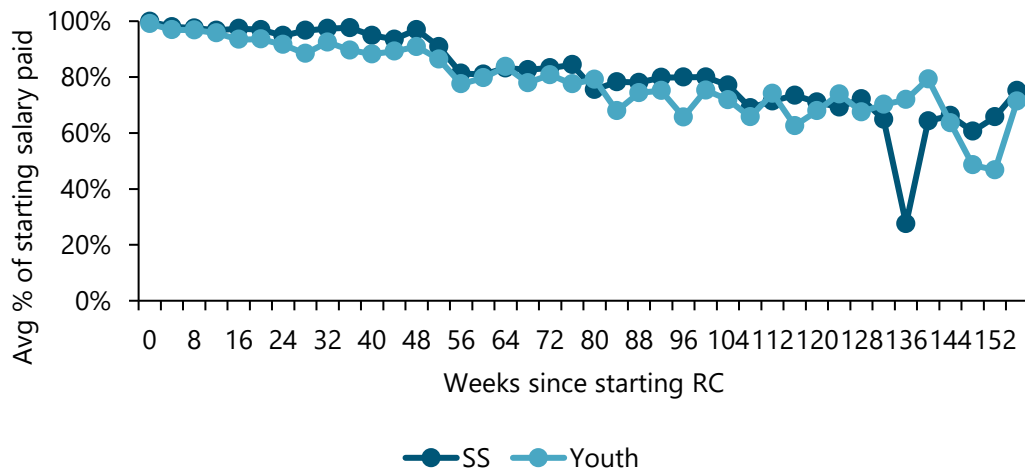


Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Note: Taper events are based on subsidy payments, and a taper event is categorised as a reduction in subsidy of between 10% and 60% during a period of at least six weeks.

For people continuing with Rent Choice, the size of the subsidy remains substantial. Clients received approximately 80% of the initial subsidy value after 12 months, and over 60% of the initial subsidy value after 24 months (Figure 11).

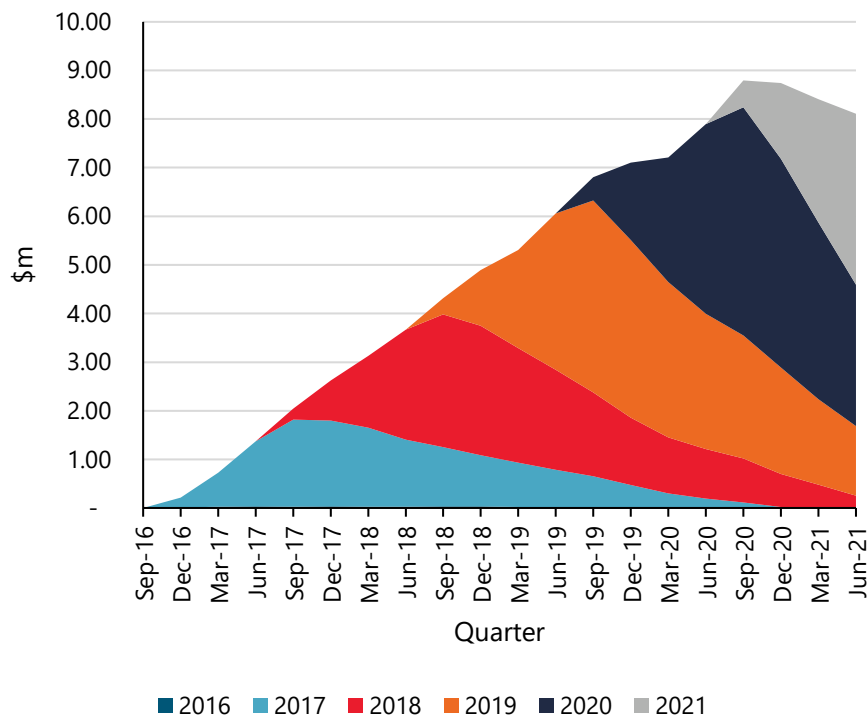
FIGURE 11. PROPORTION OF THE INITIAL RENT CHOICE START SAFELY AND YOUTH SUBSIDY REMAINING OVER TIME



Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

Total Rent Choice payments have increased over time, reflecting the growth in numbers of people who are approved for and activate a Rent Choice subsidy. Figure 12 shows how the total subsidy pool has changed over time. The combined impact of and people exiting within three years is visible as a ‘mountain’ that starts as people enter Rent Choice in a financial year, climbs as more people come receive a subsidy, and peaks around three months after the end of the financial year (before most people experience a taper or exit the subsidy). The right-hand side of the ‘mountain’ gradually descends as the subsidy tapers off over three years and as people exit Rent Choice.

FIGURE 12. TOTAL RENT CHOICE PAYMENTS FOR ALL PRODUCTS, BY FINANCIAL YEAR IN WHICH THE SUBSIDY BEGAN



Source: HOMES data 2016–2021.

4.3 WHAT WORKS FOR WHOM?

4.3.1 PROGRAM LOGIC

There is a substantial body of evidence referenced in the program logic that underpins Rent Choice as a viable alternative to social housing, including the importance of the knowledge and skills of staff members in assessing the suitability of a person and in providing empathetic and effective assistance.

Rent Choice is designed to be provided to people who are eligible and considered suitable for the product. The linked data analysis suggests that, largely, these decisions are appropriate and around 90% of people who commence Rent Choice are able to sustain their private rental tenancy in the year after the subsidy ended. In this sense, the main 'causal mechanism' that underpins the success of Rent Choice is the ability of staff to correctly *predict* whom of those in need of housing assistance will ultimately be able to sustain a private market tenancy. Staff have to form this view based on their judgement of whether a person:

- has sufficient independent living skills to sustain any kind of tenancy
- will be able to establish a private rental tenancy with the financial and non-financial tenancy facilitation assistance available
- will eventually want, and be able, to pay market rent on a private rental tenancy without state government assistance.

The evaluation found that Rent Choice can work in a range of different rental markets (other than the more expensive inner rings of Sydney). Recent changes in rental vacancy rates may have an impact on the ability to approve people for Rent Choice (based on increased rental rates in their location) or secure a private rental tenancy (based on reduced vacancy rates in their location).

Many of the causal mechanisms identified in the program logic and the contexts in which they are leveraged by Rent Choice defy direct empirical testing in large scale datasets. We have attempted to test these causal mechanisms in the longitudinal case studies. The results suggest that client circumstances and contexts in the case study sample were too complex to identify stable causal relationships between a person's participation in Rent Choice and their other characteristics, and improved housing stability and independence.

While there may be an unknown group of tenants with the intention to leave social housing, there is little qualitative or quantitative evidence to support a hypothesis that Rent Choice itself acts as a causal mechanism to leave public housing. While the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) was unable to confirm reliable causal configurations, fieldwork suggests that the program can be most effective early in a person's housing assistance trajectory, whether they are a younger person or are reasonably early in the process of resolving the crisis that sparked their contact with the social housing system. It was considered that Rent Choice can prevent people from becoming reliant on social housing. Tenancy managers commonly report people who are able to obtain social housing may have greater incentive to build their life around this stable and affordable form of accommodation than to move into the private market with all its uncertainties. Any purported mechanisms or 'push' factors, such as increased choice and amenity in accommodation type in the private market, need to exceed the 'pull' factors created by current policy settings and conditions of social housing that could incentivise current tenants to remain in stable, secure and affordable accommodation for which the rent is calculated as 25% of their income, rather than being set by market forces.

On balance, it appears that Rent Choice has significant value as a diversionary product to assist more people to meet their housing needs without relying on social housing. Its success appears to derive from the experience of staff, their networks with real estate agents and support providers, and their ability to judge a person's ability to sustain a tenancy without a subsidy over time. It is not Rent Choice that works per se, but an alignment between the circumstances of the person and the support available.

4.3.2 RENT CHOICE: MECHANISMS OF CHANGE IN THE PROGRAM LOGIC

SELECTION OF SUITABLY MOTIVATED AND CAPABLE CLIENTS WILL INCREASE THE LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT, OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

The core hypothesis of Rent Choice, that the selection of suitably motivated and capable clients will increase the likelihood of successful engagement, outputs and outcomes appears to be accurate. Stakeholders reported that the people motivated to rent privately are most often those who are new to the social housing system. However, the program's problem statement that 'the large gap between rental costs for social housing and private rental can be too daunting' appears to focus on social housing tenants or clients.

According to stakeholders, very few tenants with already established social housing were aware or motivated enough to participate in Rent Choice Transition. We cannot be certain whether this is due to a lack of awareness or a lack of motivation to move out of social housing, and it is possible that tenancy managers underestimate the latent demand. Tenancy managers are reported to often have little knowledge of the 'successful' clients who may transition out of social housing. Rather, they are said to know more about the clients who may be struggling and need additional support, and whose behaviours will affect district performance indicators, as these clients take up a large part of a tenancy manager's attention. However, the qualitative data seems to corroborate that existing social housing tenants are not generally motivated by the offer of Rent Choice Transition. Tenants reportedly value an affordable tenancy tied to their income (25% of income) over a more expensive, more insecure fixed price tenancy (private rental clients are approved up to 50% of current household income).

A TRUSTED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIENT AND SUPPORT WORKER INCREASES THE LIKELIHOOD OF CLIENTS SUCCEEDING

The importance of a trusting relationship between client and support worker has been observed in previous evaluations and was reiterated in fieldwork conducted in this evaluation. Administrative data do not consistently record the extent to which this relationship is in place. This mechanism of 'support' can, therefore, not be tested directly in the linked dataset. Stakeholders reported a wide degree of variation in support provided, from support workers who remain engaged to those who consider a client's support period effectively over once they are housed and direct their attention to the many other people with unmet housing needs. The available evidence does suggest that Rent Choice Start Safely and Rent Choice Youth recipients do achieve relative stability in their housing, as evidenced by decreases (relative to a comparison group) in movement into social housing, access to SHS or in making AHAs related to temporary accommodation (TA) or Link2home. There is some evidence of small to moderate improvements in other domains, including that most people (90%) sustain their tenancy after the subsidy is withdrawn (see Chapter 4.7).

CLIENTS RECEIVE TARGETED AND RELEVANT SUPPORTS, OPTIMISING THEIR LIKELIHOOD OF ACHIEVING THEIR GOALS

For clients who are not current social housing tenants, the tenancy facilitation work of a Private Rental Specialist or Private Rental Brokerage Service worker with good relationships with support providers and real estate agents is considered crucial to the success of the program. While 'targeted and relevant supports' is a mechanism of change, the evidence from case studies subject to QCA suggests this did not have a reliable impact on housing independence. This may be in part due to the limited sample size; however, the case studies (Chapter 3) suggest that 'support' is itself complex. The case studies reveal that the quality of support clients receive varies, but also that in practice, clients receive less support as they become more settled. This can mean that unexpected life events that can impede a client's ability to sustain a tenancy can happen when they are no longer connected with case management and support. Access to 'social networks' was similarly considered an important mechanism that may be a protective factor in times of stress; however, as with support, the data on social networks suggest that client experiences with this mechanism vary. And as

with support, this variability means 'social networks' is difficult to capture as a stable variable with consistent causal impacts. This suggests a need for targeted and ongoing formal and informal supports.

In relation to current tenants, feedback from stakeholders suggests that tenancy managers are unlikely to identify and support clients whose needs do not put their social housing tenancy at risk, and therefore these clients are less likely to be targeted with supports to achieve housing independence. This is partly due to tenancy managers' motivation to meet their KPIs (focusing their time and attention on tenants at risk of not sustaining their tenancy) and partly due to tenants' motivation to retain affordable and secure accommodation.

THE TARGETED SUPPORTS AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE REDUCE BARRIERS TO TRAINING/WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

Housing independence will in many instances require employment. Programs such as Opportunity Pathways provide an additional source of support for clients being assisted by DCJ to obtain employment. At this stage, there are relatively few clients accessing both Rent Choice and Opportunity Pathways (138 in total, with 79 accessing Rent Choice Start Safely and 59 accessing Rent Choice Youth). Strengthening the links between these programs, particularly for Rent Choice Youth and Start Safely, is a way of increasing the support available to vulnerable clients without the need for additional programming or investment.

PROVIDING HOUSING SUPPORT ASSISTS CLIENTS TO ACCESS SUITABLE HOUSING TO TRANSITION TO HOUSING INDEPENDENCE

PRA is intended to be a transition phase towards housing independence. Fieldwork findings suggest that this may be the case when PRA is genuinely provided as a diversionary product that is the most suitable option for a person rather than as a 'stop gap' when social housing is not immediately available. In many instances suitability for Rent Choice and the ability to sustain a tenancy will be related to the person's ability to sustain employment as the subsidy reduces over time. There are features of the welfare system that appear to create structural disincentives to employment. We reason these are most likely to be active for people who, over time, have become reliant on the stability of income support payments and subsidised rent. We cannot substantiate these findings other than with reference to existing literature.³⁷ We discuss the topic of structural disincentives to employment (as a result of the withdrawal of benefits) in the discussion of causal mechanisms for Opportunity Pathways and employment outcomes (Chapter 5).³⁸

³⁷ Wiesel, I., Pawson, H., Stone, W., Herath, S., & McNells, S (2014). Social housing exits: Incidence, motivations and consequences. AHURI Final Report No. 229 prepared for AHURI at UNSW and Swinburne University of Technology, www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/migration/documents/AHURI_Final_Report_No229_Social-housing-exits-incidence%2C-motivations-and-consequences.pdf.

³⁸ Research by the Australian National University on effective marginal tax rates suggests that every dollar a person on employment benefits earns results in a net gain of 6c. This is related to increased income tax and the withdrawal of welfare benefits. See Ingles, D., & Plunket, D. (2016). Effective Marginal Tax Rates. Tax and Transfer Policy Institute, Crawford School of Public Policy, ANU.

IMPLEMENTING RENT CHOICE REQUIRES FIDELITY TO THE ORIGINAL MODEL OF ASSESSING HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

Analysis of the causal impact of tapering suggests this mechanism has been effective. Most (96%) of Start Safely clients who had a taper applied maintained their tenancy, making the taper a cost-effective approach to the delivery of Rent Choice. While program guidelines indicated how and when tapering should be applied (after 12 months and with a gradual reduction until there is no subsidy by 36 months), in practice staff make decisions on a case-by-case basis. Despite evidence that tapering can create some tension for tenants, the tapering was anticipated and appears to be applied sensibly and without impacting tenancy terminations. Whether this reflects the effectiveness of the mechanisms for selecting motivated clients, or whether tapering, per se, is a causal mechanism is difficult to determine in the quantitative dataset (given the lack of data on motivation and the lack of any randomised allocation of applicants to the recipient or comparison group). It appears from the qualitative data that both factors are likely to have an impact. As noted above, around 90% of people who commence Rent Choice are able to sustain their tenancy in the year after the taper period ends and the subsidy is withdrawn. There is no indication that clients being approved for deeper subsidies are any more or less likely to be able to sustain their tenancy.

4.4 PERSONAL WELLBEING

The Housing Outcomes and Satisfaction Survey (HOSS) is an annual survey of all adults living in public housing, those on the Housing Register and those who receive a form of PRA. The most recent administration of the survey was in 2021. There are more than 1,000 responses from Rent Choice clients in 2020 and 2021. The 2019 cohort was smaller, with close to 700 responses. These are substantial numbers, although we cannot comment on any potential response bias impacts.

For this analysis, we have drawn comparisons between Rent Choice participants before and after activating their Rent Choice subsidy (over 2019 and 2020, and over 2020 and 2021) and between Rent Choice participants and other DCJ Housing clients over time.

When comparing respondents to the survey in any given year to the broader population of social housing clients, we have attempted to control for the impact of differences in the mix of demographic and housing situation between the groups by reweighting the broader pool of survey respondents to match the distribution of those who were in the program. Specifically, we have reweighted based on the joined distribution of age, gender, Aboriginal identification, CALD background and housing situation.

The overall level of subjective wellbeing (as measured by the Personal Wellbeing Index [PWI]) across both Rent Choice participants and the broader housing client survey responses are below the normative range for Australia (73.4–76.4 points). However, the PWI scores are consistently higher for Rent Choice recipients (total wellbeing between 3.9 and 7.3 points (out of 100) higher, and the differences are statistically significant (Table 16). While this is evidence that Rent Choice participants have higher wellbeing than the broader social housing client population, this is not necessarily an effect of the program; it is likely there are existing differences between the groups (some of which may be characteristics that make a person eligible for Rent Choice).

TABLE 16. RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS' PERSONAL WELLBEING, 2019, 2020 AND 2021

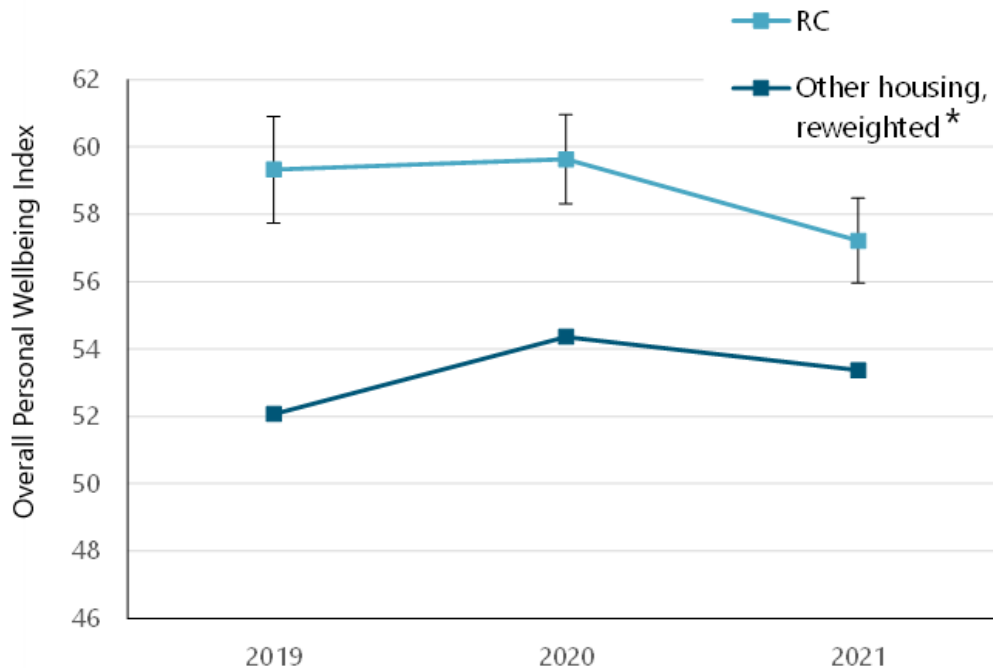
Question	2019					2020					2021				
	Rent Choice	Other participants	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Statistically significant	Rent Choice	Other participants	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Statistically significant	Rent Choice	Other participants	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Statistically significant
N	691	15,565				1,024	16,796				1,171	17,168			
Overall PWI	59.3	52.1	+7.3	0.3	Yes	59.6	54.4	+5.3	0.2	Yes	57.2	53.4	+3.9	0.2	Yes
Standard of living	6.4	4.9	+1.4	0.5	Yes	6.6	5.4	+1.3	0.4	Yes	6.2	5.2	+1.0	0.3	Yes
Personal health	6.1	5.3	+0.7	0.3	Yes	6.2	5.6	+0.7	0.2	Yes	5.8	5.4	+0.4	0.1	Yes
Achievement in life	5.9	5.0	+0.8	0.3	Yes	5.9	5.2	+0.6	0.2	Yes	5.7	5.1	+0.6	0.2	Yes
Personal relationships	5.6	5.3	+0.3	0.1	Yes	5.6	5.5	+0.1	0.0	No	5.4	5.5	-0.0	0.0	No
Personal safety	6.5	6.2	+0.3	0.1	Yes	6.6	6.5	+0.1	0.0	No	6.5	6.4	+0.1	0.0	No
Community connectedness	5.9	5.1	+0.7	0.2	Yes	5.8	5.2	+0.6	0.2	Yes	5.5	5.1	+0.4	0.1	Yes
Future security	5.2	4.5	+0.7	0.2	Yes	5.1	4.7	+0.3	0.1	Yes	4.9	4.6	+0.3	0.1	Yes

Source: HOSS, 2019, 2020 & 2021.

Note: The analysis has adjusted for differences between the Rent Choice cohort and the broader survey respondent pool (people in social housing or who have applied for housing assistance). Specifically, we have reweighted based on the joint distribution of age, gender, Aboriginal identification, CALD background and housing situation.

The gap between Rent Choice recipients and the broader social housing population has reduced over time (Figure 13). Rent Choice recipients may have been more impacted than the other respondents by the recent negative trends in wellbeing coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. Those in private rentals may have experienced increased financial stress and a more challenging rental market, leading to larger decreases in wellbeing.

FIGURE 13. RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS' PERSONAL WELLBEING OVER TIME



Source: HOSS, 2019, 2020 & 2021.

Note: The analysis has adjusted for differences between the Rent Choice cohort and the broader survey respondent pool (people in social housing or who have applied for housing assistance). Specifically, we have reweighted based on the joint distribution of age, gender, Aboriginal identification, CALD background and housing situation.

A small number (~50) of clients responded to the survey before and after entering Rent Choice. For these clients, the average overall self-reported wellbeing score improved by nine points, which is both materially and statistically significant. There were 31 such respondents over 2019–2020 (Table 17) and 22 over 2020–2021 (Table 18). Although the sample size is small and should be interpreted with caution, this provides an interesting perspective to examine the possible impact of the program on participants' wellbeing.

Over 2019–2020 the PWI shows a significant improvement in the overall wellbeing and standard of living and personal safety of Rent Choice clients both before and after they started receiving the subsidy (Table 17).

TABLE 17. RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS' PERSONAL WELLBEING, BEFORE AND AFTER SUBSIDY ACTIVATION, 2019–2020

Outcome (N=31)	Before	After	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Statistically significant
Overall PWI	45.8	56.5	+10.6	0.4	Yes
Standard of living	4.7	6.3	+1.6	0.5	Yes
Personal health	5.2	6.1	+0.9	0.3	No
Achievement in life	4.5	5.5	+1.1	0.3	No
Personal relationships	3.9	4.7	+0.8	0.2	No
Personal safety	5.4	6.9	+1.5	0.4	Yes
Community connectedness	4.4	5.2	+0.7	0.2	No
Future security	4.1	4.9	+0.8	0.3	No

Source: HOSS, 2019 & 2020.

Over 2020–2021 there are improvements in wellbeing, but the only statistically significant result is an improvement in wellbeing regarding the standard of living (Table 18).

TABLE 18. RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS' PERSONAL WELLBEING, BEFORE AND AFTER SUBSIDY ACTIVATION, 2020–2021

Outcome (N=22)	Before	After	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Statistically significant
Overall PWI	49.4	55.6	+6.2	0.2	No
Standard of living	4.7	6.4	+1.7	0.4	Yes
Personal health	5.5	6.0	+0.5	0.2	No
Achievement in life	4.8	5.6	+0.8	0.2	No
Personal relationships	4.2	5.1	+0.9	0.2	No
Personal safety	6.0	6.7	+0.7	0.2	No
Community connectedness	4.7	4.7	-0.0	0.0	No
Future security	4.6	4.5	-0.2	0.0	No

Source: HOSS, 2020 & 2021.

4.5 RECIPIENTS' EXPERIENCES

The Rent Choice concept appears to be very well received by staff, stakeholders and clients in the service system. This has been well established by previous evaluations.

4.5.1 SATISFACTION WITH DCJ

In the current evaluation, evidence is available that Rent Choice participants have higher levels of satisfaction with DCJ than other clients who were not assisted with Rent Choice. This effect is statistically significant and substantial as measured in the HOSS between 2019 and 2020, though this moderated to some extent in 2021 (Table 19, Table 20, and Table 21).

As previously noted, some recipients responded to the survey before and after receiving Rent Choice. While the sample size is small, the 2020 and 2021 survey data reveal a similar pattern of increased satisfaction after receiving Rent Choice.

TABLE 19. RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS' SATISFACTION WITH DCJ, 2019, 2020 AND 2021

Question	2019					2020					2021				
	Rent Choice	Other participants	Difference	Effect size (Cohen' s d)	Significant	Rent Choice	Other participants	Difference	Effect size (Cohen' s d)	Significant	Rent Choice	Other participants	Difference	Effect size (Cohen' s d)	Significant
Services	3.9	3.0	+0.9	0.7	Yes	4.0	3.2	+0.8	0.6	Yes	3.7	3.2	+0.5	0.4	Yes
Listening to me	3.7	2.9	+0.7	0.6	Yes	3.7	3.1	+0.6	0.5	Yes	3.5	3.1	+0.4	0.3	Yes
Communication with me	3.8	3.0	+0.8	0.6	Yes	3.9	3.2	+0.7	0.5	Yes	3.6	3.2	+0.4	0.3	Yes

Source: HOSS, 2019 & 2020.

Note: The analysis has adjusted for differences between the Rent Choice cohort and the broader survey respondent pool (people in social housing or who have applied for housing assistance). Specifically, we have reweighted based on the joint distribution of age, gender, Aboriginal identification, CALD background and housing situation.

TABLE 20. RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS' SATISFACTION WITH DCJ BEFORE AND AFTER RENT CHOICE SUBSIDY ACTIVATION, 2019 AND 2020

Question	Before	After	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Significant
Services (N=31)	3.2	4.0	+0.8	0.6	Yes
Listening to me (N=29)	3.0	3.4	+0.5	0.5	Yes
Communication with me (N=29)	3.3	3.8	+0.4	0.4	No

Source: HOSS, 2019 & 2020.

Notes: The analysis has adjusted for differences between the Rent Choice cohort and the broader survey respondent pool (people in social housing or who have applied for housing assistance). Specifically, we have reweighted based on the joint distribution of age, gender, Aboriginal identification, CALD background and housing situation.

TABLE 21. RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS' SATISFACTION WITH DCJ BEFORE AND AFTER RENT CHOICE SUBSIDY ACTIVATION, 2020 AND 2021

Question	Before	After	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Significant
Services (N=23)	3.0	3.6	+0.6	0.5	Yes
Listening to me (N=20)	3.0	3.4	+0.4	0.3	No
Communication with me (N=22)	2.8	3.5	+0.7	0.6	Yes

Source: HOSS, 2020 & 2021.

Notes: The analysis has adjusted for differences between the Rent Choice cohort and the broader survey respondent pool (people in social housing or who have applied for housing assistance). Specifically, we have reweighted based on the joint distribution of age, gender, Aboriginal identification, CALD background and housing situation.

4.5.2 SATISFACTION WITH RENT CHOICE

In the conversations with case study participants, it was clear that Rent Choice recipients' experience of the product is inextricably linked to their experience of the private rental market. For example, some recipients described being 'at the mercy of lessors' and were concerned about the safety of their neighbourhood, having their requests for maintenance or rent reviews heard, and the rising cost of private rental and decreasing affordability. It is clear that uptake of Rent Choice will be limited by potential applicants' beliefs about the private rental market (for example, that it is expensive and unstable, particularly compared with a public housing tenancy). However, the case study participants receiving Rent Choice also offered valuable insights into the product itself.

IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND THE PRODUCT

More than half (58%, 10 people) of the case study participants receiving Rent Choice described being confused about how to access the product (for example, whether they needed to secure a lease before applying for Rent Choice), or how long the support would last.

In particular, participants were confused about what tapering is and how it would be applied. Some participants received conflicting information from caseworkers, and others were not aware that tapering could be flexibly applied.

A POSITIVE CASE MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE DETERMINES PARTICIPANTS' OVERALL SATISFACTION

Interviewees had experiences of both very high-quality case management support, and less effective support. A few described having both positive and negative experiences of caseworker interactions and support, and others noted they did not have a caseworker.

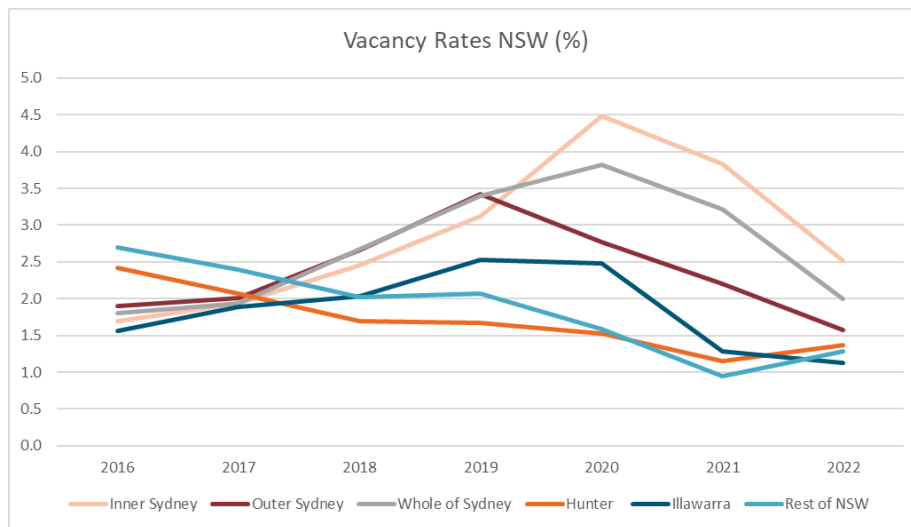
Almost half (41%, seven people) of the case study participants receiving Rent Choice described having at least one worker in a formal service provision role whose support they valued and some of these described having a number of support workers who collaborated to assist them. One quarter (29%) told us about periods where they had little or no contact from their caseworker, or about the seemingly abrupt withdrawal of support after the subsidy ended.

ACCESS TO BROKERAGE CAN HELP AVOID TENANCY FAILURE

There was some evidence from interviews with case study participants that access to brokerage funding was an important factor in tenancy sustainability. This was evident both at the start of a tenancy (when participants needed support to set up their household with whitegoods and furniture) and throughout it, when unexpected financial pressures or destabilising events occurred. Start Safely participants described how they had used brokerage to buy toys and clothing for their children, or clothing and toiletries for themselves.

COST OF HOUSING

Participants' experiences occurred in a context of fluctuating availability of rental properties over the period of the evaluation, as by rental vacancy data over the 2016–2022 period of the evaluation (Figure 14).

FIGURE 14. VACANCY RATES IN NSW (2016–2022)

Source: REINSW vacancy rates

https://www.reinsw.com.au/Web/Web/Members/Property_data/Vacancy_Rates_Survey.aspx

Participants were concerned that renting in the private market was their only viable option for housing. Five participants were open to the idea of living in social or public housing. However, these participants were also concerned that the wait time to be able to access this form of housing was long. One participant said they that would prefer to be in public housing, due to the lower cost.

4.6 ACHIEVEMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES

The linked data analysis considers service use over a year as an outcome; for example, welfare payments over the year. Outcomes are examined in the first and second year following the AHA that resulted in clients receiving Rent Choice. Outcomes for participants are included in the participant group even if they have exited the program.

Table 22 shows the short-term outcomes from the program logic and the linked administrative data measure for each outcome.

TABLE 22. SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES SPECIFIED IN THE PROGRAM LOGIC AND MEASURABLE IN THE LINKED ADMINISTRATIVE DATASET

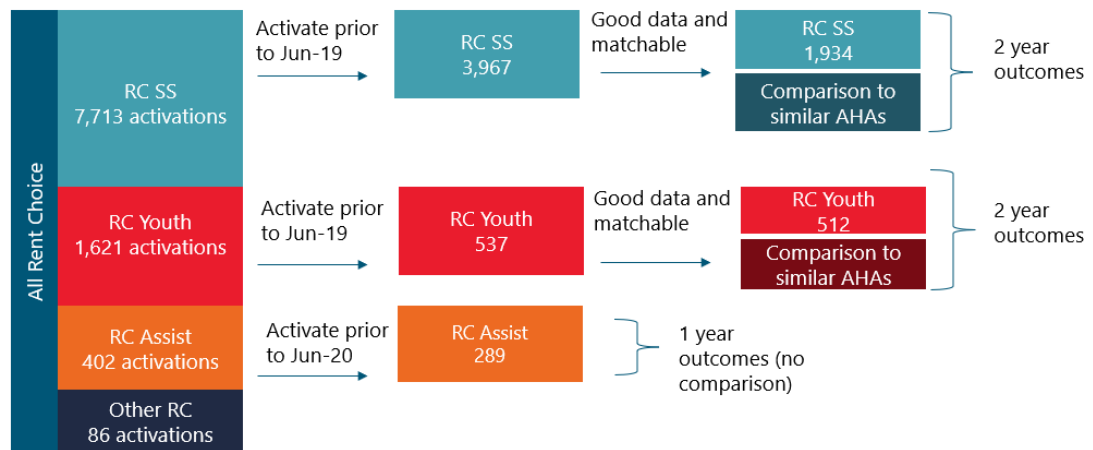
Domain	Outcome	Government service use proxy from linked administrative data
Health	Reduction in physical and/or mental barriers to training/workforce participation Improved personal wellbeing	Ambulatory mental health services Emergency department presentations Public hospital admissions PWI
Empowerment	Reduction in any physical barriers to training/workforce participation Increased confidence	PWI
Education and Skills	Improvement in highest education level	Enrolment in vocational education and apprenticeships and traineeships module
Economic	Engagement in employment	Income support benefit receipt and amounts
Home	Transition out/avoidance of social housing Progress towards fully independent housing Reduced use of SHS	Being on the NSW Housing Register Living in public or community housing Further applications for housing assistance SHS presentations
Safety	Reduced exposure to DFV	Not measurable with the linked data Court finalisations as defendant

4.6.1 RECIPIENT AND COMPARISON GROUPS

We used a difference in difference approach to compare outcomes for Rent Choice recipients with a matched comparison group. If there were differences in outcomes between the two groups prior to Rent Choice recipients starting to receive the subsidy, these are assumed to be fixed differences.

Box 1 details the recipient and comparison groups for each Rent Choice product type. More detail on the method can be found in Appendix 3. Figure 15 shows the size of the Rent Choice recipient and comparison groups, by product.

FIGURE 15. RENT CHOICE RECIPIENT GROUP SIZES, BY PRODUCT



RENT CHOICE START SAFELY AND RENT CHOICE YOUTH

We have used the same approach for Rent Choice Start Safely and Rent Choice Youth. We form a participant pool from all of those who made a Rent Choice (Start Safely or Youth) application prior to 30 June 2019 that resulted in an activation. We then carry out matching with the housing application pool to form a comparison group that looks similar in that it has the same demographics and housing application characteristics that predict activation of Rent Choice (Start Safely or Youth).

There is not always a match for all people in the participant pool. This is particularly true for Rent Choice Start Safely, where the income thresholds for eligibility are higher than for social housing. To ensure like-for-like comparisons, we excluded unmatched people.

Using this method, we formed the following recipient and comparison groups.

- Recipient group: Those who made a Rent Choice Youth or Start Safely application prior to 30 June 2019 that resulted in an activation and for whom a reasonable match could be made.
- Comparison group: Applicants selected from the housing application pool, matched one-to-one with the recipient group by characteristics that predict activation of Rent Choice Start Safely or Youth. This includes demographics and housing application characteristics.

Focusing on those activating Rent Choice before 30 June 2019 gives a two-year window to observe outcomes for the recipient and comparison groups in the linked data, which runs to 30 June 2021. We have reported both first and second year results.

The matching cannot fully account for selection effects. Rent Choice suitability is ultimately decided by a DCJ customer service officer, who recognises applicant characteristics that are not captured in administrative data. Therefore, there is likely residual bias, meaning the Rent Choice recipient group might be expected to have better outcomes than the comparison group even in the absence of Rent Choice. Further, the comparison group is drawn from those who receive a mixture of other housing support types. For example, some enter social housing and so are unlikely to require further short-term support. These factors need to be considered when interpreting differences in outcomes.

RENT CHOICE ASSIST

The recipient group is those who made a Rent Choice Assist application prior to 30 June 2020 that resulted in an activation and received a payment. We have used a later cut-off date compared to Rent Choice Start Safely and Rent Choice Youth to enable a group size large enough to report on. This means we are limited to reporting one-year outcomes.

We have not defined a comparison group for Rent Choice Assist because the sample size is too small to support statistically meaningful effect sizes when measuring differences in outcomes.

RENT CHOICE VETERANS AND RENT CHOICE TRANSITION

We have not reported on outcomes for Veterans and Transition because the number of recipients is so small that the analysis would not be meaningful (standard errors would be high) and potentially identify participants.

4.6.2 RENT CHOICE START SAFELY

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, when comparing recipients to the comparison group, Rent Choice Start Safely appears to:

- **stabilise housing in short-term:** Within one year, Start Safely recipients:
 - **presented less often for SHS supports** (a decrease of 43 percentage points for recipients, contrasted with a 34 percentage point decrease for the comparison group)
 - **made fewer applications for housing assistance** (the average number of AHAs per person for recipients decreased by 4.9, compared to 3.4 for the comparison group)
 - **used less TA** (the proportion of recipients making an AHA resulting in TA decreased by 27 percentage points compared to 21 percentage points for the comparison group)
 - **used Link2Home less** (the proportion of recipients making an AHA leading to Link2Home use decreased by 32 percentage points compared to 26 percentage points for the comparison group)
- **divert people from social housing:** Over two years, the impact has been to reduce entries to public housing by 15 percentage points and to community housing by eight percentage points. This both statistically significant and materially important
- **enable people to rent privately:** Within one year, Start Safely recipients':
 - **average annual income support payments increased** by \$1,899, compared to an increase of \$828 for the comparison group
 - **average annual CRA payments increased** by \$1,151 compared to an increase of \$119 for the comparison group
- **reduce court finalisations (as a defendant):** In the first 24 months of the subsidy, the proportion of Start Safely recipients with a court finalisation (as a defendant) decreased two percentage points, compared to no change for the comparison group.

All of these outcomes are important for decision making given that Rent Choice recipients achieve comparatively better outcomes at a relatively lower cost to the NSW Government (that is, providing Rent Choice is less expensive than providing social housing). Detailed results are available in 0 and Table 25.

In these tables, the first four columns show the service use for the recipient and comparison groups over the four quarters up to and including the quarter in which the client made the AHA that led to them receiving Rent Choice or, for the comparison group, an alternative, then the subsequent four quarters (first year). The remaining five columns present the results of the difference in difference analysis.

HOME

The outcome variables in the home domain are SHS presentations, AHAs, being on the housing waitlist, and tenancies in public or community housing.

Within one year, Rent Choice Start Safely recipients saw greater improvement in the home domain than the comparison group, particularly in terms of SHS presentations.

- The proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients with at least one SHS presentation decreased from 68% to 25%. This decrease (43 percentage points) was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 34 percentage points).
- SHS presentations are categorised as 'currently homeless' or 'at risk of homelessness'. The proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients with at least one 'currently homeless' SHS presentation decreased from 40% to 7%. This decrease (33 percentage points) was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 24 percentage points).

This is a positive sign that Rent Choice Start Safely is stabilising recipients' housing situation. However, the high rate of SHS presentations the year prior to receiving Rent Choice for Start Safely recipients (68%, compared to 63% for the comparison) is notable. This may reflect referral pathways; that is, a typical path to Rent Choice Start Safely begins by presenting to an SHS, making an AHA and then receiving Start Safely. Additionally, those in the comparison group who have entered social housing would be unlikely to access SHSs.

Over two years, Start Safely recipients continued to have better SHS outcomes although the differences are smaller, indicating that the comparison group improved to a greater extent in the second year. The proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients with at least one SHS presentation over the second year was 20%, down from 68% before receiving Rent Choice. This decrease of 49³⁹ percentage points was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 46 percentage points).

For AHA outcomes within one year, the proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients with at least one AHA presentation decreased from 100% to 40%. This 60 percentage point decrease was smaller than for the comparison group (67 percentage point decrease). However, some AHAs relate to private rental support (for example, bond loans). The average number of AHAs per person and the proportion making an AHA resulting in TA decreased more for Rent Choice Start Safely recipients. This indicates lower rates of acute need for support. Within one year the:

- average number of AHAs per person for Rent Choice Start Safely recipients was 1.0, down from 5.8 before receiving Rent Choice. This decrease of 4.9 was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 3.4)
- proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients making an AHA resulting in TA was 9%, down from 36% before receiving Rent Choice. This decrease of 27 percentage points was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 21 percentage points)
- proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients making an AHA resulting in a Link2Home referral was 8%, down from 40% before receiving Rent Choice. This

³⁹ Throughout this section some numbers do not add due to rounding.

- decrease of 32 percentage points was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 26 percentage points)
- proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients making an AHA resulting in a Waitlist status was 1% (down from 11%) and an urgent waitlist status was 1% (down from 4%). These decreases of 10 and three percentage points respectively were smaller than for the comparison group (decreases of 21 and 27 percentage points respectively). While the comparison group showed a larger decrease, many entered the waitlist in lieu of receiving Rent Choice Start Safely. This means the rates of further waitlist applications would be expected to decrease.

Within two years, the proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients with at least one AHA presentation decreased from 100% to 25%. This decrease of 75 percentage points was smaller than for the comparison group (decrease of 79 percentage points). The average number of AHAs per person for Rent Choice Start Safely recipients was 0.9, down from 5.8 before receiving Rent Choice. This decrease of 4.9 was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 3.9). Differences in changes in rates of making AHAs resulting in TA were not statistically significant.

Overall, this pattern in AHA outcomes reflects improvements for the Rent Choice Start Safely recipients over the first year, which remain steady of the second year. Outcomes improve less for the comparison group over the first year, then catch up somewhat over the second year.

Over the first year, the proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients who are on the waitlist fell to 74% (down from 80% before receiving Rent Choice). This decrease of six percentage points compares to an increase of six percentage points for the comparison group. Over the second year, the proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients who are on the waitlist further decreased to 61%. This decrease of 19 percentage points compared to before receiving Rent Choice is the same as for the comparison group. There are likely different mechanisms responsible for the decrease for Rent Choice Start Safely recipients and the comparison. Rent Choice Start Safely recipients may remain on the register but are expected to move into social housing (and so leave the waitlist) at a much lower rate than the comparison group.

Rent Choice Start Safely is acting successfully as a diversion from social housing, as indicated by:

- an **increase** (one percentage point) in the proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients who were in community housing within one year (compared with a 10 percentage point increase for the comparison group)
- a **decrease** (three percentage points) in the proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients who were in public housing within one year,⁴⁰ (compared with a 12 percentage point increase for the comparison group).

⁴⁰ Rent Choice Start Safely recipients should not be in social housing and receiving Rent Choice at the same time. However, there are some possible reasons why these proportions are not 0%. First, people who leave Rent Choice early are still included in the recipient group and the social housing measures aggregate over a year (that is, they ask whether clients are in community or public housing at any time over the year). Second, there can be lags in database updates to reflect a person exiting social housing.

These patterns continued to solidify in the second year of subsidy receipt.

Figure 16 shows the diversionary impact of Rent Choice Start Safely on rates of community housing. The red line shows the proportion of the comparison group in community housing – this increases strongly over the first year (from 11% to 20%), then more gradually over the second (20% to 22%). The solid blue line shows the proportion of the Rent Choice Start Safely recipient group in community housing (increasing slowly from 6% prior to receiving Rent Choice to 9% in the second year). The shaded area represents the impact of Rent Choice Start Safely. As explained earlier, using the difference in difference approach means allowing for the initial difference between the groups as a fixed offset. Allowing for this offset gives the recipient (expected) line. Over two years, the impact of Start Safely has been to reduce entries to community housing by eight percentage points.

FIGURE 16. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL PROPORTION OF RENT CHOICE START SAFELY RECIPIENTS AND COMPARISON GROUP IN COMMUNITY HOUSING

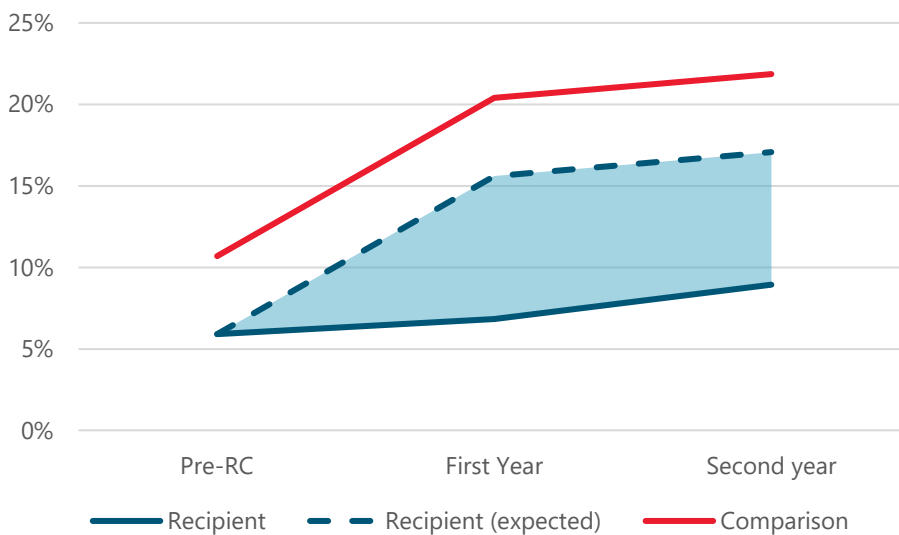
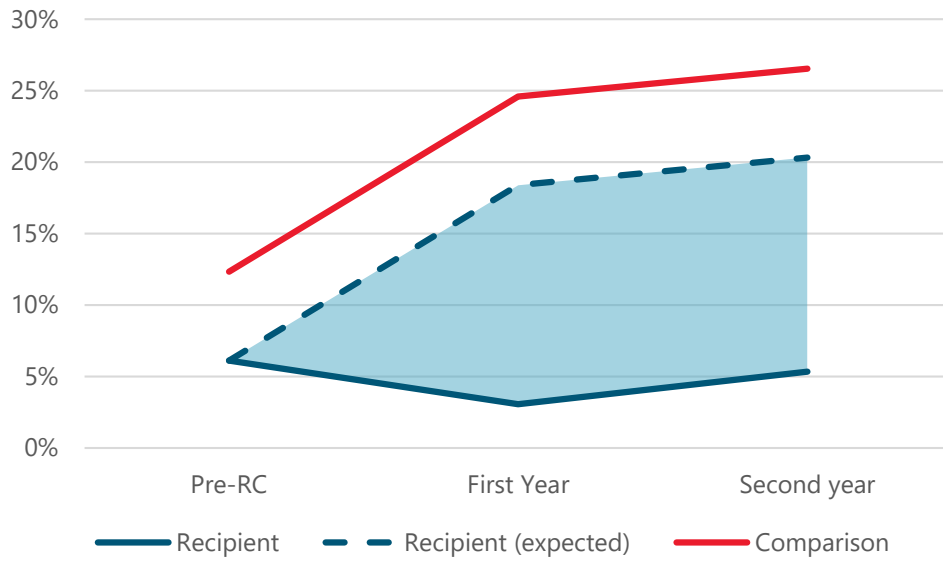


Figure 17 provides the same information for public housing. Over two years, the impact has been to reduce entries to public housing by 15 percentage points.

FIGURE 17. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL PROPORTION OF RENT CHOICE START SAFELY RECIPIENTS AND COMPARISON GROUP IN PUBLIC HOUSING



ECONOMIC

The outcome variables in the economic domain are income support and CRA. Start Safely recipients received more income support⁴¹ and rental assistance payments than the comparison group.⁴² They were also on these income benefits for longer.

As indicated in Rachael’s story (Chapter 3), this increase is likely due to changes in women’s ability to study or work when establishing an independent household; for example, they may assume sole caring responsibilities. It may also reflect the trauma associated with experiencing violence, which can result in people leaving the workforce temporarily or permanently, in a manner and at a time that is not obvious at application.

⁴¹ The second year payments are generally higher as they include COVID-19 supplements; however, these are included for both the recipient and comparison groups so the difference over two years is still a valid comparison.

⁴² High rates of CRA are to be expected among Start Safely recipients as they are renting privately.

TABLE 23. CHANGES IN INCOME SUPPORT AND CRA PAYMENTS OVER ONE AND TWO YEARS FOR RENT CHOICE START SAFELY RECIPIENTS AND A COMPARISON GROUP

Payment type	Within 12 months of subsidy receipt	Within 24 months of subsidy receipt
Income support	<p>Increased</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An average of 320 days, compared to an average of 291 days the year prior. This increase (29 days) was larger than the increase for the comparison group (15 days). Increase in average annual payments of \$1,899 (from \$15,832 to \$17,732). This is \$828 larger than for the comparison group (an increase of \$1,072, from \$16,083 to \$17,155). 	<p>Increased</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An average of 310 days, compared to an average of 291 in the year prior. This increase (19 days) was larger than the increase for the comparison group (five days). Increase in average annual payments of \$3,823 (from \$15,832 to \$19,655). This is \$1,283 larger than for the comparison group (an increase of \$2,539, from \$16,083 to \$18,623).
CRA	<p>Increased</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average payment of \$3,399, compared to \$2,248 in the year prior. This increase of \$1,151 was much larger than for the comparison group (increase of \$119, from \$2,001 to \$2,119). 	<p>Increased</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average payment of \$3,146, compared with \$2,248 in the year prior. This increase of \$898 was larger than for the comparison group (increase of \$15, from \$2,001).

JUSTICE (SAFETY)

The outcome variables in the justice domain are court finalisations for a proven offence (as a defendant) and time in custody.

Rent Choice Start Safely appears to have a small effect of reducing court finalisations (as a defendant).

- The proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients with a court finalisation for a proven offence within one year was 10%, down from 11% in the year prior to receiving Rent Choice. This decrease (one percentage point) is larger than for the comparison group.
- The proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients with a court finalisation for a proven offence within two years was 8%, down from 11% in the year prior to receiving Rent Choice. This decrease (two percentage points) is larger than for the comparison group (no change).

There is no significant difference in the proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients with time in custody.

HEALTH

The outcome variables in the health domain are emergency department presentations, days as an admitted patient, days as an admitted patient for potentially preventable diseases and the proportion using ambulatory mental health services.

The change in health outcomes for Rent Choice Start Safely participants is inconsistent. Within one year, the only statistically significant difference is for the average number of days as an admitted patient. Rent Choice Start Safely recipients averaged 2.1 days, down from 3.1 in the year prior to receiving Rent Choice. This decrease (one day) was larger than for the comparison (decrease of 0.2 days). Within two years, the only statistically significant difference is for the average number of emergency department presentations. Rent Choice Start Safely recipients averaged 1.1 presentations, down from 1.3 in the year prior to receiving Rent Choice. This decrease (0.2) was smaller than for the comparison (decrease of 0.4).

We assess these results as providing no evidence of any difference in changes in health outcomes for Rent Choice Start Safely participants compared to the comparison group.

TABLE 24. FIRST-YEAR OUTCOMES FOR THE RENT CHOICE START SAFELY RECIPIENT GROUP COMPARED WITH A MATCHED COMPARISON

Outcome (over a year)	Recipient		Comparison		Change over year		Diff. in diff.	P- value	Cohen 's d
	Pre- Rent Choice	First year	Pre- AHA	First year	Treat.	Comp.			
Number in group	1,932	1,932	1,907	1,907	1,932	1,907			
% with an SHS presentation	68%	25%	63%	29%	-43%	-34%	-9%	<0.01	0.2
% with an SHS presentation, as homeless	40%	7%	39%	15%	-33%	-24%	-8%	<0.01	0.2
% with an SHS presentation, as at risk	38%	20%	32%	14%	-19%	-18%	-1%	0.26	0.0
% with AHA	100%	40%	100%	33%	-60%	-67%	8%	<0.01	0.2
Avg. number of AHAs per person	5.8	1.0	4.8	1.4	-4.9	-3.4	-1.5	<0.01	0.2
Home % with AHA: temporary housing	36%	9%	38%	18%	-27%	-21%	-6%	<0.01	0.1
% with AHA: Link2home	40%	8%	41%	15%	-32%	-26%	-6%	<0.01	0.1
% with AHA: Waitlist	11%	1%	22%	1%	-10%	-21%	11%	<0.01	0.3
% with AHA: Waitlist – Urgent	4%	1%	29%	3%	-3%	-27%	24%	<0.01	0.6
% on Waitlist	80%	74%	76%	82%	-6%	6%	-12%	<0.01	0.3
% in community housing	6%	7%	11%	20%	1%	10%	-9%	<0.01	0.3
% in public housing	6%	3%	12%	25%	-3%	12%	-15%	<0.01	0.5
Economic % with income support	90%	90%	89%	89%	0%	0%	0%	0.50	0.0
Avg. # days on income support	291	320	294	309	29	15	14	<0.01	0.2
Avg. income support payments (\$)	15,832	17,732	16,083	17,155	1,899	1,072	828	<0.01	0.2
% with rental assistance	84%	90%	71%	70%	6%	-1%	6%	<0.01	0.2
Avg. rental assistance payments (\$)	2,248	3,399	2,001	2,119	1,151	119	1,032	<0.01	0.6
Justice % with a court finalisation for a proven offence	11%	10%	12%	13%	-1%	1%	-2%	0.03	0.1
% with time in custody	2%	2%	3%	4%	0%	1%	-1%	0.10	0.0
Health Avg. # emergency department presentations	1.3	1.1	1.4	1.3	-0.2	-0.1	-0.1	0.22	0.0
Avg. # days as admitted patient	3.1	2.1	3.3	3.2	-1.0	-0.2	-0.8	0.02	0.1
Avg. # days as admitted patient for preventable disease	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.0	-0.1	0.1	0.09	0.0
% using ambulatory mental health services	19%	15%	21%	18%	-4%	-2%	-1%	0.14	0.0

Source: Linked administrative outcomes dataset, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

Note: Bold p-values indicate significance at the 0.05 level. For statistically significant results (at the 0.05 level), green reflects an improvement in the outcome for the recipient group relative to the comparison and red reflects the converse. Some numbers do not add due to rounding.

TABLE 25. SECOND-YEAR OUTCOMES FOR THE RENT CHOICE START SAFELY RECIPIENT GROUP COMPARED WITH A MATCHED COMPARISON

Outcome (over two years)	Recipient		Comparison		Change to second year		Diff. in diff.	P- value	Cohen 's d
	Pre- Rent Choice	Second year	Pre- AHA	Second year	Treat.	Comp.			
Number in group	1,932	1,932	1,907	1,907	1,932	1,907			
% with an SHS presentation	68%	20%	63%	17%	-49%	-46%	-3%	0.05	0.1
% with an SHS presentation, as homeless	40%	6%	39%	8%	-33%	-32%	-2%	0.13	0.0
% with an SHS presentation, as at risk	38%	14%	32%	9%	-24%	-23%	-1%	0.22	0.0
% with AHA	100%	25%	100%	21%	-75%	-79%	4%	<0.01	0.1
Avg. number of AHAs per person	5.8	0.9	4.8	0.8	-4.9	-3.9	-1.0	<0.01	0.1
Home % with AHA: TA	36%	9%	38%	10%	-27%	-28%	2%	0.18	0.0
% with AHA: Link2home	40%	9%	41%	9%	-31%	-32%	1%	0.24	0.0
% with AHA: Waitlist	11%	1%	22%	1%	-10%	-21%	11%	<0.01	0.3
% with AHA: Waitlist – Urgent	4%	2%	29%	2%	-2%	-27%	25%	<0.01	0.6
% on Waitlist	80%	61%	76%	57%	-19%	-19%	0%	0.49	0.0
% in community housing	6%	9%	11%	22%	3%	11%	-8%	<0.01	0.3
% in public housing	6%	5%	12%	27%	-1%	14%	-15%	<0.01	0.4
Economic % with income support	90%	89%	89%	86%	-2%	-3%	1%	0.15	0.0
Avg. # days on income support	291	310	294	299	19	5	14	<0.01	0.1
Avg. income support payments (\$)	15,832	19,655	16,083	18,623	3,823	2,539	1,283	<0.01	0.2
% with rental assistance	84%	85%	71%	61%	1%	-9%	10%	<0.01	0.2
Avg. rental assistance payments (\$)	2,248	3,146	2,001	2,016	898	15	883	<0.01	0.4
Justice % with a court finalisation for a proven offence	11%	8%	12%	12%	-2%	0%	-3%	0.01	0.1
% with time in custody	2%	2%	3%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0.35	0.0
Health Avg. # emergency department presentations	1.3	1.1	1.4	1.1	-0.2	-0.4	0.1	0.03	0.1
Avg. # days as admitted patient	3.1	2.0	3.3	2.6	-1.1	-0.7	-0.4	0.20	0.0
Avg. # days as admitted patient for preventable disease	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.33	0.0
% using ambulatory mental health services	19%	13%	21%	16%	-6%	-4%	-2%	0.05	0.1

Source: Linked administrative outcomes dataset, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

Note: Bold p-values indicate significance at the 0.05 level. For statistically significant results (at the 0.05 level), green reflects an improvement in the outcome for the recipient group relative to the comparison and red reflects the converse. Some numbers do not add due to rounding.

4.6.3 RENT CHOICE YOUTH

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, when comparing recipients to the comparison group, Rent Choice Youth appears to:

- **stabilise housing in short-term:** Within one year Start Safely recipients:
 - **presented less often for SHS support:** The proportion of recipients with at least one SHS presentation decreased by 42 percentage points, compared to a 22 percentage point decrease for the comparison group.

- **made fewer applications for housing assistance:** The average number of AHAs made by recipients decreased by 3.9, compared to 2.6 for the comparison group.
- **divert people from social housing:** Over two years, the impact of Start Safely has been to reduce entries to public housing by nine percentage points and to community housing by five percentage points. This is both statistically significant and materially important.
- **enable people to rent privately:** Within one year, Rent Choice Youth recipients' **average annual CRA payments increased** by \$1,465 compared to an increase of \$415 for the comparison group.

All of these outcomes are important for decision making given that Rent Choice recipients achieve comparatively better outcomes at a relatively lower cost to the NSW Government (that is, providing Rent Choice is less expensive than providing social housing). Detailed results are available in **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.**

In these tables, the first four columns show the service use for the recipient and comparison groups over the four quarters up to and including the quarter in which the client made the AHA that led to them receiving Rent Choice or, for the comparison group, an alternative, then the subsequent four quarters (first year). The remaining five columns present the results of the difference in difference analysis.

HOME

The outcome variables in the home domain are SHS presentations, AHAs, being on the housing waitlist, and tenancies in public and community housing.

Within one year, Rent Choice Youth recipients saw greater improvement in the home domain than the comparison group, particularly in terms of SHS presentations.

- The proportion of Rent Choice Youth recipients with at least one SHS presentation decreased from 76% to 35%. This decrease of (42 percentage points)⁴³ was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 22 percentage points).
- SHS presentations are categorised as 'currently homeless' or 'at risk of homelessness'. The proportion of Rent Choice Start Safely recipients with at least one 'currently homeless' SHS presentation decreased from 50% to 10%. This decrease (40 percentage points) was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 20 percentage points).

This is a positive sign that Rent Choice Youth is stabilising recipients' housing situation. However, the same consideration of context is needed as for Start Safely. The rate of recipients' SHS presentations the year prior to receiving Rent Choice Youth is very high (76%, compared to 50% for the comparison). It is likely to reflect referral pathways (that is, a typical path to Rent Choice Start Safely begins by presenting to an SHS, making an AHA and then receiving Start Safely.)

⁴³ Throughout this section on the difference in difference analysis some numbers do not add due to rounding.

Within two years, the Rent Choice Youth recipient group continues to have better SHS outcomes than the comparison group, although the difference is smaller. Some decrease is to be expected given a proportion of the comparison group will have entered social housing and would be unlikely to require SHS support.

For AHA outcomes within one year, the proportion of Rent Choice Youth recipients with at least one AHA presentation decreased from 100% to 36%. This 64 percentage point decrease was smaller than for the comparison group (69 percentage point decrease). As with Start Safely, some AHAs relate to private rental support (for example, bond loans).

Within one year the:

- average number of AHAs per person for Rent Choice Youth recipients was 0.8, down from 4.6 before receiving Rent Choice. This decrease of 3.9 was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 2.6)
- proportion of Rent Choice Youth recipients making an AHA resulting in an urgent waitlist status was 1%, down from 2% before receiving Rent Choice. This decrease of one percentage point was smaller than for the comparison group (decrease of 19 percentage points). However, the very high rates in the year prior for the comparison group (21% compared with 2% for Rent Choice Youth participants) means this result is to be expected, particularly when some of the comparison group entered the waitlist in lieu of receiving Rent Choice
- rates of AHAs leading to temporary accommodation, a Link2Home referral or a (non-urgent) waitlist application were not significantly different between the two groups.

Within two years the:

- average number of AHAs per person for Rent Choice Youth recipients was 0.9, down from 4.6 before receiving Rent Choice. This decrease of 3.8 was larger than for the comparison group (decrease of 3.0)
- proportion of Rent Choice Youth recipients making an AHA resulting in a waitlist status was 1% (down from 23%) and an urgent waitlist status was 1.6% (down from 2.2%). These improvements (22 and one percentage point decreases respectively) are smaller than for the comparison group (decreases of 63 and 19 percentage points respectively). However, as with year one outcomes, the very high rates in the year prior to Rent Choice for the comparison group (64% and 21% compared to 23% and 2% for Rent Choice Youth participants) means this result is to be expected – some of the comparison group entered the waitlist, and subsequently social housing, in lieu of receiving Rent Choice
- rates of AHAs leading to temporary accommodation, a Link2Home referral or a (non-urgent) waitlist application were not significantly different between the two groups.

Over the first year, the proportion of Rent Choice Youth recipients who are on the NSW waitlist was 74%, down from 77% before receiving Rent Choice. This decrease of three percentage points compares to an increase of five percentage points for the comparison

group. Over the second year, the difference in the change was not statistically significant. Only small changes are expected for Rent Choice Youth recipients as they may remain on the waitlist. Changes for the comparison group reflect different dynamics. For example, they may enter the waitlist in lieu of Rent Choice, and they may then move into social housing (and so leave the waitlist) at a higher rate than Rent Choice Youth recipients.

Rent Choice Youth is acting successfully as a diversion from social housing, as indicated by:

- an increase (of one percentage point) in the proportion of Rent Choice Youth recipients who were in community housing within one year (compared with an eight percentage point increase for the comparison group)
- a decrease (of five percentage points) in the proportion of Rent Choice Youth recipients who were in public housing within one year (compared with a four percentage point increase for the comparison group).⁴⁴

On net, a small portion of Rent Choice Youth recipients left social housing while around one in eight people in the comparison group entered social housing (8% increase in community housing and 4% increase in public housing). These patterns continued in the second year of subsidy receipt.

Figure 18 shows the impact of Rent Choice Youth on rates of community housing; Figure 19 provides the equivalent information for public housing. The red line shows the proportion of the comparison group in community housing – this increases strongly over the first year (from 11% to 20%), then more gradually over the second (from 20% to 22%). The solid blue line shows the proportion of the Rent Choice Youth recipient group in community housing (increasing slowly from 6% prior to receiving Rent Choice to 9% in the second year). The shaded area represents the impact of Rent Choice Youth. Using the difference in difference approach means allowing for the initial difference between the groups as a fixed offset. Allowing for this offset gives the Recipient (expected) line. Over two years, the impact of Rent Choice Youth has been to reduce entries to community housing by five percentage points.

⁴⁴ Rent Choice Youth recipients should not be in social housing and receiving Rent Choice at the same time. However, there are some possible reasons these proportions are not 0%. First, people who leave Rent Choice early are still included in the recipient group and the social housing measures aggregate over a year (that is, they ask whether clients are in community or public housing at any time over the year). Second, there can be lags in database updates to reflect a person exiting social housing.

FIGURE 18. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL PROPORTION OF RENT CHOICE YOUTH RECIPIENTS AND COMPARISON GROUP IN COMMUNITY HOUSING

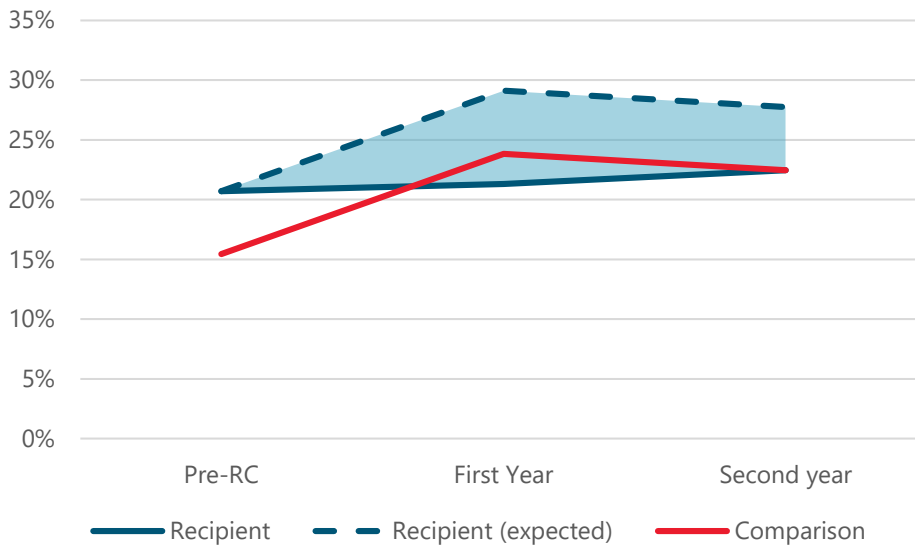
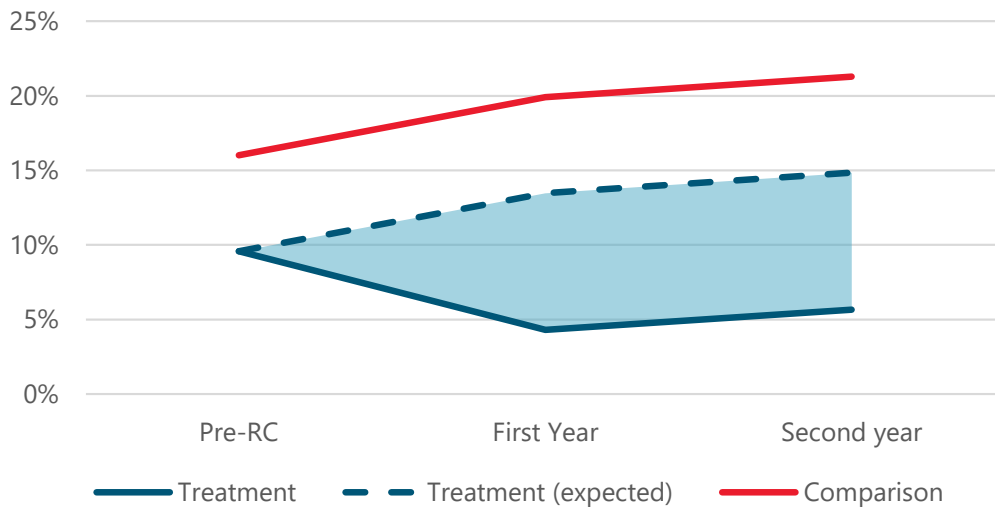


FIGURE 19. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL PROPORTION OF RENT CHOICE YOUTH RECIPIENTS AND COMPARISON GROUP IN PUBLIC HOUSING



ECONOMIC

In the economic domain we measure outcomes via income support and CRA. Overall, Rent Choice Youth results in slightly increased income support payments and increased CRA payments.

Within 12 months of receiving Rent Choice Youth, there were no statistically significant differences in the changes in income support between Rent Choice Youth recipients and the comparison group. Rent Choice Youth recipients were on income support for an average of 320 days, up from 288 in the year prior to receiving the subsidy. This increase of 32 days was

similar to that for the comparison (increase of 35 days). This represents an increase in average payments for Rent Choice Youth recipients of \$1,825 (from \$11,450 to \$13,276).

There was, however, a significant increase in Rent Choice Youth recipients' use of CRA. The average payment for Rent Choice Youth recipients was \$2,389, compared to \$924 in the year prior to receiving the subsidy. This increase of \$1,465 was much larger than for the comparison group (an increase of \$415, from \$817 to \$1,233). High rates of CRA are to be expected among Rent Choice Youth recipients as they are renting privately. The much larger increases than for the comparison indicate Rent Choice Youth is indeed enabling recipients to rent privately at a higher rate than the comparison group. Recipients are also successfully accessing the support available to them.

These results were similar over the second year of receiving Rent Choice Youth.

JUSTICE (SAFETY)

The outcome variables in the justice domain are court finalisations for a proven offence (as a defendant) and time in custody.

There were no statistically significant differences in the changes in outcomes between Rent Choice Youth participants and the comparison group. Of the Rent Choice Youth recipient group, 13% had a proven offence and 4% had time in custody in the year prior to receiving the subsidy. This was 10% and 3% in the first year of Rent Choice Youth.

HEALTH

The outcome variables in the health domain are emergency department presentations, days as an admitted patient, days as an admitted patient for potentially preventable diseases and the proportion using ambulatory mental health services.

The only statistically significant difference was in the change in number of days as an admitted patient over the second year. Rent Choice Youth recipients averaged 2.1, down from 2.4 in the year prior to receiving Rent Choice. This decrease of 0.3 was smaller than for the comparison (decrease of 2.9). The comparison group had a much higher average (6.2) in the year prior to Rent Choice. Given this and that there are no consistent effects across the different health outcomes measured, we assess this as providing no evidence of any difference in changes in health outcomes for Rent Choice Youth recipients compared to the comparison group.

TABLE 26. FIRST-YEAR OUTCOMES FOR THE RENT CHOICE YOUTH RECIPIENT GROUP COMPARED WITH A MATCHED COMPARISON

	Outcome (over a year)	Recipient		Comparison		Change over year		Diff. in diff.	P- value	Cohen 's d
		Pre-Rent Choice	First year	Pre- AHA	First year	Treat.	Comp.			
	Number in group	512	512	512	512	512	512			
	% with an SHS presentation	76%	35%	56%	34%	-42%	-22%	-20%	<0.01	0.3
	% with an SHS presentation, as homeless	50%	10%	40%	20%	-40%	-20%	-21%	<0.01	0.4
	% with an SHS presentation, as at risk	37%	24%	23%	15%	-12%	-9%	-4%	0.15	0.1
	% with AHA	100%	36%	100%	31%	-64%	-69%	5%	0.05	0.1
Home	Avg. number of AHAs per person	4.7	0.8	3.9	1.3	-3.9	-2.6	-1.3	<0.01	0.2
	% with AHA: TA	24%	7%	31%	17%	-17%	-13%	-4%	0.13	0.1
	% with AHA: Link2home	28%	7%	34%	16%	-20%	-18%	-2%	0.23	0.0
	% with AHA: Waitlist	23%	2%	64%	*	-21%	*	*	*	*
	% with AHA: Waitlist – urgent	2%	1%	21%	2%	-1%	-19%	18%	<0.01	0.6
	% on Waitlist	77%	74%	83%	88%	-3%	5%	-8%	<0.01	0.2
	% in community housing	21%	21%	15%	24%	1%	8%	-8%	<0.01	0.3
	% in public housing	10%	4%	16%	20%	-5%	4%	-9%	<0.01	0.3
	% with income support	95%	94%	95%	96%	-1%	1%	-1%	0.12	0.1
	Avg. # days on income support	288	320	288	323	32	35	-3	0.33	0.0
Economic	Avg. income support payments (\$)	11,450	13,276	12,652	14,759	1,825	2,107	-281	0.19	0.1
	% with rental assistance	71%	88%	49%	62%	16%	13%	4%	0.12	0.1
	Avg. rental assistance payments (\$)	924	2,389	817	1,233	1,465	415	1,049	<0.01	0.7
Justice	% with a court finalisation for a proven offence	13%	10%	18%	19%	-3%	1%	-3%	0.09	0.1
	% with time in custody	4%	3%	8%	8%	-1%	0%	-1%	0.18	0.1
Health	Avg. # emergency department presentations	1.4	1.5	1.8	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.36	0.0
	Avg. # days as admitted patient	2.4	2.4	6.2	4.7	0.0	-1.5	1.5	0.12	0.1
	Avg. # days as admitted patient for preventable disease	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.1	-0.1	0.10	0.1
	% using ambulatory mental health services	23%	23%	28%	25%	-1%	-3%	2%	0.22	0.0

Source: Linked administrative outcomes dataset, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

Note: Bold p-values indicate significance at the 0.05 level. For statistically significant results (at the 0.05 level), green reflects an improvement in the outcome for the recipient group relative to the comparison and red reflects the converse. Some results relating to small groups are suppressed (*).

TABLE 27. SECOND-YEAR OUTCOMES FOR THE RENT CHOICE YOUTH RECIPIENT GROUP COMPARED WITH A MATCHED COMPARISON

Outcome (over two years)	Recipient		Comparison		Change to second year		Diff. in diff.	P- value	Cohen 's d
	Pre- Rent Choice	Second year	Pre- AHA	Second year	Treat.	Comp.			
Number in group	512	512	512	512	512	512			
% with an SHS presentation	76%	26%	56%	21%	-50%	-35%	-15%	<0.01	0.3
% with an SHS presentation, as homeless	50%	11%	40%	12%	-39%	-28%	-11%	<0.01	0.2
% with an SHS presentation, as at risk	37%	18%	23%	11%	-19%	-13%	-6%	0.04	0.1
% with AHA	100%	25%	100%	23%	-75%	-77%	2%	0.23	0.0
Avg. number of AHAs per person	4.7	0.9	3.9	0.9	-3.8	-3.0	-0.9	0.02	0.1
Home % with AHA: TA	24%	10%	31%	13%	-15%	-18%	3%	0.18	0.1
% with AHA: Link2home	28%	10%	34%	13%	-17%	-21%	4%	0.14	0.1
% with AHA: Waitlist	23%	1%	64%	1%	-22%	-63%	41%	<0.01	0.9
% with AHA: Waitlist – urgent	2%	2%	21%	1%	-1%	-19%	19%	<0.01	0.6
% on Waitlist	77%	64%	83%	70%	-13%	-13%	0%	0.45	0.0
% in community housing	21%	22%	15%	26%	2%	11%	-9%	<0.01	0.3
% in public housing	10%	6%	16%	21%	-4%	5%	-9%	<0.01	0.2
Economic % with income support	95%	92%	95%	90%	-4%	-5%	1%	0.22	0.0
Avg. # days on income support	288	303	288	306	15	18	-2	0.38	0.0
Avg. income support payments (\$)	11,450	16,707	12,652	16,711	5,257	4,059	1,198	<0.01	0.1
% with rental assistance	71%	77%	49%	55%	5%	6%	-1%	0.44	0.0
Avg. rental assistance payments (\$)	924	2,053	817	1,304	1,129	487	641	<0.01	0.4
Justice % with a court finalisation for a proven offence	13%	11%	18%	17%	-1%	-1%	0%	0.47	0.0
% with time in custody	4%	3%	8%	8%	-1%	0%	0%	0.45	0.0
Health Avg. # emergency department presentations	1.4	1.5	1.8	1.6	0.1	-0.2	0.3	0.09	0.1
Avg. # days as admitted patient	2.4	2.1	6.2	3.1	-0.3	-3.1	2.9	<0.01	0.1
Avg. # days as admitted patient for preventable disease	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.45	0.0
% using ambulatory mental health services	23%	21%	28%	20%	-3%	-7%	4%	0.06	0.1

Source: Linked administrative outcomes dataset, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

Note: Bold p-values indicate significance at the 0.05 level. For statistically significant results (at the 0.05 level), green reflects an improvement in the outcome for the recipient group relative to the comparison and red reflects the converse. Some results relating to small groups are suppressed (*).

4.6.4 HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Throughout our qualitative analysis, we heard anecdotal evidence that Rent Choice may work better or worse for different cohorts. The most common (but untestable) hypothesis is that those with the determination to find education and employment were most likely to have a positive exist – this may be the determination the client brings to the program, or how the Rent Choice officer ensures support services are in place to foster this attitude. Unfortunately, this is a subjective variable that cannot be tested quantitatively in the linked data. We explored these hypotheses in the linked administrative dataset for the Interim Report.⁴⁵ There was no quantitative evidence to support the anecdotes. We also note that the QCA analysis was unable to find strong causal links between qualitative factors in the longitudinal case studies. The clear, but possibly unhelpful conclusion from a policy perspective is that the complexity of clients' lives are not reducible to a set of variables for which there are stable cause and effect relationships or predictors of success with the Rent Choice product (Section 3.4).

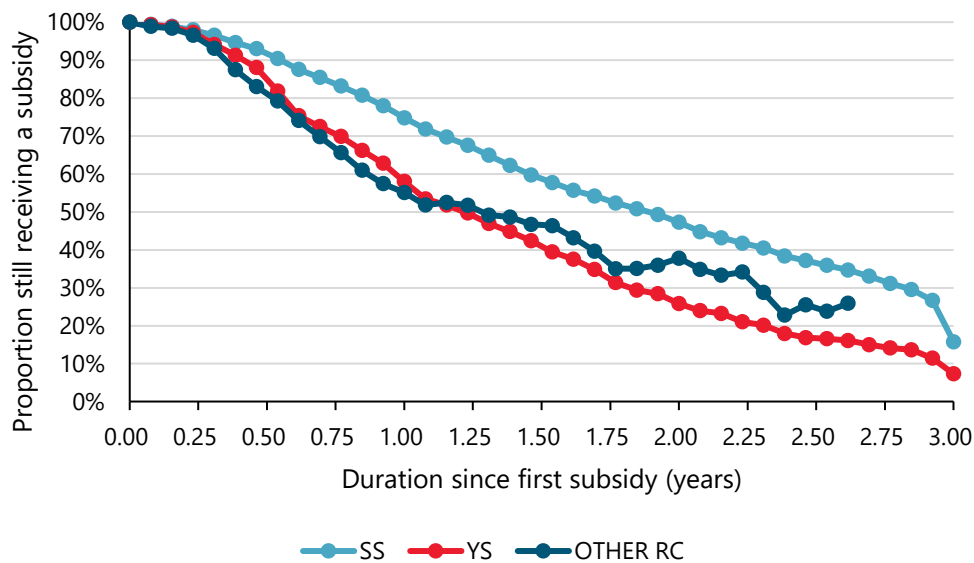
- **Recipients with a 12-month taper applied** tend to have better outcomes than those without. Better outcomes may not necessarily be as the result of tapering; rather, because the tapering policy allows for flexibility in application, it is likely that those recipients for whom a taper was applied were already demonstrating success, which was the reason for its use.
- **Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal and CALD recipients** experienced similar outcomes; none of the differences between the two groups were statistically significant. There were too few CALD clients for meaningful analysis.
- **Social housing history** is not associated with poorer outcomes. While it appears to be most often used by people not currently in social housing, and work effectively as a diversion from social housing, there was very little evidence from the outcomes analysis of different impacts of Rent Choice for people with and without a history in social housing.
- **Receiving additional subsidies**, particularly parenting payments, were not associated with better outcomes for Rent Choice recipients. There were very few differences between people who receive Start Safely or Youth subsidies and a parenting payment, and people who do not receive a parenting payment.
- **People participating in Opportunity Pathways** and receiving Rent Choice: There were too few people in this group for meaningful analysis.

⁴⁵ These analyses were not repeated for the Final Report because the cut-off dates for activation (up to 30 June 2019) for the participant groups meant there was very little change in the composition or size of the groups.

4.7 SUSTAINABILITY AND VARIABILITY OF OUTCOMES

The duration for which Rent Choice recipients receive a subsidy varies. As Figure 20 shows, people gradually exit over the course of the three years. Less than one-third (30%) receive their subsidy for the full three-year period.

FIGURE 20. PROPORTION OF RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS CONTINUING TO RECEIVE A SUBSIDY, BY DURATION SINCE FIRST SUBSIDY



The dataset includes a full year of administrative data for just over 3,000 Rent Choice recipients whose subsidy had ended. This section presents the analysis of the housing services this exited cohort used over that 12-month period.

0 shows the service use for this full group (all those whose Rent Choice subsidies finished before 30 June 2020) over the three time periods – the year before receiving Rent Choice, during Rent Choice and the year following the conclusion of Rent Choice.⁴⁶ While we are primarily interested in what happens after Rent Choice, the periods prior to and during Rent Choice subsidy receipt gives import context to the service use rates.

A key finding is that most (90%) Rent Choice recipients who received CRA during their subsidy period continue to receive it one year after the Rent Choice subsidy ended, which suggests their private rental tenancy has been sustained.

⁴⁶ Note that the period ‘during Rent Choice’ is on average 1.25 years, compared to the before and after periods, which are 1.0 years; rates are therefore not directly comparable.

TABLE 28. HOUSING SERVICE USE BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER RENT CHOICE, FOR RECIPIENTS WHOSE SUBSIDY FINISHED BEFORE 30 JUNE 2020

Housing service	The year before Rent Choice	During Rent Choice	The year following Rent Choice
% making an AHA	100%	39%	33%
Avg. # of AHAs per person making at least one	5.6	2.1	4.1
% approved to waitlist	17%	4%	4%
% approved for TA	33%	10%	13%
% approved for Rent Choice	100%	1%	13%
% leaving the waitlist	8%	14%	22%
% accessing SHS	66%	29%	21%
Avg. # of SHS, for those accessing at least once	7.7	4.4	5.6
% with CRA	82%	88%	79%
% with CRA following Rent Choice compared to during			90%
Avg. annual CRA, for those with some CRA	\$2,661	\$3,854	\$3,277
Avg. annual CRA, for those with some CRA relative to during Rent Choice rates	69%	100%	85%

We can observe the following for this full group of Rent Choice recipients.

- In the year leading up to receiving Rent Choice:
 - everyone made an AHA (by definition – an AHA led to them receiving Rent Choice)
 - 17% were approved to the waitlist (either waitlist or urgent)
 - 33% were approved for TA
 - 66% accessed SHS, on average 7.7 times for those accessing at least once
 - 82% received CRA. Those getting CRA received, on average, \$2,661 in these payments over the year.
- As would be expected, once receiving Rent Choice, recipients' housing situations appear to stabilise and their service use decreases – the rate of making AHAs, the average number of AHAs, rates of being approved to the waitlist and for TA, and rates of accessing SHS all show large decreases. The proportion receiving CRA increases slightly to 88%, and the average annual payments increase by 45%. This likely reflects people getting these payments continuously for the full period, rather than a higher payment rate.

- In the year following Rent Choice, former recipients' housing service use remains considerably lower than prior to receiving Rent Choice, and similar to that during the period of Rent Choice subsidy.
 - Only 33% make an AHA. There were on average 4.1 AHAs per person among those making at least one.
 - 4% were approved to the waitlist.
 - 13% were approved for temporary accommodation.
 - 13% were approved for a further Rent Choice product.
 - 22% left the housing register.
 - 21% accessed SHS, on average 5.6 times for those accessing at least once.
 - 79% received CRA over the year, with average annual payments of \$3,277 or \$63 per week.

Overall, in the year after finishing their Rent Choice subsidy, only one in three people return to make a new AHA, which is in line with their service use while receiving subsidies. Only 4% return and are approved to the Waitlist, which shows the diversion from social housing observed over the first and second year of receiving Rent Choice may be sustained over the longer term. The rate of returning and being approved for a new Rent Choice subsidy is 13% (these clients are possibly moving rental properties). Four in five (79%) receive CRA, noting this peaked at 88% during the period of Rent Choice, and 90% continue to receive their CRA payments. This means a large proportion of clients are continuing to rent privately after their Rent Choice subsidy ends.⁴⁷ Average annual CRA payments are 85% relative to during Rent Choice, suggesting many continue to receive these payments for the full year after their Rent Choice subsidy ends. This indicates most clients are sustaining their market rental after finishing Rent Choice.

4.7.1 VARIABILITY OF SUSTAINABILITY

We can also look at the same service use for different subgroups. Table 29 shows the housing service use for subgroups over the year following Rent Choice. Table 29 shows this information for subgroups based on previous service use. Following that, Table 30 shows the same information for subgroups by DCJ district.

In reporting for subgroups, we have aggregated across all Rent Choice types (apart from when reporting for Start Safely, Youth and Other Rent Choice). This is to ensure the size of the groups using particular services remains large enough to enable reporting (within the privacy protections).

For former Rent Choice recipients with some CRA relative to during Rent Choice, the key indicator of sustaining a private rental after Rent Choice is the average annual CRA (the final row in Table 29, Table 30 and Table 31).

⁴⁷ Clients in community housing are eligible to receive CRA, so this proportion includes those who have moved into community housing. Based on the data, nearly 10% of Rent Choice clients are in community housing while receiving the subsidy. We believe this is a limitation of the data being annual snapshots and potentially not always up to date for all household members. The proportion moving into community housing is small (about 2%) and adjusting for this would reduce the continued CRA rate to 86%. We have not adjusted this due to the data limitations.

- When looking at demographic groups (Table 29), the average annual CRA Assistance for those with some CRA relative to the rate they received during Rent Choice is mostly between 80% and 90%, suggesting most groups are experiencing similar rates of housing independence outcomes. The rate is slightly higher for longer duration subsidies (94% for those with two or more years of a Rent Choice subsidy) and Start Safely (87%) compared to shorter durations (87%) for those with less than one year of a Rent Choice subsidy and Youth (81%).
- Looking across service use groups (Table 30), this rate is slightly higher for those without a history of social housing (86%) compared to those in social housing within the last five years (80%). The rate is relatively low for people also participating in Opportunity Pathways (67%). The rate is highest for people not on income support (97%) compared to those on parenting payments (87%) and other forms of income support (84%). The rate is very high for those with deeper subsidies (110%),⁴⁸ but the other results are poorer, with 21% being approved for TA and 42% presenting to SHS. These rates are close to double the overall averages.
- There are no clear regional trends (Table 31). Nepean Blue Mountains, New England, South Eastern Sydney and South Western Sydney all have relatively high rates of continued CRA. However, New England sees a relatively high rate of subsequent return for TA (17%).

⁴⁸ Not all people are recorded as receiving CRA during Rent Choice, so the proportion can exceed 100%. For example, this can occur if on average people receive CRA for more weeks in the year subsequent to Rent Choice than during, or if people eligible for relatively high levels of CRA payments receive them subsequent to Rent Choice but not during.

TABLE 29. HOUSING SERVICE USE FOLLOWING RENT CHOICE, FOR RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS WHO FINISHED THEIR SUBSIDY BEFORE 30 JUNE 2020, BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

	Duration < 1 year	Duration 1–2 years	Duration 2+ years	Start Safely	Youth	Other Rent Choice	Not CALD	CALD	Age <25	Age 25–44	Age 45+	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
% making AHA	39%	28%	21%	33%	32%	26%	34%	24%	34%	33%	25%	43%	31%
Avg. # of AHA, for those making an AHA	4.2	3.9	3.8	4.1	4.3	4.6	4.2	3.6	4.1	4.2	3.4	4.3	4.0
% approved to waitlist	4%	3%	4%						4%	4%	3%	7%	3%
% approved for TA	16%	11%	7%	13%	16%	12%	14%	9%	16%	13%	7%	20%	12%
% approved for Rent Choice	17%	11%	4%									13%	13%
% leaving register	21%	24%	23%				23%	22%	25%	21%	19%	25%	21%
% accessing SHS	26%	16%	14%	20%	30%	10%	23%	12%	28%	19%	15%	31%	19%
Avg. # of SHS, for those accessing	5.6	5.9	5.0	5.4	6.6	5.1	5.7	5.3	6.5	5.1	5.4	5.9	5.5
% with CRA	78%	80%	84%	81%	74%	66%	79%	81%	80%	81%	68%	78%	80%
% with CRA following Rent Choice compared to during	91%	88%	91%	91%	85%	102%	90%	92%	89%	92%	84%	88%	91%
Avg. annual CRA, for those with CRA	\$3,077	\$3,334	\$3,796	\$3,424	\$2,380	\$2,933	\$3,259	\$3,608	\$2,939	\$3,455	\$3,087	\$3,098	\$3,308
Avg. annual CRA, for those with some CRA relative to during Rent Choice rates	87%	89%	94%	87%	81%	86%	85%	88%	82%	86%	87%	82%	86%

Note: Blank cells indicate numbers not reported as a privacy protection due to small underlying group sizes.

TABLE 30. HOUSING SERVICE USE FOLLOWING RENT CHOICE, FOR RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS WHO FINISHED THEIR SUBSIDY BEFORE 30 JUNE 2020, BY SERVICE USE GROUPS

	No history social housing (past 5 years)	Social housing history	Opportunity Pathways	Parents income support payment	Other income support	No income support	Not a deeper subsidy	Deeper Subsidy
% making AHA	30%	41%	28%	33%	33%	31%	32%	46%
Avg. # of AHA, for those making an AHA	4.0	4.3	4.5	4.1	3.9	4.8	4.0	5.3
% approved to waitlist	3%	7%		4%	4%	5%		
% approved for TA	11%	19%		13%	13%	14%	13%	21%
% approved for Rent Choice	13%	13%						
% leaving register	21%	26%		21%	23%	20%		
% accessing SHS	18%	31%	13%	21%	22%	17%	21%	42%
Avg. # of SHS, for those accessing	5.4	6.0	6.2	5.6	5.5	6.4	5.6	6.4
% with CRA	79%	79%	82%	89%	81%	24%	80%	65%
% with CRA following Rent Choice compared to during	90%	91%	101%	92%	87%	110%	90%	91%
Avg. annual CRA, for those with CRA	\$3,333	\$3,077	\$2,949	\$3,553	\$2,933	\$2,841	\$3,288	\$2,807
Avg. annual CRA, for those with some CRA relative to during Rent Choice rates	86%	80%	67%	87%	84%	97%	85%	110%

Note: Blank cells indicate numbers not reported as a privacy protection due to small underlying group sizes.

TABLE 31. HOUSING SERVICE USE FOLLOWING RENT CHOICE, FOR RENT CHOICE RECIPIENTS WHO FINISHED THEIR SUBSIDY BEFORE 30 JUNE 2020, BY DISTRICT

	Central Coast	Hunter	Illawarra Shoalhaven	Mid North Coast	Missing	Murrumbidgee	Nepean Blue Mountains	New England	Northern NSW	Northern Sydney	South Eastern Svdnev	South Western Svdnev	Southern NSW	Sydney	Western NSW	Western Sydney
% making AHA	31%	32%	32%	36%	23%	23%	28%	46%	40%	28%	31%	32%	34%	41%	36%	29%
Avg. # of AHA, for those making an AHA	3.7	4.0	4.2	4.1	5.5	3.4	3.8	3.9	3.6	3.8	3.0	4.3	4.7	6.2	3.0	4.6
% approved to waitlist																
% approved for TA	11%	16%	12%	14%	11%	14%	12%	17%	15%	15%	7%	11%	16%	18%	15%	13%
% approved for Rent Choice																
% leaving register																
% accessing SHS	15%	26%	23%	25%	24%	17%	18%	24%	29%	13%	18%	15%	32%	33%	40%	16%
Avg. # of SHS, for those accessing	8.4	5.7	6.0	5.2	5.7	3.1	5.7	6.3	5.1	3.0	4.7	5.2	5.2	12.2	5.1	4.1
% with CRA	84%	83%	80%	89%	75%	69%	80%	78%	87%	66%	73%	80%	69%	69%	73%	77%
% with CRA following Rent Choice compared to during	89%	91%	88%	98%	86%	77%	91%	88%	96%	94%	89%	93%	81%	81%	87%	89%
Avg. annual CRA, for those with CRA	\$ 3,343	\$ 3,088	\$ 3,169	\$ 3,454	\$ 3,195	\$ 2,803	\$ 3,318	\$ 3,294	\$ 3,307	\$ 3,037	\$ 3,092	\$ 3,484	\$ 2,986	\$ 2,984	\$ 3,159	\$ 3,355
Avg. annual CRA, for those with some CRA relative to during Rent Choice rates	85%	81%	83%	86%	93%	79%	88%	87%	82%	84%	86%	86%	79%	85%	84%	85%

Note: Blank cells indicate numbers not reported as a privacy protection due to small underlying group sizes

4.8 COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

4.8.1 APPROACH

This was an ex-post Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) that incorporates outcomes identified from the linked administrative data analysis, together with estimates of future costs and benefits.

The CBA has been prepared from the perspective of the Australian community, in this case being primarily NSW citizens, the NSW Government and the Australian Government.

The analysis covers the implementation of Rent Choice over the five-year period 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021. During this period, there were 9,822 Rent Choice activations. The analysis period, which reflects a mix of actual and estimated costs and benefits from the 9,822 Rent Choice activations, extends beyond 30 June 2021 to capture relevant costs and benefits attributable to the 9,822 Rent Choice activations.

Costs and benefits are expressed in 2020–2021 prices with the present value of cost and benefit streams calculated after applying a social discount rate of 7%. Sensitivity testing has been undertaken at 3% and 10%. The results of these analyses are presented in the Appendices (Volume 2).

Those costs and benefits that cannot be quantified and monetised have been described in qualitative terms.

Consistent with the practice recommended by the NSW Government,⁴⁹ transfer payments (for example, income support payments and CRA) are excluded because they have no impact on the net benefits of the program: the benefits to one group are offset by costs to other groups. Distributional impacts on the various groups impacted (primarily the Australian Government and NSW citizens) are shown separately.

4.8.2 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Summary results of the CBA are presented for the Rent Choice program in 0 and on a 'per Rent Choice recipient' basis in Table 34.

The summary results are presented for both the Rent Choice Start Safely and Rent Choice Youth products, which represent 95% of the 9,822 Rent Choice activations over the five-year period 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

The estimated overall BCR for Rent Choice based on DCJ guidance was 0.9 with an NPV of negative \$29.5 million. The present value of quantifiable costs was estimated at \$251.5 million and the present value of quantifiable benefits at \$222.0 million.

⁴⁹ NSW Government Guide to Cost-Benefit Analysis (TPP17-03).

The benefits included \$186.9 million in reduced use of social housing, \$22.6 million in reduced use of health services, \$8 million in reduced use of homelessness services and \$4.4 million in reduced costs to the criminal justice system.

More detailed analysis at the product level (Start Safely and Youth) found that both products had the same BCR of 0.9.

In estimating the benefits of reduced use of social housing, unit cost estimates were applied for public and community housing that have been developed by DCJ for comparable use in the appraisal and evaluation of programs across the department. These unit costs (\$8,634 for community housing and \$8,150 for social housing) do not include the opportunity cost of funds tied up in the capital (land and other assets) used to provide social housing (that is, the return that could have been generated if the funds were employed in their next best use).⁵⁰

If the ROGS 2021 net recurrent expenditure per dwelling on public housing of \$48,159 (which includes user cost of capital) were applied instead,⁵¹ this would give rise to significantly higher benefit values for reduced use of social housing and in turn significantly higher estimates of the BCR and NPV for Rent Choice of 4.4 and \$864.3 million respectively.

This is a significant issue in the appraisal and evaluation of social housing programs as a full-cost approach will almost always preference programs that seek to divert people away from social housing. In other words, if the choice is to assist a person with Rent Choice or provide no support, then on the quantifiable economic benefits the costs are greater than the benefits. If the other possible benefits that are difficult to quantify, such as being free of the experience of domestic violence, are considered then the value may well exceed the cost (i.e., the BCR may exceed 1.0). Whether or not the provision of housing services should be viewed primarily in terms of the costs and quantifiable economic benefits to the broader community, or through a public goods perspective is debated within the economic literature. To put this economic finding in a broader perspective, the provision of private rental assistance for a person escaping domestic violence could be compared with child protection services. It is unlikely that child protection would be ceased simply because it failed to generate a positive cost benefit ratio. If we consider that instead of providing Rent Choice, the NSW Government may provide social housing to the recipient, then Rent Choice provides far better value for money than social housing.

Rent Choice also results in an increase in income support payments and rental assistance payments made by the Commonwealth of \$15.2 million and \$13.8 million respectively, with a corresponding increase in income support and rental assistance received by NSW citizens. Both of these are transfer payments (Table 33 and Table 35).

The sensitivity analysis indicates an increase in NPV/BCR at a 3% social discount rate (to \$25.6 million and 1.1 respectively) and a decrease in NPV/BCR at a 10% discount rate (to negative \$61 million and 0.8 respectively).

⁵⁰ Report on Government Services 2013, 2.14.

⁵¹ Report on Government Services 2021, Part G, Section 18. Latest update: 3 June 2021, Table 18A.43.

TABLE 32. SUMMARY OF CBA RESULTS FOR RENT CHOICE WITH A DISCOUNT RATE OF 7% APPLIED (\$ MILLION)

Category	Start Safely	Youth	Other	Total
Present value (2020–2021) of costs				
Housing subsidy	\$123.7	\$14.6	\$7.3	\$145.6
Housing supports				
- Casework	\$64.8	\$13.6	\$4.1	\$82.5
- Brokerage	\$15.3	\$3.2	\$1.0	\$19.5
Program management costs	\$2.4	\$1.3	\$0.2	\$3.9
Total costs	\$206.3	\$32.7	\$12.6	\$251.5
Present value (2020–2021) of benefits				
Reduced use of public housing	\$95.0	\$12.2	\$7.7	\$114.9
Reduced use of community housing	\$55.2	\$13.0	\$3.9	\$72.0
Reduced use of SHS	\$3.3	\$4.2	\$0.5	\$8.0
Reduced use of health services	\$22.6			\$22.6
Avoided criminal justice system costs	\$4.4			\$4.4
Total benefits	\$180.4	\$29.4	\$12.2	\$222.0
NPV	-\$25.8	-\$3.3		-\$29.5
BCR	0.9	0.9		0.9

TABLE 33. TRANSFER PAYMENTS FOR RENT CHOICE WITH A DISCOUNT RATE OF 7% APPLIED (\$ MILLION)

Category	Start Safely	Youth	Other	Total
Increased income support payments (Commonwealth)	-\$14.0	-\$1.2		-\$15.2
Increased rental assistance payments (Commonwealth)	-\$11.5	-\$2.4		-\$13.8
Increased income support received (NSW citizens)	\$14.0	\$1.2		\$15.2
Increased rental assistance received (NSW citizens)	\$11.5	\$2.4		\$13.8

TABLE 34. SUMMARY OF CBA RESULTS FOR RENT CHOICE WITH A DISCOUNT RATE OF 7% APPLIED (\$ MILLION), PER RECIPIENT

Category	Start Safely	Youth	Other	Total
Housing subsidy	\$16,041	\$8,980	\$14,914	\$14,820
Housing supports				
- Casework	\$8,403	\$8,403	\$8,403	\$8,403
- Brokerage	\$1,986	\$1,986	\$1,986	\$1,986
Program management costs	\$311	\$784	\$427	\$395
Total costs	\$26,741	\$20,153	\$25,730	\$25,603
Present value (2020–2021) of benefits				
Reduced use of public housing	\$12,311	\$7,545	\$15,844	\$11,700
Reduced use of community housing	\$7,152	\$7,994	\$7,994	\$7,333
Reduced use of SHSs	\$425	\$2,580	\$1,121	\$815
Reduced use of health services	\$2,928	\$0	\$0	\$2,299
Avoided criminal justice system costs	\$576	\$0	\$0	\$452
Total benefits	\$23,392	\$18,119	\$24,958	\$22,599
NPV	-\$3,349	-\$2,033		-\$3,004
BCR	0.9	0.9		0.9

TABLE 35. TRANSFER PAYMENTS FOR RENT CHOICE WITH A DISCOUNT RATE OF 7% APPLIED (\$ MILLION), PER RECIPIENT

Category	Start Safely	Youth	Other	Total
Increased income support payments (Commonwealth)	\$1,812	\$766		\$1,550
Increased rental assistance payments (Commonwealth)	\$1,486	\$1,455		\$1,407
Increased income support received (NSW citizens)	\$1,812	\$766		\$1,550
Increased rental assistance received (NSW citizens)	\$1,486	\$1,455		\$1,407

5. OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS: DETAILED FINDINGS

This chapter presents the evidence from all stages of the evaluation (process, outcomes and economic) to answer the key evaluation questions for Opportunity Pathways. It considers the implementation and outcomes of the program from commencement (1 March 2019) to 30 June 2021.

Opportunity Pathways is a support program to assist social housing applicants, tenants and their household members, and Rent Choice subsidy recipients who aspire to and have capacity to, with the appropriate support, find or increase their employment. It seeks to assist these people in overcoming barriers to education and employment; to increase their economic participation through gaining, increasing or retaining employment; and to facilitate them to make positive exits from social housing and/or achieve their housing independence goals.

A review of the program design and providers' performance was done in August 2020. Following the review, up to 30% of the contracted employment targets were converted to education and training outcomes to recognise further education and work experience as a stepping stone towards employment. From 1 July 2022, a redesigned version of the program has been operating in South Western Sydney, New England, Hunter Central Coast and Western NSW.⁵²

The scope of the evaluation and the evidence and findings presented against the key evaluation questions (Table 36) in this chapter are limited to the original Opportunity Pathways program.

⁵² These locations were identified by the design and performance review as having the most established referral networks and program outcomes.

TABLE 36. ANSWERS TO KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS

Key evaluation question	Opportunity Pathways
How well is Opportunity Pathways reaching its target population?	<p>Between 1 March 2019 and 30 June 2021, program data suggest a total of 5,264 people were referred to Opportunity Pathways, of which 3,471 people were determined to be suitable and enrolled. This equates to an enrolment rate of 60%, which has been fairly stable over time. The referral and enrolment rates vary substantially across Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) districts, which is likely to reflect factors including the extent to which the program was promoted across the referral network, and the strength of the providers' referral networks. Both these factors are likely to reflect the relative experience of the program providers in the employment services sector.</p> <p>Young people are the largest Opportunity Pathways recipient group (37% aged 16–25 years), but there are substantial numbers of older participants (13% aged 46–55 and 5% aged 55+). Most clients were female (61%) and aged between 16 and 35 years (61%). One quarter (26%) of clients were Aboriginal. Most clients were living in social housing (42%) and on the Housing Register (29%). Approximately one quarter (27%) of Opportunity Pathways clients were living in a private rental property and also receiving Rent Choice.</p>
What outcomes are being achieved by clients and what degree of variability are there in these outcomes?	<p>In comparison to outcomes prior to participation (including regression controls to account for natural changes over time) data show a significant improvement in three of the seven Outcome Framework domains: home, economic and justice.</p> <p>Participation in Opportunity Pathways is associated with a substantive and statistically significant reduction in SHS presentations ($p < 0.01$). We estimate that there is a 45% reduction in SHS presentations in the year following participation in Opportunity Pathways. However, this may be confounded by participants' housing situation stabilising around the time of referral. For example, participants seek SHS support, and this triggers government support, which stabilises their housing situation, after which they become eligible for and are referred to</p>

Key evaluation question**Opportunity Pathways**

Opportunity Pathways. There is no significant impact for people being in public or community housing, which suggests that people are not transitioning out of social housing as a result of participating in the program.

In terms of independence from income support, the data show that 18% of Opportunity Pathways participants are off benefits after two years, compared to 13% who were expected to be. The reduction in payments increases in the first 18 months after referral, then stabilises to a reduction of around \$292 per quarter. The reduction is due to a combination of participants coming off income support entirely or receiving a reduced amount due to increases in earned income.

At the end of June 2021, 37% of participants who had been in the program for at least half a year had achieved a 13- or 26-week employment, education or training outcome. Rates were not markedly higher for those who had been in longer than a year, although these participants would have been more affected by COVID-19-related lockdowns in 2020 (outcome rates may have been higher for earlier entrants otherwise).

More than half (60%) of participants worked 20 or more hours per week, suggesting that most participants who achieve outcomes sit well above the minimum target. For those who gained employment while in the program, more than half (54%) achieved casual employment, another quarter (25%) achieved permanent part-time employment and one in five (18%) achieved permanent full-time employment. A very small number of clients (12 people) sustained unpaid work for 13 weeks.

A very small proportion (3.4%) of the Opportunity Pathways clients who started the program in the last 12 months have education outcomes, compared to almost one in five (16%) of the clients who started more than 15 months ago achieving education outcomes (mostly within the first six months of the program). This is likely to be the result of factors external to the program (including changes in the employment market) and internal to it (including changes to the program design).

There were no statistically significant changes in health outcomes as the result of participating in Opportunity Pathways. Participation is associated with a significant reduction in court finalisations, estimated at 12%.

Key evaluation question	Opportunity Pathways
<p>What evidence is there to confirm hypotheses about key mechanisms (including particular products or services) by which the program works, what features, or context determine if they work, and for which type of clients do they work best?</p>	<p>The evaluation suggests that Opportunity Pathways is effective because it provides a sufficient quantum of support to participants who have a ‘voice’ in setting goals and objectives.</p> <p>The key causal mechanism is the motivation of potential participants. This requires delivery mechanisms that are adept at identifying and referring appropriate clients.</p> <p>Extensive analysis of patterns in linked data and across the case studies using Qualitative Comparative Analysis did not confirm any specific hypothesis about whom is more or less able to be assisted by Opportunity Pathways beyond the most basic casual mechanism. Interestingly, the results do indicate those on longer term benefits were relatively more likely to reduce their reliance on income support. We tested the inclusion of income support duration of greater than two years as a main effect, as well as an interaction with the program effect. This gives an estimated reduction of \$310 per quarter for longer duration participants, compared to a reduction of \$70 per quarter for shorter duration participants (on benefits for less than two years). However, the baseline estimate for the longer duration participants was also \$1,510 more per quarter than for the shorter duration participants.</p>
<p>How do clients experience the program?</p>	<p>Opportunity Pathways participants tend to report high levels of satisfaction – although there are substantial gaps in program data exit surveys. When participants are satisfied, it is because they obtained enough support from a person who sought to understand their goals and aspirations rather than focus on short-term employment outcomes. Program data quality issues preclude direct testing of the relationship between the quantum of support provided and satisfaction with case plan goals and employment outcomes.</p>
<p>What implications can be drawn from the outcomes, including ‘validation’ and contextualisation of findings with clients and communities?</p>	<p>Overall, Opportunity Pathways can work for people who are motivated to work, and for whom other obstacles to finding employment can be overcome.</p> <p>Participants who have been unemployed longer term may benefit to a greater degree than the short-term unemployed. This is likely to reflect the more ‘client-centred’ and long-term focus of Opportunity Pathways in comparison to the shorter-term focus of Commonwealth employment services.</p>

Key evaluation question	Opportunity Pathways
What have been the costs and benefits of assisting clients with the program?	<p>The estimate of the overall benefit-cost ratio (BCR) for Opportunity Pathways based on DCJ guidance was 1.4 with a net present value (NPV) of positive \$14.6 million. The present value of quantifiable costs was estimated at \$32.9 million, and the present value of quantifiable benefits at \$47.5 million.</p> <p>The benefits included \$23.4 million in additional income to NSW citizens (net of additional rent payments to the NSW Government) and \$5.5 million in additional lifetime earnings for NSW citizens arising from enrolments in vocational education. Benefits also included \$7.8 million in additional rental payments to the NSW Government, \$4.9 million in reduced use of SHS, \$3.9 million in reduced costs to the criminal justice system and \$2.2 million in reduced use of health services.</p>

5.1 REACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Between 1 March 2019 and 30 June 2021, program data suggest a total of 5,264 people were referred to Opportunity Pathways, of which 3,471 people were determined to be suitable and enrolled. This equates to an enrolment rate of 60%, which has been fairly stable over time (Table 37). The referral and enrolment rates vary substantially across Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) districts, which is likely to reflect factors including the extent to which the program was promoted across the referral network, and the strength of the providers' referral networks. Both these factors are likely to reflect the relative experience of the program providers in the employment services sector.

TABLE 37. OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS REFERRALS AND ENROLMENTS, BY DCJ DISTRICT

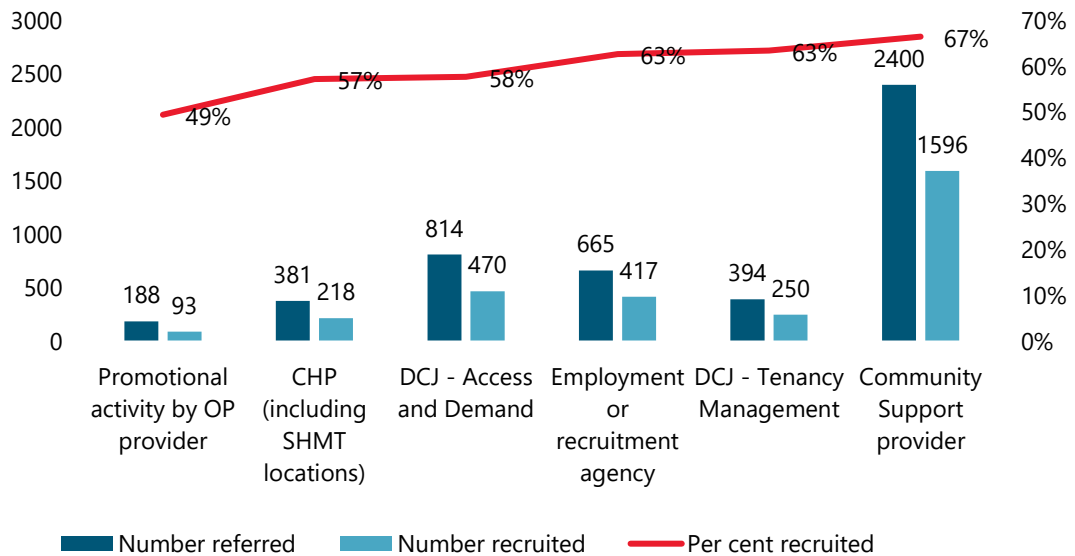
District	Number referred 2019–2020	Number referred 2020–2021	Number enrolled 2019–2020	Number enrolled 2020–2021	Total referred	Total enrolled	Total enrolment rate
Far West	15	15	14	15	30	29	97%
Hunter Central Coast	737	233	376	136	970	512	53%
Illawarra Shoalhaven	283	154	192	127	437	319	73%
Mid North Coast	438	119	201	67	557	268	48%
Murrumbidgee	24	52	20	51	76	71	93%
Nepean Blue Mountains	100	144	26	70	244	96	39%
New England	102	164	66	101	266	167	63%
Northern NSW	145	150	152	148	295	300	102%
Northern Sydney	96	112	75	74	208	149	72%
South East Sydney	133	220	97	144	353	241	68%
South Western Sydney	351	461	158	186	812	344	42%
Southern NSW	17	85	13	88	102	101	99%
Sydney	142	230	98	148	372	246	66%
Western NSW	33	145	31	115	178	146	82%
Western Sydney	97	267	87	97	364	184	51%
Total	2713	2551	1606	1567	5264	3173	60%

Source: Unlinked program data, 1 April 2019 to 30 June 2021.

Note: Figures for individual districts should be treated with caution, as can be seen from the enrolment rate exceeding 100% in one district.

About half of the referrals (50%, 2,400 referrals) were from community support providers, and around one quarter (28%, 1,208 referrals) came from DCJ. The enrolment rates were also fairly stable by referral source, with the highest numbers and highest enrolment rate (67%) from Community Support Providers (Figure 21).

FIGURE 21. OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS REFERRALS AND ENROLMENTS, BY MAJOR REFERRAL SOURCE



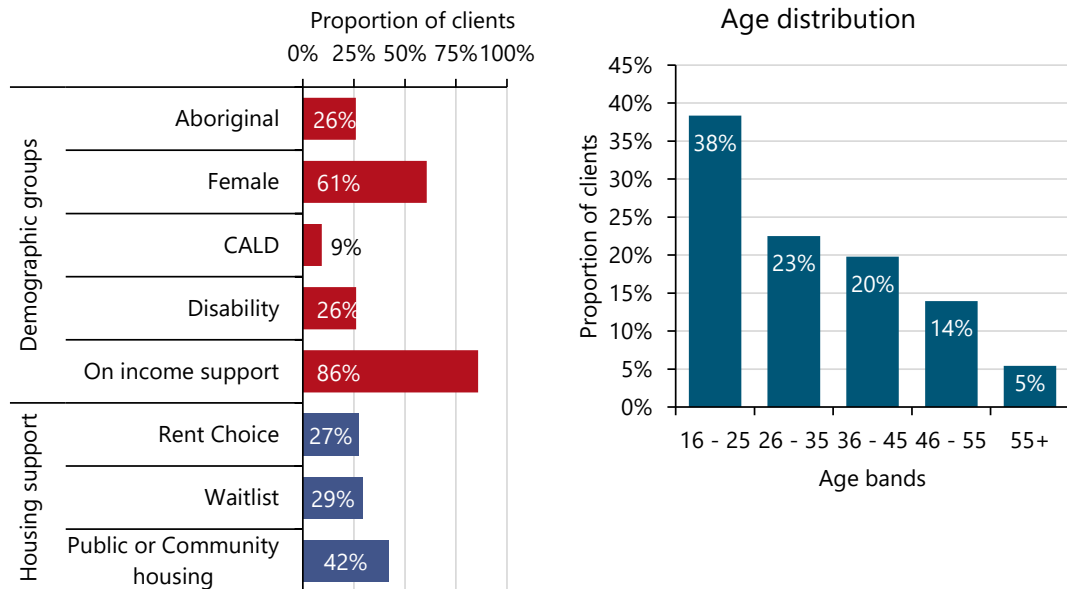
Young people are the largest Opportunity Pathways recipient group (37% aged 16–25 years), but there are substantial numbers of older participants (13% aged 46–55 and 5% aged 55+).

The demographic characteristics of participants provided here are for the 2,742 people who were referred to the program and for whom data linkage was possible – see Figure 22.⁵³

Most clients were female (61%) and aged between 16 and 35 years (61%). One quarter (26%) of clients were Aboriginal. Most clients were living in social housing (42%) and on the Housing Register (29%). Approximately one quarter (27%) of Opportunity Pathways clients were living in a private rental property and also receiving Rent Choice.

⁵³ There are some issues with Opportunity Pathways program data quality and completeness. The linked administrative dataset has a more comprehensive view of Opportunity Pathways clients because it draws on data sources beyond the program data. However, the lack of program data completeness affected the data linkage match rate, so the cohort of Opportunity Pathways participants in the linked administrative dataset is less than the total number of people referred to and enrolled in Opportunity Pathways.

FIGURE 22. SUMMARY OF OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS



5.2 IMPLEMENTATION

Our interviews with stakeholders occurred between August and November 2020. Some of these interviews were conducted as part of a separate program design and performance review DCJ commissioned ARTD to do. At the time of interview, many non-client stakeholders were uncertain about how Opportunity Pathways would be delivered going forward. This uncertainty is now resolved, with a redesigned version of the program operating in South Western Sydney, New England, Hunter Central Coast and Western NSW since 1 July 2022.

Analysis of all data sources indicated that Opportunity Pathways was challenged during its initial implementation by:

- rapid implementation
- lack of maturity of referral network and recruitment approaches
- lower than expected performance against contracted targets
- external factors, including the impact of COVID-19
- incomplete and invalid performance monitoring data.

These issues are detailed below.

5.2.1 RAPID IMPLEMENTATION

For some providers, there was only a matter of days between contract execution and program commencement. These compressed timelines were due to the NSW Government

entering caretaker mode⁵⁴ ahead of the 2019 state election. Although the contracted service providers were well-established organisations that could leverage existing systems and processes and draw on financial and human resources across their organisations, many providers described themselves as being 'on the back foot' from when the program went live. It took time for all service providers to recruit staff, and several providers did not have any service delivery staff for the first three months of implementation.

5.2.2 LACK OF MATURITY OF REFERRAL NETWORK AND RECRUITMENT APPROACHES

The program is unique in its positioning at the intersection between the housing, employment and education sectors, which is both a strength and a risk. It is a strength because it increases the likelihood that participants will achieve housing independence (or at least, avoid homelessness) by acquiring the necessary training and education to support access to sustainable employment. It is also a risk, because it requires the contracted Opportunity Pathways providers – and their employment coaches – to be sufficiently connected across the three sectors to generate and sustain enough referrals to the program, and to source appropriate training and employment opportunities. The contracted providers brought a mix of experience in, and connection with, these three sectors, but none had mature referral networks in all three sectors, which is likely to have impacted recruitment. Two key referral sources that many providers expected to be available – referrals from DCJ tenancy management teams, and referrals from employment agencies or Jobactive providers – were, by and large, not strong sources.

In the model under evaluation, which is a voluntary program, suitable participants must be capable of taking up the education and employment opportunities available to them, as well as be motivated to engage with the program. The program guidelines require all referred participants to be assessed to determine their suitability for the program, beyond their eligibility for it. Stakeholders' general view was that as the program became established and known to the referral network, and as Opportunity Pathways providers refined their understanding of applying eligibility and suitability criteria, the proportion of potential participants deemed suitable increased. Initially, providers were working with whomever was referred due to low numbers, but over time more appropriate clients with a genuine desire to 'do the work' were referred.

This indicates the appropriateness and importance of the program's eligibility and suitability criteria. However, providers varied in their approach to assessing need and planning. Some suggested that in the absence of a thorough assessment process, it can be difficult for providers to balance the employment coaches' caseload and mix. It is possible that some coaches are working entirely with a cohort of high needs, high complexity participants, which can lead to burnout for the worker and sub-optimal outcomes for the participants.

⁵⁴ The caretaker period runs from the dissolution of the Legislative Assembly until the election result is clear (if the current government is returned) or the new Premier is commissioned to form government (if there is a change of government) During the caretaker period, the routine of business of government continues, but by convention, no substantive decisions, appointments or contractual commitments are made. <https://sef.psc.nsw.gov.au/understanding-the-sector/elections-and-caretaker-conventions>

Providers' contracts also required them to develop an individualised Training, Employment and Housing Plan (TEHP), which outlines the agreed supports and services necessary to achieve an individual's employment outcomes. In interviews contracted service providers indicated the TEHPs are regularly done, but the program data does not support this. Up to 30 June 2020, only half (49%) of all participants across all providers were recorded as having a TEHP. As shown in Table 38, this varied considerably across DCJ districts. It is likely that the low rates reflect missing data as well as a lack of compliance with the requirement to prepare a TEHP, but it is not clear which of these is the dominant factor.⁵⁵ These figures appear to have increased to June 2021 but anomalies in the program data – for example, the proportion of clients with TEHPs exceeding 100% in Northern NSW – suggest these should be treated with caution.

TABLE 38. PROPORTION OF OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS CLIENTS WITH A COMPLETED TEHP TO 30 JUNE 2020

District	Proportion of clients with TEHP – to June 30, 2020	Proportion of clients with TEHP – to June 30, 2021
Far West	33%	100%
Hunter Central Coast	50%	54%
Illawarra Shoalhaven	75%	81%
Mid North Coast	49%	53%
Murrumbidgee	40%	99%
Nepean Blue Mountains	31%	43%
New England	60%	59%
Northern NSW	100%	104%
Northern Sydney	69%	63%
South Eastern Sydney	55%	66%
South Western Sydney	36%	48%

Source: Unlinked program data, 1 April 2019 to 30 June 2021.

Note: Figures for individual districts should be treated with caution, as can be seen from the TEHP rate exceeding 100% in one district.

⁵⁵ Client unit record data to 30 June 2020. These data indicate that 1,480 out of 3,040 participants have a TEHP across all years. The same data indicate a first year TEHP rate of 51.1% and a second-year rate of 38.2%. This does not quite equate to the 49% for all years, because some records have missing date data and cannot be assigned to year one or year two. The March 2020 (end of year one) statewide dashboard indicates a TEHP rate of 49.6% (1,218 clients with a TEHP from 2,456 referrals). This is almost the same as the client unit record data of 51.1%. The 30 September 2020 (mid-year two) statewide dashboard indicates a TEHP rate of 66.4% (1,153 clients with a TEHP from 1,735 referrals), which is substantially higher than the client unit record data of 38.2%.

5.2.3 LOWER THAN EXPECTED PERFORMANCE AGAINST CONTRACTED TARGETS

Opportunity Pathways providers were contracted to deliver employment outcomes for eligible individuals. A key part of the contracting process was to set the number of people the program would assist to achieve 13- and 26-week outcomes (that is, the number of clients who secured and sustained employment for 13 or 26 weeks).

Most contracted providers experienced difficulty meeting their performance targets in the first 18 months of program operation, triggering the DCJ Housing and Homelessness Strategy Steering Committee to request a program design and performance review in August 2020. In September 2020, following feedback from district offices, the providers' contracts were modified. Under the revised contracts, 30% (20% in one case) of the employment outcomes targets were transferred to employment pathways outcomes, which included participation in education or training, or structured volunteering activities. This reflects the importance of participating in education, training and volunteering activities as pathways to finding and maintaining suitable employment.

Key stakeholders suggested that, in most instances, they set their proposed targets based on what their organisation knew about outcomes for mandatory Commonwealth employment programs. On reflection, many contracted service providers noted it was 'ambitious' to set targets for a voluntary program that involved many participants with substantial barriers to employment using information from a program with a broader cohort where participation is mandatory. Another key issue with 13- and 26-week employment as an outcome measure is that unlike for Commonwealth employment programs, these outcomes are not automatically reported back to providers. Unless providers maintained an ongoing relationship with the participant once they were employed, it was difficult for providers to know whether participants had sustained their employment. Further, while the assistance from Opportunity Pathways may not have led to immediate education, training or employment outcomes, many participants (either through anecdotal feedback to program staff or through the longitudinal case studies) expressed that participating in the program was life changing. There was no systematic capture of these intermediate outcomes. This suggests that any program targets should be decided through a sufficiently rigorous process (for example, alignment with program logic), taking into account the feasibility of collecting relevant data, to ensure they are reliable and valid.

5.2.4 EXTERNAL FACTORS INCLUDING COVID-19

The employment market changed considerably since Opportunity Pathways began. In the first half of 2020, all areas in the state were affected by COVID-19 and the limits it placed on travel, social interaction and employment opportunities. Stakeholders noted that this changed the types of industries with job availability, and therefore the opportunities for program participants. For example, the retail and hospitality sectors, which are accessible options for Opportunity Pathways participants, experienced a rapid and prolonged contraction associated with social distancing requirements. The pandemic also affected education and training opportunities available to participants. For example, face-to-face

courses in forklift operation were reduced, limiting some participants' ability to meet the mandatory requirements for job opportunities.

There is also anecdotal evidence from stakeholders that the economic stimulus measures implemented by the Commonwealth (the JobSeeker COVID-19 Supplement) represented an increased income for many people in the target cohort, thereby reducing their imperative or motivation to secure employment. To some extent, this is borne out in the program data. Of the participants referred to Opportunity Pathways between 31 March 2020 and 31 March 2021, three quarters (76%) were on income support benefits that made them eligible for the COVID-19 Supplement. Receipt of the COVID-19 Supplement represented a 57% increase in income benefits received by program participants over this period.

5.2.5 INCOMPLETE AND INVALID PERFORMANCE MONITORING DATA

There have been persistent issues with the reliability and validity of program performance monitoring data, to the detriment of the interim and final outcomes evaluations. For example, the final program dataset includes 2,970 self-assessments, however most (75%, 2,277) are intake assessments: this means changes over time cannot be reliably determined. Almost 96% of satisfaction surveys are missing a statistical linkage key (SLK), which prevented further analysis in the linked dataset.

Evidence from interviews with stakeholders suggested the 13- and 26-week outcome data reported is incomplete. In particular, some providers were thought to be *undercounting* their outcomes because they lost contact with people they had assisted into employment. Further, providers had no systematic way of tracking housing outcomes. Theoretically, this data should have been available to the interim and final outcomes evaluation through the quantitative linked administrative data; however, data collection practices (for example, missing identifiers such as date of birth or statistical linkage keys) have constrained the rates of linkage of Opportunity Pathways data collections with other datasets.

There was evidence of different data entry patterns within and between contracted service providers, which makes comparisons between providers less reliable. During interviews, contracted service providers were evidently uncertain about how to implement the Opportunity Pathways performance monitoring system. There are broad implications for this, including on our ability to reliably determine patterns in participant outcomes from program data.

5.3 WHAT WORKS FOR WHOM?

The evaluation considered Opportunity Pathways as it was originally developed and implemented from March 2019 to end June 2022. In late 2021, a decision was made to discontinue the majority of contracts for provision of this initiative as a result of widespread shortfalls in contracted employment targets. Opportunity Pathways has since been refocused and re-contracted as a social impact bond. The program logic and mechanisms of change discussed in this section may be superseded and the new service model was outside the scope of the evaluation.

Opportunity Pathways is based on the well-established finding that employment is a key driver of wellbeing and economic independence.⁵⁶ It is based on the inference that employment provides higher disposable income and either leads to, or coincides with, the ability and willingness of social housing clients to pay private market rental rates.

The program logic identifies a broad group of eligible housing assistance clients (such as Rent Choice or Social Housing Register applicants). Despite this, social housing tenants appear to be the focus for the program logic, which refers to 'ongoing reliance on the social housing system among those with capacity to achieve economic independence'. This is also evident in the identification of barriers associated with exiting social housing, for example, 'lack of experience or understanding of how to access the private rental market' and 'lack of long-term tenancy security in private rental'.

The core assumption in the program logic is that a significant number of social housing tenants have the motivation and, with the supports on offer, ability to achieve housing independence; that is, exit the social housing system. The core logic is that, once identified, these tenants can be assisted to develop their capacity through support that is not otherwise available to them, for example through the Commonwealth job services network, and then find and sustain employment.

In practice, social housing tenants are not the clients who are most often referred to the program. The majority (57%) of those referred to Opportunity Pathways were not living in social housing (public or community) and were not referred by DCJ tenancy managers (92%). When considering a measure of appropriate referrals – that is, those referred who were then recruited – we find that 41% of those recruited into Opportunity Pathways were living in some form of social housing (public or community).

Tenancy managers reported being fully occupied with the tenants who are at risk of not sustaining their tenancy and whose tenancy failure is likely to affect district performance indicators. While the responsibility to identify clients is a requirement placed on Opportunity Pathway providers, it would be useful if a feasible mechanism for tenancy managers to identify suitable clients could be developed.

The interview data indicates the clients deemed most suitable for Opportunities Pathways may be those who have not lived in social housing for an extended duration. For current tenants, there may be disincentives associated with increasing income, including withdrawal of income support benefits and ineligibility for social housing. The fear of 'earning too much' and being 'kicked out' of social housing is clearly apparent amongst the people who participated in the longitudinal client case studies.

⁵⁶ Family and Community Services. (2018). Opportunity Pathways, Evidence Summary.

5.3.1 MECHANISMS OF CHANGE IN THE PROGRAM LOGIC

SELECTION OF SUITABLY MOTIVATED AND CAPABLE CLIENTS WILL INCREASE THE LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT, OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

This is the core of the program. Providers reported increases in the number of suitably motivated referrals over time and to some extent this is reflected in quantitative outcomes data. Providers reported using a more selective process as a result of stronger referral pathways. If this is the case, it is expected that the proportion of clients obtaining employment and 13- or 26-week education, training and employment outcomes will continue to grow. In addition, as identified above, mechanisms for the identification of suitable clients in social housing appears to be lacking in the program design.

ASSESSMENT ENSURES SUPPORTS ARE ALIGNED TO CLIENTS' CAPACITIES AND ASPIRATIONS, FACILITATING APPROPRIATE SUPPORT AND MAXIMISING CLIENT OUTCOMES

The available interview data suggests making effective assessments was a key focus for providers; however, there are no data available from clients to directly test this mechanism. Although service providers are contracted to report on these data, fewer than 2% of clients had completed satisfaction surveys. This may be because the program was in an establishment phase (first 12 months) when data was obtained, meaning there was not sufficient time to collect a substantial number of surveys. Nonetheless, data quality remained an issue despite considerable efforts and engagement with providers to improve reporting. The issue of data quality was previously raised in the Opportunity Pathways Program review completed in March 2021, the interim Future Directions evaluation report, and subsequent management meetings.

A TRUSTED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIENT AND SUPPORT WORKER INCREASES THE LIKELIHOOD OF CLIENTS SUCCEEDING

There is limited program data that allow exploration of the nature of the relationship between clients and support workers. The case study data showed some positive and negative experiences with support workers, as well as an absence of support workers. Very few (10%) clients completed the satisfaction surveys that service providers were contracted to administer. We do have a substantial number of self-assessments and worker assessments, but not sufficient data beyond the initial assessment at this time.

CLIENTS RECEIVE TARGETED AND RELEVANT SUPPORTS, OPTIMISING THEIR LIKELIHOOD OF ACHIEVING THEIR GOALS

As of 30 June 2021, about half (49%) of all clients had a completed a TEHP (Table 38). As noted above, data quality and completeness was a substantive issue for the evaluation. However, evidence from the longitudinal client case studies and interviews with providers suggests that Opportunity Pathways participants received a range of supports and services aligned to their individual needs. The tailored and intensive nature of the support provided was seen by most stakeholders as necessary to effect change for people in the program's target group. It also underpins client satisfaction (see Section 5.5).

PROVIDING HOUSING SUPPORT TO CLIENTS ASSISTS THEM TO ACCESS SUITABLE HOUSING TO TRANSITION TO HOUSING INDEPENDENCE

The nature of 'housing support' and 'suitable housing to transition to housing independence' is unclear and could be clarified. It may relate to the finding that Opportunity Pathways and Rent Choice (as a product that provides time-limited assistance to rent in the private market, with an eventual outcome of tenants paying market rent) together may be more impactful than either alone. There are currently only 138 people in the linked dataset that have received both Opportunity Pathways and Rent Choice.

REGULAR PROGRESS REVIEWS ENABLE EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF ANY ISSUES AND TIMELY ADJUSTMENT OF CLIENT PLANS AND GOALS

As above, insufficient data on progress reviews (worker and client assessments) and satisfaction surveys were available to test the perceived importance of this mechanism. There is some qualitative evidence from stakeholders and participants that the program was responsive to participants' changing needs.

5.4 PERSONAL WELLBEING

Each year, DCJ distributes the Housing Outcomes Satisfaction Survey (HOSS) to social housing tenants and waitlisted applicants. The survey includes the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI).⁵⁷ As shown in Table 39, both Opportunity Pathways participants and the broader pool of social housing tenants and waitlisted applicants report lower wellbeing than the Australian population.⁵⁸

On average, Opportunity Pathways participants had higher wellbeing than non-participants in the program in 2020 (this was statistically significant in most domains). The wellbeing gap between participants and non-participants closed between 2020 and 2021, particularly in the 'personal health' and 'achievement in life' domains. It is difficult to characterise this wellbeing decline – the survey is cross-sectional, and only a small number of Opportunity Pathways participants (24 people) completed a survey in both years – but is possibly due to the experiences of COVID-19.

While exploration of these data is informative, the sample size is small and many of the differences are not statistically significant.

⁵⁷ Cummins, R. A., Eckersley, R., Pallant, J., Van Vugt, J., & Miisajon, R. (2003). 'Developing a national index of subjective wellbeing: The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index', *Social Indicators Research*, 64: 159–190.

⁵⁸ When comparing Opportunity Pathways participants to broader housing population clients, we control for the impact of different demographic characteristics and housing mix by reweighting the survey respondents to match the distribution of those who were in the program. Specifically, we have reweighted based on the joined distribution of age, gender, Aboriginal identification, CALD background and housing situation. The normative range for Australia is 73.4 to 76.4 points.

TABLE 39. OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS' PERSONAL WELLBEING, 2019, 2020 AND 2021

Question	2019					2020					2021				
	OP	Other participants	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Statistically significant	OP	Other participants	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Statistically significant	OP	Other participants	Difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Statistically significant
N	44	16,212				184	17,636				240	18,105			
Overall PWI	56.8	54.2	+2.6	0.1	No	58.7	55.1	+3.6	0.1	Yes	54.7	54.5	+0.1	0.0	No
Standard of living	5.4	5.4	+0.0	0.0	No	6.2	5.6	+0.6	0.2	Yes	5.8	5.5	+0.3	0.1	No
Personal health	6.1	5.5	+0.5	0.2	No	6.2	5.6	+0.6	0.2	Yes	5.7	5.5	+0.2	0.1	No
Achievement in life	5.9	5.4	+0.6	0.2	No	5.7	5.3	+0.4	0.1	Yes	5.5	5.3	+0.1	0.0	No
Personal relationships	5.8	5.5	+0.3	0.1	No	5.7	5.6	+0.1	0.0	No	5.2	5.5	-0.3	0.1	No
Personal safety	5.8	6.2	-0.4	0.1	No	6.7	6.3	+0.3	0.1	No	6.3	6.2	+0.0	0.0	No
Community connectedness	6.1	5.2	+0.9	0.3	Yes	5.7	5.3	+0.4	0.1	Yes	5.0	5.2	-0.2	0.1	No
Future security	4.7	4.8	-0.1	0.0	No	5.0	4.9	+0.1	0.0	No	4.8	4.9	-0.1	0.0	No

Source: HOSS, 2019, 2020 & 2021.

Note: The analysis has adjusted for differences between the Rent Choice cohort and the broader survey respondent pool (people in social housing or who have applied for housing assistance). Specifically, we have reweighted based on the joint distribution of age, gender, Aboriginal identification, CALD background and housing situation.

5.5 PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES

5.5.1 SATISFACTION WITH DCJ

As previously discussed, data quality and completeness remains a substantive issue for the evaluation and limited our ability to describe participants' satisfaction with the program. Satisfaction data was incomplete for 90% of Opportunity Pathways participants, so the findings discussed in this section should be viewed as indicative only. Client satisfaction surveys indicated almost all (94%) Opportunity Pathways participants who responded would recommend the program to someone else in a similar situation. Satisfaction was similarly high across all types of employment (full-/part-time or casual) achieved by the participants. A Principal Components factor analysis⁵⁹ of the patterns within the satisfaction data identified three factors driving participants' satisfaction with Opportunity Pathways:

1. receiving enough support, having a voice in that support and setting personal goals (31% of variation in satisfaction is explained by this factor)
2. being linked to a service that helped them get a job (25% of variation in satisfaction is explained by this factor)
3. receiving useful training (20% of variation in satisfaction is explained by this factor).

Regression analysis⁶⁰ shows that overall satisfaction was most strongly related to receiving 'enough support'. This was four times as important as the next most important variable, 'voice in support'.

The HOSS includes some additional insights into participant satisfaction with DCJ, across several dimensions. In 2020, Opportunity Pathways participants' satisfaction was higher than for non-participants in the 'services' and 'communication with me' dimensions. In 2021, it was higher than for non-participants in the 'listening to me' dimension.⁶¹ There were no other statistically significant differences between Opportunity Pathways participants and others' satisfaction levels in the three survey rounds between 2019 and 2021.

5.5.2 SATISFACTION WITH OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS

Some participants (four out of the 10 longitudinal case study participants who received Opportunity Pathways and Rent Choice) had poor specific awareness of the program, where it was delivered alongside Rent Choice. Participants were unsure of the distinction between the two programs, with two participants stating that they 'thought' they were on Opportunity Pathways. Two others mentioned that they had no contact with support services.

⁵⁹ Principal Components factor analysis identifies patterns in the correlations between variables, which are used to infer the existence of underlying, latent variables in the data. These variables are often referred to as 'factors', 'components' or 'dimensions'.

⁶⁰ Regression analysis is a statistical method allowing examination of the relationship between multiple variables.

⁶¹ The analysis has adjusted for differences between the Rent Choice cohort and the broader survey respondent pool. Specifically, we have reweighted based on the joint distribution of age, gender, Aboriginal identification, CALD background and housing situation. The scale for responses is 1–5.

Where people had awareness of the program (six out of the 10 longitudinal case study participants who received Opportunity Pathways and Rent Choice), they had mostly had positive experiences, describing the support they received such as help in writing resumes, getting into TAFE and finding suitable work, as well as being provided with support letters. They valued that caseworkers were supportive of them finding work that suited their skills and interests, rather than just any job. The social and emotional support provided were also highly valued alongside the practical support to connect them with employment and education opportunities. One person reported that they lost contact with their caseworker in the last year. Another said that whilst initially their caseworker was very helpful in finding appropriate courses and work, they later 'had a falling out' and she did not receive support after that. This highlights the importance of the relationship between participant and caseworker and the continuity of support.

Although the sample was small, participants from particular locations had a degree of consistency in their assessment of their service. Three out of the four participants from Lismore reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with Opportunity Pathways. The sample of participants in other districts was too small to find consistent patterns. One participant's experience was a transformative intervention for her with Opportunity Pathways connecting her with a traineeship that is becoming a full-time job. She has a highly supportive employer who has been flexible and understanding of her mental health needs and time constraints around childcare availability and school hours. Others also relayed a very positive experience with the program.

5.6 ACHIEVEMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES

This section addresses the key evaluation questions relating to the impacts of Opportunity Pathways for clients across the five of the seven domains identified in the Outcomes Framework (Table 40). The table shows the government service use proxies we have used as outcomes measures in each domain. For Opportunity Pathways we have measured these outcomes on a quarterly basis.

The outcomes are primarily assessed using a stepped wedge approach, which compares outcomes for the same people before and after they started participating in Opportunity Pathways. This means the number of quarters post-Opportunity Pathways over which we measure outcomes varies based on when participants started Opportunity Pathways. This is controlled for in the modelling.

The stepped wedge approach was selected to minimise selection bias (that is, people who participate in the program are likely to be systematically different from those who do not) and because the referral pathway for each provider is different (for example, some are also Jobactive providers, providing a direct referral for jobseekers). This means that the identification of 'similar' individuals who did not participate in the program is challenging. Further details about the approach can be found in the Appendices (Volume 2).

TABLE 40. SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES FROM THE PROGRAM LOGIC AND LINKED ADMINISTRATIVE DATA MEASURE

Domain	Outcome	Government service use proxy from linked administrative data
Health	Reduction in physical and/or mental barriers to training/workforce participation	Ambulatory mental health services Emergency department presentations Public hospital admissions PWI
Empowerment	Reduction in any physical barriers to training/workforce participation	PWI
Education and Skills	Improvement in skills through training or education and improved work readiness	Enrolment in vocational education and apprenticeships & traineeships module
Economic	Engagement in employment in a field or industry identified in their agreed case plan Reduced dependence on welfare related income	Income support benefit receipt and amounts
Home	Progress towards fully independent housing	Living in public or community housing SHS presentations

The data used in this section are restricted to those clients who could be located in the linked dataset. In this data we identified 2,742⁶² people referred to Opportunity Pathways who commenced up to 30 June 2021.

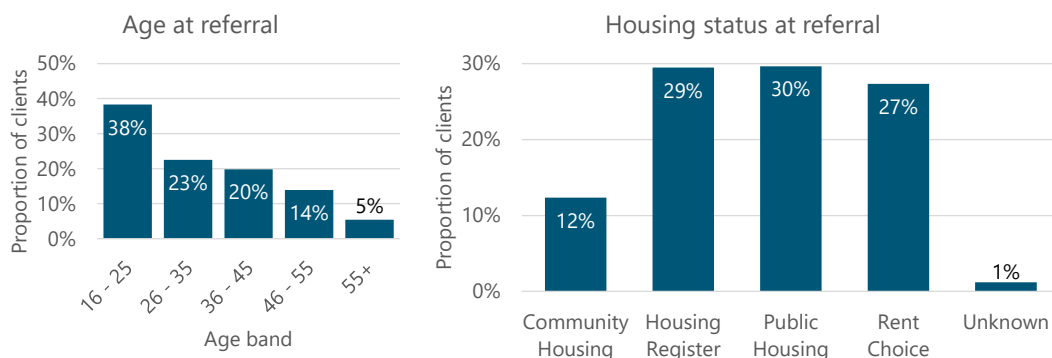
0 outlines some of the demographic characteristics of this group. Slightly more than half are female (61%), 26% identified as Aboriginal, 9% identified as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), and a quarter as having a disability. In addition, around 86% of people were receiving income benefits at referral.

⁶² We were able to identify 3,173 participants in the unlinked program data, indicating that 86% of participants were linked.

TABLE 41. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PEOPLE WHO COMMENCED OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS (PARTICIPANT GROUP)

Referral quarter	Count of participants	Female	Aboriginal	CALD	Disability	Receiving income benefits
2019 Q2	83	64%	25%	11%	39%	84%
2019 Q3	325	64%	22%	9%	29%	81%
2019 Q4	262	68%	21%	13%	32%	84%
2020 Q1	418	59%	18%	9%	28%	87%
2020 Q2	291	57%	27%	7%	28%	87%
2020 Q3	323	59%	32%	9%	24%	86%
2020 Q4	359	61%	30%	10%	25%	87%
2021 Q1	330	59%	26%	9%	22%	89%
2021 Q2	351	59%	31%	8%	19%	85%
Total	2742	61%	26%	9%	26%	86%

Figure 23 summarises the age and housing distribution for the 2,742 commenced participants. While about two-fifths were aged under 25 years, there were still a substantial number of non-youth participants in the program. Housing status includes a good spread across community housing, public housing, those receiving private rental subsidy supports and those who are on the register.

FIGURE 23. AGE AND HOUSING STATUS DISTRIBUTIONS FOR OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS

The data show that there were statistically significant improvements in three of the five Outcome Framework domains tested: home, economic and justice. There were no statistically significant improvements in the outcomes measured under the education and skills domain. These results are discussed by domain in the following sections.

Table 42 summarises the results of the outcomes modelling for the Opportunity Pathways participant cohort. We have applied outcome models to each of the linked outcomes in Table 40 as well as court finalisations to test for improvements in the safety domain.

TABLE 42. OUTCOME MODEL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANT COHORT

Domain	Outcome (in quarter)	# of people included in the model	Odds ratio (or impact) (95% confidence interval)	P-value	Impact estimate
Home	SHS presentations	2,742	0.67 (0.59, 0.79)	< 0.01	Estimated 45% reduction in SHS use after one year
	Being in public or community housing	2,742	1.33 (0.79, 2.25)	0.28	No evidence of impact
Economic	Income support benefit receipt	2,742	0.48 (0.41, 0.57)	< 0.01	18% off benefits after two years, compared to 13% expected
	Income support benefit payments (a)	2,742	-151 (-194, -109)	< 0.01	Estimate \$292 reduction per quarter after 1.5 years in program
Education and skills	Enrolment in vocational education and apprenticeships and traineeships module	2,061	1.10 (0.99, 1.21)	0.06	Borderline evidence for a 10% increase in vocational enrolments, particularly in early stages of program
Health	Ambulatory mental health use	2,742	0.89 (0.78, 1.02)	0.09	Borderline evidence for a 10% decrease in ambulatory mental health use
	Emergency department presentations	2,742	0.96 (0.89, 1.03)	0.26	No evidence of impact
	Public hospital admissions	2,742	0.89 (0.79, 1.01)	0.07	Borderline evidence of 10% reduction in admissions
Justice	Court finalisation for a proven offence	2,742	0.86 (0.75, 0.98)	0.02	Estimated 12% reduction in court finalisations

(a) Note affect size for income support payments is the dollar value impact, rather than the odds ratio.

5.6.1 HOME

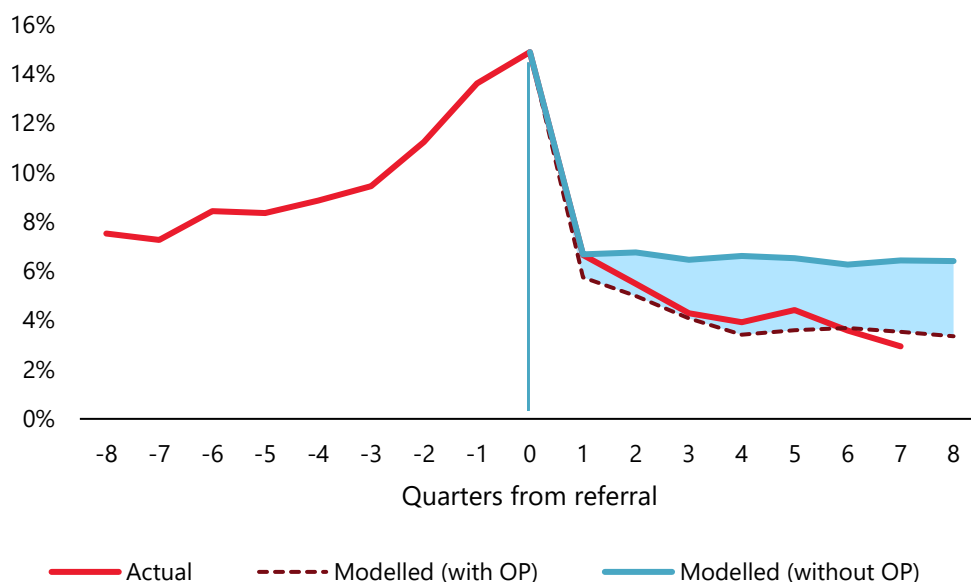
Participation in Opportunity Pathways is associated with a substantive and statistically significant reduction in SHS presentations ($p < 0.01$). We estimate that there is a 45% reduction in SHS presentations in the year following participation in Opportunity Pathways. However, this may be confounded by participants' housing situation stabilising around the time of referral. For example, participants seek SHS support, and this triggers government support, which stabilises their housing situation, after which they become eligible for and are referred to Opportunity Pathways.

Figure 24 shows the estimated impact of Opportunity Pathways on SHS presentation rates.

- The red line shows the actual rate of SHS presentations for participants.
- The dotted red line shows the modelled rate of SHS presentations using the estimated effect size (Table 42).
- The solid blue line shows the modelled rate of SHS presentations in the absence of Opportunity Pathways. To produce this line, we are estimating what the SHS presentation rate would have been if Opportunity Pathways had no effect.
- The shaded blue region therefore represents our estimate of the impact that Opportunity Pathways has had on SHS presentation rates.

We have adopted a similar approach for estimating the program's impact on the other outcomes.

FIGURE 24. PROPORTION OF OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS PRESENTING TO SHS



From Figure 24, we can see there are strong selection effects leading up to referral as indicated by the ramp up in SHS presentation rates. There is a reduction following referral and this reduction increases in the first four quarters after referral, after which it stabilises. We note there is some uncertainty around the counterfactual due to the strong selection

effects and so we have selected the baseline period as the period four quarters prior to provide our most reliable estimates of the impact of Opportunity Pathways.

There is no significant impact for people being in public or community housing, which suggests that people are not transitioning out of social housing as a result of participating in the program. Key stakeholders have noted that while the program targets people in social housing and ultimately attempts to support them to transition into the private rental market, this may not align with social housing tenants’ intent. Some stakeholders posited that participants may ‘self-sabotage’, either by not engaging with the program initially, or dropping out from it at the time when their income approaches the threshold for exiting social housing.

5.6.2 ECONOMIC

In terms of independence from income support, the data show that 18% of Opportunity Pathways participants are off benefits after two years, compared to 13% who were expected to be (Figure 25).

FIGURE 25. OBSERVED AND EXPECTED PROPORTION OF OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS RECEIVING INCOME SUPPORT

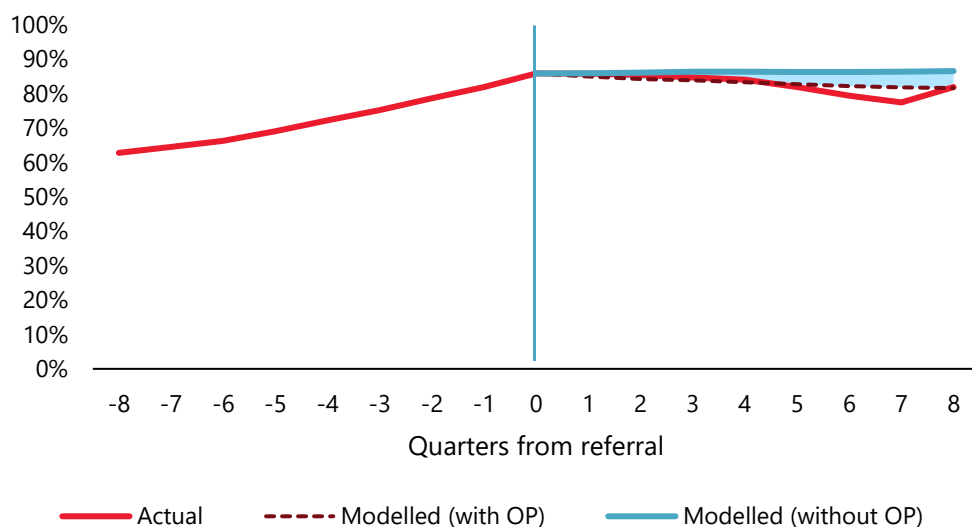
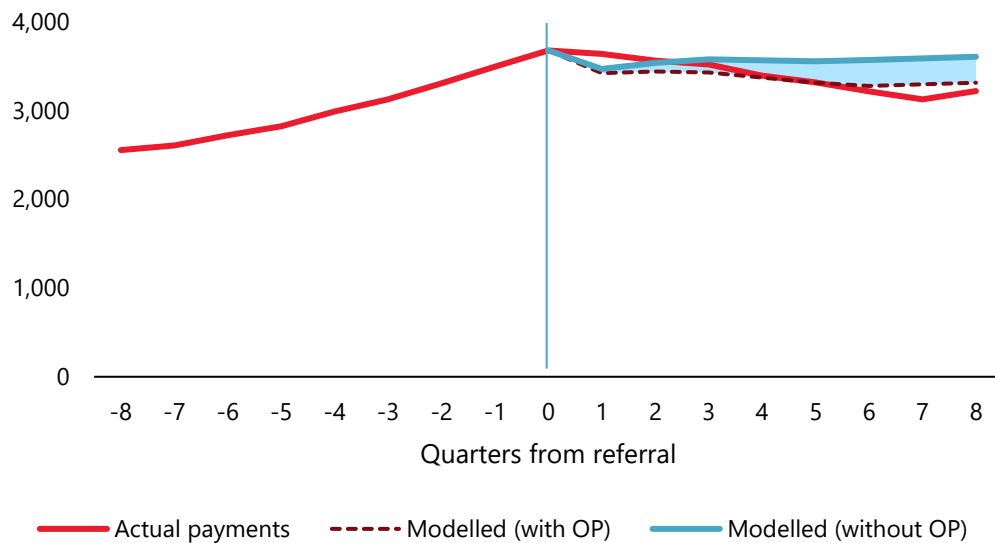


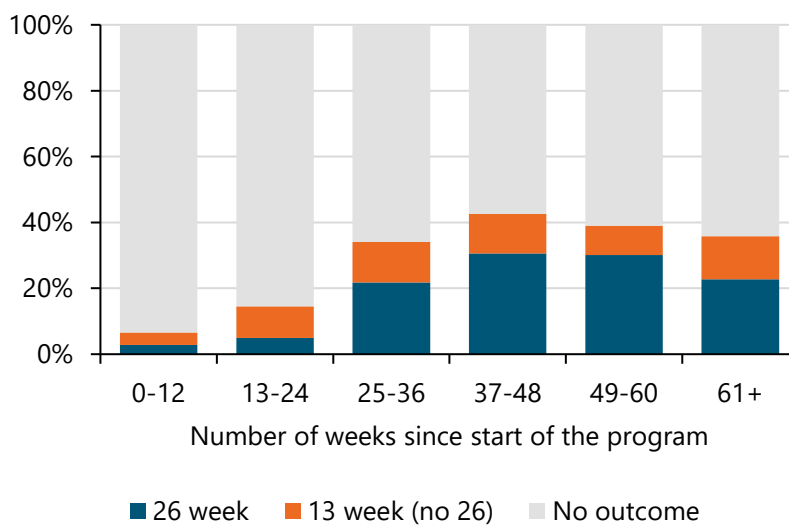
Figure 26 shows the estimated impact of Opportunity Pathways on reducing income benefit payments. The reduction in payments increases in the first 18 months after referral, then stabilises to a reduction of around \$292 per quarter. The reduction is due to a combination of participants coming off income support entirely or receiving a reduced amount due to increases in earned income.

FIGURE 26. OBSERVED AND EXPECTED QUARTERLY INCOME BENEFIT (\$) FOR OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS



There is further detail available on employment outcomes using the program data. Figure 27 shows outcome rates by length of time in the program, as a way of understanding overall progression to employment. At the end of June 2021, 37% of participants who had been in the program for at least half a year had achieved a 13- or 26-week outcome. Rates were not markedly higher for those who had been in longer than a year, although these participants would have been more affected by COVID-19-related lockdowns in 2020 (outcome rates may have been higher for earlier entrants otherwise).

FIGURE 27. PROPORTION OF OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS WITH A SUSTAINED EMPLOYMENT OUTCOME (13 WEEKS OR 26 WEEKS)



While the program has a minimum target of 14 hours a week for defining employment outcomes, it is worth noting actual hours achieved form a range around this. For participants who have recorded employment hours as part of the program:

- 14% achieved 5–13 hours per week
- 26% achieved 14–19 hours per week
- 17% achieved 20–24 hours per week
- 43% achieved 25+ hours per week.

Encouragingly, the large proportion of participants who worked at least 20 hours a week suggests that most participants who achieve outcomes sit well above the minimum target.

For those who gained employment while in the program, more than half (54%) achieved casual employment, another quarter (25%) achieved permanent part-time employment and one in five (18%) achieved permanent full-time employment. A very small number of clients (12 people) sustained unpaid work for 13 weeks.

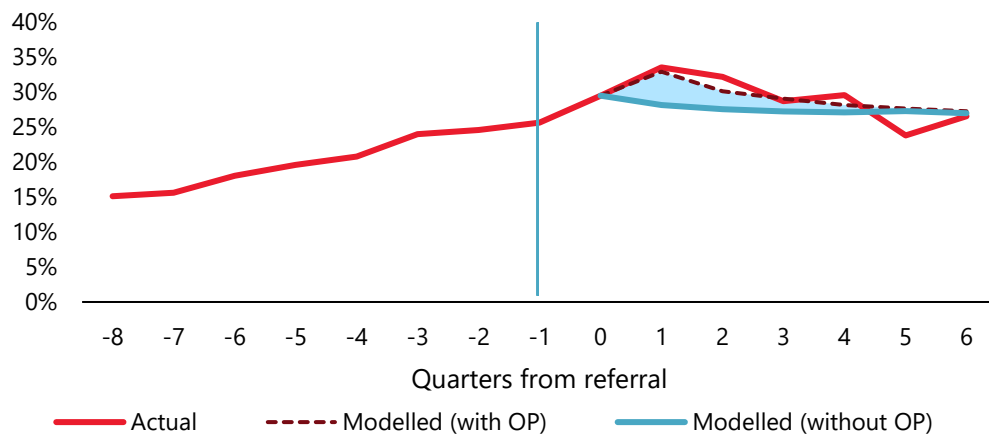
5.6.3 EDUCATION AND SKILLS

As shown in Table 42, there is evidence of a 10% increase in vocational enrolments, particularly in early stages of program, although replication of this figure in future years is to be treated with caution given the borderline statistical significance (Figure 28).

On the basis of available program data, it seems that most people (80%) who began a training course completed it. Across providers, the Hunter Central Coast and Illawarra Shoalhaven Districts had the highest number and proportion of course completions (90% and 82% respectively). In Northern Sydney, 149 Opportunity Pathways clients were enrolled for a training course and in the Far West, 29 Opportunity Pathways clients were enrolled for a training course (or were recorded as having started them), but the completion rate was 100% in both locations.

Figure 28 shows the estimated impact of Opportunity Pathways on increased enrolments in vocational education and training, noting that the estimate is not statistically significant ($p=0.06$).

FIGURE 28. OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS ENROLMENTS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (NATIONAL CENTRE FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH DATA)



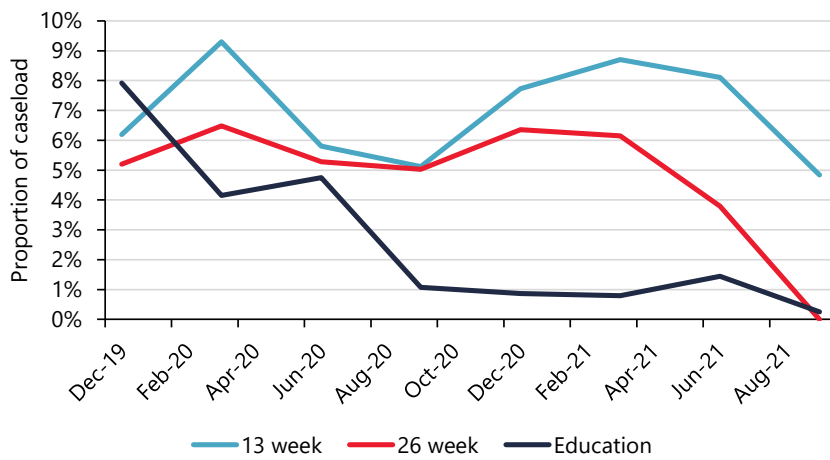
Participants can also be supported through pre-employment education support. Overlaps are common – about one third (30%) of the cohort who completed an accredited pre-employment training course also had a 26-week employment outcome. Unlike employment, education outcomes (which we define as completion of an accredited training course as part of Opportunity Pathways) have significantly decreased over time.

A very small proportion (3.4%) of the Opportunity Pathways clients who started the program in the last 12 months have education outcomes, compared to almost one in five (16%) of the clients who started more than 15 months ago achieving education outcomes (mostly within the first six months of the program). Trends in respective employment and education rates are shown in Figure 29.

Our interpretation is that this decrease in education outcomes is due to a combination of:

- greater use of employment pathways during the COVID-19-related lockdowns of 2020, when gaining employment was more difficult
- a natural decision to pursue education early in a participant's time in the program
- a perception of less need for education pathways after June 2020 when unemployment was falling rapidly and job vacancy rates high
- anticipation of program closure, increasing providers' motivation to achieve employment in the time remaining.

FIGURE 29. PROPORTION OF OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS ACHIEVING A 12-WEEK OR 26-WEEK EMPLOYMENT OR EDUCATION OUTCOME, 1 MARCH 2019 – 30 JUNE 2021



Note: No adjustment has been made for eligibility of outcomes, but for later periods the impact is very small.

5.6.4 HEALTH

Figure 30 shows the estimated impact of Opportunity Pathways on reductions in ambulatory mental health use. We estimate that there is a 10% reduction in ambulatory mental health use, though that this estimate is not statistically significant (p=0.09).

FIGURE 30. OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS’ USE OF AMBULATORY MENTAL HEALTH

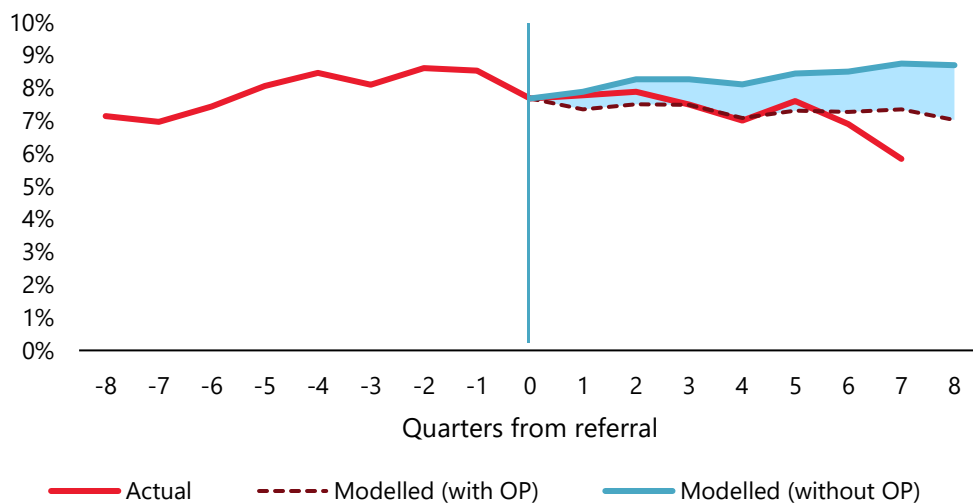
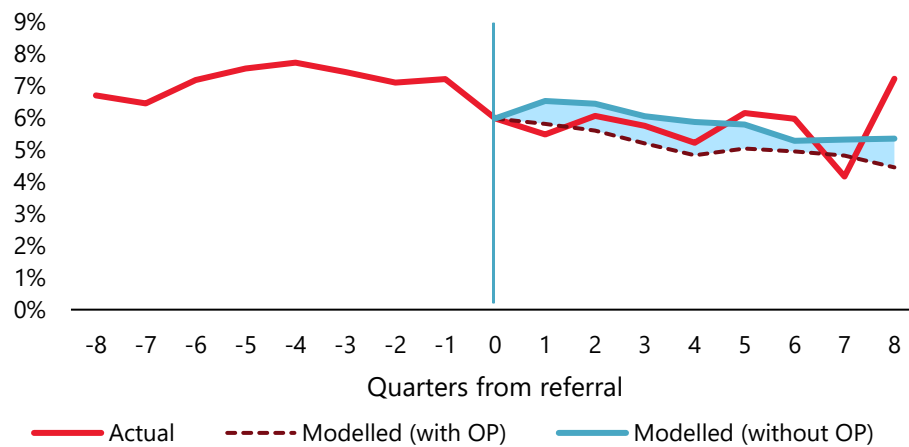


Figure 31 shows the estimated impact of Opportunity Pathways on reductions in rates of participant public hospital admissions. We estimate that there was a 10% reduction in admissions to public hospitals, though this estimate is not statistically significant ($p=0.07$).

There was no evidence of Opportunity Pathways having an impact on the rate of emergency department presentations.

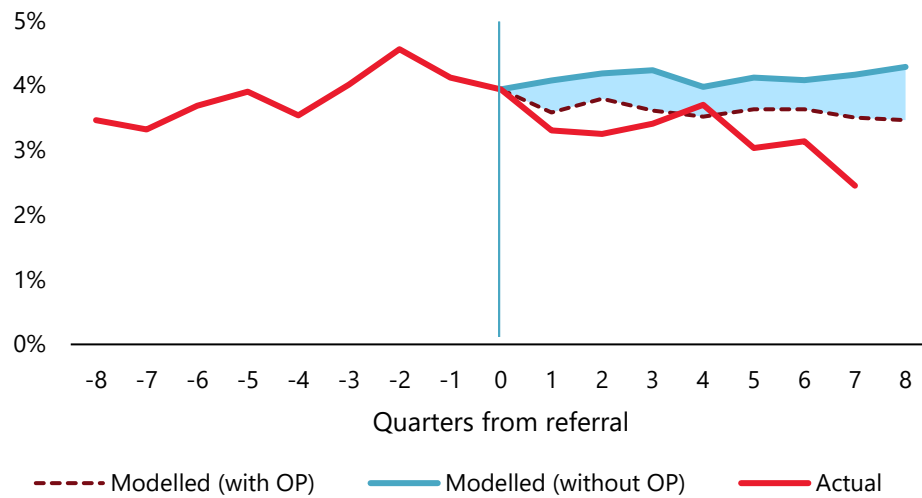
FIGURE 31. PROPORTION OF OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS WITH A PUBLIC HOSPITAL ADMISSION



5.6.5 SAFETY

Participation in Opportunity Pathways is associated with a significant reduction in court finalisations, estimated at 12% (Figure 32).

FIGURE 32. COURT FINALISATION RATE FOR OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS



5.6.6 CAREER PATHWAYS

The Career Pathways program was a precursor to the Opportunity Pathways program and was delivered between 2016 to 2019. The administrative dataset includes data for 258 Career Pathways participants over this period. Although the number of participants was reasonably small, this cohort provides a useful indicator of potential long-term outcomes for the Opportunity Pathways participants. For example, in the 2016 Career Pathways cohort offers a view of participant outcomes more than five years after participation.

Figure 33 shows the proportion of Career Pathways participants in public and community housing tenancies. Visually, with the exception of the 2017 cohort, it suggests that there is limited evidence of people transitioning out of social housing after referral into the program. This is consistent with the program effect estimated for the Opportunity Pathways cohort.⁶³

⁶³ The 2017 cohort only represents 42 of the 258 participants (16%).

FIGURE 33. PROPORTION OF CAREER PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS IN SOCIAL HOUSING TENANCIES, BY YEAR

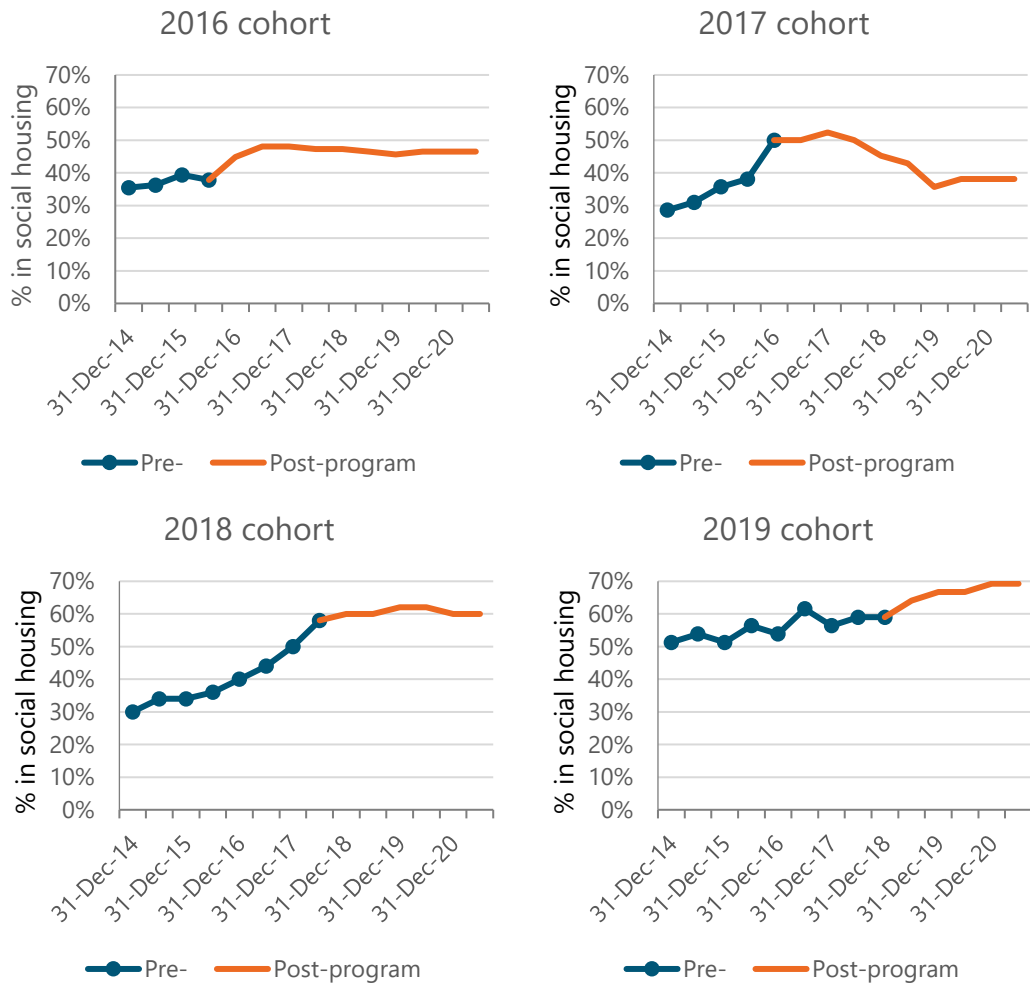
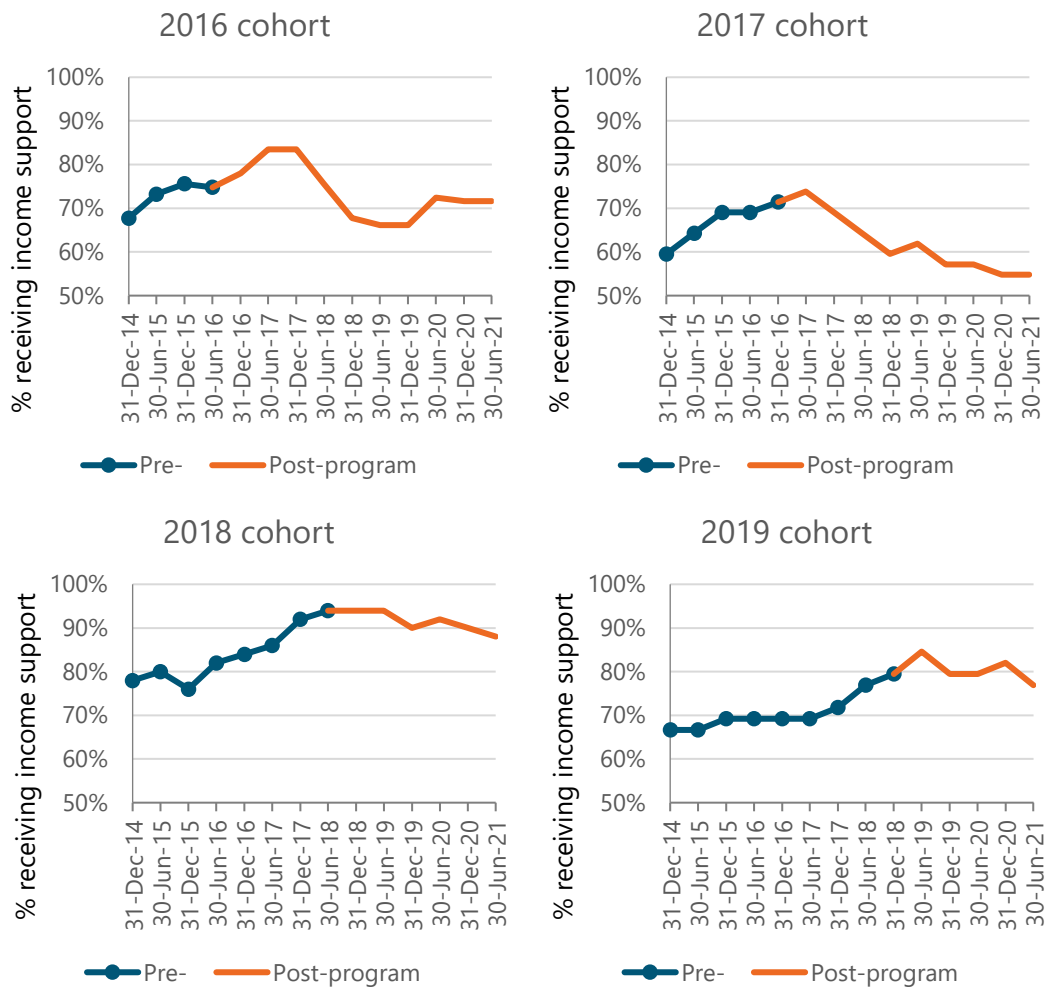


Figure 34 shows the proportion of Career Pathways participants on income support benefits. It suggests that participants are no longer on income support benefits after participation in the Career Pathways program, and that this decrease in income support benefits is sustained over time.

FIGURE 34. PROPORTION OF CAREER PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS RECEIVING INCOME SUPPORT, BY YEAR



5.7 SUSTAINABILITY AND VARIABILITY OF OUTCOMES

The same quantitative modelling approach was used to further test if there are differences in income benefit receipt among subgroups in the program. Income benefit support was selected as it was viewed as the strongest program effect measured at the aggregate level.

There was some evidence to support the hypothesis that the program might be more effective for those who are long-term unemployed.

For those who are on benefits for a longer time period (more than two years), there is evidence of a greater reduction in income benefit payments. We tested the inclusion of income support duration of greater than two years as a main effect, as well as an interaction with the program effect. This gives an estimated reduction of \$310 per quarter for longer duration participants, compared to a reduction of \$70 per quarter for shorter duration participants (on benefits for less than two years). However, the baseline estimate for the longer duration participants was also \$1,510 more per quarter than for the shorter duration participants.

There was no quantitative evidence to support the hypotheses identified in the qualitative analyses:

- people also receiving Rent Choice and Opportunity Pathways
- young people (aged 25 or under)
- Aboriginal participants
- people from CALD groups
- people not living in public or community housing
- people who are on the housing register
- people who self-refer into the program.

There was no quantitative evidence to support the hypotheses identified in the qualitative analyses, which are detailed below.

5.7.1 PEOPLE RECEIVING OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS AND RENT CHOICE

The linked data analysis does not show any differences in outcomes for Opportunity Pathways participants who were also receiving a Rent Choice subsidy. However, there is some qualitative evidence (noted in Section 3.5 and separately in the Opportunity Pathways interim evaluation report) that Rent Choice subsidies and Opportunity Pathways are useful when delivered together.

5.7.2 ABORIGINAL PARTICIPANTS

There is a smaller reduction in benefits received for Aboriginal people of \$146 per quarter compared to \$233 per quarter for non-Aboriginal people. Baseline estimates of income support for Aboriginal people are also higher, with Aboriginal people estimated to be receiving \$116 more each quarter than non-Aboriginal people. This may indicate that Aboriginal people have higher needs on entry, which persist during and after participation in the Opportunity Pathways program. Knowing more about the Aboriginal participant cohort is important to ensuring the program is appropriately designed to respond to Aboriginal people's needs.

5.7.3 PROGRAM PROVIDER

Table 43 shows the estimated reduction in income benefit payments by district and Opportunity Pathways provider. There are large variations between providers and districts, with the estimated reduction in income benefits ranging from 12.9% for Murrumbidgee to 1.5% for Southern NSW. At a provider level, Mission Australia and Social Futures have the largest percentage reduction in income benefit payments.

TABLE 43. PERCENTAGE REDUCTION IN INCOME BENEFIT PAYMENTS FOR OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANTS, BY CONTRACTED SERVICE PROVIDER

Provider	District	Rank	Number of participants	Percentage reduction in income benefits payments	Average income support benefits per quarter, without program	Average income support benefits per quarter, with program
Mission Australia	Murrumbidgee	1	74	-12.9%	\$4,040	\$3,519
Evolve Housing	Nepean Blue Mountains	2	101	-10.6%	\$3,607	\$3,226
Wesley Mission	Hunter Central Coast	3	223	-9.4%	\$3,610	\$3,270
Social futures	Northern NSW	4	277	-8.9%	\$2,880	\$2,625
Wesley Mission	Mid North Coast	5	236	-8.1%	\$3,989	\$3,665
BEST Employment	New England	6	167	-7.1%	\$3,751	\$3,483
Housing Plus	Far West	7	28	-6.6%	\$3,504	\$3,272
Settlement Services International	Western Sydney	8	183	-6.1%	\$3,996	\$3,753
MAX Solutions Pty Ltd	Northern Sydney	9	135	-5.9%	\$3,196	\$3,006
Evolve Housing	South Western Sydney	10	381	-5.4%	\$3,531	\$3,340
MAX Solutions Pty Ltd	South East Sydney	11	230	-5.1%	\$3,679	\$3,493
Housing Plus	Western NSW	12	149	-5.0%	\$3,958	\$3,758
Wesley Mission	Illawarra Shoalhaven	13	244	-4.0%	\$4,384	\$4,208
MAX Solutions Pty Ltd	Sydney	14	232	-1.9%	\$3,926	\$3,853
Mission Australia	Southern NSW	15	82	-1.5%	\$3,951	\$3,891

5.8 COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

5.8.1 APPROACH

This was an ex-post cost-benefit analysis (CBA) that incorporates outcomes identified from the linked administrative data analysis as well as estimates of future costs and benefits. The CBA has been prepared from the perspective of the Australian community, in this case being primarily NSW citizens, the NSW Government and the Australian Government.

The analysis covers the implementation of Opportunity Pathways over the period 1 April 2019 to 30 June 2021. During this period, 3,173 clients were enrolled in Opportunity Pathways, approximately half in 2020–2021 and half before 2020–2021.

Costs and benefits are expressed in 2020–2021 prices with the present value of cost and benefit streams (both past and future) calculated after applying a social discount rate of 7%. Sensitivity testing has been undertaken at 3% and 10%. Those costs and benefits that cannot be quantified and monetised have been described in qualitative terms.

Consistent with the practice recommended by the NSW Government,⁶⁴ transfer payments (for example, income support payments and rental assistance) are excluded from the CBA because they have no impact on the net benefits of the program, as the benefits to one group are offset by costs to other groups. Distributional impacts on the various groups impacted (primarily the Australian Government and NSW citizens) are shown separately.

5.8.2 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Summary results of the CBA are presented in Table 44 and on a 'per participant' basis in Table 46.

Detailed explanation of how costs and benefits were identified, estimated, and valued is set out in the appendices (Volume 2).

The estimated overall BCR for Opportunity Pathways based on DCJ guidance was 1.4 with an NPV of positive \$14.6 million. The present value of quantifiable costs was estimated at \$32.9 million, and the present value of quantifiable benefits at \$47.5 million.

The benefits included \$23.4 million in additional income to NSW citizens (net of additional rent payments to the NSW Government) and \$5.5 million in additional lifetime earnings for NSW citizens arising from enrolments in vocational education. Benefits also included \$7.8 million in additional rental payments to the NSW Government, \$4.9 million in reduced use of SHS, \$3.9 million in reduced costs to the criminal justice system and \$2.2 million in reduced use of health services.

Opportunity Pathways also results in a reduction of income support payments made by the Commonwealth of \$15.6 million and a corresponding reduction in income support payments

⁶⁴ NSW Government Guide to Cost-Benefit Analysis (TPP17-03).

of \$15.6 million received by NSW citizens (both are transfer payments) (see Table 45 and Table 47).

Sensitivity analyses indicates an increase in NPV/BCR at a 3% social discount rate (to \$16.5 million and 1.5 respectively) and a decrease in NPV/BCR at a 10% discount rate (to \$13.2 million and 1.4 respectively). Results of the sensitivity analyses for income benefits are set out in the Appendices (Volume 2).

Additional income benefits (net of additional rent payments) represent approximately 50% of total benefits. Although derived from statistically significant outcomes of the linked data analysis, the results of the CBA are particularly sensitive to assumptions made in estimating these benefits.

TABLE 44. SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF CBA FOR OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS, DISCOUNTED AT 7% (\$ MILLION)

Category	Cost to/ benefit to	Present value (2020– 2021)
Costs		
Service provider costs	NSW Government	\$25.2
Financial assistance provided (brokerage)	NSW Government	\$6.7
Program management costs	NSW Government	\$1.0
Total costs		\$32.9
Benefits		
Increased enrolment in vocational education	NSW citizens	\$5.5
Additional income benefits (net of additional rent payments)	NSW citizens	\$23.4
Additional rent payments received	NSW Government	\$7.8
Reduced use of SHS	NSW Government	\$4.9
Criminal justice system savings	NSW Government	\$3.9
Avoided health system costs	NSW Government	\$2.2
Total benefits		\$47.5
NPV		\$14.6
BCR		1.4

TABLE 45. TRANSFER PAYMENTS FOR OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS, DISCOUNTED AT 7% (\$ MILLION)

Category	Cost to/ benefit to	Present value (2020– 2021)
Reduced income support payments made	Commonwealth	\$15.6
Reduced income support payments received	NSW citizens	(\$15.6)

TABLE 46. SUMMARY RESULTS OF COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS PER OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANT, DISCOUNTED AT 7% (\$ MILLION)

Category	Cost to/ benefit to	Present value (2020– 2021)
Costs		
Service provider costs	NSW Government	\$7,955
Financial assistance provided (brokerage)	NSW Government	\$2,116
Program management costs	NSW Government	\$304
Total costs		\$10,375
Benefits		
Increased enrolment in vocational education	NSW citizens	\$1,733
Additional income benefits (net of additional rent payments)	NSW citizens	\$7,360
Additional rent payments received	NSW Government	\$2,453
Reduced use of SHS	NSW Government	\$1,529
Criminal justice system savings	NSW Government	\$1,220
Avoided health system costs	NSW Government	\$680
Total benefits		\$14,975
NPV		\$4,600
BCR		1.4

TABLE 47. TRANSFER PAYMENTS PER OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PARTICIPANT, DISCOUNTED AT 7% (\$ MILLION)

Category	Cost to/ benefit to	Present value (2020– 2021)
Reduced income support payments made	Commonwealth	\$4,906
Reduced income support payments received	NSW citizens	(\$4,906)

6. YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS: DETAILED FINDINGS

This chapter presents the evidence from all stages of the evaluation (process, outcomes and economic) to answer the key evaluation questions for Youth Development Scholarships. It considers the implementation of the program for the period 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

Youth Development Scholarships (formerly Scholarships and Mentoring) is offered to eligible young people across New South Wales, providing a scholarship of \$1,000 to be used for educational and support related expenses. Its purpose is to support vulnerable young people to stay at school and remain engaged with their education by enabling them to purchase relevant equipment or pay to attend excursions.

The current Scholarships program (2017 to 2023) builds on the strengths of previous iterations, offering more scholarships earlier (from Year 10) and for longer (up to seven years).

The Mentoring component was an expansion of the Scholarships program, which began as a trial in 2017–2018 at James Fallon High School and Murray High School in Albury, with a cohort of 30 students. It was extended in 2018–2019, with 15 more students becoming involved at each school. The Mentoring program ended in 2018–2019, and program level data regarding satisfaction and mentoring sessions completed by Mentoring participants, was not available.

In 2019–2020, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) began piloting the Universal Screening and Supports (USS) program in Albury. The program screens children at risk of homelessness and provides social worker support. The mentoring component of the Scholarships program is now delivered as part of USS.

Key evaluation questions are answered in brief in Table 48 and discussed throughout the rest of the chapter.

TABLE 48. ANSWERS TO KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS

Key evaluation question	Youth Development Scholarships
How well is Youth Development Scholarships reaching and engaging its target population?	<p>Between 2017 and 2021, there were 4,614 eligible applications for Youth Development Scholarships, leading to the award of 2,264 scholarships. The program was broadly supported by stakeholders who participated in the evaluation. Key stakeholder interviews indicate that the number of eligible applications (that is, the applicant meets the criteria and submits a complete application) has increased over time. As noted in the process evaluation report, DCJ made substantive efforts to streamline the application process and the application form itself.</p> <p>Applicants from South Western Sydney (12%) and the Hunter Central Coast (11%) districts make up nearly half of all successful Scholarship recipients. This is likely to reflect both the potential size of the applicant pool (that is, the number of social housing tenancies in each district) and the extent to which the program is promoted by the districts to social housing tenants. The applicant success rate also varies across districts. Western NSW (79%), New England (78%) and Mid North Coast (73%) have the highest rates of successful applicants. Northern Sydney (20%) and South Eastern Sydney (21%) have the lowest rates of successful applicants.</p> <p>On average, scholarship recipients are 16 years old. Female students make up 57% of successful applicants and 55% of unsuccessful applicants. Reflecting DCJ's deliberate prioritisation of vulnerable young people, among those awarded a scholarship, there are proportionately more Aboriginal young people (41% of those awarded a scholarship compared to 13% of those unsuccessful), young people with disability (11% of those awarded a scholarship compared to 5% of those unsuccessful), recipients in out-of-home care (17% of those awarded a scholarship compared to 8% of those unsuccessful), recipients living in social housing than not (41% of recipients are living in public housing and 10% in community housing). A further 22% of recipients are living in households receiving private rental assistance (8%) or on the NSW Housing Register (14%).</p> <p>Two out of three (66%) return for a second year, and half (47%) for a third year.</p>

Key evaluation question	Youth Development Scholarships
<p>What outcomes are being achieved by clients and what degree of variability are there in these outcomes?</p>	<p>There is no empirical evidence in the linked administrative dataset that Youth Development Scholarship recipients are more engaged in school or achieve better education related outcomes (improved school completion rates or higher education) or health related outcomes (improved self-esteem, resilience, social competency or wellbeing).</p> <p>Stakeholders shared a range of anecdotal evidence about the difference a scholarship has made for young people whose families were experiencing hardship; however, the quantitative analysis found no statistically significant outcomes for recipients in the education or health domains (improved self-esteem, resilience, social competency and wellbeing).</p> <p>Many stakeholders consider that scholarships are an important determinant of a young person’s ongoing engagement with education, but only 16% (32 students out of 197 valid exit survey responses) said they would have disengaged from school without the scholarship.</p>
<p>What evidence is there to confirm hypotheses about key mechanisms (including particular products or services) by which the program works, what features, or context determine if it works, and for which type of clients does it work best?</p>	<p>The academic evidence base for scholarship programs indicates the main predictor of ‘success’ is likely to be the young person’s intrinsic motivation. The factors that motivate young people are likely to vary from person to person. The causal mechanisms are not observable in administrative datasets and while they were explored in interviews with key stakeholders, they could not be tested directly in the linked dataset.</p>
<p>How do clients experience the program?</p>	<p>The evaluation did not seek direct input from young people. It may be appropriate to explore young people’s motivation to apply for the scholarship, as captured in their long-form written responses on the application form, or to consider direct engagement with young people to understand their motivation for applying for the scholarship and the impact of receiving it on them and their family – particularly around the positive or negative aspects of winning the scholarship.</p>
<p>What implications can be drawn from the outcomes, including ‘validation’ and</p>	<p>There is no empirical evidence in the linked administrative dataset that Youth Development Scholarship recipients are more engaged in school or achieve better education related outcomes as a result of the</p>

Key evaluation question	Youth Development Scholarships
contextualisation of findings with clients and communities?	scholarship. While many stakeholders hold a positive attitude towards the scholarship, it is unlikely that awarding a scholarship activates the mechanisms of change identified in the program logic.
What have been the costs and benefits of assisting clients with the program?	No quantifiable educational or health outcomes have been identified from the linked administrative data analysis to date (the linked data analysis was limited to the domains of health and education as these were the two domains where the program logic expected to see positive outcomes). The estimated overall benefit-cost ratio for Youth Development Scholarships is therefore zero.

6.1 REACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Between 2017 and 2021, there were 4,614 eligible applications for Youth Development Scholarships, leading to the award of 2,264 scholarships (Table 49). The program was broadly supported by stakeholders who participated in the evaluation. Key stakeholder interviews indicate that the number of eligible applications (that is, the applicant meets the criteria and submits a complete application) has increased over time. As noted in the process evaluation report, DCJ made substantive efforts to streamline the application process and the application form itself.

TABLE 49. DISTRIBUTION OF ELIGIBLE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS, BY SCHOLARSHIP RECEIPT 2017–2021

Year	Successful		Unsuccessful		Total	
	N	%	N	%		
2017	360	41%	511	59%	871	
2018	291	52%	265	48%	556	
2019	364	33%	734	67%	1,098	
2020	541	64%	306	36%	847	
2021	708	57%	534	43%	1,242	
TOTAL	2,264	49%	2,350	51%	4,614	

Notes: Restricted to those who completed the application process. Successful means the applicant received the scholarship. Unsuccessful includes the applicant withdrawing after a successful application.

Applicants from South Western Sydney (12%) and the Hunter Central Coast (11%) districts make up nearly half of all successful Scholarship recipients (Table 50). This is likely to reflect both the potential size of the applicant pool (that is, the number of social housing tenancies in each district) and the extent to which the program is promoted by the districts to social housing tenants. The applicant success rate also varies across districts. Western NSW (79%), New England (78%) and Mid North Coast (73%) have the highest rates of successful applicants. Northern Sydney (20%) and South Eastern Sydney (21%) have the lowest rates of successful applicants.

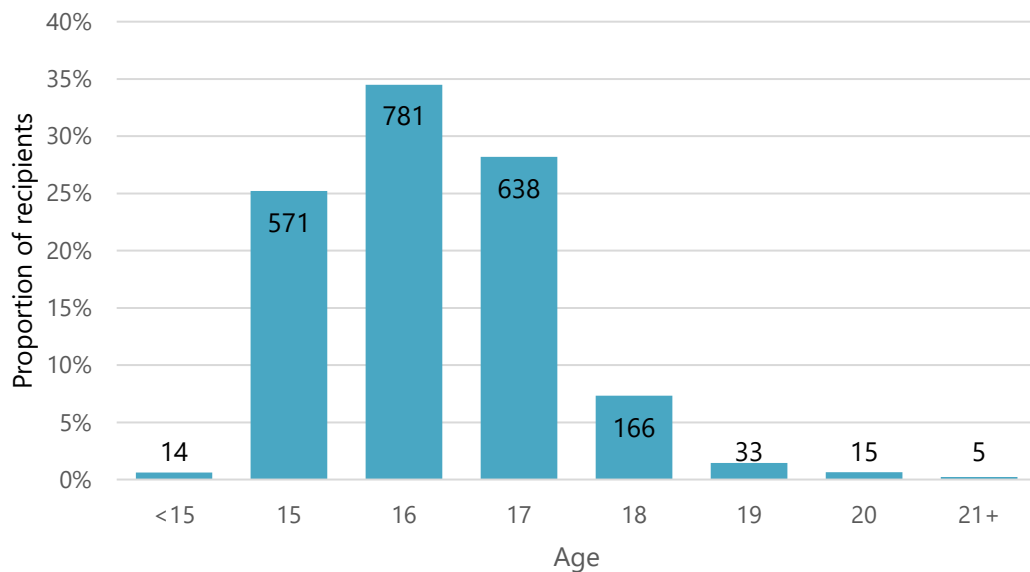
TABLE 50. DISTRIBUTION OF ELIGIBLE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP APPLICANTS, BY SCHOLARSHIP RECEIPT AND DISTRICT, 2017–21

	Successful	Unsuccessful	Total	% Successful
Far West	*	*	*	*
Hunter Central Coast	333	12%	268	8%
Illawarra Shoalhaven	119	4%	132	4%
Mid North Coast	75	3%	28	1%
Murrumbidgee	82	3%	37	1%
Nepean Blue Mountains	49	2%	74	2%
New England	73	3%	21	1%
Northern NSW	62	2%	64	2%
Northern Sydney	12	0%	48	1%
South Eastern Sydney	50	2%	189	6%
South Western Sydney	305	11%	415	13%
Southern NSW	*	*	*	*
Sydney	51	2%	121	4%
Western NSW	89	3%	23	1%
Western Sydney	168	6%	260	8%
TOTAL	1,353	48%	1,625	49%

Notes: Restricted to those who completed the application process. Successful means the applicant received the scholarship. Unsuccessful includes 1% who withdrew after a successful application. Some values have been suppressed to protect privacy, indicated by *.

On average, scholarship recipients are 16 years old. As shown in Figure 35, most recipients fall within the age range of high school students studying in Year 10, 11 or 12; very few applicants are aged over 18 years and applying to the program for support during a tertiary enrolment.

FIGURE 35. AGE DISTRIBUTION OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS, 2017–2021



Source: Linked administrative data, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

Note: The number of people is also shown.

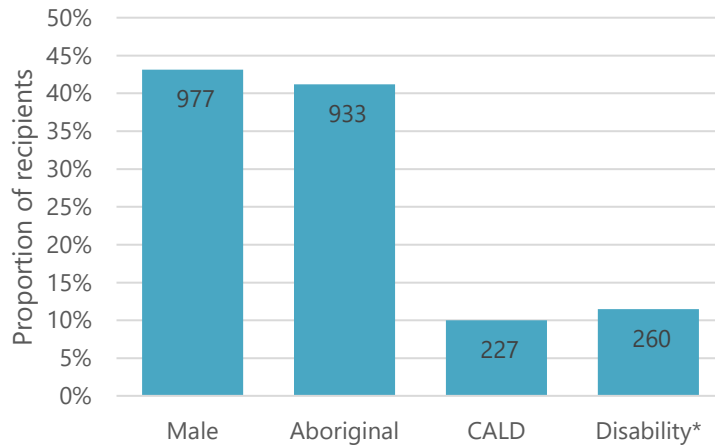
Eligible applicants are more likely to be female than male. Female students make up 57% of successful applicants and 55% of unsuccessful applicants (Figure 36). Reflecting DCJ's deliberate prioritisation of vulnerable young people, among those awarded a scholarship,⁶⁵ there are proportionately more:

- Aboriginal young people than in the unsuccessful applicant group (accounting for 41% of those awarded a scholarship compared to 13% of those unsuccessful). DCJ has deliberately included Aboriginal scholarship recipients in promotional materials, and the five communities we consulted with as part of the evaluation were most familiar with the Scholarships program. Some program stakeholders suggested the program's reach into Aboriginal communities could be further extended through targeted engagement with Aboriginal service providers and community organisations.
- young people with disability than in the unsuccessful applicant group (accounting for 11% of those awarded a scholarship compared to 5% of those unsuccessful)
- recipients in out-of-home care than in the unsuccessful applicant group (accounting for 23% of those awarded a scholarship compared to 8% of those unsuccessful)
- recipients living in social housing than not (41% of recipients are living in public housing and 10% in community housing) (Figure 37). A further 20% of recipients are living in households receiving private rental assistance (8%) or on the NSW Housing Register (12%).

This is consistent with the program design and reflects the program's prioritisation of these cohorts. The prioritisation matrix ensures these young people are likely to receive a higher eligibility assessment score and hence be awarded a scholarship.

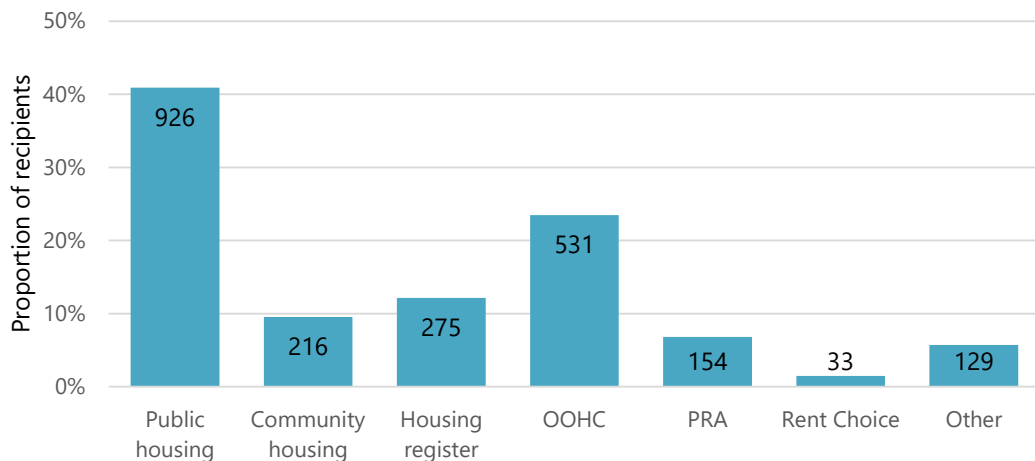
⁶⁵ The reported numbers of successful scholarship recipients are higher than in the interim reports due to broadening of the study population in the most recent data linkage.

FIGURE 36. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS, 2017–2021



Source: Linked administrative data, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.
 Note: The number of people is also shown.

FIGURE 37. HOUSING STATUS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS, 2017–2021



Source: Linked administrative data, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021
 Note: The number of people is also shown.

Table 51 shows the proportion of students receiving a scholarship in multiple years. Two out of three (66%) return for a second year, and half (47%) for a third year. There may be a range of reasons for the declining ‘return rate’. For example, there is anecdotal evidence from stakeholders that students are unsure about what else other than a laptop or computer equipment they could use the funds for, and that the burden of applying for the scholarship exceeds the financial benefit of receiving it. Other stakeholders suggested that contrary to the program logic, receipt of a scholarship alone (financial support) is insufficient to keep vulnerable young people engaged in education. This latter suggestion appears to be borne out in the quantitative data analysis.

TABLE 51. PROPORTION OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS RETURNING FOR MULTIPLE YEARS

First year of Scholarship	# of recipients	% returning: second year	% returning: third year	% returning: fourth year	% returning: fifth year
2017	360	67%	35%	20%	7%
2018	291	71%	34%	18%	
2019	364	70%	29%		
2020	541	60%			
2021	708				

Note: For people first receiving the scholarship in 2017, there are five years of data available. For people first receiving the scholarship in subsequent years, there are less data available. For people first receiving the scholarship in 2021 we do not yet know how many also received a scholarship in 2022.

6.2 IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation issues were reported in the baseline and interim reports and have largely been resolved. Stakeholders consider DCJ's continuous quality improvement focus as one of the program's key strengths, leading to stronger reach and uptake. They agree that the changing selection criteria is an important feature of the program because it allows it to respond to the needs of emerging priority groups.

There may be additional ways to strengthen reach and uptake, including by engaging with young people who are motivated to further their education, but who are currently not engaged with school for reasons including financial hardship or caring responsibilities. This was noted by Aboriginal stakeholders as a particular issue for their communities. It was suggested that working with community liaison officers or independent services providing youth mentoring—including Aboriginal community controlled-organisations—would be a way of engaging this cohort.

An issue that remains unresolved is the lack of visibility of how students use their funds – remains unresolved.

The necessity for funding acquittal reports was removed to minimise administrative and reporting burden on recipients, schools and DCJ wherever possible. This decision was based on feedback from earlier programs, including Youth Scholarships, and in acknowledgement of the already high administrative burden and resource constraints of schools.

Previous evaluations,⁶⁶ interviews with stakeholders and exit surveys indicate that most students buy technology, such as a laptop or an iPad: several of the Aboriginal people we spoke to during our consultation referred to the Scholarships program as the 'laptop fund'. Stakeholder feedback indicates that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, more students used the funds to meet the costs of home schooling (for example, to buy desks or chairs).

⁶⁶ The Miller Group. (2019). Evaluation of FACS' Scholarship and Pilot Mentoring Program for Students Living in Social Housing.

There may be ways to easily collect expenditure data, such as via an app, which do not add substantial administrative burden for students, schools or DCJ. This data would be useful for developing an understanding of what 'works' for students, in what circumstances.

6.3 WHAT WORKS FOR WHOM?

The program logic defines the problem to be addressed as one of students who are living in social housing experiencing barriers to engaging in and completing education. Most scholarship recipients are living in social housing (41% in public housing and 10% in community housing) or out-of-home care (23%). This reflects the program's deliberate prioritisation of vulnerable young people.

6.3.1 MECHANISMS OF CHANGE IN THE PROGRAM LOGIC

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

The evidence base for scholarships indicates the main predictor of 'success' (completion of school, engagement with higher education) is likely to be the young person's intrinsic motivation.⁶⁷ Two mechanisms of change for Scholarships that are described in the program logic relate to selecting 'motivated and capable' students, for whom scholarship receipt (reduction of financial barriers) will enable them to 'better engage in educational activities, feel less social stigma and have higher self-confidence'.

The selection criteria for the program largely do not address motivation: the focus is on 'worthiness' or 'neediness'. There is no empirical data available to support an understanding of young people's motivation, although applicants' written responses may provide some insight. This information was not available to the evaluation.

EMPOWERMENT

The theory of change is that removing financial barriers⁶⁸ for motivated students promotes empowerment and greater engagement with school, and that having access to core equipment (such as a laptop) will reduce stigma. There is a limited amount of empirical data on the mechanisms of empowerment and reduced stigma.

Key stakeholder interview data indicates that scholarship recipients can choose how to spend their scholarship money; however, stakeholders cited some examples where a young person's school (which administers the funds) directed that the money be spent on certain items (for example, schoolbooks). This may reduce the extent to which the program is empowering.

⁶⁷ Howard JL, Bureau J, Guay F, Chong JXY and Ryan RM (2021) Student motivation and associated outcomes: A meta-analysis from self-determination theory, *Perspectives in Psychological Science*, 16(6): 1300–1323.

⁶⁸ The evidence base for the program would be strengthened with evidence about how the amount of \$1,000 might effectively remove financial barriers.

An evaluation⁶⁹ of the Scholarships and Mentoring program in 2019 referred to the mechanisms of active involvement in setting and achieving goals, decision making and problem solving, as well as a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem, that were identified from a review of the literature.⁷⁰ However, these mechanisms appear to relate to the mentoring component of the program, which is no longer a part of the Scholarships program. In the absence of the mentoring component, it is unlikely these outcomes can be achieved.

OUTCOMES SPECIFIED IN THE PROGRAM LOGIC

The outcomes that appear to be most relevant are empowerment, physical and mental health, and education and skills. However, there are numerous factors that moderate and mediate the extent to which the scholarship and its purported impact on engagement would flow through to have a significant, policy-relevant impact on education outcomes. For example, young people may live in an environment that does not provide sufficient physical support (such as a quiet place to study) or emotional support (such as understanding household members) to remain engaged in education.

Qualitative evidence heard throughout the evaluation indicates that financial support, in the absence of mentoring or other formal ways of connecting young people with support, may be insufficient to achieve the intended outcomes. The interim evaluation noted this concern particularly in view of the removal of mentoring support and suggested redrafting the program logic to specify outcomes that aligned with the reduced scope of delivery.

The outcomes data indicate that scholarship recipients have not, when compared with an equivalent group of students who did not receive a scholarship, experienced statistically significant improvements in the longer-term education outcomes specified in the program logic (see Appendix 1).

The longer-term outcomes identified in the program logic include a 'transition out/avoidance of social housing'. The precise causal logic here is unclear, other than that improved employment prospects may have an effect on transitioning out of, or avoiding, social housing (notwithstanding the impact of other factors that lead people to enter or remain in social housing – a key issue for all SIIIs). There is a logical link between engagement in education and employment, given the long history of research linking education and employment. However, it is unlikely that the scholarship 'dose' will be sufficient to lead to achieving the educational outcomes and employment outcomes required to support longer-term goals of housing independence.

⁶⁹ The Miller Group. (2019). Evaluation of FACS' Scholarship and Pilot Mentoring Program for Students Living in Social Housing.

⁷⁰ See for example Lamb, S. et al. (2004). *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia*, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne; Price-Mitchell, M. (2018). 'Goal setting is linked to higher achievement', *Psychology Today*, March; Covington, M. (2000). 'Goal theory, motivation, and school achievement: An integrative review', *Annual. Rev. Psychol.* 51(171): 200; Rowe, D. et al. (2017). 'Effects of goal-setting instruction on academic engagement for students at risk', *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 40(1): 25–35; Moeller, A. J. et al. (2012). 'Goal setting and student achievement: A longitudinal study', *The Modern Language Journal*, 96(2): 153–169.

6.4 RECIPIENTS' EXPERIENCES

Scholarship recipients' experience of the program was not explored in any of the evaluation phases, both because a comprehensive evaluation had been recently done in 2019 (when this evaluation was commissioned), and because of the ethical complexities of involving young people via schools in the evaluation.

In brief, the 2019 evaluation found scholarships and mentoring:⁷¹

- helped recipients achieve goals (school retention)
- reduced family financial and personal financial stress
- increased recipients' self-confidence in classroom
- improved recipients' sense of wellbeing
- decreased recipients' stress about school and enabled them to study better in school hours and at home
- made recipients feel better supported at school.⁷²

Qualitative feedback from scholarship recipients is no doubt important for further program development and may be an avenue DCJ wishes to explore if the program is continued.

The Personal Wellbeing Index has recently been added to the application form, which, if retained, may provide another way of measuring changes in returning applicants' wellbeing over time. However, interviews with key stakeholders indicate young people are often assisted to complete the application form, and this may result in an invalid measurement of personal wellbeing.

6.5 ACHIEVEMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES

This section addresses the key evaluation questions relating to the impacts of the Youth Development Scholarship for young people across the education and health domains of the Outcomes Framework.

The analysis compares the outcomes for people who received a scholarship (recipient) with young people who were eligible for a scholarship and who completed the application process, but who were unsuccessful (comparison). In some cases, applicants missed out for quota-related reasons, so this is a fair comparison. In other cases, members of this group carry some bias compared to the program participants, having either:

- lower (assessed) needs, hence, missing out on the program
- been assessed as less likely to benefit from the program.

This means that even in the absence of the Youth Development Scholarship, there would be some differences in outcomes expected between the groups.

⁷¹ As noted above, the mentoring component ended in 2018–2019, and program level data regarding satisfaction and mentoring sessions completed by Mentoring participants was not available.

⁷² The Miller Group. (2019). Evaluation of FACS' Scholarship and Pilot Mentoring Program for Students Living in Social Housing.

The primary analysis approach was a regression model, where scholarship receipt was modelled alongside control variables (including application score, which determines scholarship receipt) and considering relative disadvantage amongst recipients. Further details on the approach can be found in the Appendices (Volume 2).

Table 52 shows the outcomes for young people who received a Youth Development Scholarship, tested using this approach. Overall, outcome rates for the recipient group are generally worse than those in the comparison group. This is to be expected as the recipient group are a more disadvantaged cohort. However, after controlling for differences between the recipient and comparison group, we do not find any evidence that the Youth Development Scholarship improves outcomes for participants.

TABLE 52. LINKED OUTCOME MODEL RESULTS FOR THE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS PROGRAM, 1 JULY 2016 – 30 JUNE 2021

Domain	Outcome	# of people in program	# of people in comparison	Rate of outcome in program	Rate of outcome in comparison	Odds ratio (95% confidence interval)	P-value
Education	Attaining HSC	379	379	45%	61%	0.86 (0.77, 1.50)	0.35
	Completing school year	1,296	1,428	90%	90%	1.23 (0.93, 1.62)	0.15
	Improved school attendance rate	597	549	73%	82%	0.67 (0.56, 0.80)	0.00
	Enrolling in vocational educational module	244	314	45%	45%	1.04 (0.71, 1.50)	0.85
Health	Mental health ambulatory service use	1,556	1,816	11%	6%	1.24 (0.92, 1.67)	0.15
	Emergency department presentations	1,556	1,816	33%	24%	1.22 (1.03, 1.45)	0.02
	Public hospital admissions	1,556	1,816	12%	9%	1.10 (0.87, 1.40)	0.41

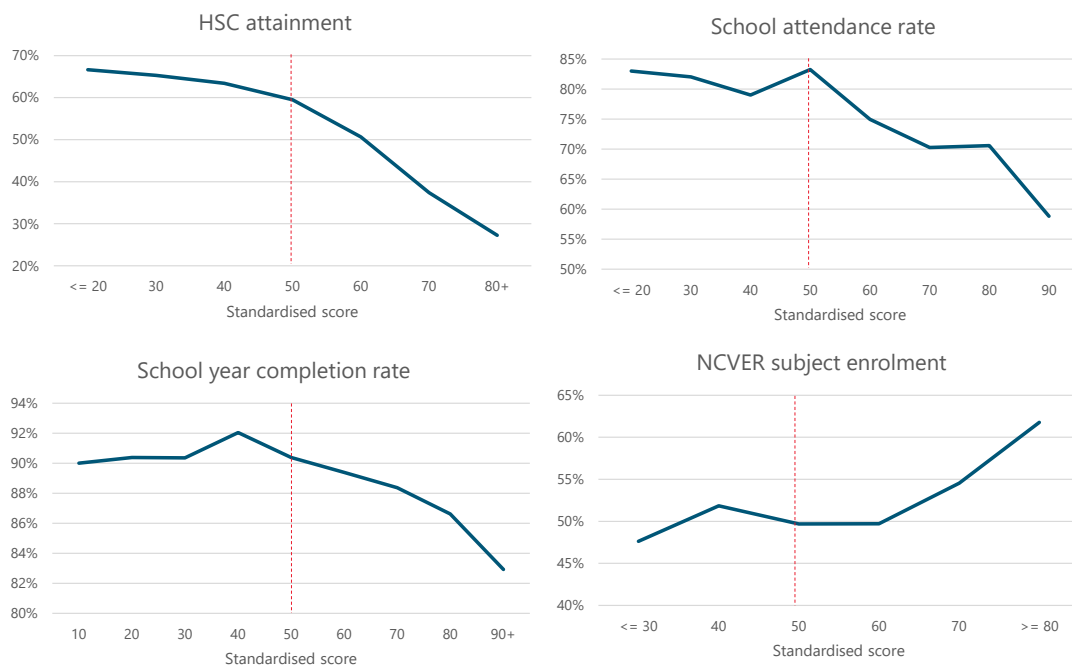
Source: Linked administrative data, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

Note: We have built a regression model for each of the outcomes listed. Appendix 3 provides more details on this approach as well as an illustrative example of the size of the effect that would be necessary for there to be evidence of improvement.

6.5.1 EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Figure 38 shows the relationship between the applicants' selection scores and the outcomes tested as part of the education and skills domain. To accommodate for yearly changes in the application scoring approach, the model uses a standardised score. The higher the score, the greater the assessed disadvantage. Most students receiving a scholarship have a standardised score of 50 or more, and 50 represents a nominal (fuzzy) threshold between non-recipients (below 50) and recipients (50 and above). More details on the approach to standardising can be found in the Appendices (Volume 2).

FIGURE 38. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS STANDARDISED SELECTION SCORE AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES, 2017–2021



Source: Linked administrative data, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

Note: The selection score criteria and distribution of scores have changed over time, so we have standardised the score on a scale of 0 to 100, with an approximate cut-off score of 50 (above which a scholarship is awarded) to ensure that valid comparisons can be made across the years.

There is a *decreasing* (or negative) relationship between the applicant score and HSC attainment, school attendance and school completion outcomes, which is to be expected given the greater level of disadvantage for those receiving the scholarship. On the other hand, there is an *increasing* (or positive) relationship between the applicant score and vocational education module enrolment. It may be that less disadvantaged students tend to enrol in tertiary education, such as university, rather than TAFE, although this cannot be verified.⁷³

⁷³ University enrolment data was not available to the evaluation.

Many stakeholders hold the firm view that receiving a scholarship is an important determinant of a young person's ongoing engagement with education. Stakeholders shared anecdotes about how receiving a scholarship made a meaningful difference for young people whose families are experiencing financial hardship. However, this is not borne out in the quantitative data.

There was no evidence that receiving a Youth Development Scholarship resulted in statistically significant improvements in HSC attainment, school completion or vocational education module enrolment rates. School attendance rates appear to decrease; however, this is likely to be explained by higher rates of non-attendance amongst young people whose scholarship score was higher rather than a program effect (Figure 38). In addition, school attendance data was unavailable for 2020 due to COVID-19, and these patterns should be cautiously interpreted.

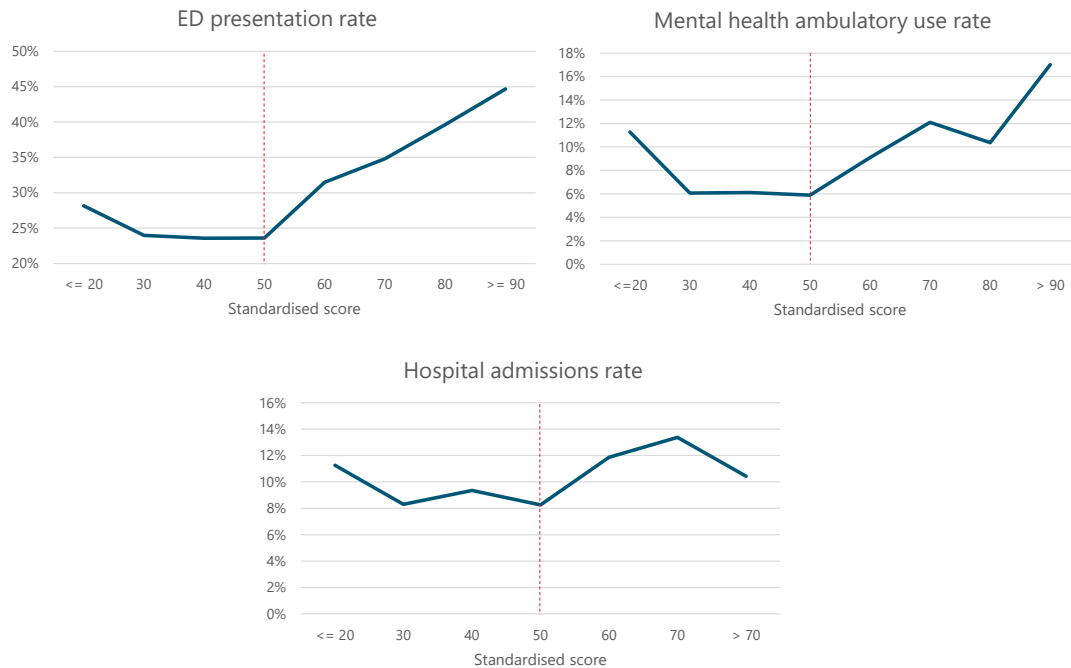
Analysis of scholarship exit surveys shows that three-quarters (71%) of the students who returned a survey (230 people) said they would have stayed at school without the scholarship. This may indicate their intrinsic motivation for engaging with education.

6.5.2 HEALTH

Figure 39 shows the relationship between applicants' selection scores and the outcomes tested as part of the health domain. There is an *increasing* (positive) relationship between the applicant's score and their rates of emergency department presentation, mental health ambulatory use and hospital admissions. Similar to the outcomes tested for the education domain, this is to be expected given the greater level of disadvantage of young people receiving the scholarship.

There was no evidence that the Youth Development Scholarship resulted in reduced mental health ambulatory use or hospital admission rates. A negative effect was detected for emergency department presentations; however, this is likely to be explained by higher rates of emergency department presentation amongst young people whose scholarship score was higher. The 2018 cohort drives the relationship between scholarship score and emergency department presentation rate: when this cohort is removed from the analysis, the relationship between scholarship score and emergency department presentation rate is no longer statistically significant.

FIGURE 39. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS STANDARDISED SELECTION SCORE AND HEALTH OUTCOMES, 2017–2021



Source: Linked administrative data, 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021.

Notes: The selection score criteria and distribution of scores have changed over time, so we have standardised the score on a scale of 0 to 100, with an approximate cut-off score of 50 (above which a scholarship is awarded) to ensure that valid comparisons can be made across the years.

6.6 VARIABILITY OF OUTCOMES

Completion of the school year is a targeted short-term outcome described in the program logic. It is directly measurable using the linked administrative data. Therefore, this was selected as the key outcome for subgroup analyses. Consistent with the overall results, we found no effect for:

- Aboriginal people
- people from CALD backgrounds
- different districts
- different housing types (for example, public housing, waitlist, out of home care).

The evidence base for the Scholarships program indicates the main predictor of 'success' is likely to be the young person's intrinsic motivation. The factors that motivate young people are likely to vary from person to person.

It may be important to explore young people's motivation to apply for the scholarship in future evaluations. This may be captured in their long-form written responses on the application form, or through direct engagement with young people to understand their motivation for applying for the scholarship and the impact of receiving it on them and their family – particularly in relation to the positive or negative aspects of being awarded a scholarship.

6.7 COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

6.7.1 APPROACH

No quantifiable educational or health outcomes have been identified from the linked administrative data analysis to date (the linked data analysis was limited to the domains of health and education as these were the two domains where the program logic expected to see positive outcomes).

The estimated overall benefit-cost ratio for Youth Development Scholarships is therefore zero, and no sensitivity analysis was done.

The qualitative benefits of Youth Development Scholarships are discussed in Section 6.4.

In the absence of any quantifiable benefits, the quantitative analysis was limited to analysis of the costs of the program only.

The cost analysis covers the five-year period 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021. During this period, scholarships were awarded to 2,264 different students (Table 49), with some of those students receiving scholarships in one or more subsequent years (Table 51). In total, 3,433 scholarships were awarded.

Successful applicants receive \$1,000 each in the program year to help with school expenses and secondary support.

Costs are expressed in nominal terms and have not been discounted.

6.7.2 SUMMARY OF COSTS

Total costs for Youth Development Scholarships are shown in Table 53.

TABLE 53. SUMMARY OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP COSTS (\$ MILLION)

Financial year	Scholarships paid	Program management costs	Total
30 June 2017	0.2	0.3	0.5
30 June 2018	0.6	0.5	1.1
30 June 2019	0.7	0.5	1.1
30 June 2020	0.9	0.6	1.5
30 June 2021	1.1	0.5	1.6
Total	3.5	2.4	5.9

Scholarships paid represent total scholarships awarded less refunds for monies awarded but not spent.

Program management costs comprise estimates of various costs including DCJ staff costs, housing contact centre costs, NSW Department of Education staff costs, Ministerial and Communication Services costs, and costs of the mentoring pilot.

Program management costs as a percentage of total program costs have progressively reduced over time, from 63% of total program costs in 2016–2017 to 32% in 2020–2021.

Costs per scholarship over the five-year period to 30 June 2021 are shown in Table 54.

TABLE 54. SUMMARY OF COSTS PER YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT

Period	Scholarship costs	Program management costs	Total
1 July 2016 to 30 June 2021	\$1,000	\$729	\$1,729

7. ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We talked with 76 Aboriginal people across five locations: Campbelltown (Dharawal country), Kempsey (Dunghutti country), Batemans Bay (Yuin county), Dubbo (Wiradjuri country) and Redfern (Eora country). Our detailed methods for the consultation are provided in the Appendices (Volume 2). The purpose of this engagement was to understand the extent to which the Service Improvement Initiatives (SIIs) were known to the communities, and the extent to which the SIIs met the housing needs of Aboriginal people, organisations and communities.

This section presents the findings of this engagement, highlighting the design and policy implications for the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) when responding to the housing needs of Aboriginal people and communities across NSW. Where relevant, specific insights about the SIIs have been incorporated across this report.

The section is structured according to the first three (of four) Priority Reforms under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (National Agreement), which focus on changing the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Priority Reforms are intended to:

- **strengthen and establish formal partnerships and shared decision making**
- **build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector**
- **transform government organisations so they work better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**
- improve and share access to data and information to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to make informed decisions.

It is important to note that the conversations with community came before these priority reforms were announced, and our consultation was not about the National Agreement. However, the issues raised during consultation mirror the priority areas and the structure of this section is intended to highlight that.

7.1 STRENGTHENING FORMAL PARTNERSHIPS AND SHARED DECISION MAKING

The first Priority Reform is to strengthen and establish structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based process against Closing the Gap. The National Agreement points to two types of partnerships: policy partnerships (which are created for the purpose of working on discrete policy areas, such as education, health or housing) and place-based partnerships (which are based on a specific region) between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives and agreed others.

The importance of localised decision making is emphasised in the OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment) Plan, which acknowledges that Aboriginal

communities are best placed to recognise and understand local needs.⁷⁴ Similarly, the Strong Family, Strong Communities 2018–2028 Implementation Plan 2019–2022 supports self-determination for families and communities by putting culture and community at the centre of program design and implementation.⁷⁵ This includes partnering with peak Aboriginal organisations and using the knowledge and experiences of tenants, their families and communities to shape the plan.

Conversations with Aboriginal people, organisations and communities indicated that, while consultation between DCJ and the five Aboriginal communities about housing and homelessness policies and responses was previously strong, it has recently been limited. For example, leaders in the Redfern Aboriginal community-controlled sector noted they had not been invited to meet with DCJ for up to five years. Aboriginal people, organisations and communities expressed a desire to meaningfully engage with DCJ to co-design policies and programs to meet the Aboriginal communities' housing and homelessness needs; however, they were unsure about the NSW Government's commitment to this.

Lack of consultation with Aboriginal people, organisations and communities may lead to inappropriate program design and implementation. For example, there were many examples provided of communities in which an Aboriginal Private Rental Specialist fostered strong, positive relationships for Aboriginal Rent Choice recipients renting in the private market. It is important that individual Aboriginal communities have the opportunity to outline to DCJ what roles or supports will be important to a program's success, in a particular local implementation and cultural context. The risk to DCJ of not considering Aboriginal voices in commissioning includes community disengagement, duplication of investment and poorer outcomes for Aboriginal people.

There were calls for Aboriginal voices to be heard at existing forums – as distinct from creating new governance structures – and for Aboriginal people to be able to provide advice at local and state levels. The evaluation's Aboriginal Reference Group identified a range of internal DCJ resources, including the Transforming Aboriginal Outcome teams, the state and district Aboriginal reference groups, Ngarra Housing and Homelessness Aboriginal Staff Network, that are well placed to support shared decision making. It was unanimous across the five Aboriginal communities that it will be impossible to meet the commitments made at either the Australian or NSW Government levels to improving outcomes for Aboriginal people, organisations and communities without shared decision making. The Aboriginal people we spoke with named a range of principles that underpin shared decision making – transparency, inclusiveness and self-determination – many of which are consistent with those outlined in the National Agreement.

The consultation generated a range of practical suggestions for strengthening the policy- and place-based partnerships between Aboriginal people, organisations and communities. These are outlined in Table 55. In making these suggestions, many stakeholders noted the

⁷⁴ NSW Government. (2019). OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment) Plan: NSW Government Plan for Aboriginal affairs: Education, employment and accountability. NSW Government, www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/our-agency/staying-accountable/ochre/the-ochre-plan/AA_OCHRE_final.pdf.

⁷⁵ Aboriginal Housing Office. (2019). Strong Families, Strong Communities 2018–2028: Implementation Plan 2019–2022, Aboriginal Housing Office, www.aho.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/inline-files/Strong%20Family%20Strong%20Communities%20Implementation%20Plan.pdf.

importance of allowing sufficient time for relationships to develop and mature, and for the processes of decision making itself.

TABLE 55. SUGGESTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING POLICY- AND PLACE-BASED PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN DCJ AND ABORIGINAL PEOPLE, ORGANISATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

Policy-based	Place-based
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the cultural capability of the policy instruments, commissioning and planning procedures, and organisational practices to ensure programs and services are client-centred and that Aboriginal communities play a central role in shaping them. • Consider how Aboriginal people can be involved in co-designing the implementation of programs and initiatives, including the ongoing Future Directions strategy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link activities with District Action Plans. • Ensure local implementation of the SII is focused on the needs of Aboriginal people within the districts. Aboriginal Reference Groups, housing networks and emerging Aboriginal hubs in the districts strengthen existing mechanisms for consulting with Aboriginal employees and communities. • Include opportunities for regular consultation to create an iterative process that ensures collective input, allows time to consult with communities and generates a sense of ownership within communities who are impacted by homelessness. • Develop a relationship between DCJ and local councils so communities can understand their different roles and how they can contribute. • Develop a good working relationship with local communities to share information, resources and identify opportunities to work together and streamline service delivery. • Build partnerships within DCJ across Housing, Community Services, Child Protection and Youth Justice to increase understanding of work with common clients. • Build partnerships with Koori Interagencies, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

7.2 BUILDING THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED SECTOR

DCJ works in partnership with a range of non-government organisations to deliver housing and homelessness supports and services. Some Aboriginal people, organisations and communities across the five communities are concerned about the appropriateness of the supports and services delivered by some of these organisations, most of which are mainstream. For example, there were examples of domestic and family violence (DFV) services operated by mainstream organisations that are not appropriate for Aboriginal women, including because there are no Aboriginal staff in the organisation. Other people raised concerns about low awareness in the community housing sector of cultural drivers of tenancy instability among social housing tenants – such as the high prevalence of undiagnosed health or mental health conditions, particularly those associated with a history of dispossession – leading to punitive rather than therapeutic responses from staff. As detailed in the interim evaluation report for Rent Choice, there is qualitative evidence that Aboriginal people have experienced unconscious bias when seeking support from DCJ.

Many Aboriginal people typically prefer to access Aboriginal-run services because of their shared understanding of culture and connection to community. However, the Aboriginal community consultation points to the absence of Aboriginal-specific services along the housing continuum. For example, Aboriginal people asked why they could not access Rent Choice through a community-controlled organisation. A recent DCJ-commissioned review of specialist homelessness services (SHS) also identified several gaps in specialised services for Aboriginal people, including transitional housing; DFV refuges; and integrated and holistic approaches to meeting clients' needs, particularly around drug and alcohol rehabilitation or mental health services and supports. The same review noted the need to support Aboriginal people whose tenancies were at risk of failing.

The consultations with Aboriginal people point to the opportunity to continue strengthening the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to ensure it can deliver high-quality services to meet the needs of Aboriginal people who require housing and homelessness supports and services. This aligns with principles expressed in the Australian and NSW Government commitments.

There was support for more Aboriginal organisations to move into the housing and homelessness sector to ensure Aboriginal people have access to and choice in which services and supports they access. DCJ can show leadership in its commissioning and planning practices by seeking to partner with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to deliver housing and homelessness services and supports.

A stronger Aboriginal community-controlled sector would support implementation of the SSIs, particularly through a strengthened referral network. A stronger referral network could, for example, support referral of motivated and suitable Aboriginal social housing tenants to participate in Opportunity Pathways. Equally, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations could participate in Partner Facilitation Groups, to ensure culturally appropriate support is available to young Aboriginal Rent Choice Youth recipients. Aboriginal stakeholders suggested that there may be additional ways to strengthen reach and uptake of the Youth Development Scholarships, including by engaging with Aboriginal young people who are

motivated to further their education, but who are currently not engaged with school for reasons including financial hardship or caring responsibilities. These stakeholders suggested that engaging with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations providing youth mentoring would be a way of engaging this cohort.

7.3 TRANSFORMING GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

Access to two of the SII, Rent Choice and Opportunity Pathways, is determined by staff applying their informed judgement to determine a potential client's suitability for the program. This is a strength of both initiatives and empowers specialist staff to choose the most appropriate package of support for an individual. In many cases, this may include offering both a Rent Choice subsidy and referral to Opportunity Pathways. However, this may also limit reach and uptake of the products in instances where Aboriginal people experience conscious bias.

Our consultation heard claims of conscious bias, including multiple examples of Aboriginal people eligible for Rent Choice not being offered it until they presented at a housing office with a non-Aboriginal person who acted as their advocate. These observations appear evident in the quantitative program and linked administrative datasets. For example, Aboriginal people are less likely to be approved for Rent Choice and less likely to activate the subsidy, yet once established, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can achieve positive outcomes.

It is likely that there are factors influencing this pattern of approvals and activations that are both within and beyond DCJ's control. For example, while DCJ cannot control the availability of safe, secure and affordable housing in a constrained private rental market, it may be able to provide support Aboriginal people to help them identify a suitable property. DCJ can also provide advocacy for Aboriginal people to overcome the reported reluctance of some real estate agents and lessors to approve tenancy applications for Aboriginal people.

DCJ can show leadership by continuing to strengthen culturally appropriate practice in accordance with the NSW Homelessness Strategy,⁷⁶ which commits to delivering Aboriginal cultural capability training to all DCJ staff and non-government organisation services in NSW.

Stakeholders in several of the Aboriginal communities we consulted identified the importance of localising any cultural capability training, so that staff are aware of and can respond to communities' specific expectations and needs. Other stakeholders noted that this training should sit alongside additional, specific training in DFV and trauma-informed practice so Aboriginal people, and particularly Aboriginal women, do not suffer additional trauma when seeking housing assistance.

Alongside the need for a culturally capable workforce is the need for an increased Aboriginal workforce. There are fewer than 70 frontline Aboriginal staff in DCJ Housing offices (approximately 6% of all DCJ staff). This makes it unlikely that Aboriginal people seeking housing assistance will be immediately able to speak with an Aboriginal person about their housing needs (although they can make an appointment to do so). This is a particular barrier

⁷⁶ NSW Government. (2018). NSW Homelessness Strategy, 2018–2023. Sydney.

for Aboriginal women experiencing DFV, who often find the application process retraumatising and culturally unsafe.

The literature highlights the importance of Aboriginal people being supported by people who share or are deeply aware of the lived experiences of Aboriginal people. For example, an Aboriginal worker is more likely to understand the cultural or spiritual aspects of housing insecurity for their Aboriginal clients, such as recognising spiritual homelessness (where Aboriginal people experience separation from their traditional lands, kinships and communities) or understanding that while an individual might not have 'traditional' accommodation, they may have a sense of home, belonging or recognition regarding a certain space and want to maintain connection with it.⁷⁷

Identified Aboriginal roles can also be particularly important for ensuring access to the private rental market. In speaking with the Aboriginal community, we heard that the Aboriginal specialist was viewed as a crucial determinant of Aboriginal people gaining access to the private rental market. There were many examples provided of communities in which the specialist fostered strong, positive relationships with the private market and in which there was equality of access to the private rental market for Aboriginal people, often by virtue of the specialist's advocacy for individual tenants. However, these relationships reversed when the Aboriginal specialist role became vacant, leading to reduced opportunities in the private market for Aboriginal tenants.

The recent SHS review highlighted the challenge of recruiting and retaining Aboriginal staff, both within government and non-government services. It noted that DCJ could support increased Aboriginal employment by:

- sharing examples of good recruitment and development practices
- sponsoring Aboriginal mentoring and professional development initiatives
- sponsoring traineeships
- mandating Aboriginal employment practices.

⁷⁷ Memmott, P., Long, S., Chamber, C., & Spring, F. (2003). Categories of Indigenous 'homeless' people and good practice responses to their needs. AHURI Final Report No 49.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 SERVICE IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

As illustrated in the case stories, almost all (95%, 18 people) of the longitudinal case study participants reported experiences of traumatic life events, including removal from their family of origin, culture or country; domestic and family violence (DFV) (often both in childhood and adult relationships); involvement in the child protection or out-of-home care systems; or homelessness. This prompted us to explore the prevalence of traumatic life experiences in the linked administrative datasets.⁷⁸

This analysis found almost two-thirds (69%) of people under 25 years who interacted with Rent Choice and/or Opportunity Pathways had experienced traumatic life events. The observed rates were slightly higher for women and Aboriginal people, which also reflects their over representation in these services. For people over 25 years, child protection history is less reliable, so our analysis relied mostly on specialist homelessness service (SHS) history. Regardless, we found that two in five participants had experienced traumatic life events. Almost half (47%) of all Aboriginal people in this cohort had experienced at least one traumatic life event.

The literature shows that not all people will be traumatised by experiencing a distressing or traumatic event.⁷⁹ Further, while we cannot presume that the individuals who self-reported or were administratively flagged as having experienced a traumatic event would meet the clinical threshold for a diagnosis of trauma, it is reasonable to assume that the prevalence of trauma – ranging from simple to complex and persistent – is substantial within the cohorts targeted by housing and homelessness programs like the SIs.

There are clear implications for policy and practice, given the strong and often mutually reinforcing relationship between the experience of homelessness and the experience of trauma: psychological and physical trauma underlies many people's experiences of homelessness, and a traumatic event might precipitate homelessness. People can also suffer trauma from experiencing homelessness, which affects their ability to recover from other traumatising events.⁸⁰ Further, there is growing evidence and understanding of the cyclical relationship between trauma (both simple and complex), chronic homelessness, mental health difficulties and social disadvantage.⁸¹ Research by the Trauma and Homelessness Initiative Service in Victoria showed that trauma and traumatic events are often a 'precursor' to becoming homeless.⁸² It is also well understood that DFV is one of the main drivers

⁷⁸ We did this by creating a trauma 'flag' where people who had a child protection history with notes relating to domestic violence or sexual assault; a period of out-of-home care within the child protection system; or a SHS presentation, with trauma or related needs (DFV or family issues) flagged.

⁷⁹ Cash, R., O'Donnell, M., Varker, T., Armstrong, R., Di Censo, L., Zanatta, P., Murnane, A., Brophy, L., & Phelps, A. (2014). *The Trauma and Homelessness Service Framework*. Report prepared by the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health in collaboration with Sacred Heart Mission, Mind Australia, Inner Southern Community Health and VincentCare Victoria.

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid.

of homelessness and housing insecurity in NSW for women and children and Aboriginal women.⁸³

The NSW Homelessness Strategy specifies a plan to improve services by increasing trauma-informed care.⁸⁴ As part of this commitment, training in trauma-informed care is continuing to roll out to all DCJ staff and non-government organisation services in NSW. Our stakeholder and community consultation supports the need for this training, but also cautions against training as a panacea. Key stakeholders noted the importance of embedding trauma-informed practices into organisational policies, as well as incorporating them into program and service design and practice, alongside building the knowledge and awareness of individual staff members through training and other professional learning opportunities.

Trauma-informed organisational policies are designed to reflect the well-established links between experiences of trauma and antisocial behaviours and seek to ensure people who have experienced trauma are not exposed to further harm when they access services and support from an agency.

It is also well understood that in NSW, DFV is one of the main drivers of homelessness and housing insecurity for women and children and Aboriginal women.⁸⁵ Survivors of DFV have reported housing security as being the one of the primary reasons *not* to leave a violent relationship, and as one of the most crucial securities to establish immediately after leaving the relationship. As the case studies showed, Rent Choice Start Safely was instrumental for some survivors to escape their situation of DFV, but the level of support was in some cases not sufficient to allow women with caring responsibilities to meet their further education or employment goals.

Given the complexity of issues many survivors face, it is best practice to provide housing supports alongside specific violence-related products and services, such as legal advice and advocacy, and therapeutic and financial counselling.

Skattebol et al. 2015⁸⁶ and Borland et al. 2016⁸⁷ both emphasise that highly disadvantaged jobseekers have multiple support needs that cross different government agencies and portfolios, and require a flexible, personalised, and joined-up service that *may include ongoing therapeutic interventions*.

The SIIs are designed to be mutually reinforcing, and it is expected some people will participate in more than one program. There is a cohort of 138 people who have received a Rent Choice subsidy while participating in Opportunity Pathways (79 people receiving Rent Choice Start Safely and 59 people receiving Rent Choice Youth). Many stakeholders observed

⁸³ Drabsch, T. (2019). The Relationship between Domestic and Family Violence and Housing, NSW Parliamentary Research Service, eBrief 07/2019, p. 7.

⁸⁴ NSW Government. (2018). NSW Homelessness Strategy, 2018–2023, Sydney.

⁸⁵ Drabsch, T. (2019). The Relationship between Domestic and Family Violence and Housing, NSW Parliamentary Research Service, eBrief 07/2019, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Skattebol, J., Hill, T., Griffiths, A., & Wong, M. (2016). Unpacking Youth Unemployment, SPRC Report 15/2015. Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Australia.

⁸⁷ Borland, J., Considine, M., Kalb, G., & Ribar, D. (2016). *What are Best-Practice Programs for Jobseekers Facing High Barriers to Employment?* Melbourne Institute Policy Brief Series, Policy Brief No. 4/16. Melbourne: Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, The University of Melbourne.

the complementary nature of the Rent Choice product suite and Opportunity Pathways. Some stakeholders noted that while Rent Choice Youth requires young people to work towards education, training or employment outcomes, the number of support hours is limited. When offered concurrently with Opportunity Pathways, the two products deliver wraparound support to the young person. Other stakeholders noted the synergy between Opportunity Pathways and Start Safely, where the Rent Choice subsidy provides immediate financial assistance to women establishing their independence, and Opportunity Pathways supports them with the necessary education and training to maintain independence.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Shift the culture of social housing provision to include a central place for supporting people to access the private market.**
2. **Advocate for broader whole of government policy to improve the affordability and experience of people renting in the private market. This includes investments in Affordable housing, build to rent schemes and review of tax and transfer policy settings that distort incentives for low-income households to exit social housing.**
3. **Continue to invest in trauma-informed training and other professional learning opportunities to ensure all staff understand the causes and consequences of trauma, particularly how it shapes behaviour that can lead to long term dependence on social housing.**
4. **Review current policies to embed trauma-informed principles and ensure a balance between therapeutic and punitive responses. For example, policies that respond to antisocial behaviours in public housing could include increasing support options as an alternative to or alongside increasing consequences for antisocial behaviours.**
5. **Review caseworker resourcing and oversight, and participant communication strategies to:**
 - **enable all participants to have a positive one-on-one relationship and contact with a supportive caseworker when they need it.**
 - **empower participants with clear, appropriate and reiterated communications about how the SII they are receiving works and what to expect – for example, how Rent Choice tapering is applied or the supports available through Opportunity Pathways.**
6. **Consider ways of ensuring specialist counsellors or trauma practitioners are available to support clients to develop their capability, capacity and motivation for housing independence, which may include partnerships with the non-government and Aboriginal community-controlled sectors.**
7. **Continue to strengthen inter-agency collaborations and partnerships with external providers of specialist services, and development of referral pathways.**

8. **Continue to strengthen the organisational commitment to recruiting and retaining an Aboriginal workforce at all levels, but particularly frontline workers. Support increased Aboriginal employment by:**
 - sharing examples of good recruitment and development practices
 - sponsoring Aboriginal mentoring and professional development initiatives
 - sponsoring traineeships
 - mandating Aboriginal employment practices.
9. **Explore ways to partner with specialist organisations and the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to ensure Aboriginal people – particularly Aboriginal women who have experienced violence and members of the Stolen Generations – are not traumatised by the experience of seeking housing assistance.**
10. **Explore opportunities to partner with and connect SII participants who are escaping DFV to organisations providing legal advice and advocacy, counselling and other therapies, and financial counselling.**
11. **Co-design responses to ensure people in need of housing assistance can develop long-term positive support relationships and informal social networks. This may range from peer support networks through to formal psychological therapy for people with experiences of trauma.**

8.2 RENT CHOICE

Evidence from the linked administrative dataset indicates Rent Choice is diverting people from the social housing system and supporting them to rent sustainably in the private market. There is evidence that Rent Choice can work in diverse markets, with high Rent Choice activation rates in districts with higher median rents.

While some people may need the maximum subsidy length Rent Choice can provide, fewer than half of all recipients (25–50%) of any type of Rent Choice are still receiving a subsidy at two years, and for those who do continue, the taper is being applied. One year after ending the subsidy, around 90% of people who receive the Rent Choice subsidy are sustaining their tenancies, regardless of how long they have received the subsidy.

Subsidy recipients exhibit greater personal wellbeing than the broader cohort of people eligible for social housing, and their wellbeing appears to improve once their subsidy is activated.

Access to the Rent Choice subsidy suite is determined by staff applying their informed judgement to determine a potential recipient's suitability for the product. This is a strength of the model and empowers specialists to choose the most appropriate package of support

for individuals – in some cases, this may include offering both a Rent Choice subsidy and Opportunity Pathways. However, this aspect of the model may also limit reach and uptake where conscious bias exists, such as towards women escaping violence or towards Aboriginal people.

Factors outside the DCJ's control, but within its realm of influence, also limit uptake; in particular, real estate agent and lessor attitudes. The highest Rent Choice activation rates tend to be in locations that approve Rent Choice the most and, counterintuitively, in districts with higher median rents. This lends support to a qualitative finding that a crucial factor in the success of Rent Choice is staff members' real estate sector experience and relationships with real estate agents.

The Aboriginal specialist role was also viewed as a determinant of the degree to which the private rental market is willing to support Aboriginal people to gain access to it. There were many examples provided of communities in which the specialist fostered strong, positive relationships with the private market and in which there was equality of access to the private rental market for Aboriginal people, often by virtue of the specialist's advocacy for individual tenants. However, these relationships reversed when the Aboriginal specialist role became vacant, leading to reduced opportunities in the private market for Aboriginal tenants.

There is an opportunity for DCJ to show leadership by disseminating the results of the evaluation, supporting the continued rollout of localised cultural capability training and shifting cultural norms to support equitable access and treatment.

In response to earlier evaluations, DCJ has reduced the frequency of rent reviews to six-monthly. While this is broadly seen as positive, it may have a negative consequence for tenants whose progress may slow in the absence of regular review. These reviews precede application of a taper. If these are not being applied – and there is quantitative evidence to suggest they are not being done regularly in some districts – recipients' progress may not be optimal.

The people we interviewed wanted to study and work. Our studies document lives that are otherwise heading in a positive direction before being interrupted by unwanted intrusions (such as violent ex-partners), recurrent obstacles (such as in securing a property) or systemic barriers (such as racism). The qualitative data suggest that Rent Choice – particularly in combination with Opportunity Pathways – is most effective in reducing repeat homelessness and reliance on income support when applied early, both in terms of someone's contact with the social housing and welfare systems and when they are young.

The estimated overall benefit-cost ratio (BCR) for Rent Choice with DCJ guidance was 0.9 with a net present value (NPV) of negative \$29.5 million. The present value of quantifiable costs was estimated at \$251.5 million and the present value of quantifiable benefits at \$222.0 million. This means that Rent Choice recipients achieve comparatively better outcomes at a relatively lower cost to the NSW Government (that is, providing Rent Choice is less expensive than providing social housing).


The implication of the economic analyses for policy is the Rent Choice is a cost-effective diversionary product that clearly reduces the need for long term social housing assistance. It is not a panacea and can't address all the complex needs and unpredictable life events of

recipients. Given the borderline CBA results of 0.9 (i.e., just less than 1.0) it is uncertain whether there is a net economic benefit to the community from providing this form of assistance. Yet, if the question is how best to assist a person on low to moderate income with unmet housing need who is escaping domestic violence or is young and in need of support, who has the capacity, motivation and incentives to engage in education and employment, then it is far more cost effective to provide Rent Choice than social housing.

As an effective diversionary product and given the low rates of positive exits from social housing, Rent Choice would appear to be an important component in future directions to reduce reliance on government for housing assistance. Products such as Rent Choice and many other forms of private market assistance provided by DCJ, as well as more broadly with Affordable Housing, build to rent schemes and other policies have the potential to increase the attractiveness of the private market in contrast to social housing as a person's final housing destination.

Increasing the prominence of this cost-effective form of housing assistance relative to social and other forms of assistance, requires a broader consideration of the overall incentives, as well as costs and benefits of different products and services to meet housing need in the private market in the immediate and longer term.

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Use current Rent Choice products to divert people on low incomes from social housing. Rent Choice is more cost effective than social housing for current clients.**
2. **Expand Rent Choice as the product of choice for people on low to moderate incomes with unmet housing need who have the capability, capacity and motivation to engage with education and employment.**
3. **Increase focus on improving the experience of renting in the private market. This requires a broader consideration of the overall incentives, as well as costs and benefits of different products and services to meet housing need in the private market in the immediate and longer term. Any mechanisms or 'push' factors, such as increased choice and amenity in accommodation type in the private rental market, need to exceed the 'pull' factors created by current tax and transfer policy settings and as well as costs and conditions of social housing.**
4. **Support a culture of private rental assistance as a core part of social housing assistance through key performance indicators. For example, a district level indicator focusing on numbers of suitable people supported into Rent Choice as well as the proportion of clients engaged in education and employment have the potential to drive a major cultural change that supports private rental assistance as legitimate form of cost-effective short term of social housing assistance.**
5. **Recognise that providing private rental assistance is a specialist skill different to assessment and demand or tenancy management. All efforts need to be made to recruit staff with the appropriate skill sets – which must extend to an understanding of how real estate**

agents operate. Ensuring all staff engage with the objectives of Rent Choice as a short-term assistance and increasing opportunities for mentoring and sharing information between the Rent Choice officers is critical to ongoing success.

See also 'Overall Recommendations.'

8.3 OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS

Opportunity Pathways is providing valuable assistance to clients to achieve education, training and employment outcomes that will help them towards financial independence. The cost-benefit analysis (CBA) showed it is also providing more benefit to the NSW Government and public than it costs, with an estimated overall BCR of 1.4, and an NPV of positive \$14.6 million. Its benefits include additional income to both the NSW Government and NSW citizens through rent payment as well as additional lifetime earnings for NSW citizens from enrolments in vocational education; reduced use of SHS and health services; and reduced costs to the criminal justice system.

Opportunity Pathways was provided through a contracting for outcomes approach, and in most cases, employment targets were not being met.⁸⁸ Opportunity Pathways has now been reformulated as a social impact investment that is outside the scope of the evaluation. The interim evaluation and program review stressed that 13- and 26-week outcome targets may have been set without an accurate understanding of how many people needed to achieve these outcomes for the initiative to provide value for money. The current evaluation suggests that the program was providing value for money despite lower than expected performance.

The Opportunity Pathways program logic identifies a broad group of clients eligible for Opportunity Pathways (social housing tenants, Rent Choice recipients or Housing Register applicants). The logic is underpinned by a theory that housing independence can be achieved through greater economic participation, by accessing education, training and employment opportunities.

The core assumption in the logic appears to be the existence of a significant number of social housing tenants with the motivation and capacity to achieve housing independence; that is, to exit the social housing system. The evaluation has found a cohort of suitably motivated social housing tenants who have referred themselves to the program and have tended to obtain positive outcomes. Yet it remains a challenge to enumerate, identify and refer substantial numbers of suitable tenants to Opportunity Pathways. More participants come to Opportunity Pathways from beyond the social housing tenant pool than within it. Interviews with stakeholders suggest that the clients most suitable for Opportunity Pathways tend to be those who have not yet entered social housing. Despite this, the results show that those who have received longer-term income support can and in fact do benefit more than

⁸⁸ This report is focuses on the overall initiative; an analysis of provider performance is addressed in the Opportunity Pathways Program Review (March 2021).


other clients. However, the evaluation found no evidence to suggest that people are transitioning out of social housing as a result of participating in the program.

Opportunity Pathways providers and DCJ district staff were confident that the core causal mechanism for Opportunity Pathways is the intrinsic motivation of clients. The key delivery mechanism is the referral of clients with the requisite motivation. Once clients are selected, the key causal mechanism in Opportunity Pathways appears to be the provision of a sufficient amount of support aligned to clients' aspirations. Limitations of the ability of linked data to identify these variables and gaps in the program monitoring data provided meant we were unable to directly test how the 'client-centredness' of these purported causal mechanisms impacted client outcomes.

The longitudinal case studies set out in Section 3.5 provide a more in-depth exploration of the causal mechanisms and contexts in which OP participants achieve outcomes. These case studies suggest that while motivation might be a strong causal mechanism, it could not always outweigh the effects of other features of context – for example, a history of self-reported trauma; lack of positive support networks and access to a car; child caring responsibilities; and unpredictable life events, such as the return of a violent ex-partner – that undermined attempts toward self-improvement.

In summary, Opportunity Pathways achieves positive economic outcomes for people who are motivated and who need housing assistance. It can provide benefits to individuals, including longer-term unemployed people, who have proved most challenging for employment services contracted by the Commonwealth to support. The benefits to the housing system are fairly minor, however. Opportunity Pathways cannot overcome other factors that lead to the need for housing assistance. Further, it does not address structural disincentives to work such as the withdrawal of income support payments or eligibility for housing assistance – both of which provide clients with stability – when they earn too much.

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Develop assessment processes and tools that support identification of eligible and suitable (motivated) clients, including those who are long-term unemployed.**
2. **Strengthen the connection between Opportunity Pathways and Rent Choice.**

See also 'Recommendations to enhance program monitoring' and 'Overall Recommendations.'

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE PROGRAM MONITORING

Monitoring is about providing program stakeholders with regular and timely information about program delivery or impact to stakeholders. It uses readily available data and tends to be concerned with facts or changing conditions. It is difficult to monitor outcomes because of the need for rigorous measurement, counterfactual thinking and qualitative and quantitative data sources.

Performance monitoring or commissioning for outcomes attempts to bridge monitoring and evaluation using reliable, valid metrics that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound (SMART).

It is outside the scope of this evaluation to provide an extended discussion of best practice in program monitoring. However, given the consistent problems with the Opportunity Pathways monitoring data, we have provided some specific suggestions for improving performance monitoring.



1. **Ensure any metrics are accurate (reliable).** Some Opportunity Pathways providers did not know if their clients had achieved 13- and 26-week employment outcomes because these outcomes are not (unlike for Commonwealth employment programs) automatically reported to providers. This means the data on employment outcomes may not be reliable.
2. **Review performance metrics to ensure they provide a 'valid' measure of performance, that is, represent the value being delivered.** It is possible that value and an economic return is being obtained despite performance metrics not being achieved. This is what happened with Opportunity Pathways.
3. **Review performance targets to ensure they are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound (SMART) or, if no targets are set, focus on improvements over time.** In Opportunity Pathways, providers were responsible for outcomes, meaning their performance was measured against the outcomes they themselves selected. This is the basis of commissioning for outcomes. Here the logic may be that providers should focus on outcomes not performance, as there is an assumption that outcomes are the product of good performance irrespective of factors outside providers' control. This is neat in theory, but the history of performance metrics being applied to public policy for vulnerable groups shows many perverse outcomes; for example, providers choosing clients or locations where there is low need, and outcomes are reasonably assured or likely to have happened without the provider's efforts.⁸⁹
4. **Review and test performance monitoring systems from a user-experience and implementation perspective to ensure they are used and updated consistently.** This may include removing data reporting on fields that are not necessary for decision making; and ensure buy-in from users. Performance monitoring systems must not only be technically adequate, but also attend to human factors in design and implementation. It is important to carefully consider what is mandated and used rather than simply asking for everything, just in case. This can make it difficult for providers to understand the value of individual data points, and how they contribute to program delivery.
5. **Incentivise accurate data collection, including by showing providers how the data will be used and reported on.** For example, develop a report for providers on the proportion of clients who have completed their satisfaction survey. Note that in this

⁸⁹ See Muller, J. (2018). *The Tyranny of Metrics*. Princeton University Press.

example, the incentive is to drive up the response rate, not report a level of satisfaction based on a low sample size from a few clients. This rewards those who put in the effort to include people that are satisfied and not satisfied rather than those who ensure a few happy clients do a survey. Performance in the first instance is getting the surveys done; only after a good response rate is achieved can analysis of actual satisfaction be achieved. Thus, a performance metric might be the percentage of clients having completed an intake and exit survey. Another one might be the actual levels of satisfaction. A third may include the proportion that obtain 13- or 26-week outcomes – but as this is a product of design, context *and* performance it may be invalid as a single metric of performance. Providers should feel the consequences of not obtaining the data and see how the data are being used, or they will reason that it is not that important, and therefore that they will not do it.

8.4 YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS

Stakeholders shared a range of anecdotal evidence about the difference a scholarship has made for young people whose families were experiencing hardship. However, there is no empirical evidence in the linked administrative dataset that Youth Development Scholarship recipients are more engaged in school or achieve better education related outcomes (improved school completion rates or higher education) or health related outcomes (improved self-esteem, resilience, social competency or wellbeing) in line with the intended outcomes set out in the program logic.

Many stakeholders consider that scholarships are an important determinant of a young person's ongoing engagement with education, but only 16% (32 students out of 197 valid exit survey responses) said they would have disengaged from school without the scholarship. The academic evidence base for scholarship programs indicates the main predictor of success is likely to be the young person's intrinsic motivation. The causal mechanisms are not observable in administrative datasets and while they were explored in interviews with key stakeholders, they could not be tested directly with quantitative analyses.

A 2019 evaluation⁹⁰ of the Scholarships and Mentoring program referred to the mechanisms of active involvement in setting and achieving goals, decision making and problem solving, as well as sense of accomplishment and self-esteem, that were identified from a review of the literature.⁹¹ However, these mechanisms appear to relate to the mentoring component of the program, which is no longer a part of the Scholarships program.

⁹⁰ The Miller Group. (2019). Evaluation of FACS' Scholarship and Pilot Mentoring Program for Students Living in Social Housing.

⁹¹ See for example Lamb, S. et al. (2004). *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia*, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne; Price-Mitchell, M. (2018). 'Goal setting is linked to higher achievement', *Psychology Today*, March; Covington, M. (2000). 'Goal theory, motivation, and school achievement: An integrative review', *Annual. Rev. Psychol.* 51(171): 200; Rowe, D. et al. (2017). 'Effects of

In the absence of the mentoring component, it is unlikely that education or other outcomes specified in the logic will be achieved. There is no empirical evidence in the linked administrative dataset that Scholarship recipients are more engaged in school or achieve better education related outcomes as a result of the scholarship. While many stakeholders hold a positive attitude towards the scholarship, at this stage, it is unlikely that awarding a scholarship activates the mechanisms of change identified in the program logic.


No quantifiable educational or health outcomes have been identified from the linked administrative data analysis to date (the linked data analysis was limited to the domains of health and education as these were the two domains where the program logic expected to see positive outcomes).

The estimated overall BCR for Youth Development Scholarships is therefore zero, and we have undertaken no sensitivity analysis.

Given there is no evidence of outcomes and the CBA findings, DCJ may wish to consider the future of the Youth Development Scholarships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following actions are recommended should the initiative continue in its current form.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review the program logic to ensure that it accurately reflects the outcomes that are possible for a financial payment (scholarship) in the absence of mentoring support. 2. Review the process for collecting Personal Wellbeing Index data from young people at entry and exit. In particular, ensure that young people are responsible for completing this data, rather than their parents/guardians/support workers. 3. Include an assessment of motivation on entry (through the application form) and exit (through the exit survey). 4. Consider ways of engaging meaningfully and deliberately with organisations, including Aboriginal service providers and community-controlled organisations, that support young people who are not engaged with school. This may strengthen the Youth Development Scholarships' reach to and uptake by young people who are motivated to further their education but are currently not engaged with school for reasons including financial hardship or caring responsibilities. 5. Explore opportunities to link scholarship recipients with Rent Choice Youth, Opportunity Pathways and/or NSW Government mentoring programs to help them achieve their future aspirations. 6. Consider ways to easily collect expenditure data, such as via an app or text message service, that do not add substantial administrative burden for students, schools or DCJ. These data
---	--

goal-setting instruction on academic engagement for students at risk', *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 40(1): 25–35; Moeller, A. J. et al. (2012). 'Goal setting and student achievement: A longitudinal study', *The Modern Language Journal*, 96(2): 153–169.

	<p>would be useful for developing an understanding of 'what works' for students, in what circumstances.</p>
--	--