

# LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF WARDS LEAVING CARE

Judy Cashmore and Marina Paxman

Social Policy Research Centre  
University of New South Wales  
January 1996

Report of Research Project commissioned by the NSW Department of Community Services

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, approximately 100 young people aged 16 to 18 years leave wardship each year in New South Wales. They enter care for a range of reasons and experience different forms and numbers of placements during their time in care. With a range of experiences behind them, they leave care to begin a period after care which again encompasses a wide variety of experiences.

This study focuses on the experiences of young people leaving wardship in New South Wales. It was funded by the New South Wales Department of Community Services and the objectives of the study were:

- (1) to examine the circumstances, experiences, and difficulties of young people leaving wardship at the time of leaving care and subsequently;
- (2) to document their perceptions of the events and experiences of being in care;
- (3) to evaluate the service needs of young people leaving care and the extent to which these needs are being met by Departmental and non-departmental services;
- (4) to examine any relationships between outcomes and young people's individual characteristics, family histories and experiences in care.

The project comprised several parts. The first was a prospective longitudinal interview study of young people leaving care. It involved a series of three interviews with state wards with the first interview just before they were discharged from wardship, and the second and third approximately three months and twelve months after discharge. The second part was the inclusion of two comparison groups, involving one interview with young people the same age as the wards but who had not been 'in care'. The first comparison group comprised young people living 'away from home', mostly in refuges or in supported accommodation; the second group included young people still living at home with their parent(s). In effect, they provided respectively a 'disadvantaged' and an 'advantaged' point of comparison. The third part was a study of the departmental files of the total group of young people leaving care within the one-year period. This was to allow a comparison of the young people leaving wardship who were able to be interviewed with those who were not. The fourth part of the project involved interviews with the District Officers who were dealing with the young people in the leaving care interview group at the time of their discharge.

Although the main concern of the study was to find out what happens to young people when they leave wardship and what their needs are, it was clear that their experience in care and their circumstances as they were leaving care had a significant effect on their transition from wardship. In particular, there were significant implications for the management of substitute care which included:

- . The importance of stability and continuity for children in care; the median number of placements was 6.5, and 76.9 per cent of young people had three or more placements while in care. However, young people who had spent at least 75 per cent of their time in care in one long-term placement were better off than those who had not, even if they were not living in that placement when they were discharged from wardship. They attended fewer schools, were happier, were more likely to have completed at least Year 10 at school, to report being able to 'make ends meet', to be satisfied with what the Department had done

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for them, and to be less likely to say they missed out on affection and ‘things other kids had’, and less likely to have thought about or attempted suicide

- . The need to inform and explain to children the reasons for their entry to care, and what they could expect of the Department; young people who had believed at some stage that they were responsible for going into care were less likely to complete high school, more likely to have thought about or attempted suicide and less happy after leaving care than those who did not believe that.
- . The importance of family contact while in care because the best predictor of contact after leaving care was contact in care.
- . The importance of closely monitoring children’s placements in out-of-home care, listening to children and helping them to develop a trusting relationship with a worker in order to prevent and thwart abuse in care and to provide at least one potential source of continuity for children in care.

It is also clear that young people leaving wardship vary considerably in their circumstances, including their age at entry into out-of-home care, how many placements they have had, who they are living with when they are discharged, and what sources of support they have. Their needs will therefore vary and they generally also change over time. The need for preparation and ongoing support beyond discharge, however, is common, and may include financial support, emotional support and advice, and information about their background. In particular:

.There needs to be some flexibility in the age at which young people are discharged from wardship to take account of needs, maturity, personal wishes and circumstances.

Nearly half the young people who were leaving care, at some stage, felt unsure and vulnerable about doing so, although they maintained indifference or enthusiasm at other times. There seem to be particular difficulties when young people leaving wardship leave care and school at the same time and a large number are unemployed a year after they are discharged from wardship.

- . Young people leaving care need to be able to do so as part of a gradual process which provides them with the same opportunities for extended support as young people in general receive, especially since income support and other government policies assume such support. Unfortunately, many young people leaving care clearly do not have the same level of support or stability as young people still living at home generally have.
- . Within 12 months of leaving wardship, only one in four former wards were still living where they were just before they were discharged from wardship. On average they had moved three times. The more placements they had been in while they were in care, the more places they lived in after leaving care.
- . Just under half the former wards were unemployed 12 months after being discharged from wardship. Nearly half said they were having problems ‘making ends meet’ financially.
- . Nearly one in three of the young women had been pregnant or had a child soon after leaving wardship.
- . Just over half had completed only Year 10 or less of schooling, consistent with the findings of other studies of poor educational attainment of young people in care.
- . Young people leaving care need assistance and support to develop both the more obvious ‘hard’ skills

to do with employment and independent living and the 'soft' social and emotional skills required for successful interpersonal relationships in adulthood. This is particularly important because over half the former wards and two-thirds of the young people living away from home have thought about or attempted suicide.

- . After care policies and services need to be developed as an essential part of substitute care policy and practice. Workers, foster carers and young people need to be aware of these policies, and the legislation needs to be more specific about entitlements for young people leaving wardship. The Department and agencies need to inform young people what help they could reasonably expect and to be willing to offer help since some young people may be willing to accept help even if they are not willing to ask for it. Young people should be able to expect that they can receive reasonable timely and appropriate support and consistency of service that is not dependent upon the goodwill of workers. State responsibility continues for these young people even though service delivery is increasingly being 'contracted out'.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### SUBSTITUTE CARE

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| Wardship | Transfer of guardianship by order of the Children's Court from the child's parents to the Minister for Community Services |
| In care  | Out-of-home substitute care including foster care, residential care, and family group homes                               |

### ACCOMMODATION

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Supported accommodation | Medium to long-term accommodation, single or shared with a youth worker visiting regularly or living in. |
| Refuge                  | Short-term crisis accommodation  |
| Independent             | Private rental accommodation   |

### INCOME SUPPORT

- . The Commonwealth Department of Social Security (DSS) income support payments at independent rates or the young homeless rate consist of: *Job Search Allowance* and *New Start Allowance* (now the Youth Training Allowance), *Sickness Allowance*, *Sole Parent Pension* or *Special Benefit*.
- . The Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, and Training (DEET) is responsible for AUSTUDY and ABSTUDY (for Aboriginal people) with a Student Homeless Rate.

### TEXT NOTES

All names in the text and in the young people's and District Officers' quotations have been changed to ensure anonymity.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, approximately 100 young people aged 16 to 18 years leave wardship each year in New South Wales. They enter care for a range of reasons and experience different forms and numbers of placements during their time in care. With a range of experiences behind them, they leave care to begin their life after care. But how well prepared are they for the period after care? What effect has their experience in care had on them? What happens to them after they are discharged from wardship? What resources can they call on and what support is available to them? The aim of the present study was to address these questions and in so doing to provide some insight into the needs of these young people and the services they require to assist their transition from care to independence and adulthood.

### 1.1 What is wardship?

When the Department of Community Services is seriously concerned about the welfare of children, and the Children's Court on application from the Department determines that it is not in the child's best interests to remain at home, there are several options for long-term orders for care and protection. The orders may specify that the child is placed in the care of a specific person or in the custody of a licensed substitute care program (including foster care and residential care programs run by the Department or by non-government organisations (NGO)). The child may also be made a ward of the state, and in this case, legal guardianship is transferred from the child's parents to the Minister of the Department of Community Services. The state is then responsible as guardian for the long-term welfare of children in wardship (Blackmore, 1991; Shaver et al., 1992; Report of the Senate Standing Committee, 1985).<sup>1</sup> Although the direct care of the child is generally carried out by foster carers or residential workers, the statutory responsibility for ensuring that the child's needs are met rest with the Department of Community Services. This entails ensuring the quality of care for children in substitute care, the promotion of their development and the provision of services so that intervention is constructive for the child and their family (Graycar, 1989: 204; Shaver et al., 1992: 6; Report of the Senate Standing Committee, 1985: 8-9).

This responsibility continues until the order expires (if it is a limited term order) or until the child turns 18 and attains adult legal status. At that time, the state relinquishes statutory responsibility regardless of the young person's wishes, maturity or readiness for independence (Smith, 1992: 8). Material and financial support and other services relating to education and training are, however, still available to ex-wards at the discretion of

---

<sup>1</sup> Guardianship is not defined in the Children (Care and Protection) Act 1987 but s 63 of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) defines the 'guardian of a child' as one who has "responsibility for the long-term welfare of the child and has, in relation to the child, all the powers, rights and duties that are, apart from this Act, vested by law or custom in the guardian of a child, other than: (a) the right to have the daily care and control of the child; and (b) the right and responsibility to make decisions concerning the daily care and control of the child. Significantly, the *Family Law Reform Act* (1995) has replaced terms such as 'custody' and 'guardianship' with new terms such as 'parental responsibility' and the *Children (Care and Protection) Act* 1987 is currently under review.

the Minister and the Department, according to s 92 (1) of the *Children (Care and Protection) Act 1987*.<sup>2</sup> In general terms, the legislation allows the Minister, and those acting with delegated authority, to provide the same assistance to former wards and protected persons as they were able to obtain as wards. Any assistance is discretionary and open to wide interpretation as the legislation is not specific about what this may entail, apart from time-limited assistance for 'education or vocational training'. It is not an entitlement, and no age is specified at which benefits to ex-wards cease.

## 1.2 Leaving wardship

When young people leave care, they generally have a history of abuse or neglect prior to being placed in care and a history of out-of-home placements, irregular parent contact, and changes in schooling and workers while they are in care. What happens to them before they enter care and while they are in care significantly affects the way they cope when they leave care. As an English report pointed out, "Leaving care for independence is a crisis which brings to the surface past deficits in care and attainment; it often requires, but does not receive, a major input of services and support" (Department of Health, 1991).

The degree to which children and young people experience continuity and stability in care is probably the most important factor influencing outcome in out-of-home care. Unfortunately, however, research indicates that many children in care experience multiple placements as a result of planned moves, placement break-down, misadventure (eg., the death or illness of a carer) or the closure of residential accommodation (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Biehal et al., 1994). Despite 'permanency planning' policies, few children stay in only one or two placements during their time in care, and some make multiple moves, with detrimental effects on their social, emotional and academic development. The long-term effects of repeated moves involving separation from care-givers are an impaired capacity for trusting relationships, "antisocial and asocial behaviors, chronic depression and low self-esteem, exaggerated dependency, and the tendency to compulsively, though unconsciously, evoke from the new environment a repetition of the original rejection" (Steinhauer, 1991, p.

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<sup>2</sup> S 92 states that:

- (1) The Minister may give to, or provide for, any person who has ceased to be a ward or protected person -
  - (a) such assistance as the minister was empowered to give to, or provide for, the person while the person was a ward or protected person; and
  - (b) such other assistance (whether financial or other), as, in the Minister's opinion, is reasonable having regard to the circumstances of the case.
- (2) For the purpose of securing education or vocational training on a full-time basis for any person who has ceased to be a ward or protected person, the Minister may, subject to such conditions as the minister may determine, from time to time and for periods not exceeding 6 months at any one time, authorise the making of payments for that purpose as if the person were a ward or protected person.
- (3) Any payment continued under the provisions of subsection (2) may, at the discretion of the Minister, be discontinued or varied at any time.

367). In addition, children moving from one placement to another are likely to change schools, and this in turn increases the likelihood of placement breakdown (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987) and contributes to their poor performance at school (Aldgate, 1994; Biehal et al., 1994; Triseliotis & Russell, 1984).

Not only do children in care experience change of placements and changes of school, they also have difficulty sustaining meaningful contact with their families. Children's contact with their family is, however, one of the most important factors affecting placement outcome and children's development and well-being (Aldgate, 1980; Fanshell & Shinn, 1978; Hess, 1987). Most children in substitute care who maintain regular contact with their parents have been found to benefit by being more settled in their placements, more able to manage relationships with other adults, and by being 'more competent socially and educationally' (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Bullock et al., 1991). They are also more likely to return home and to spend less time in care (Hess, 1987, Millham et al., 1989). Although the importance of family contact has increasingly been recognised and more children are now placed with family members in kinship foster care placements, contact with parents and siblings is often infrequent and irregular (Cashmore & Castell McGregor, 1996; McCartt Hess & Proch, 1993; Steinhauer, 1991). It requires workers who are both committed to ensuring that appropriate contact occurs and who have the time to prepare the children, support the parents and encourage the compliance and commitment of foster carers. Unfortunately, crisis child protection work often takes priority over this type of work, and often parents, foster parents, and sometimes children, find it easier not to have contact (McCartt Hess & Proch, 1993).

With tenuous links to their families while in care, young people generally leave care with little continuity of care from workers and variable relationships with former foster carers. Although their circumstances vary, it is reasonable to conclude, as do Maluccio, Krieger and Pine (1990) and Aldgate (1994), that young people in general leave care with multiple 'jeopardies'.

They are typically brought into care by reason of abuse or neglect; their family situations are characterized by poverty, disorganization, and major needs in basic areas of life such as health, education, and housing; and their parents often experience serious difficulties such as substance abuse and mental illness.

The foster care experience, which often involves multiple placements and lack of stability, is likely to complicate rather than promote their growth and development; its resources are insufficient, as is attention to their individual needs; and its abrupt and often premature discharge at age eighteen leaves no provision for the continuing support that all young adults need.

The foster care population includes a disproportionate number of young persons of color who have limited economic opportunities and who suffer the consequences of racism and other oppressive social conditions hostile to their achievement of competence. (Maluccio, Krieger, & Pine, 1990, p. 8)

### 1.3 What happens to young people after leaving care?

It is not surprising given the 'risk factors' or 'triple jeopardy' outlined by Maluccio, Krieger and Pine (1990) that young people who have been in care and lack the support of their families, foster carers and workers are at greater risk of unemployment, poverty and homelessness than other young people their age. Various surveys and research in England, the United States and Australia have found that young people who have been in care are over-represented among single homeless young people and those who do not have stable accommodation (Hirst, 1989; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Burdekin), 1989; Mech, 1988; Randall, 1989; Stein & Carey, 1986). While government policies in relation to income support, education and employment in Australia, England and the United States increasingly assume that young people will continue to have the support of their families until they establish themselves in their early 20's, the state's responsibilities for the vulnerable group of young people who have been in care usually end when they turn 18. As Shaver and Paxman (1992: 4) pointed out in relation to the Australian situation, the tax-sharing arrangements between the Commonwealth and the States have 'failed to keep pace' with the increasing 'need for resources in child and adolescent welfare'. They also do not take account of the range of needs of young people leaving the 'care' of the state.

A major study of young people leaving care was conducted by Stein and Carey (1986) in Leeds, England, and involved a follow-up of young people for two and half years after they left care. The findings were not encouraging. They indicated a high rate of unemployment, poor educational attainment, considerable mobility and loneliness after care, following a negative experience in care for most young people. They concluded:

Apart from the experience of a very small number of young people there is little evidence that state care was able to compensate for what was judged by social services to be missing in their background. In comparison with young people who had not been in care, our young people were more likely to be unemployed, to lack educational qualifications, to be living in poverty, to change accommodation frequently and to be confused about their pasts and unsettled in their present relationships. (Stein & Carey, 1986, p. 179)

Similarly, another study conducted in the United Kingdom found a pattern of instability in childhood/ wardship to be associated with instability in adulthood/ ex-wardship leading to future homelessness and social dislocation (Garnett, 1992).

As a result of research findings such as these and political action by young people, workers, and agencies, the difficulties facing young people as they leave care have increasingly been recognised in a number of overseas jurisdictions. Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom have introduced specific legislation, policies, and funding for programs to assist young people in their transition from care.

In England and Wales, the UK *Children Act 1989* provides for five main areas of Local Authority responsibility to prepare young people for leaving care and to assist them afterwards. These include preparation for after-care, advice and support, financial assistance, accommodation, representation and complaints

procedures (Biehal, Clayden, Stein & Wade, 1994; Stone, 1990). In Canada, the various provinces have also legislated to require state and non-government agencies to 'provide after care support including leaving care grants and/or brokerage funds' (Spence, 1994). In Ontario, for example, former wards aged 18 to 21 are eligible according to the Ontario (Canada) Child and Family Services Act for ongoing financial support under a system of 'Extended Care and Maintenance'. Similarly, federal legislation in the United States under Title IV-E Independent Living Program since 1986 has provided funding for the states to support preparation and independent living programs for young people leaving out-of-home care.

In each of these countries, legislation provided the necessary incentive and obligation for the provision of services for young people leaving care. Although the scope and adequacy of services varies from area to area, the range includes supported accommodation schemes, income support and job training, education assistance, independent living training in the 'hard skills' such as housekeeping and money management, and advice and personal support (DeWoody et al., 1993; Spence, 1994). Unfortunately, as in many welfare programs, the main problem remains the lack of adequate resourcing (Broad, 1994; De Woody et al., 1993) and the impact of other changes and cut-backs in relation to income support and housing (Land, 1994; Stone, 1990).

In contrast, in Australia there are no legislative provisions which require agencies to assist young people leaving care and there are few services or programs which assist young people in their transition from care (Fredman & Green, 1994; Wilson et al., 1994). As Le Sueur (1990) stated:

The lack of a legal mandate to provide services and, more importantly, resource problems and competing priorities have prevented welfare departments from providing anything more than minimal assistance to young people discharged from guardianship. The situation has also been complicated by Commonwealth responsibilities for income maintenance and disputes over respective State / Commonwealth obligations. (p. 27)

In the shift to the increased provision of substitute care services by non-government agencies in New South Wales, there are as yet no clear guidelines or specifications for the provision of after-care services as part of the tendering process. There are no government run programs. Fredman and Green's (1994) comment on the provision of services to young people after they leave care in Victoria provides a good summary of the overall situation in Australia:

After care is the poor cousin of service delivery. At best programs offer an informal and unfunded component which aims to assist young people maintain contact with non-abusing family members, assist young people moving from placement to placement or in the transition to independent living. At worst the young people are expected to move from placement to placement or from long term care to independence with little or no continuity in personal supports (p. 41)

There seems, however, to be increasing acknowledgement, as Le Sueur (1990) notes, by State welfare



departments "of their moral obligations for children's futures as citizens and the consequent need to place greater emphasis on independent living skills and post-guardianship assistance" (p. 27). To some extent, this has been stirred by several inquiries into homeless youth (Burdekin, 1989; Morris Report, 1995). Burdekin (1989) found, for example, that there was generally little or no information about wards leaving care and that welfare departments do little, if anything, to assist state wards leaving care make the transition into stable independent living situations or to divert them from homelessness.

The questions of emotional, developmental and identity needs are critical and demand a continuity in services and relationships yet these seem to be given minimal priority in service provision for children leaving wardship. Even the more 'visible' needs for housing, income support, education, training and employment are not being met for a number of children in question (Taylor, 1988 in Burdekin, 1989: 113).

Burdekin (1989) concluded that there was an urgent need for the state to adopt a more proactive role for young homeless people as well as those at risk of homelessness and for the Department to assist with the transition from wardship to independent 'adult' living (Burdekin, 1989: 28-29,110).<sup>3</sup> More recently the Morris Report (1995) confirmed and restated the over-representation of young people who had been in state care among the young homeless and noted the inadequacy of the assistance young people receive after they leave care.

The aim of the current study then is to investigate what happens to young people in New South Wales after they are discharged from wardship. In particular, it is important to conduct longitudinal research with young people leaving care and to take account of the quality of young people's experience in care as a significant contributor to the quality of their transition from care. The specific objectives of the study were:

- (1) to examine the circumstances, experiences, and difficulties of young people leaving wardship at the time of leaving care and subsequently;
- (2) to document their perceptions of the events and experiences of being in care;
- (3) to evaluate the service needs of young people leaving care and the extent to which these needs are being met by Departmental and non-departmental services;
- (4) to examine any relationships between outcomes and young people's individual characteristics, family histories and experiences in care.

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<sup>3</sup> Findings of the New South Wales Ministerial *Inquiry into Homelessness and the Provision of Affordable Accommodation in the Inner City of Sydney* looked at the needs of 3,000 men, women and children without shelter in Sydney each night. Further, Burdekin (1989) found some state wards were discharged whilst living in a refuge and not given further support, leaving the transition phase in the hands of refuge workers (Burdekin, 1989, p. 111).

## 2 METHOD AND PROCEDURE

The overall study consists of four parts. The first and major aspect was a longitudinal study of young people being discharged from wardship who agreed to be interviewed. The second was a study of the Departmental 'B' files for all the young people who were being discharged during the specified 12 month period. This allowed a comparison of information relating to the young people who were interviewed and those who were not to determine whether the young people who were interviewed were representative of all young people their age being discharged from wardship. The third was a study of two comparison groups of young people - one group still living at home and another living in refuges. The fourth and final part was an interview study of the District Officers involved with the young people in the interview study at the time of their discharge.

### 2.1 Wards study

**The sample.** One hundred and five (105) young people aged 16 to 18 were expected to leave wardship in New South Wales over the 12 month period from 1 September 1992 to 31 August 1993. Fifty-one young people agreed to participate, and were interviewed before their impending discharge from wardship. The decision to discharge four young people was, however, reversed so these young people did not fit the criterion of being discharged within the 12 month set period. The interview sample therefore consists of 47 young people. All 47 were re-interviewed for the first post-discharge interview but two could not be contacted for the final third interview. The overall re-contact rate was therefore 95.7 per cent.

The remaining 54 non-respondents was also reduced in number to 44 as six young people, who were expected to be discharged within the set period, were not and four were excluded on the basis of their intellectual disability.<sup>1</sup> Of these 44, six (6, 13.6 per cent) were 'lost in care' and unable to be contacted; 16 (36.4 per cent) were discharged before an invitation to participate was extended; 13 (29.5 per cent) could not be contacted after they agreed to be in the study and 9 refused to participate (20.5 per cent). The overall refusal rate was therefore 9.9 per cent (9 / 91).

To ensure that we had not missed any young people who were discharged during the specified 12 month period, a check was made later (after the end of the period) with each office. We supplied a list of the young people we believed were discharged during the 12 months and asked for this list to be verified. This check did not reveal any further young people who should have been included in the study but it did indicate that some young people expected to be discharged had not been discharged.

**Procedure.** Contact with young people who met the study's criteria of being wards of state, aged 16 to 18, and about to be discharged from wardship, was made through the New South Wales Department of Community Services. All offices of the Department received a circular informing them of the study and requesting them to draw up a list of all wards aged 16 to 18 under their supervision who were due to be discharged from care between

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<sup>1</sup> A decision was made with the Steering Committee not to include the small number of young people with an intellectual disability because their experience of life after discharge was expected to be quite dissimilar to that of other young people leaving care. Their numbers in one year were so small that it would be necessary to conduct a special study over several years to be able to draw any useful conclusions. Several young people with only mild intellectual disabilities were included, however.

September 1992 and August 1993. Subsequently, the relevant District Officers were contacted about the possible involvement of their client in the research and sent correspondence inviting the state ward to participate in the study. If the young people agreed to participate, the most appropriate way for researchers to contact them was established. From this stage on, the researchers made contact with the young people, explained the purpose of the study, and arranged to meet and interview the young people at a location convenient to them.

A series of three interviews was conducted with willing participants. The first interview was conducted up to three months prior to discharge and covered issues related to the experience of being in care and the young people's expectations and plans after discharge. The second interview was conducted at least three months after discharge. It was concerned with the young person's circumstances around and after discharge, including any changes in living arrangements, education or employment, and any support from the Department or other sources during the transition period. The third and final interview, conducted one year after discharge from wardship, was concerned with further changes in the young person's circumstances and with their current perceptions of their time in care and their needs after discharge.

The interviews were generally face-to-face and taped with the consent of the young person for later transcription. Most interviews were conducted in the young person's home (47%) but others were carried out in a variety of locations. These included parks, cafes, schools and New South Wales Department of Community Services offices. A small proportion (about 16 per cent) were conducted via telephone because of the cost and long distances involved in travelling to more distant areas (such as Broken Hill and Queensland). Two young Aboriginal women were, according to their choice, interviewed by an experienced Aboriginal woman interviewer.

Before each interview, we explained to the participants that we were interested in their views and that what they told us would remain confidential.<sup>2</sup> They were also told that they did not have to answer specific questions if they did not wish to do so, and on completion of the interview, participants were asked if they found any questions too personal or intrusive. They were also asked if they wanted someone (researcher, District Officer or carer) to contact them within a couple of days to follow up any issues arising from the interview. All participants were paid \$20.00 per interview. They have received an interim summary during the fieldwork (Appendix 1) and will receive a summary of the report at the completion of the project.

**Materials.** All three interviews included both open-ended and closed quantitative and qualitative questions dealing with the young person's experience of wardship, their knowledge of their personal background, their evaluation of their time in care, their current circumstances and their expectations of the future. The three questionnaires were designed by the researchers and then circulated amongst the project's Steering Committee, work colleagues, academics and the Australian Child Welfare Association's Leaving Care Working Party representing several key child welfare agencies for comment. A copy of each of the interviews is included in Appendix 2.

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<sup>2</sup> On a few occasions, however, we did inform the Department of Community Services with the consent of the young person involved of the need for support and services such as counselling and financial assistance. In several cases, for example, young women were still dealing with unresolved issues relating to sexual abuse, another young woman needed glasses, and a young unemployed person living in an independent boarding house did not have a fridge in summer.

## 2.2 Comparison group study

**Sample.** Two groups of young people were included to provide comparison groups for the wards leaving care. One group, the '*away from home*' group or '*early home leavers*', comprised young people living independently from the age of 16 to 18; just over half were male (55 per cent). Most (75 per cent) were living in a refuge or in supported accommodation at the time of the interview and the others were living with friends, in a boarding house or in rented accommodation. Seven were friends of the young people leaving wardship and were contacted through them. The others were contacted through three supported accommodation or housing programs for young people in Sydney (two were inner city and the third was based at Parramatta). Nearly all (18, 90 per cent) were unemployed at the time of the interview although a number had been working (see Section 6.2.1); two were still at school. Their average age was 17.98 years ( $sd = .9$ ) and they had been living away from home, on average, for 2.5 years. The average age at which they left home was 15.5 years but ranged from 11 to 18 years. Most had parents who were no longer living together, and indeed, conflict with their step-parent or their parent's de facto partner was one of their main reasons for leaving home ( $n = 8$ , 40 per cent). The other main reasons were wanting to be independent or conflict over wanting to 'do things their way' ( $n = 15$ , 75 per cent) and not be able to cope with the violence, abuse or conflict at home ( $n = 16$ , 80 per cent).<sup>3</sup>

The other group, the '*at home*' comparison group, comprised young people aged 17 to 19, still living at home with at least one parent. In contrast with the '*away from home*' group, most (85 per cent) were living with both birth parents; one young woman was living with her mother only (her father left when she was 6); a young man was living with his mother only (his father died when he was 3); and another young man lived with his father and step-mother (his mother died when he was young). Eight were friends or partners of the young people leaving wardship, and the others were contacted through several schools in an area similar in socio-economic status to the area and schools attended by the wards. The average age of the '*at home*' group was 18.4 years ( $sd = .58$ ). Most were either employed or studying (or about to begin a course) (see Section 6.3.1). Just over half (55 per cent) were female.

**Procedure.** Where young people were friends of the young people leaving care, contact was made through them and the purpose of the study first explained by them. Where young people were living in supported accommodation or refuges, they were approached by their workers and asked if they were willing to participate. The other young people still living at home were contacted by their former school and given a letter explaining the study and asking for their participation. In all cases, before each interview, the purpose of the study and the reason we needed their participation was explained. Like the wards, participants were told that we were interested in their views and that what they told us would remain confidential. They were also told that they did not have to answer specific questions if they did not wish to do so.

Most interviews were conducted in the place where the young person was living but some were conducted at a friends' place. All the interviews with the young people in the '*away from home*' group were face-to-face and so were most of the '*at home*' group interviews. Some of the interviews with young people still living at home were, however, conducted via telephone for convenience and choice because a number were restricted by working hours and other commitments. Like the former wards, young people in the comparison groups were paid for their

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<sup>3</sup> Most young people referred to two or more reasons for leaving home.

participation. A copy of the interview schedule for the two comparison groups is presented in Appendix 3. It included many of the questions from the first and third interviews for the wards and additional questions as appropriate to cover the circumstances of young people living in refuges or supported accommodation, and at home with their parents.

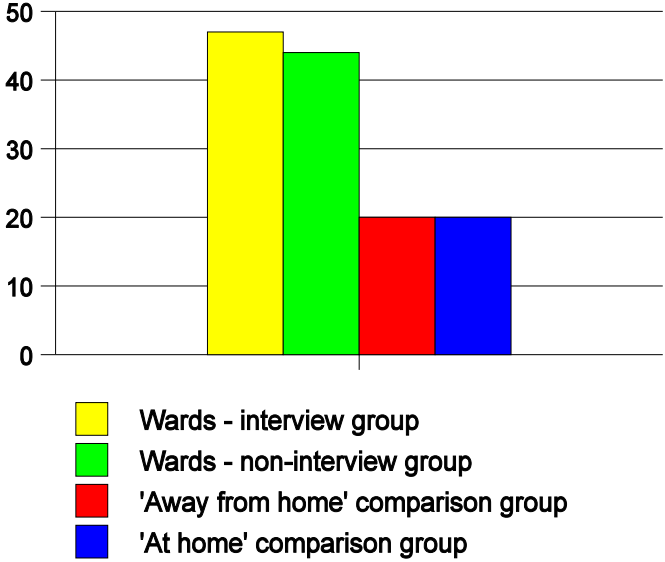


Figure 2. 1 Number of young people in wards groups and comparison groups

**2. 3 Study of departmental files<sup>4</sup>**

The departmental ‘B-Files’ for all the young people leaving care in the specified period were reviewed and coded. This was done for several reasons. The first was to determine whether the young people we were able to interview and those we were not were comparable. This is important as a check on the generalisability of the findings. If the two groups are not comparable, then any conclusions from the interview study must be tempered by the known differences between the two groups. It is possible, for example, that the young people in the interview sample may be ‘better off’, and more stable throughout their time in care and at discharge than those in the non-interview group. If this is the case, then any difficulties the young people in the interview sample experience will underestimate the difficulties of a less settled non-interview group. The second reason was to gain [reasonably] accurate information about the movement of children and young people in care, by recording information about

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<sup>4</sup> Reviewing the B-files was extremely time-consuming and the amount of work involved was seriously under-estimated. Each file took between 3 and 8 hours to review, the time depending on the size and complexity of the file, as well as the way they were organised. It is clear that it is impossible for workers to gain a quick clear picture of children’s background from these files unless they are well-organised and contain clear summary up-dates. Access to the files was, however, very valuable and yielded much more useful information than the CIS entries. It provided the only reliable basis of comparison between the young people we were able to interview and those we were not.

their placements. The third reason was to obtain information about departmental practice and about the services offered to young people in care and about to be discharged.

**Procedure.** The Director of the Strategic Planning and Research Unit [SPRU] of the Department of Community Services sent a letter to all the relevant offices informing them of the study and the need for access to the B-files of all young people due to be discharged in the set 12 month period.<sup>5</sup> The SPRU coordinated the recall of the files and we had access to the files and read and coded them there.<sup>6</sup> The coding schedule is included in Appendix 4.

#### **2.4 District Officers' interviews**

The District Officers and non-government agency workers who were involved with young people at the time they were about to be discharged were asked if they would be prepared to talk to us about the young people and their views about how well prepared they were for discharge, and any concerns they had about their experience in care. All the District Officers and agency workers we were able to contact agreed to be interviewed, including several who were on leave or who had since left the employment of the department. Five District Officers, however, were unable to be contacted. Most interviews were conducted by telephone. A copy of the interview schedule is included in Appendix 5.

#### **2.5 How representative was the interview sample of young people leaving care?**

A comparison of the demographic characteristics of young people in the interview sample and the non-interview sample (see Table 2. 1) indicates that the interview sample provides a good representation of the overall population of young people leaving care during the study period. Overall, about 40 per cent were male and 60 per cent, female; about 15 per cent were Aboriginal. Just over half (54.9 per cent) were located in metropolitan, inner city and suburban locations (including Newcastle and Wollongong) and just under half (45.1 per cent) in rural locations including coastal towns extending to the Queensland boarder and inland to rural Tamworth, Dubbo, Queanbeyan and Wagga Wagga. Interestingly, males in both the interview and non-interview were more likely to be in the metropolitan area (70.3 per cent) than in rural areas (29.7 per cent) whereas females were fairly evenly divided between the metropolitan (44.4 per cent) and rural (55.5 per cent) areas.<sup>7</sup> While this difference was statistically significant, there were no significant differences between the two samples in terms of gender, area or Aboriginality.

The lack of any significant demographic differences between the two groups - the interview and the non-interview group - is important because it means that any differences that are found between the groups on other

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<sup>5</sup> One young person we interviewed refused permission to see her file so in this case, and in two others where the files were not able to be found, information from the Client Information System (CIS) was used instead.

<sup>6</sup> The task of managing the recall and return of the B-files was carried out by Frances Hellier, and as noted in the acknowledgments, the work involved and the time-saving to the researchers is much appreciated.

<sup>7</sup> This difference was statistically significant:  $\chi^2 = 5.9, 1 \text{ df}, p < .02$ .

aspects are not a function of these demographic differences. Although the interview sample was clearly representative of the population of young people leaving care in terms of gender, location, and Aboriginality, it is possible that the interview sample may not be representative in other respects. The young people who were interviewed may, for example, have been in more stable circumstances than the non-respondents at the time we attempted to contact them, and may have more stable histories in care. One aim of the analysis of the B-files is to compare the two groups and check whether this is the case.<sup>8</sup> Other aspects of comparison between the two samples are discussed later.

**Table 2.1 Population of young people leaving care (interview sample and non-interview sample) by gender, location and Aboriginality**

|                      | Interview sample |              | Non-interview |              | Total     |              |
|----------------------|------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|
|                      | n                | %            | n             | %            | n         | %            |
| <i>Location</i>      |                  |              |               |              |           |              |
| Metropolitan Sydney  | 18               | 38.3         | 23            | 52.3         | 41        | 45.1         |
| Newcastle/Wollongong | 4                | 8.5          | 5             | 11.4         | 9         | 9.9          |
| Rural                | 25               | 53.2         | 16            | 36.4         | 41        | 45.1         |
| Male                 | 17               | 36.2         | 20            | 45.5         | 37        | 40.7         |
| Female               | 30               | 63.8         | 24            | 54.5         | 54        | 59.3         |
| Aboriginal           | 6                | 12.8         | 8             | 18.2         | 14        | 15.4         |
| Non-Aboriginal       | 41               | 87.2         | 36            | 81.8         | 77        | 84.6         |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>47</b>        | <b>100.0</b> | <b>44</b>     | <b>100.0</b> | <b>91</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

## 2.6 How representative are the young people leaving care of young people in general?

Both the interview sample and the total group of young people leaving wardship differed from the general population of young people *not* in care in several ways:

- (a) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [TSI] people were over-represented in wardship. Fourteen young people (ten female and four male) were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, constituting 15.4 per cent of the interview sample, compared with only about two per cent of young people under 19 at that time in the general population in New South Wales (ABS No. 2740.0, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> A bias in the make-up of the interview sample could have been introduced as a result of: (a) a difference in the level of enthusiasm and encouragement expressed by District Officers when asking the wards to participate; (b) self-selection. First, although the staff were generally very cooperative, a few District Officers were not so helpful. One office denied us access to a state ward deciding on their behalf that they would not be interested in participation. That view may have been correct but it denied the young woman concerned, soon to be a mother, the opportunity to make her own decision and perhaps express her own views about her experiences in wardship. In several other offices it took quite a lot of persistence to get access to the state wards; often telephone calls and faxes were not returned, and although we appreciate the demands on District Officers, we were concerned that clients may have had similar difficulty contacting staff. Second, young people who were in unstable placements and more disenchanted with the Department may have been unwilling to cooperate or may have been cynical about the object of the study. This self-selection may have left us with the 'very best' cases, in which case the needs expressed by the young people in the study may well under-estimate the needs of young people leaving care in general.

- (b) young people in wardship were more likely to have spent time in a detention centre than young people in general. Nine of the 91 state wards leaving care (9.9 per cent overall: eight males, 21.6 per cent and one female, 1.9 per cent) had spent time in juvenile detention centres (Source: Office of Juvenile Justice, 1993). Most were aged 15 or more when first detained and had a number of admissions (eg., five or more). In contrast at the same time in 1992, only .07 per cent of the general male population in New South Wales between the ages of 10-17 years and .003 per cent of females had been in a juvenile detention centre (Dagger, 1993).
- (c) wards were more likely to be unemployed (see section 6.3 );
- (d) young women in wardship were more likely to have teenage pregnancies than their age-mates in the general population. Nearly one third (n = 17, 31.5 per cent) of the young women leaving wardship were mothers or had been pregnant, compared with only two per cent of under 19 year-olds in the general population (ABS No. 4101.0, 1991). This is consistent with the findings of overseas research (Biehal, Clayden, Stein & Wade, 1994; Cook, 1994).

In summary, just over half (51.6 per cent) the young people aged from 16 to 18 leaving wardship in the 12 month period from 1 September 1992 to 31 August 1993 were interviewed in the longitudinal wards study. In demographic terms (gender, area and Aboriginality), they were representative of all young people leaving care during that period. Compared with the general population of young people their age, they were over-represented in terms of Aboriginality, unemployment, teenage pregnancies and having spent time in juvenile detention centres. Representing respectively the most disadvantaged and advantaged groups of same age peers, two comparison groups of young people - those living '*away from home*', mostly in supported or crisis accommodation, and young people still living '*at home*', mostly with both parents were included in the study. Their characteristics and responses provide an important point of comparison for the young people leaving care.

Unfortunately, the small number of young people in the interview sample did not allow for full and appropriate analysis by racial or cultural background but the issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are being fully explored as part of the ongoing *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.



### 3 ENTERING CARE

This section focuses on the characteristics of young people in care, the age they entered care, the reasons they were admitted to wardship, and, for those who could remember it, their perceptions of their experiences on entry to care.

#### 3.1 Entry to care and admission to wardship

**Entering care** was defined by the first entry to substitute care whereas **admission to wardship** was defined by court order transferring guardianship from the parents to the Minister. Half the wards who left wardship during the set 12 month period had entered care for the first time by the time they were seven years old. Their average age was 7.3 years (sd = 5.3). For several young people, entry to their first out-of-home substitute care placement was almost immediately after birth; they were transferred from the hospital where they were born to a psychiatric unit with their mother, or to a special care unit. Just under a quarter (23.6 per cent) of young people did not enter care for the first time until they were adolescents, a substantially lower figure than that reported by several overseas studies (eg., Biehal, Clayden, Stein & Wade, 1994: 62 per cent were aged 11 and over compared with 32.5 per cent in this study).

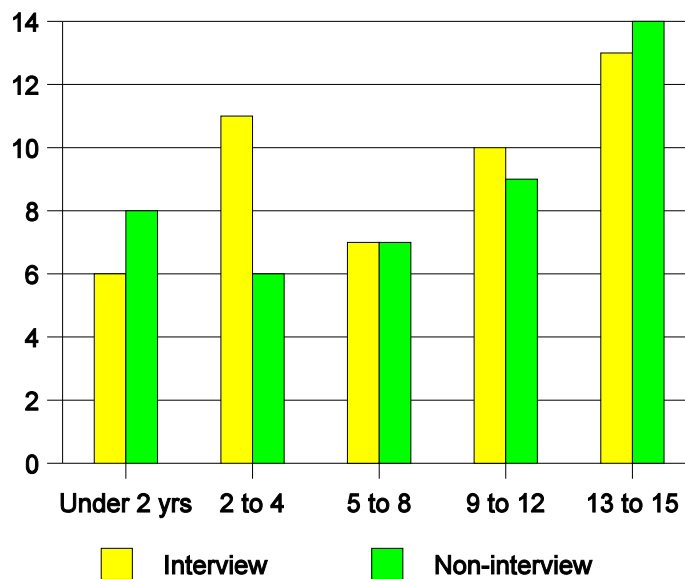


Figure 3.1 Age of children at admission to wardship

Most young people (73 per cent) were admitted to wardship within a year of entering their first out-of-home substitute care placement although the time between the two varied markedly. The average time was 1.2 years, but for some young people (n = 15, 16.9 per cent), the two events were almost simultaneous - they entered their first substitute care placement on the day or in the week in which they were admitted to wardship. For others, the period was as long as five or ten years (n = 6, 6.7 per cent) and three young people had several periods of wardship. They became wards at a young age and then were restored home and discharged from wardship, only to be admitted as wards again a few years later.

Suzanne's mother left her with relatives and moved interstate when Suzanne was nearly three. She was committed to care when her mother, father and siblings could not be found. Her relatives were unable to cope with Suzanne and her sister as well as their own children. She was placed in temporary foster care, then at Minda for three months before being moved to longer-term foster care. Her mother returned several months later to find that the children had been made wards. The children were finally restored to her care after two years, and two years later they were discharged from wardship.

When Suzanne was 11, she ran away to her father's. She had been sexually abused for some time by her mother's de facto partner. She was admitted to wardship again and placed temporarily at Renwick until long-term foster care was available. After four and a half years there, she ran away and moved into supported accommodation. She was discharged at 18 after five other 'placements'.

The average age at which young people were admitted to wardship was 8.5 years but the youngest was only 2 months old and the oldest nearly 16. Just over half the young people were admitted to wardship by their tenth birthday (n = 49, 53.8 per cent), but over a quarter were adolescents (13 to 15 years: n = 26, 28.6 per cent). There were no significant differences between the interview and the non-interview group (Figure 3.1), and there were no significant differences by gender in either group, as Table 3.1 shows.

**Table 3.1 Mean age of entry into care and wardship and time in wardship by group and gender**

|                              | Interview group  |                    | Non-interview group |                    |
|------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
|                              | Male<br>(n = 18) | Female<br>(n = 29) | Male<br>(n = 20)    | Female<br>(n = 23) |
| <b>AGE</b> (years)           |                  |                    |                     |                    |
| Entry into care <sup>1</sup> | 5.8 (4.4)        | 7.6 (5.6)          | 7.2 (5.5)           | 8.2 (5.4)          |
| Admission to wardship        | 7.9 (4.5)        | 8.3 (5.5)          | 8.4 (5.5)           | 9.1 (5.4)          |

Alison was three and a half years old when she and her younger sister were committed to the care of a white foster family until the age of 16. Alison and her sister are Aboriginal. They had been found wandering alone in the inner city. Their mother had left them with friends. Alison was admitted to hospital and treated for injuries as a result of sexual assault.

The girls remained with the same foster family and had irregular contact with their mother and other relatives for the next 12 years. The first reports of conflict emerged when Alison was nearly 15. Finally she refused to go home, and moved from one refuge to another. An application for wardship was made on the grounds of the irretrievable break-down of the long-term foster care relationship. Alison lived in six different places before she became a ward and in 23 placements during wardship.

### 3.2 Parental circumstances at admission to wardship

Only 16.5 per cent of young people were living with both biological parents just before they entered wardship (Table 3.2). A further 15.4 per cent were living in a two-parent family including natural and de-facto or step-parents. The majority (n = 62, 68.1 per cent), however, were living in sole parent families, and in most of these, the parent had been married but was separated, divorced or widowed. Where the parents were separated or divorced, children were more often living with their mothers than with their fathers. Three fathers had died and, in addition, three fathers were absent because they were in gaol. The whereabouts, and even the identity, of a number of other fathers was not known, an issue that became significant for some young people especially when they reached adolescence (see section 4.3.1).

While fathers were more often absent than mothers, seven mothers left the children with their fathers or other relatives, sometimes as a result of domestic violence, and eight mothers died before the young people were admitted to wardship.

Like the wards, a high proportion of the young people in the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group (75 per cent) came from families in which the parents were no longer living together. In contrast, only ten per cent of

<sup>1</sup> Entering care is defined by the date at which children first moved into an out-of-home substitute care placement. Admission to wardship was defined by the date on which the application for wardship was granted.

young people in the 'at home' comparison group were living in sole parent families.<sup>2</sup> This figure is very similar to that for the general population - about 14.5 per cent.<sup>3</sup> It is clear then that both the wards and the 'away from home' comparison group were heavily over-represented in terms of the proportion coming from sole parent families.

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**Table 3.2 Child living with before wardship by group**

| <i>Circumstances</i>   | Interview group |              | Non-interview group |              | Total     |              |
|------------------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|
|                        | n               | %            | n                   | %            | n         | %            |
| Both parents           | 8               | 17.0         | 7                   | 15.9         | 15        | 16.5         |
| Parent and step-parent | 5               | 10.6         | 9                   | 20.5         | 14        | 15.4         |
| Mother only            | 21              | 44.7         | 20                  | 45.5         | 41        | 45.1         |
| Father only            | 10              | 21.3         | 3                   | 6.8          | 13        | 14.3         |
| Relative/other         | 3               | 6.4          | 5                   | 11.4         | 8         | 8.8          |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>47</b>       | <b>100.0</b> | <b>44</b>           | <b>100.0</b> | <b>91</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

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### 3.3 Reasons for entering wardship

The reasons the young people in the interview sample entered wardship were obtained from the young people themselves and from the departmental files. A maximum of three reasons were coded according to the coding scheme in Appendix 4.<sup>4</sup> Table 3.3 shows the number and percentage of young people who were admitted to wardship as a result of abuse, neglect, and the inability of the carer to cope for various reasons. Since there were often more than one reason for the young person being admitted to wardship, the total adds to more than the total number of young people (91).

The most common reason was neglect due to parental inability to cope because of various combinations of poverty, mental illness, intellectual disability, and drug and alcohol dependency. Neglect was a major contributing factor in the admission to wardship for just over half (57.1 per cent) the young people in both the interview and non-interview groups.

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<sup>2</sup> In the 'at home' comparison group, most (75 per cent) parents were still living together, two parents had died, with one man remarrying but the other parent, a mother, did not; the parents in the one remaining family separated.

<sup>3</sup> ABS No. 6224.0 1991.

<sup>4</sup> The reasons provided by the young people included the following: sexual abuse, "my mother was sick", "my mother died and Dad couldn't cope", "she [mother] couldn't look after us", "Dad didn't want me and Mum got sick", "my parents left me", "bad car accident and Mum couldn't look after us", "don't know".

**Table 3.3 Reasons for young people entering wardship**

|                         | Interview group |      | Non-interview group |      | Total |      |
|-------------------------|-----------------|------|---------------------|------|-------|------|
|                         | n               | %    | n                   | %    | n     | %    |
| Physical abuse          | 11              | 23.4 | 12                  | 23.4 | 23    | 25.2 |
| Sexual abuse            | 10              | 21.3 | 3                   | 6.8  | 13    | 14.3 |
| Emotional abuse         | 3               | 6.4  | 3                   | 6.8  | 6     | 6.6  |
| Neglect                 | 27              | 57.4 | 25                  | 58.1 | 52    | 57.1 |
| Irretrievable breakdown | 10              | 21.3 | 12                  | 27.9 | 22    | 24.2 |
| Carer unable to cope    | 13              | 27.7 | 9                   | 20.5 | 22    | 24.2 |
| Death/gaol of carer     | 4               | 8.5  | 2                   | 4.5  | 6     | 6.6  |

In 38.5 per cent of cases, children entered wardship as a result of some form of child abuse, most frequently physical or sexual abuse. In eight cases, the perpetrators of abuse were step-fathers, and in one case, a step-brother. This was also the case in three cases in the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group. All the victims of sexual abuse were girls, and their ages at the time they entered care ranged from 9 to 15. They were taken into care because they did not have the support of their mothers and families. As one girl, who entered wardship at 14 after being sexually abused by her father, said:

... because I was the one so determined to step out of my family and the other ones stood by my father and backed him up all the time so then the only way I could get out was to stand up for my rights and get out.

Just before they were discharged from wardship, 21 per cent of the interview group said they did not know why they entered care. Most of these young people (7 out of 10) were very young when they entered care and went to live with members of their extended family or in foster care. Their average age was 4.2 years, significantly younger than the children who did know why they entered care (7.8 years).<sup>5</sup>

Alex was two and a half when he was placed in temporary foster care with his younger sister. They were notified for neglect by his mother, a former ward, and for suspected physical abuse by his step-father. His mother was drug-dependent. The application for wardship was granted within weeks and Alex was placed in long-term foster care. His mother made numerous attempts to have Alex restored to her care but these were unsuccessful. Alex’s younger siblings were also placed with him as they too were admitted to wardship but they were later moved when the foster mother was unable to cope. Alex remained with the same foster family until he was discharged from wardship at 18.

<sup>5</sup> The mean ages of the two groups- those who knew why they entered care and those who did not - were significantly different:  $t(21.7) = 2.38, p < .03$ .

### 3.4 Experiences at admission to wardship

Given the young age at which some children entered care and wardship, it is not surprising that a number of them cannot remember going to court (46.8 per cent),<sup>6</sup> cannot remember anyone explaining the process (36.8 per cent), and could not understand what was happening to them. Youth or young age is not, however, an excuse for not being truthful with children; even young children may be able to tell when they are not being told the truth, as the following comment of a young woman, who was five years old when she was admitted to wardship, shows:

.. then our District Officer came out of the court and said we [my younger sister and I] were going down to Sydney for a holiday. I really knew we were going down to live with our relatives for a long time ... I hated it!

A lack of understanding and a lack of explanation were also not confined to children admitted to wardship at younger ages, as the comments of young people admitted to wardship as teenagers indicate. They too were unclear about what happened at admission to wardship.

#### Young people's memories of being admitted to care

They sort of explained why I was in care but they keep you in the dark a lot - what was happening and they plan your future without listening to you. (Aged 15 when admitted to wardship)

All I knew was that someone told me I was a state ward ... the District Officer that I had then, who was an absolute fuckwit, basically said to me it was in my interest because there would be more doors open for me ... they should have listened to me (Age 13)

I didn't know what was going on. After court I was taken to a children's home. It was lonely, I made friends quickly, but it was still lonely. (Aged 9)

It all happened so quickly that I had no say in it whatsoever, they just took me to the court, put me in some room, I sat there and was told this is what is going on and the next thing I know I'm sitting in this weird place [Minali assessment centre] ... I was really frightened because I didn't know what was going to happen, and bang, I'm in this house full of kids and there is a mother and father, a roster ... how long will I be staying here? They said about two weeks to get me away from my Dad. (Aged 12)

When asked later in the third interview whether they ever felt responsible for going into care, a significant proportion (n = 14, 31.1 per cent) said that they had felt responsible when they were younger, and in fact, several still did 12 months after being discharged from wardship. In most cases, they felt guilty but were not able to articulate the reason but several said they had thought it was their fault simply for being born. In two of

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<sup>6</sup> The mean ages of the two groups - those who could remember going to court and those who could not - were significantly different:  $t(38.1) = 6.92, p < .001$ .

the five cases in which sexual abuse was the reason for their entry to care, two young women said they had felt responsible for breaking up the family when they were younger but did not feel that way later. It seems, however, that it may take some time to work through these feelings and to come to believe that they really are not responsible. As one young woman said:

I used to feel responsible a lot for my family breaking up. I worked it out on my own though a lot of people told me it wasn't my fault .. but I had to work it out for myself. It's fair enough others saying it's not your fault but you've got to believe it. I understand why my mother went with him. She'd scared to be alone. She thinks if she divorced Dad, she's have nothing and my brother and sister would reject her too. They didn't want nothing to do with me. I split up their family.

As we will see later, feeling responsible for entering care is a significant issue that has implications for young people's later happiness and ability to cope.

## 4 BEING IN CARE

### 4.1 Placements in substitute care

One of the major and most common difficulties children face in substitute care is that they are often moved through a series of placements. This means having to adjust to new living situations, generally with new adults, new children and new routines, and often with new schools and unfamiliar neighbourhoods. For children who generally come into care with a history of instability, this can be very demanding and may have long-term detrimental effects on their social, emotional and academic development (Steinhauer, 1991).

Information from the files indicated the number of placements in substitute care for young people both before and after they were admitted to wardship. 'Placement' was defined as each 'episode' of time in which children lived away from home, and included periods in which children were 'missing' from their arranged out-of-home placement.<sup>1</sup> After admission to wardship, placements with birth parents or restorations to them were included as placements (ie as wardship placements) but not prior to wardship. Overall, the wards in both the interview and non-interview groups together had a total of 191 placements before they were admitted to wardship, and 609 during wardship, and an overall total of 757 placements.<sup>2</sup> This means an average of 8.3 placements per child; the overall median was 6, one before wardship, and five during wardship. Figure 4.1 shows the numbers of placements young people in the interview and non-interview groups had during their time in care. Only six of the 91 young people leaving care had only one placement during their wardship (6.7 per cent overall: 8.5 per cent of the interview group and 4.5 per cent of the non-interview group); 14 (15.4 per cent) had two, but over three-quarters (78 per cent) had three or more placements and nearly one in three young people (30 per cent) had at least ten placements. One young person had 32 placements. These figures are higher than recent comparable figures for South Australia (Giannakakos & Tucker, 1994) and in the US (Westat, 1988) which both reported 58 per cent of children having three or more placements. It indicates little stability in placement.

The number of young people who spent a substantial proportion of their time in care in one placement provides another indicator of stability which takes account of the variability in the group and in young people's history in care. For example, some young people who had a number of placements had stable periods where they spent a long period of time in the one placement, before or less commonly after a period of considerable instability. Just over 40 per cent ( $n = 37$ , 40.7 %) had spent at least 75 per cent of their time in one placement, with this being more common among those who entered care before adolescence (early entry, 48.4 per cent compared with adolescent entry, 23.1 per cent:  $\chi^2 = 3.92$ ,  $p < .05$ ). One long-term placement was also more common for the interview (46.8 per cent) than for the non-interview group (34.1 per cent), although the

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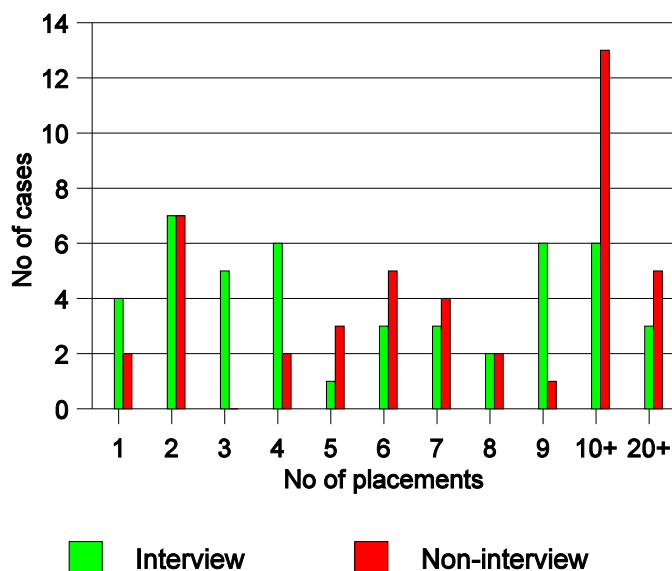
<sup>1</sup> The number of 'places' children lived in during out-of-home care was also calculated taking account of the number of repeated stays in a particular place and ignoring the number of movements. Thus, if a child was placed or lived in one particular arrangement on several different occasions (eg, foster care with a particular family), this was counted only once. The mean number of 'placements' (repeats included) and 'places' (repeats not included) are shown in Appendix 6 Table 1a. The only significant difference in the figures was between the number of placements and places during wardship for wards in the non-interview group. The number of placements was used for general discussion because it more accurately reflects the movement between places and the experience of young people as they are moved between places.

<sup>2</sup> The total number of placements does not equal the sum of the pre-wardship and wardship placements because in some cases children remained in the same pre-wardship placement after they entered wardship.



difference was not significantly different.

Taking account of the length of time they were in wardship prior to their discharge, young people who entered wardship as adolescents (aged 13 years and older) also had significantly shorter placements. The average length of placement for 'adolescent-entry' wards was 10.9 months compared with 62.9 months for those who entered wardship earlier.<sup>3</sup>

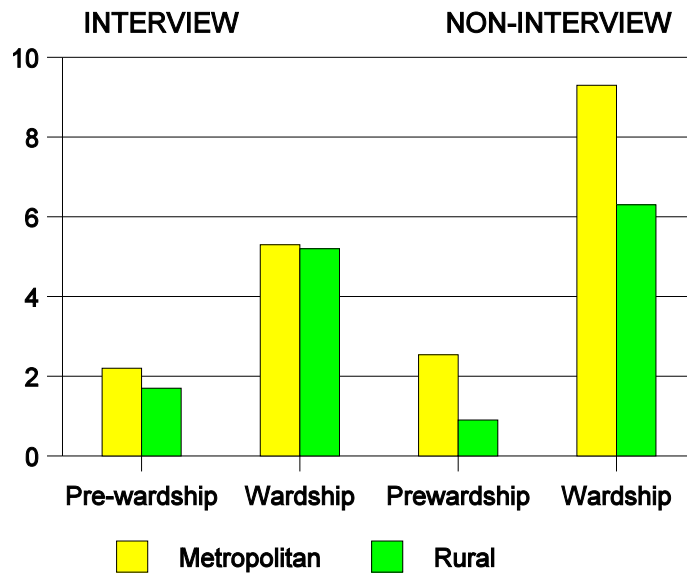


**Figure 4.1 Number of placements during time in care by group**

There was little difference between the interview and non-interview groups in the number of pre-wardship placements but during wardship the non-interview group had more placements than the interview group (an average of 8.2 for the non-interview group and 5.3 for the interview group).<sup>4</sup> Figure 4.2 shows the mean number of placements for these two groups by location and shows that the non-interview group had more placements during wardship than the interview group in both the metropolitan and rural areas (see also Table 1 in Appendix 6). There were also differences by location for the non-interview group, with a greater number of placements in the metropolitan areas of Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong than in rural areas. There were no differences by gender or by Aboriginality in the number of placements, either before or during wardship or overall.

<sup>3</sup> The average length of placement was calculated by dividing the time in wardship (date of discharge - date of admission to wardship) by the number of placements during wardship. These figures include both the interview and non-interview groups. Figure 1 in Appendix 6 plots the number of placements in care against age at entry to care and also shows that the number of placements tends to increase as age at entry to care increases.

<sup>4</sup> Statistical tests of significance were not conducted on this data. Since the study of B-files covered the population of young people leaving care in this period, it is not necessary to conduct tests to determine whether the difference is significant. If there is a difference, there is a difference.



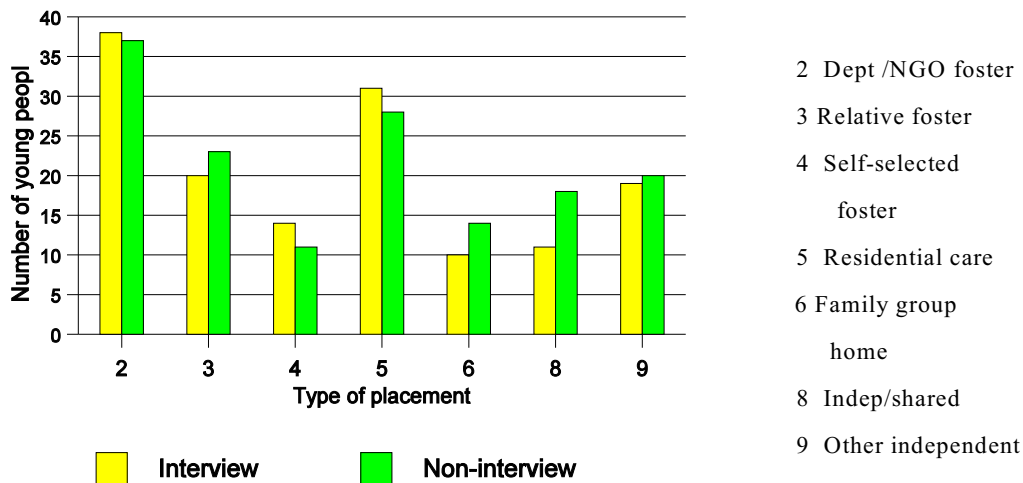
**Figure 4.2 Mean number of placements by area and group**

The preceding discussion was based on information obtained from the B-files of the young people leaving wardship (see Appendix 4 for the Coding Schedule). In addition, young people in the interview sample were asked how many places they had lived in since they entered care. They reported a total of 255 placements, ranging from one to 18 and averaging 5.5 per ward. This is less than the 313 placements indicated in the B-files for this group but this difference is to be expected because some young people's reports omitted very early placements and very short temporary placements. On the other hand, some young people were able to fill in some of the gaps in the file information about where they had been staying when they had been 'missing'. Overall, however, there was a high degree of agreement between the placements reported by the young people and those indicated in the files.<sup>5</sup> Young people's ratings of their reported placements are outlined in Section 4.1.4.

The placements both before wardship and during wardship (as indicated by the B-files) were coded according to type, and information was collected on the dates on which children and young people entered and left each placement, and the reasons for leaving. Figure 4.3 shows the number of young people who had been in each of the different types of placement for both the interview and non-interview groups. It includes both pre-wardship and wardship placements, and indicates that most young people in both groups had been placed at least once in departmental or agency foster care or in residential care.

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<sup>5</sup> The correlation between the number of placements reported in the files and the number reported by young people in the interview sample was very high ( $r = .77$ ,  $p < .001$ ).



**Figure 4.3 Number of young people in at least one placement**

**4.1.1 Type of placement.** Foster care, in its various forms, was the most common placement both before admission to wardship and during wardship. Of the 757 placements overall, 272 (35.9 per cent) were foster placements (see Table 4.1). Only seven young people (7.7 per cent) had not been in foster care at any stage, and nearly one in five (19.7 per cent) had been in five or more foster placements. The overall average number of foster placements was 3.24 per child. Foster placements were also on average longer than other types of placement, both before and during wardship (see Figure 4.4 and 4.5). Departmental or agency-based foster care was the longest-lasting placement type during wardship (mean length of 41.6 months), and relative foster care was the longest before wardship (15.4 months).

***Stable long-term foster care***

Rob became a ward of the state when he was one year old, along with his older brother, because his mother was involved in a serious car accident. Rob has met his birth parents but has not seen them for a long time; he thinks his mother could be dead. He would like to know more about his birth family, and his foster parents have told him all they know so he intends to go to the Department one day to find out more.

Rob has lived in one foster home only and he sees this home as his family. He completed high school and continued on to tertiary education. He does casual gardening jobs in the local area and trains for ‘iron-man’ competitions.

Rob has had a lot of support from his foster parents. The Department have played a minimal role in his life. Indeed, he does not know who his DO is and would not think to contact for emotional or financial assistance. The only contact Rob had with the Department concerning discharge from wardship was a letter from the Minister which arrived by post. Rob's foster parents discussed the issue of discharge with him on their own initiative but, unlike Rob, they would have liked more contact and support from the Department.

**Table 4.1 - Mean age (sd) on entering placement and mean length (sd) of placement by type**

| Placement type                    | Pre-wardship |                     |       |                       |        | Wardship |                     |       |                       |        |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|---------------------|-------|-----------------------|--------|----------|---------------------|-------|-----------------------|--------|
|                                   | n            | Mean age<br>(Years) |       | Mean length<br>(Mths) |        | n        | Mean age<br>(Years) |       | Mean length<br>(Mths) |        |
| Hospital                          | 9            | 1.0                 | (1.2) | 2.6                   | (2.1)  | --       |                     |       |                       |        |
| Relative non-foster<br>Parents    | 10           | 7.1                 | (4.1) | 6.6                   | (4.8)  | 9        | 13.6                | (5.7) | 4.1                   | (2.7)  |
| <i>Foster care (all)</i>          | --           |                     |       |                       |        | 57       | 13.9                | (3.9) | 5.6                   | (6.8)  |
| Dept/NGO foster                   | 64           | 8.6                 | (4.6) | 9.9                   | (23.9) | 208      | 11.9                | (5.4) | 33.2                  | (56.9) |
| Relative foster                   | 40           | 9.0                 | (4.9) | 8.3                   | (23.8) | 143      | 10.6                | (5.7) | 41.6                  | (62.2) |
| Self-selected/<br>Friend's family | 17           | 7.5                 | (3.8) | 15.4                  | (27.4) | 29       | 13.0                | (4.5) | 24.5                  | (50.3) |
| Residential care                  | 7            | 10.4                | (4.8) | 2.4                   | (1.3)  | 36       | 15.6                | (2.5) | 9.8                   | (26.7) |
| Family group home                 | 45           | 8.6                 | (5.9) | 5.9                   | (10.3) | 113      | 11.9                | (4.8) | 9.3                   | (14.7) |
| Supported accommodation           | 9            | 13.7                | (1.5) | 4.5                   | (3.5)  | 24       | 10.4                | (4.4) | 17.7                  | (18.6) |
| Refuge                            | 2            | 7.2                 | (9.4) | 9.5                   | (1.8)  | 23       | 16.2                | (1.7) | 4.8                   | (5.9)  |
| Boarding house                    | 20           | 14.0                | (1.4) | 0.7                   | (0.8)  | 56       | 15.9                | (1.4) | 1.8                   | (3.9)  |
| Independent/share                 | 1            | 13.1                | --    | 0.6                   |        | 8        | 15.9                | (1.1) | 5.6                   | (8.5)  |
| Detention centre                  | --           |                     |       |                       |        | 63       | 16.5                | (1.0) | 5.1                   | (6.2)  |
| Street/missing                    | --           |                     |       |                       |        | 11       | 14.9                | (1.5) | 3.1                   | (3.9)  |
| TOTAL                             | --           |                     |       |                       |        | 32       | 15.5                | (1.4) | 2.0                   | (3.6)  |
|                                   | 160          |                     |       |                       |        | 604      |                     |       |                       |        |

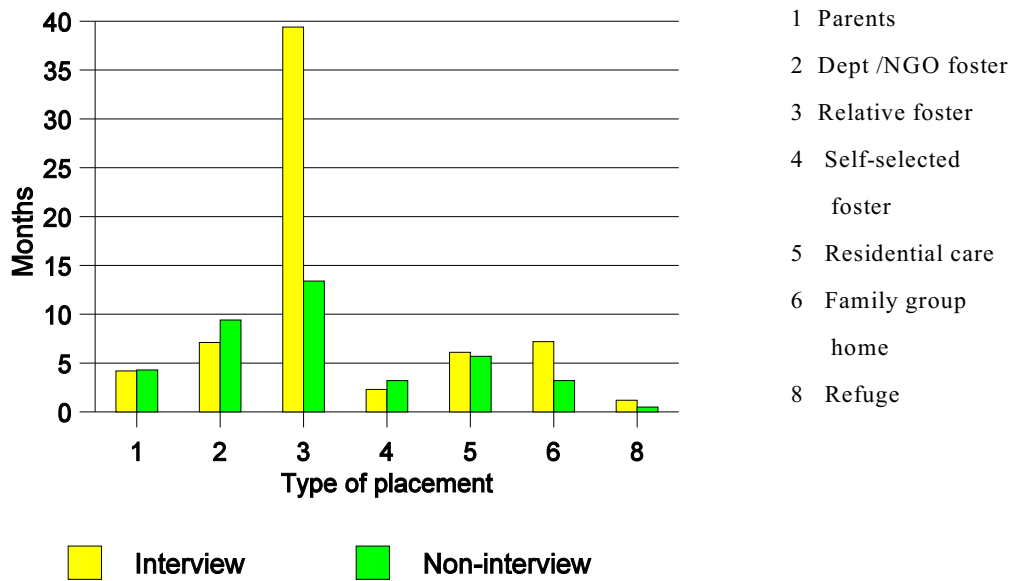


Figure 4.4. Mean length of placements before wardship by group

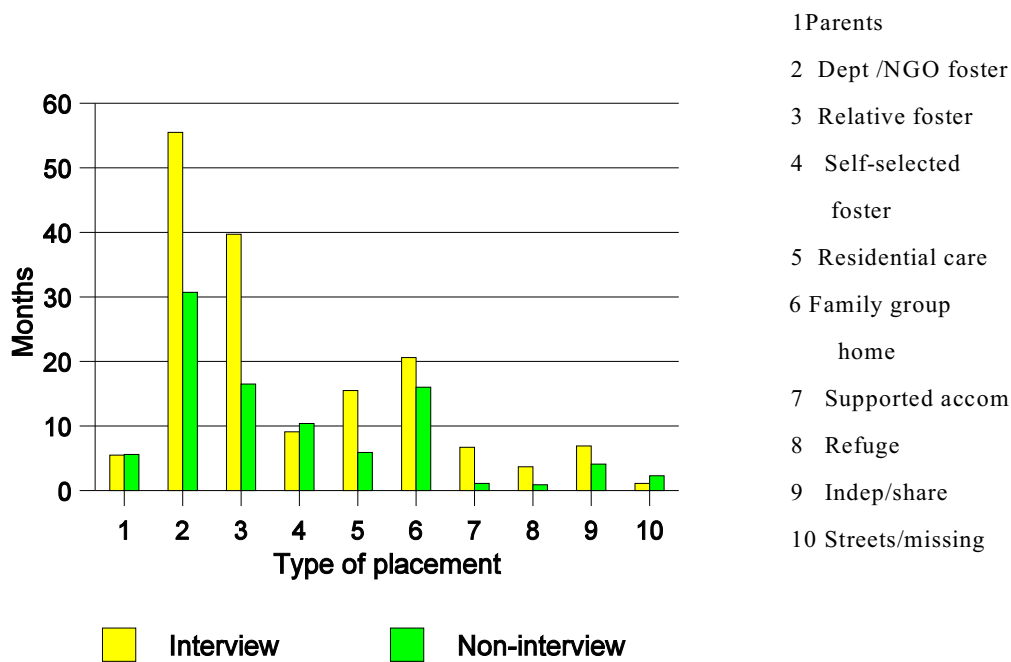


Figure 4. 5 Mean length of placements during wardship by group

The next most common type of placement both before and during wardship was **residential care**. One in four placements before wardship (45, 23.6 per cent) and nearly one in five placements during wardship (113, 18.5 per cent) were in residential care. Nearly two-thirds of the young people (59, 64.8 per cent) spent some time in residential care, either before they were admitted to wardship or after.<sup>6</sup> The average length of stay in residential care was 5.9 months before wardship, and 9.3 months during wardship.

The other fairly common types of placement during wardship were independent and shared living (63 placements; 29 young people, 31.8 per cent) and other forms of **independent living** -- in refuges, supported accommodation and boarding houses (110 placements; 39 young people, 42.8 per cent). The average age of entry to these placements was around 15 to 16 but several were less than 13 and one young woman had been only 10 when she was placed in a youth crisis accommodation service (see Table 4.1). The average length of stay in these forms of independent accommodation was about five months but it was less than two months (1.8 months) for refuges. Eight young people had stayed in more than five refuges and 12 had been in more than five placements in either refuges or supported accommodation. Twenty-one young people had lived on the streets or been 'missing' at some stage, for an average of two months (over 24 'placements').

#### **Long-term unsettled**

Peter became a ward when he was 9 years old because his mother could not protect him from a violent step-brother. His sister was made a ward at the same time but she was placed in the care of their relatives. Peter has lived in nine places during his wardship, including foster care, state ward homes, refuges, independent living and a period with his grandfather. He preferred living in group homes because he had a bad experience and was abused in foster care. He now lives in a privately owned boarding house because it is all he can afford. It is dirty and he is unhappy there.

Peter completed Year 11 at school, tried Year 12 but did not finish. When not at school and on AUSTUDY Peter gets *JSA*; he received *Special Benefit* at 15 years. At the first interview, he was unemployed and looking for work, but not sure what line of work he would like to do. Peter has no family support and he doesn't feel there is much support from the Department either. He has had to make a lot of decisions on his own and finds this draining.

**4.1.2 Differences between the interview and the non-interview groups.** As outlined earlier, young people in the non-interview group had more placements on average than those in the interview group but this difference was not related to demographic aspects in terms of gender, Aboriginality or age of entry into care or wardship. What differences were there then, if any, between the two groups in the types of placements they experienced and their length of stay there?

In terms of foster care, there was no difference between the interview and non-interview group in the proportion who had been in any type of foster care (interview group, 91.5 per cent; non-interview group, 93.2 per cent) nor in the types of foster care they had experienced. Nor was there any difference in the number of placements per child for the different forms of foster care. There was, however, a difference between the two

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<sup>6</sup> In addition, 25.2 per cent of young people spent some time in a family group home as well as in residential care.

groups in the average age at which young people in these two groups entered foster placements and the length of time they stayed in them. Before wardship, the average age of young people entering departmental or agency-based foster care placements was 7.7 years for the interview group and 10.2 years for the non-interview group. This was despite the fact that there was no difference between the groups in the age at which they entered care. More young people in the non-interview group, however, entered voluntary placements with relatives and friends of the family before wardship than in the interview group.

There was little difference between the two groups in the average length of stay in foster care before admission to wardship. During wardship, however, there were quite marked differences between the groups in length of stay. Young people in the interview group stayed significantly longer in departmental and agency-based foster care - an average of 55.5 months compared with 30.6 months for the non-interview group. Similarly, the figures for the average length of stay in relative foster care were 56.3 months and 19.8 months. The ages at which they entered both forms of foster care also differed, with young people in the interview group entering foster care placements at a younger age on average than those in the non-interview group. For departmental and agency-based care, the average ages of the two groups were 9.4 years (interview) and 11.4 years (non-interview). For relative care, the figures were 9.7 years and 13.8 years, respectively.

In relation to residential care, there was no difference in the proportion of young people in each group who had been in residential care at least once; 65.9 per cent of young people in the interview group had been in residential care, as had 63.6 per cent of young people in the non-interview group. Again, however, there were differences between the groups in the age of entry and the length of stay. Before wardship, young people in the interview group were on average three years younger (mean of 6.9 years) than those in the non-interview group (mean of 10.3 years) but there was no difference in length of stay (both about 6 months). During wardship, the interview group was also somewhat younger on average (10.4 years compared with 12.7 years) but the main difference lay in the length of stay; 15.5 months on average for the interview group but only 5.9 months for the non-interview group.

*Adolescent entry (unsettled)*

Marilyn was 13 when she entered care as a result of sexual abuse by her step-father. Her first placement was in a short-term refuge, followed by several further refuge placements, an unsuccessful foster placement, a short-term stint with an older friend as a self-selected foster parent. At 16 she was pregnant and moved into a home for pregnant teenagers. She left there after the birth of the baby to live with her boyfriend in a series of flats.

She left school at 14 after feeling rejected by her friends and formerly friendly teachers when they discovered she had been sexually abused. She has had several short-term jobs but was receiving the supporting parent's benefit and looking after her child at the last interview.

Young people in the non-interview group also stayed for shorter times in refuges, supported accommodation and

in independent or shared accommodation<sup>7</sup> but they spent longer with friends' families and were more likely to be missing or living on the streets than those in the interview group. They were also more likely to move into independent/shared accommodation<sup>8</sup> but their stays were shorter than for those in the interview group. Their average age at entry to these forms of placement did not differ.

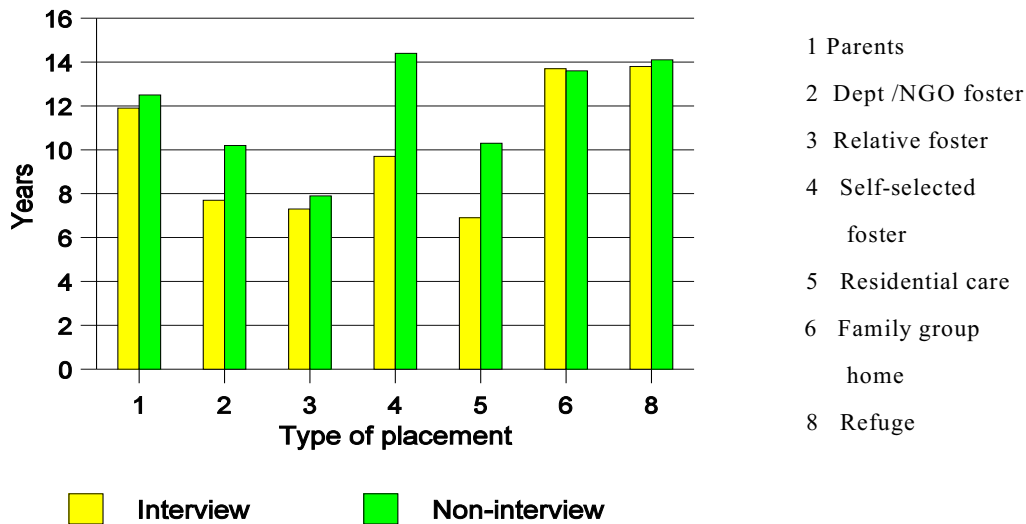


Figure 4. 6 Mean age at entry to placements before wardship

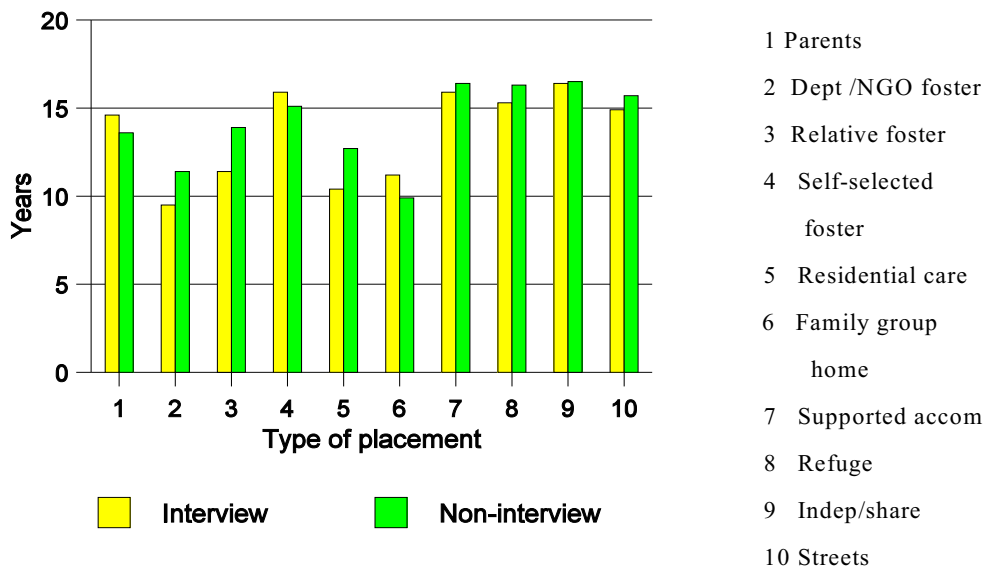


Figure 4. 7 Mean age at entry to placements during wardship

<sup>7</sup> The average length of time for the non-interview group in supported accommodation was 1.1 month compared with 6.7 months for the interview group; in refuges, the figures were .8 months and 3.7 months; in independent/shared accommodation, the figures were 4.1 months and 6.9 months,

<sup>8</sup> The number of placements in independent accommodation was greater (41 compared with 22) and the number of young people involved was greater (40.9 per cent of young people in the non-interview group compared with 23.4 per cent in the interview group).



In general, then, the young people in the non-interview group were on average less settled than those in the interview group. They had a greater number of placements overall, especially in various forms of independent and semi-independent accommodation in their later years in wardship, and stayed in them for shorter periods. In line with this more unsettled pattern, behaviour problems were more prevalent (at least as noted on their files) among this group, especially in relation to 'acting-out' behaviour; 20 young people in this group (45.5 per cent) were noted as having 'difficult behaviour' compared with only nine in the interview group (19.1 per cent). Overall, the incidence of behaviour problems was 54.5 per cent in the non-interview group and 38.3 per cent in the interview group. There was also a higher incidence of school suspensions among the non-interview group (34.1 per cent compared with 21.3 per cent).

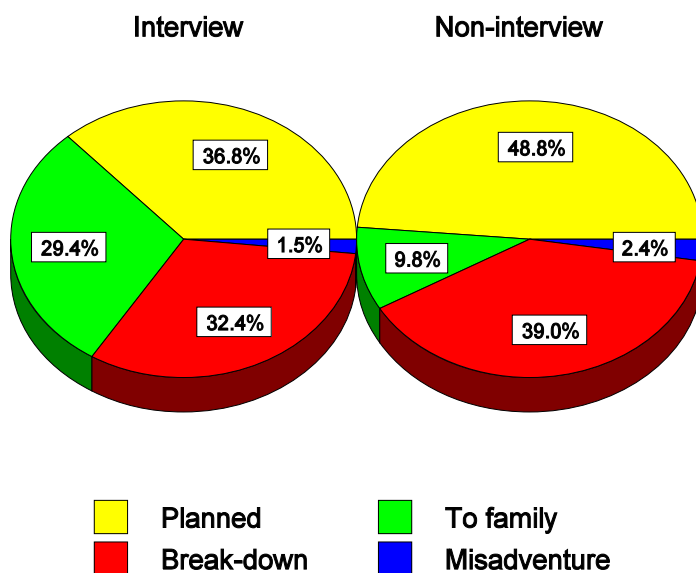
Disentangling cause and effect here is very difficult. Placements may have broken down because of the young people's difficult behaviour and the lack of stability in placements may have resulted in more difficult behaviour. It is clear though that the young people in this group were generally more difficult and more unsettled, which explains why they were harder to find and contact than those in the interview group. Not all the young people in the non-interview group were unsettled or difficult to find, however. Several were living in stable foster care (with grandparents, for example) and did not wish to participate in the study because they did not see themselves as 'wards'.

Within each group then there were several different patterns of experience in care, patterns that may be brought into better focus by looking at the reasons young people left their placements and also by case studies which depict these patterns.

**4.1.3 Reasons for changing placements.** The reasons for a change of placement were generally indicated on the files but were also mentioned in general discussion by young people in the interview group and in response to specific questions. Both sources of information are used in this section.

Figure 4.8 and Table 4.2 show the number and percentage of placements which ended for various reasons. Figure 4.8 refers to pre-wardship placements and Table 4.2 includes only placements during wardship which had ended and in which the reason for its ending was known. The reasons indicated on the files were grouped into five categories (see Table 4.2). The first category included planned moves in which the child was moved to foster parents after a short-term placement in temporary foster care or in a residential assessment centre. The second category included moves in which children were returned to their parents or families (including relative foster care), whether or not the move was planned. The third comprised moves to independent or share accommodation or to somewhere more convenient to the young person's place of work or education. The fourth included various unplanned moves as a result of problems with the placement which led to the breakdown of the placement, with the child running away, or the carer unable to cope. It also included cases of disclosed abuse in care. The fifth and final category comprised some type of unexpected event or misadventure, such as the separation, illness or death of foster parents, and the closure of residential care or family group home establishments.

As Figure 4.8 shows, **pre-ward placements** most commonly ended because of a planned move in which the children were moved from short-term placements to (longer-term) foster placements (65 placements in total) or returned to their families (28 placements). Nearly as prevalent were unplanned placement break-downs (54 placements). The reasons for the break-down varied but included six cases of abuse or ill-treatment. Restoration to the child’s family was less common in the non-interview group (9.8 per cent) than the interview group (29.4 per cent); planned moves to other types of placement and placement break-down were proportionally greater.



**Figure 4.8** Reasons for leaving pre-ward placements by group

In contrast to pre-ward placements where planned moves outnumbered unplanned break-downs, **wardship placements** were as likely to end unexpectedly through conflict and break-down as in expected and planned moves. In fact, just over half the total placements during wardship ended unexpectedly through break-down (48.3 per cent) or as a result of the illness, death or separation of the carers (4.5 per cent). The inability of carers to cope with the child’s or young person’s behaviour, problems with family contact, and conflict with at least one person in the placement, often same-age peers or children of the foster parents, were the main reasons for placements breaking down.

Placement break-down was more prevalent in the non-interview group, where 55.4 per cent of placements during wardship broke down. Just over three out of four (34, 77.3 per cent) of young people in this group experienced at least one placement break down and one in four (11, 27.3 per cent) had five or more placements break down. The figures were somewhat lower for the interview group (24, 51.1 per cent with one placement break-down but only 3, 6.4 per cent with five or more). These figures indicate a substantial rate of placement break-down and are cause for concern, especially considering the effects on children. Although some young people chose to leave or were relieved to leave when the placement broke down or when they had been abused, for many children, placement break-downs, especially in foster care, were very disruptive. They were emotionally upsetting and socially disruptive, causing children to move from familiar neighbourhoods and schools and leaving some

confused as to the reason ‘things didn’t work out’ or ‘hardened’ by the experience (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987). For example, several young people reported their reactions to being moved unexpectedly:

- . I was confused and angry until I got a new DO at a different office who told me what was going on. She listened to me, to what I wanted and arranged counselling which was good, I guess.
- . Unhappy, angry but you get used to moving around. I stopped going to school when I was about 12 but this year I’m doing Year 10 and so far it’s the most stable year I’ve had since I was 12.
- . Moving from Minali was OK because I knew this is what happens. Otherwise I was pissed off when I had to move.
- . Confused. I didn’t want to move because I had a lot of friends at the time and I said I’d stay at friends. I had to change schools and leave my friends.

**Table 4.2 Frequency of reasons for leaving wardship placements by group**

| <i>Reason for placement ending</i>                     | Interview  |              | Non-interview |              | Total      |              |
|--|------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
|  | n          | %            | n             | %            | n          | %            |
| Planned move   | 57         | 34.3         | 89            | 29.9         | 146        | 31.5         |
| Return to parents                                      | 20         | 12.0         | 22            | 7.4          | 42         | 9.1          |
| Move to independent living                             | 20         | 12.0         | 11            | 3.7          | 31         | 6.7          |
| Break-down/conflict                                    | 59         | 35.5         | 165           | 55.4         | 224        | 48.3         |
| Death, illness or separation of foster parents/parents | 10         | 6.0          | 11            | 3.7          | 21         | 4.5          |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>166</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>298</b>    | <b>100.0</b> | <b>464</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

While 20 per cent of young people said they did not know why they were moved and would have liked the changes explained to them, other young people were clear about the reasons for the break-down of the placement but were unhappy about the way they were told or about the lack of consultation about their next placement. In some cases, the children exercised the only control they had over their circumstances by running away or threatening to run away from unhappy placements. One young woman said, for example:

It took XX office ages to do anything about moving me from the foster home I didn't like. I was really unhappy there but I had to threaten to run away first before they moved me.

A number of young people ‘took to the streets’ or moved in with a friend’s family rather than accept the placement that had been arranged for them. Even at quite a young age, one girl and her sister exercised some control by refusing to get on the plane .. one morning when we were meant to go back". Another girl admitted to wardship when she was eight provided a gamut of reasons for moving from one placement to another during her time in care:

My Mum came back for my brother [restored] but she left me because she said that if I was in welfare care they could help me with my cleft palate. I've been in and out of refuges since I was 12 ... I had to leave the refuge because I turned 12 and I went back to my Mum's because there was nowhere else they [DOCS] could put me ... Mum's boyfriend was there and we didn't get

along so he kicked me out [after three weeks] and Mum agreed with it ... and I went to my Nanna's [for two weeks] and she rang around to see if there were any refuges around ... she found one in Penshurst ... I couldn't stay at the refuge [short-term] and I had no-where else to go so I took off to the streets with my friends [for about two years]. The welfare couldn't find me, then they found me ... then I got placed in Minali for about 6 months ... it was really strict ... then I got placed in a Catholic home [one week] ... back onto the streets just roaming around ... then to Lithgow House - it's an independent living house [8 months] ... I left because I didn't get on with one of the girls ... back roaming the streets again ... re-applied at Lithgow House again ... left [after 6 months] because we had an argument ... the workers then asked me to leave and put a two year restraining order on me.

Unfortunately, she did not receive the promised medical services and surgery and is now living with friends of her mother's boyfriend.

One young man was particularly unlucky with two consecutive foster parents becoming fatally ill. The death of his second foster father with whom he had a very close relationship left him very vulnerable and he became difficult to manage. His foster mother finally asked for him to be placed elsewhere and he then had a number of short placements in Minali and in various family group homes. He was finally placed in agency-based foster care and was still there after being discharged.

In summary, changes in placements before and during wardship were split between planned moves and unexpected and often unwelcome changes. Some placements were only temporary until other more permanent placements could be found. Others became unavailable because the residence closed down, because foster parents were no longer able to foster or because the young people had become ineligible because of their age or pregnancy. Other placements broke down as a result of conflict or the inability of carers to cope and some young people had run away because they were unhappy. Some young people left detention centres. Others returned to their parents, with varying degrees of success, sometimes to help their parents rather than themselves. For example, one young woman explained that she left her foster placement:

... to go back to Mum because she's made a lot of effort and for her to make more changes I'd have to be there to help her through it. And also because she might not have a lot of time left.

**4.1.4 Young people's perceptions of placements.** Young people were asked to rate (using a 4-point scale where '1' = "not at all" to '4' = "a lot") seven aspects of the places they had lived in since coming into care. These aspects, shown in Table 4.3, include how secure, understood and well-treated the young people felt they were, how interested the carers were in them, how fair the discipline was, and how difficult the young people thought they were to look after in the placement. A total of 164 placements was rated. This did not include all placements, either because the placements occurred when the young people were very young or because they were so brief they made little impression. The placements were grouped into five categories. The first category was

foster care and included departmental foster care, non-government agency-based foster care,<sup>9</sup> and self-selected foster care (eg., with former worker or friend's family). The second was residential care and included assessment centres, family group homes, children's homes, and residential care institutions such as Renwick and Allanville. The third type of placement was with parents, with or without the Department's approval or arrangement. The fourth was independent living, either alone in rented accommodation, in a boarding house or hostel or sharing with friends. Another form of independent living, including supported or crisis accommodation (short-term or medium-term refuges and medium- and long-term supported accommodation), made up the fifth category.<sup>10</sup>

Table 4.3 shows the numbers of each type of placement rated, the average length of the various types of placement and the average age at which children entered them, together with young people's mean ratings for the different aspects of those placements. By far the most frequent ratings were for foster care in its various forms (n = 86, 49.4 per cent), and the least frequent was living with parents (n = 6, 16.2 per cent). Consistent with the earlier analyses of placement length, foster care was also the longest form of placement, with children staying an average of 50.8 months over all types of foster care, significantly longer than for the other types of care.<sup>11</sup> Within foster care, Departmental/agency foster care was significantly longer than self-selected foster care (an average of 59.1 months compared with 22.9 months).<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, the length of placement and the favourableness of the ratings were positively correlated. The longer the placement, the more favourable the ratings<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, children who were in placements for longer periods were more likely to keep in contact with the carers in those placements.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> There were too few ratings for agency-based foster placements to analyse them separately.

<sup>10</sup> Other forms of placement such as being on the streets or in a juvenile detention centre occurred but were not rated by young people. Their comments, which were almost universally negative, are discussed later.

<sup>11</sup>  $F(4, 164) = 7.81, p < .001$ . All planned comparisons involving foster care were significant at  $p < .001$ .

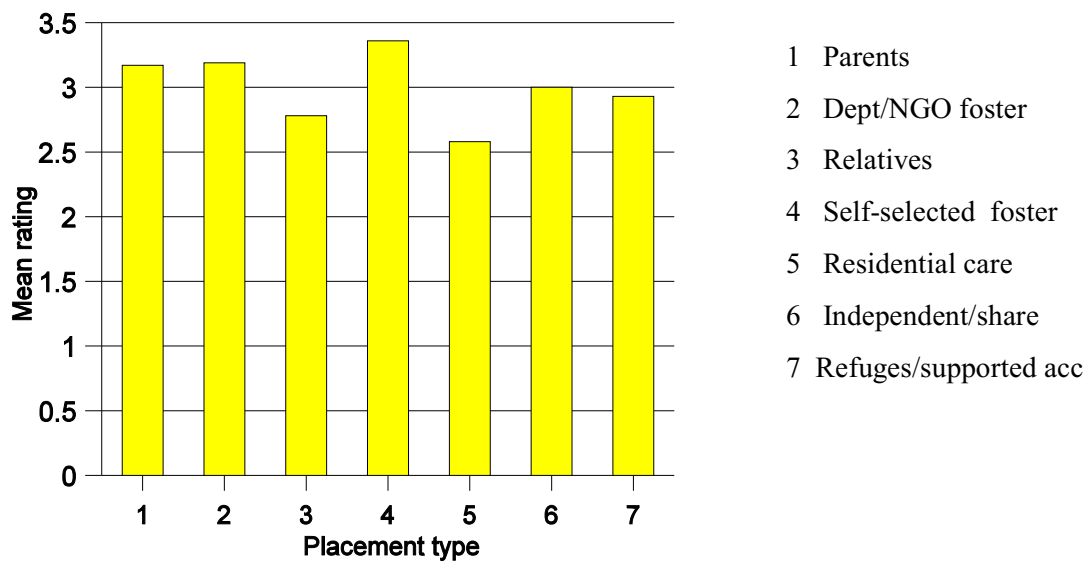
<sup>12</sup> Taking account of the dependence which arises from one person giving more than one rating,  $t(27) = 2.12, p < .03$ .

<sup>13</sup> The correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) between the length of placement and the rated security of the placement was .22 (n = 164,  $p < .01$ ; with perceived understanding,  $r = .26, p < .01$ ; with perceived interest,  $r = .19, p < .01$ ).

<sup>14</sup> The correlation between the length of placement and the rated likelihood of young people keeping in contact was .26,  $p < .01$ .

The age at which children entered different types of placements also varied but age at entry did not affect the favourableness of ratings.<sup>15</sup> Children were significantly younger entering foster care placements (average age of 10.6 years) than they were when they moved into refuges or supported accommodation (mean = 14.8 years) or when they returned to live with their parents (15.2 years) or began to live independently (mean = 16.2 years).<sup>16</sup> There was no difference, however, between foster care and residential care in the average age of children entering these placements.

The mean ratings for the various types of placement, presented in Table 4.3, show that residential care was rated least favourably on all aspects, and self-selected foster care, independent living and living with parents rated highest on several aspects each. Parents rated highest on security and perceived interest, self-selected foster care rated highest on being understood, treated well and having reasonable rules and discipline, and living with friends rated highest in terms of reasonable rules and not being difficult to get on with. Analyses of the mean ratings revealed, however, that the significant differences in evaluations were between foster care and residential care only - on feeling understood ( $p < .05$ ), on perceived interest ( $p < .03$ ), on being treated well ( $p < .04$ ) and on the reasonableness of rules and discipline ( $p < .03$ ).<sup>17</sup> In all aspects, foster care was rated more favourably than residential care. Parents, however, were rated more highly on security ( $p < .03$ ) than foster care, and independent living was, not surprisingly, rated more highly on the reasonableness of rules and discipline ( $p < .005$ ).



**Figure 4.9 Mean ratings of quality of treatment by placement type**

<sup>15</sup> The correlations between age at entry and the various ratings ranged between -.01 and -.12.

<sup>16</sup>  $F(4, 157) = 10.96, p < .0001$ . All planned comparisons involving foster care, except against residential care, were significant at  $p < .01$ .

<sup>17</sup> These significance levels relate to planned contrasts and take into account the dependence in the data that arises from one person giving more than one set of ratings - for example, the average number of ratings per person was about 3.5. When age of placement entry and the length of stay were held constant, some significant differences dropped out but generally the results did not vary greatly.

**Table 4.3**  
**Mean ratings for various aspects of placements by type**

| Type of placement | n  | Secure | Understood | Interest | Treated | Discipline | Difficult | Mean Length (mths) | Mean Age (yrs) |
|-------------------|----|--------|------------|----------|---------|------------|-----------|--------------------|----------------|
| Foster care       |    |        |            |          |         |            |           |                    |                |
| Dept/NGO          | 53 | 3.0    | 2.7        | 3.0      | 3.2     | 2.9        | 1.9       | 59.1               | 9.9            |
| Relatives         | 19 | 2.8    | 2.4        | 2.9      | 2.8     | 2.7        | 1.6       | 47.1               | 10.9           |
| Self-select       | 14 | 3.2    | 3.0        | 3.4      | 3.4     | 3.4        | 1.4       | 22.9               | 13.6           |
| Residential care  |    |        |            |          |         |            |           |                    |                |
| Parent(s)         | 6  | 3.7    | 2.3        | 3.2      | 3.2     | 3.0        | 1.8       | 9.0                | 15.2           |
| Independent/share | 19 | 2.7    | 2.9        | 3.0      | 3.0     | 3.4        | 1.4       | 6.7                | 16.2           |
| Refuges/Supported |    |        |            |          |         |            |           |                    |                |
| Supported         | 28 | 2.8    | 2.5        | 2.8      | 2.9     | 2.8        | 2.0       | 5.6                | 14.8           |

a. Secure: Did you feel secure there?    b. Understood: Do you feel they understood you?    c. Interest: Did they show interest in you?  
d. Treated: Were you well treated there?    e. Discipline: Were the rules and discipline reasonable?    f. Difficult: Were you difficult to care for?  
The various aspects were highly intercorrelated with correlation coefficients ranging between .56 and .76.

Within foster care, there was a consistent trend for self-selected foster care to be rated more favourably than either departmental/agency-based foster care or relative care, and for relative foster care to be rated less favourably than either of the other two forms of foster care. There were, however, only a few significant differences. Self-selected foster care was rated more favourably than departmental ( $p < .015$ ) or relative foster care ( $p < .03$ ) on the reasonableness of rules and discipline, and young people also tended to rate themselves as being less difficult to care for in self-selected foster care than in departmental or agency-based foster care ( $p < .10$ ).

The other significant differences related to young people's responses as to whether they currently had any contact with people from former placements. The main differences were again between foster care and other forms of placement. Young people were more likely to keep in contact with former foster families than with anyone from their time in residential care or in supported accommodation or refuges. Contact with biological family members was, however, more sustained than that with foster families. In only 32.0 per cent of rated residential care placements and in 30.7 per cent of refuge/supported accommodation placements did young people still have continuing links with their carers or with other people in the placement, compared with 66.7 per cent for independent living, 83.3 per cent for parents, and 57.6 per cent for foster care placements. The latter type of placements were therefore more likely than residential care and supported and crisis accommodation to result in relationships that will survive into the future and provide a means of support following discharge from care. The sources of support for young people just before they left care and after they left care are discussed later (Section 5.6 and 6.7).

While the mean ratings allow comparisons to be drawn between the various *types* of placement, they do tend to overlook the variability in the ratings. Some individual placements were ranked very favourably and others were ranked extremely poorly. Indeed, the intra-class correlations indicate that there was in fact more variation *within* young people's ratings than *between* the ratings given by different young people.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, it is useful to look at the *best* and the *worst* ratings given by young people for each type of placement. For example, if a young person had been in three foster placements, the highest rating for each aspect evaluated was selected and compared with the best of other types of placements. If they had been in only one foster placement, the ratings for that placement were used. Similarly, the worst or lowest ratings were selected for each type of placement and each aspect evaluated. When the 'best' ratings were analysed as before, the results generally confirmed the findings for the mean overall ratings, with the main significant differences occurring between foster care and residential care on most of the rated aspects. These ratings are shown in Figure 2 (Appendix 6), together with the overall mean rating for each aspect. They give some indication of the variability between the 'best' and the 'worst' of each type of placement and show that the 'worst' of some types of placement were rated more highly than the 'best' of others. For example, in relation to young people's ratings of the reasonableness of rules and discipline, the (average) 'worst' rating for self-selected foster care [labelled 'friends'] is higher than the 'best' ratings for all other types of placement, except for parents and independent living. Once again, the main significant difference was between foster care and residential care ( $p < .006$ ).

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<sup>18</sup> The intra-class correlations ranged from  $-.06$  to  $+.15$ . An intra-class correlation of  $.15$  indicates that 15% of the variation in ratings is due to variation between young people and 85% is due to variation within young people.



Young people's comments on their placements are especially helpful because they provide some indication of variability within types of placements and, more importantly, because they add life and depth to the ratings, indicating what young people did and did not like about their placements. For example, while residential care was generally rated poorly on all aspects, for some young people, stable long-term residential care was preferable to foster care, and the comments of some young people about specific forms of residential care were very positive.

For example:

- . I didn't want to be in foster care or another family situation. I was scared from what happened at home [sexual abuse] and scared it could happen in another place. I only wanted one placement - stability. ... I don't like the workers changing and I find it difficult accepting the new ones.
- . It was really good. It was run by FACS. But I had to leave when I was 12 because it only went to that age. They've closed it down now but they shouldn't have closed it. [City-based residential care home]
- . They were pretty good, I reckon. If you had a complaint, they'd listen and put up with you. And they took us on excursions all the time, things like that I would not have ever done or gone anywhere if it wasn't for XX.
- . It was really good ... girls my own age, still got friends from then. I had a pony and I was in a pony club. [Country-based residential children's home]

Unfortunately, this latter young woman moved into short-lived foster care with the family of a friend she met at the pony club but her friend became jealous of the attention she was receiving from her parents and the placement broke down.

Other young people, however, were much less positive and some were damning in their criticism of residential care:

- . State ward homes were horrible - they treat you like shit.
- . They do everything by the book ... they should be more flexible ... that suits individuals.
- . I hated it ... patronised, talked down to. XX was a hole, I hated everything about it .. it was an institution .. their ideas are bizarre and they don't screen the house parents properly.
- . Good in that you had somewhere to live and you could go to school, etc. Not good in that you can't choose the rules and who you live with ... I just felt like you were told to do this, shut up, do that, you know. They didn't treat you like people, you know.

Some young people were equally critical of some refuges:

- . Hated most of the refuges .. that's why I got kicked out of most of them. Most of the workers are just arse-holes, they put you down and their attitude is if he doesn't like this place and he steps out of line just once, we'll move him on and he's gonna be on the streets.
- . One of the workers there didn't like females - used to hassle them and made comments... kicked me out for being rude to him. But I didn't feel very secure there anyway because they were going to turn it into a D & A [drug and alcohol] centre.
- . Some youth-workers are dick-heads. Got different values plus they have rules they have to enforce anyway they can, and often that's wrong. For example, a youth worker at XX touched

me on the back and I said 'Don't!' So he hassled me and I ran away. It wasn't sexual but it invaded my space and he didn't respect that. [This young woman had been admitted to wardship as a result of sexual abuse.]

Young people's comments also indicated why relative care was rated more negatively than other forms of foster care. While seven young people reported at least one good experience in relative foster care, and for some this was successful on a long-term basis, nine others reported bad experiences, and in some cases with more than one relative. They had problems with older relatives (grandparents) who imposed what they saw as unreasonable rules and restrictions on them, and with aunts and uncles who made derogatory comments about one or both parents, and restricted their access to them. In one case, a young woman in the non-interview group complained about a lack of privacy because her grandparents would not allow her to have a door on her bedroom because they did not trust her.<sup>19</sup> Another young woman complained that her grandmother was 'a bit senile' and 'tried to make her like her mother', not allowing her to follow her own interests. When asked how they were treated by their relatives, several young people said, for example:

- . OK, I suppose, except they hit me and she [aunt] was a real bitch, she wouldn't let me see my father, and they tricked me into believing they were my parents. They got the shits and kicked me out because I kept getting suspended from school.
- . It was terrible - they treated me like a slave.
- . They didn't trust me and blamed me for everything that went wrong. Said I'd probably end up just like Mum. And there was no privacy - they went through my room when I wasn't there.

On the other hand, several young people were very happy in long-term stable foster care with relatives and did not really consider themselves to be wards.

Young people's comments showed a degree of insight into their earlier behaviour and their needs and indicate a fairly balanced assessment of their experiences. For example, while in general young people did not believe they had been difficult to care for, some were willing to concede that they had been very difficult in some placements and that they needed more control than they were given. Their comments are similar to those reported by Stone (1989) in relation to young people's comments about leaving care schemes in England.

- . I was difficult because they [state ward homes] were treating me like shit. I was an angry kid. I had a lot of shit swimming around in my head.
- . I left because I didn't like conforming ... I didn't like obeying the rules.
- . I was given too much freedom, ended up a real hoodlum. At the time I thought I was having a great time.

In essence, then, what young people were looking for in their placements and what they said they wanted was stable, continuous care with people who were "understanding", "flexible", and "willing to listen". As the comments above indicate, they also wanted limits and they wanted to feel safe. In addition, they valued privacy and respect for their own ideas, including the right not to practice the religion of the people they were living with. For

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<sup>19</sup> Information from the B-file.

example:

- . They expected me to go to church with them every week. They've got to be joking after months of being on the streets and doing pretty much as I wanted.
- . I left both foster families - one because they were "Bible-bashers" and the other because they were rich and they tried to buy me but they were never at home. They did nothing but work, but they wanted me to call them 'Mum and Dad' straight away. They bought me everything but didn't give me what I wanted most, and when I left, they wanted everything back.

Just over half the young people said that they had never been asked 'in private' by their worker how they liked their placement, but the majority of these young people (71 per cent) would like to have been asked. Some young people did not see that they had any choice or that telling their worker would have made any difference. For example:

- . They should taken me out of my first placement when I started to complain [*Why do you think they didn't move you?*] They didn't care, they had too much work and they thought me chatting to them would fix it but, if anything, it made it worse.
- . It wouldn't have changed anything.
- . Not much I could do. I was put there and I was there to stay. [*Would you have told the DO if they'd asked?*] I don't think I had a DO at the time. If I had one, I would have been down there. [*Were you unhappy there?*] Yes, when I was stopped from running away at the farm.
- . No one ever asked - only saw them once in a blue moon.

Others said that although they had been asked, this had not happened in private so they had not felt that they could have been honest. Others were more satisfied and said that at least one of their workers had asked or been prepared to listen. These young people had generally been happy in their placements or had sufficient trust in their District Officer to tell them if they were unhappy.

- . Not really ever asked, but I felt as though I could say if I was unhappy. Back in 1987, I got asked by my natural mother to move back with her. So I got advice from a DO - I had to pick which mum I wanted to live with. I decided to stay here (foster home). I get a lot of support from the welfare officers.
- . She [DO] asks you while she's somewhat in a dream but if you were to say 'No', she'd snap and come to, in full proper mode. I told her I wasn't happy at the XX's and she did something as fast as she could.

**4. 1. 5 District Officers' views about placements.** District Officers and several agency-based workers were asked whether the young people they were dealing with at discharge had, in their opinion, ever been placed inappropriately. Nearly one-third (29.8 per cent) said 'yes' and provided a range of reasons for the inappropriateness of some of the placements. Twelve workers referred to various problems the young people had in foster care placements, including abusive treatment, lack of care and attention, 'paternalistic and suffocating' treatment, competition with the children of the foster parents, and separation from their own siblings. Relative foster care was criticised in several cases for being reluctantly undertaken as a duty which in both cases resulted in very unhappy placements for the young people. For example:

I think it was wrong to put him with his aunt in the first place. She felt responsible but didn't really wish to have him and her husband didn't want him. They did him a lot of damage.

In other cases, where young people were abused in care, the workers were critical of the lack of monitoring of the placement which left children in abusive homes for too long.

Residential care was also seen to have been inappropriate in several cases because it involved the separation of siblings, was inflexible, and was perceived by the young people to constitute 'punishment', and be like a 'prison'. Other workers were critical of premature independent living arrangements and of placements in refuges but indicated that this occurred because of the lack of options, especially in rural areas and for 'difficult to place' adolescents. In some cases, refuges and other forms of independent accommodation were the 'only available placements'.

The District Officers' complaints about the shortage of appropriate placements were well supported by the documentation in a number of files in which the placement options for adolescents and numerous unsuccessful attempts to find vacancies were documented. In one case, for example, over 20 programs and establishments were approached without success over a period of four months to provide a placement for a 15-year-old with a mild intellectual disability and very difficult behaviour, who was then placed at Minali. The magistrate hearing the application for wardship adjourned the hearing until the Department was able to make assurances as to where this young man would be accommodated. The District Officer's memo clearly outlined the difficulty:

The position in relation to Specialist Residential Care has not changed since the last court date. There are no vacancies in any specialist residential care facilities. Every attempt at referral to all known programs has been made.

In other cases, the circumstances were seen to be beyond the Department's control, with factors such as the young person's behaviour and destabilising family relationships being responsible for the break-down of some placements and for the failure to secure others.

On the other hand, other workers were satisfied that the young people concerned had been placed appropriately throughout their time in care or at least in the 'best available placements'. For example:

- . They were in a very good placement. They had everything. They were very lucky.
- . I think they gave him a whole of things he hadn't had before.

#### **4.2 Abuse in care**

The abuse of children who have been taken into care because of abuse or neglect is a classic form of institutional abuse and constitutes 'systems abuse' (Cashmore et al., 1994). Unfortunately, there is little Australian literature and virtually no Australian statistics available to indicate the extent of the problem. Figures from the NSW Department of Community Services on the incidence of abuse of children in care by their foster parents provide a very low estimate of around .2 to .3 per cent but these figures do not include abuse by relatives or by the children of foster carers nor the number of children abused in residential institutions. The information from the young people in this study and from the files suggests that these figures are a gross under-estimate.

Information from the B-files indicates that 8 young people in the interview group (17.0 per cent) and 11 in the non-interview group (25 per cent) suffered some form of abuse or neglect while they were wards. This included

nine cases of physical abuse, seven cases of sexual assault, and three of emotional abuse and neglect. Two cases of physical abuse and one case of sexual assault occurred while the young people in the non-interview group were in the care of their birth parents during access visits or trial restoration periods. While these incidents occurred while the young people were wards, they differ in some respects from cases of abuse at the hands of substitute carers who are entrusted with the care of children who have had to be separated from their families. Abuse from biological family members or step-parents while the ward is staying with them does, however, indicate the need for thorough assessments before overnight or holiday access visits or restoration occurs and the need for proper monitoring while children are in their care.

While these figures indicate a significant and disturbing problem, information from the interviews with young people leaving care indicated a much higher incidence of abusive treatment, much of which they had not reported. In total, on the basis of their reports, 16 young people in the interview group (34.0 per cent) said that they had been subjected to abuse or ill-treatment in substitute care. This figure is double the incidence indicated in Departmental files for this group (8 cases, 17.1 per cent) but where information was noted in the files, it confirmed the accuracy of young people's reports of abusive treatment. Where information relating to young people's complaints was not included in the files, there are several likely explanations. First, children and young people are generally very reluctant to report problems and may not have complained (about unequal treatment, for example) to workers because they did not expect that anything could be done or because they may have expected retaliatory treatment from the carer who was complained about. Second, if they did tell the worker, it may have been dealt with but not recorded on the file. Thirdly, the complaint may not have been taken seriously.

**4. 2. 1 Reports of abuse by young people in the interview group.** The following information outlines the varying types of abuse and ill-treatment experienced by the young people in the interview group and reported in the interviews. There was no evidence that their reports, where confirmed by information from the files, were at all exaggerated. In fact, the opposite was the case in most cases.

Three young women (9.4 per cent) reported that they had been sexually assaulted while they were wards. One was sexually assaulted by her carer (group home parent) and another was assaulted several times while homeless and living on the streets. Another young woman was assaulted by her uncle/foster father, moved to another foster placement, and later subjected to sexual advances from her 'new' foster father after she moved out of the foster home. This resulted in a breakdown in her relationship with her foster mother and the loss of her main source of support in independent living. In addition, there were two other cases which give cause for concern although they may not meet some strict definitions of sexual assault. In one case, a young woman in independent living was harassed by her landlord and pressured to provide 'payment in kind' for overdue rent. Another two young women left their place of employment where they were living after sexual harassment from their employers. In one case, the young woman 'ran away' when her employer made his intentions very clear when his wife was going to be away overnight. In a further case, one of the male wards reported that when he was between 4 and 6 years old, his older foster brother (aged 17 to 19) had "tried to kiss" him "all the time". He remembers this some ten years later with some discomfort.

Another six young people suffered physical abuse while in care - three by their foster parents, and three at

the hands of peers in group homes, presumably because of inadequate supervision. Some of the incidents of abuse consisted of "being bashed, hit with a belt and buckle or willow sticks", "hitting my head against the wall or hitting our heads together", being "thrown against the staircase", and being "bashed by other kids".

Perhaps the most common forms of abuse were neglect and emotional abuse. Two young women complained that they never had enough to eat; they 'stole' food from the fridge or from the bin or other children's lunch boxes at school because they were so hungry. As one young woman said of her family group home:

I had to steal food when I was there because I never had enough to eat, and my brother used to get hit.

Only one of these cases came to Departmental notice and then only after some time. The lack of appropriate food was so serious in this case that medical tests showed that the growth of this child, and that of her siblings also in the same placement, was substantially delayed. The school had notified the Department on several occasions because they were concerned about the children stealing food, but nothing of any substance was done until the older child was 14, some 8 years after the initial complaint.

I finally left because she was mistreating me physically and emotionally. The DO knew but didn't do anything. We told some of it, and they also picked it up from tests with the psychologist. I felt under threat, thought I'd be punished if I told. [*How did you come to leave finally?*] We had an argument, she kept flogging me so I got out, went to the Department and said I wasn't going back.

This young woman and five other young people in the study were also subjected to emotional ill-treatment, comprising bizarre sexual 'education' (eg., equating menstruation with the "devil"), being locked outside to play separately from siblings, and ridicule of the child's mother. One young woman commented on her aunt's derision of her mother in these terms:

... my aunty was a bitch ... she put our mother down in front of us to the point where we'd sit down and bawl our eyes out.

Another complaint from several young people was that they were treated very differently to the biological children of their foster parents and expected to do an unfair amount of household work, especially in comparison with what other children (especially the biological children of the foster parents) were required to do. Unequal treatment included not being invited to family parties or social occasions like weddings, being given different food (eg., plain biscuits rather than chocolate biscuits) and restricted access to food, and being expected to provide an unpaid babysitting service. In the words of one, "I got treated like a slave and had to look after their younger kids all the time, get their meals at night, bath them etc etc." While unequal treatment is a common complaint among siblings, these young people's complaints should not be dismissed as such, both because their perceptions constitute reality for them and because they were able to provide detail about the considerable work they did, both before and after school, and about the ways they were treated differently. It is difficult to estimate the effects on children of feeling that they are being treated differently - in a negative way - but they are likely to be very substantial for children who have already suffered separation from their own families. As the British report on the findings of the *ChildLine* phone-in service for children in residential and foster care points out:

When foster carers favour their own children in terms of space, material goods and most importantly, in love and affection, this is particularly painful for children

separated from their own family, who are looking for a home they can call their own.

(p. 43)

At first, they put me into, with foster parents but I hated that because she drank too much and her daughter and I used to fight. She had a natural daughter and she could have anything she liked. Even though she was only 2 days older than me .. because I was a foster kid, I had to do all the cleaning, the housework. She didn't even give me pocket money - she kept it for drinks and cigarettes.

I did nearly all the house-work in the foster family - there were older and younger children who did very little.

The food is good here [with mother] but in my foster family I was only allowed to eat when they ate ... at meals. The other children were allowed to eat when they liked and go to the fridge but I wasn't.

Being homeless in care comprised another form of neglect. Three young women and four young men (13.7 per cent) reported that they had been homeless at some stage while they were wards, generally because they left placements where they were unhappy even though they had nowhere else safe to go. For one young woman referred to earlier, being homeless left her vulnerable to sexual assault - sexual harassment to her was an expected part of every day life on the streets - but she also received no counselling or health services.

One of the problems that emerges clearly from these young people's comments is the difficulty they had in having access to, complaining to, and being 'heard' by their District Officers. This was a result of children not having District Officers to complain to or not knowing they did, children not expecting to be believed, or District Officers not being open to hear complaints or not acting quickly enough. As several young people commented:

- . ... it was an institution ... their ideas are bizarre, the house parents are not screened properly ... I was given a bleeding nose by my house father ... the next one was an ex-minister alcoholic who got chucked out of the church for alcohol ... I ran away two weeks after he got in. *Did you talk to your District Officer about it?* I didn't have one, or I didn't have one accessible. I didn't know who my District Officer was ... they kept me in the dark ... I met them after I ran away and went missing for 3 weeks.
- . They wouldn't believe me. A worker gave me a bleeding nose and I didn't know I had a DO. I could only complain to the boss at X - nothing happened.
- . I ran away about 3 to 4 times from my foster home where I was being beaten - finally the Department [of Community Services] moved me on.
- . One of them, when she dropped me off at a foster home, she virtually told me I was really lucky to get into a foster home and that I should put up with it, and behave myself.

At the third interview, young people were asked whether there had been anyone they could tell if they were

unhappy in a placement and whether they had ever complained about the way they were treated in care. Their responses point to the difficulties of asking children and young people in care to make complaints and support Lindsay's (1991) comments in relation to the 'Pindown' Inquiry in England.

Children in care have shown extreme reluctance in complaining, doubting, with some justification, that anyone will believe them and fearing, with equal justification, victimisation and reprisals if they complain against those who can exercise so much power and control over their lives. (Lindsay, 1991)

Only half the young people in the current study (n = 22, 50 per cent) said they had someone they could tell, and for the majority of these young people, that person was their District Officer (77.2 per cent) or another worker (18.2 per cent). Other people included foster parents (n = 4), and siblings (n = 2) or friends (n = 2). Less than half (n = 18, 40.9 per cent) ever complained, but when they did their 'confidantes' were mainly workers (District Officers, n = 8; workers, n = 4) and their complaints often did not achieve a resolution of their problem. For example:

- . I was just a kid. I tried to tell them [re physical abuse in foster family] but I was just a kid. I told them I hated this place and was in tears - but they just kept me putting me back there. Eventually they moved me.
- . A big talk about it. That's as far as it went. It didn't solve the problem. It got back to the person I complained about and that was worse. I didn't expect it to get back to the person.

The main reasons young people did not complain then were lack of an appropriate confidante, fear of not being listened to or believed, and fear of the consequences of speaking out. Several also said that the conditions they experienced in care were not as bad as their experiences at home - in short, they did not really expect any better. Others said that when they were older they took action themselves and moved out rather than complain and wait for someone else to act.

**Did you ever complain about the way you were treated?**

No, I didn't have the guts. I thought it would get me into more trouble by telling on them.

No, not as often as I should. If you whinge, you get a belting, get into more trouble than if you shut your mouth.

No, I really didn't think I'd get very far- I didn't think they'd listen. [*If they'd asked you whether anything was wrong, would you have told them?*] Probably.

No way! If I said it, they'd want to go into this psychology thing and it would go on and on so it's easier not to say anything.



**4. 2. 2 Young people in the non-interview group.** Information from the B-files indicated a similar pattern of physical abuse and sexual assault in this group, apart from the three cases of abuse by members of their biological families or step-parents mentioned earlier. Physical abuse occurred in foster homes and in residential care. In one case, the young person who was then 11, was thrown against a wall by a residential care worker and injured his knee; although the complaint and information about the incident was recorded in the file, there was no indication how the complaint was resolved. There were also two different complaints, not found among the interviewees. These concerned 'strip-searching' at a residential care institution, and 'gay bashing' of a young man at a residential institution in the country. In the latter case, the young man took out an Apprehended Violence Order against the perpetrators to protect himself.

The pattern of sexual assault was similar to that found for the interview group, with one young woman sexually assaulted by her foster father and a neighbour, and another sexually assaulted while she was homeless in Kings Cross. Applications for Victims' Compensation were made in relation to the sexual assault by the foster father, and also in relation to one of the cases in which a young woman was sexually assaulted when she was restored home. An additional case concerned a young man who sexually assaulted his younger step-sister when he returned home, after allegedly being sexually assaulted at school when he was younger.

There was no information pertaining to emotional abuse or neglect in the B-files for the non-interview group, apart from one case in which a foster mother forced the children to burn photos of their birth mother and obstructed contact with her. Given the experience of the young people in the interview group and the lack of information in their files about emotional abuse and neglect in substitute care, it is probably reasonable to assume that some of the young people in the non-interview group would have had similar experiences.

In summary, then, it is clear that the rate of abuse in care for these young people during their wardship was substantial. The incidence is clearly higher than the information from the B-files would suggest. The information from the files and from the young people who were interviewed provides for the first time a clearer picture of the risk of abuse to children in substitute care, a risk much greater than the Department's figures would suggest. As the '*Systems Abuse Report*' points out, "it is particularly tragic and ironic" that children removed from their own homes to ensure their safety are abused in 'places of safety'".

### **4. 3 Family contact**

The general philosophy of the Department is that when a child is separated from natural family, the child is to be assisted to maintain contact with his/her family and other significant persons, **unless** such contact is contrary to the child's best interests, welfare; and/or contrary to the Order of a Court. ... Whether or not restoration of a child to his/her family is the ultimate goal, parents and natural family continue to have an important role to perform in the child's life. (NSW Department of Family and Community Services Substitute Care Administrative and Procedural Handbook, Volume 1 on Access and Contact)

The purpose of natural family contact, and in particular parent-child contact, varies according to the age of

the child, the reasons for their placement, and the probable length of time in care but in general, it is intended to give children a sense of continuity and family identity and to lessen feelings of having been rejected. It may also be part of the process of working toward restoring children to their families or helping them to come to terms with the separation. Research confirms the significance of children's contact with their birth family, indicating that it is one of the most important factors affecting placement outcome and children's development and well-being (Aldgate, 1980; Fanshell & Shinn, 1978; Hess, 1987). This does not mean, however, that birth family contact is appropriate for all children in care or that children always react positively to visits.

Given the positive research findings and Departmental policy encouraging children's contact with their biological families, what was the experience of this group of young people while they were in care and just before discharge from wardship? In simple number terms, the vast majority (93.6 per cent) of the young people who were interviewed had some contact with their family during their time in care, although the extent, regularity and frequency of that contact varied widely. Who they had contact with and how often was affected by the age at which they entered care, and the reasons for it, by the attitudes of their parents, carers and workers, and by the wishes of the children themselves. There were also differences between mothers and fathers in the frequency and regularity of contact, with mothers more likely to have contact than fathers.

There were a number of patterns of change in family contact but there were few cases where children had continuing regular contact with even one parent. Stable and continuous contact was more common with siblings where they were placed together, though being placed together was no guarantee of continuing, conflict-free contact.

**4. 3. 1 Parents.** The main reasons for no contact with parents were that the parent was dead or their whereabouts unknown or because contact was rejected by either the parent or child, particularly following the disclosure of child sexual assault.

The mothers of five young people in the interview sample died when they were young children, and in four cases, this directly contributed to the children being placed in care when they were still quite young because their fathers or other relatives were unable to provide adequate or safe care for them.<sup>20</sup> In the other case, the girl's father and older brother sexually abused her for some years after her mother died but she did not enter care until she disclosed the abuse when she was 15. The mothers of six other young people also died, but not until their children were adolescents (four cases) or about to be discharged (two cases). In one of these cases, the child's mother committed suicide and this, and other factors, led to the girl being admitted to wardship. The father of one young man also committed suicide and the fathers of five other young people died either when the children were quite young (one case) or more often (four cases) when the children were adolescents.

In a significant number of cases, the reason for no contact was that the parents' whereabouts were unknown for either some, most or all of the time the child was in care. This was more often the case for fathers than mothers. Whereas the whereabouts and even the identity of 17 fathers (36.1 per cent) was unknown for all or nearly all the

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<sup>20</sup> In one case, the father was in prison for murdering the child's mother. In the other cases, the father was either an alcoholic and incapable of caring for the children or had sexually abused one or more of his children.

time the child was a ward, only two mothers were 'missing'. In several cases, where 'missing' parents were finally located, they were unaware that the child was a ward. In only two cases, however, did fathers seriously consider or take on the responsibility of caring for the young person once they were 'found'. In contrast, one mother sought contact with her son for some years after he was taken from her as a baby by his father; she finally met him again when he was 17. The District Officer for this young man was critical of the Department's lack of action in locating his mother.

DOCS should have put more effort into contact in this family. The Department should have sought Peter's mother earlier. She searched for Peter for ages - his father snatched him from his mother when he was a baby and that is the last she saw of him until two years ago. The other children were lost - we have no idea where they are. If more effort was put into this family in the beginning, restoration probably would have been a possibility because the mother who they have just located is pretty together.

Jenny was admitted to wardship at 15, ten months after disclosing sexual abuse by her step-father. She ran away from home several times before telling anyone why. Immediately after disclosure, her mother moved out of home with Jenny and her sister but several months later, Jenny was moved into a group home because her mother was accusing her of lying and blamed her for upsetting the family. She refused to visit her or to allow her to see her sister. The relationship deteriorated further when her step-father was prosecuted. Jenny had problems at school and she became bulimic and thought about committing suicide. She was admitted to wardship on the grounds of substantial and irretrievable break-down in the relationship with her parent.

About this time, Jenny indicated that she wanted to find her father whom she had not seen for nine years since her parents separated. The Department was unsuccessful but Jenny found him herself. She said: 'I found my Dad and keep in contact with him. I got sick of DOCS trying to find him so I found him myself. I looked up his name in the phone book and rang. It took about 12 phone calls to find him, I hadn't seen him since I was seven.'

The other main reason for no contact between parents and children was rejection of contact by either the parents or the children. There were several patterns and underlying reasons here. One related to child sexual assault and the reason for the child's admission to wardship. Six young women entered wardship because they could not live with their families after they disclosed that they had been sexually abused. Two young women thereby lost contact with both parents, and three others had only minimal or no contact with their mother because she remained with the perpetrator. For example, one young woman said:

It's been three and a half years and I've had nothing to do with them [her natural family] ... Before the court case, the Department and children's home pushed for visits, Mum came out for weekly visits ... but after the court hearing and Dad was convicted and went to jail, well, Mum followed him and I lost contact.

In three cases, however, where the perpetrator was the step-father, there was some contact with the father though in one case it took some effort to find him.

In several other cases, young people rejected contact with their parents because they were angry with them for causing them to enter care. A history of unreliable contact, with parents not showing for organised contact meetings or not keeping their promises over other forms of contact, exacerbated the issue and led several young

people to reject all contact with their parents. In the words of two young people:

I haven't seen Dad for two years - I don't want to see him now after I found out he hit Mum [mother now dead].

She [mother] had those so-called visits every three months and we're supposed to see her but we don't. I stopped them years ago. There's no point seeing her every six months to talk about the weather when you just want to forget about them. I lead another life now. I don't actually consider her my mum because it's never been like that. She's biological but that's about all.

I hate her [mother]. What hasn't she done? I definitely do not want to see her - keep her out of my life! She's already destroyed my life before and now she's trying to do it again.

Two other common patterns in birth parent access were a gradual decline in the frequency of contact after initial interest, and unreliable or sporadic contact, reflecting the difficulty that biological non-custodial parents have in managing their feelings and maintaining contact over a prolonged period of time. As Bullock et al. (1991: 86) pointed out:

... the managing of a visit for parents, children and care givers requires considerable skill on the part of social workers. They need to overcome the parents' feelings of guilt, resentment and inadequacy that such meetings engender and to counteract the tendency for parents to meet such stress by reducing their visiting.

Unfortunately, as some District Officers admitted, they often did not have the time or the resources that are required to organise and maintain contact. Their job is made more difficult when parents and foster parents move, necessitating the coordination of several offices. These difficulties meant that they either left it to the parents themselves to organise contact or did not put in the work required to maintain contact with parents and support them in maintaining their relationship with their children.<sup>21</sup> For example:

I guess if I'd been involved with the case before ... I probably would have allowed more access and done more work with him and his mum - longer periods of time at home rather than have them run away because they wanted to be there with mum.

Encouraging family contact also entails preparing the child and the carers and supporting them after visits or with any problems that arise. Again, this is time-consuming and there is often not the time available, given the 'succession of other crisis work' (Bullock et al, 1991; Hess & Proch, 1988). District Officers were, however, aware of the problem. For example:

He had contact with his mother after a number of years but it didn't go very well. It happened with a whole lot of his family that he didn't know there. He didn't know how to go about it and he gave the impression he didn't care because he just wanted to get away. He needed more support and preparation than he received.

We should have listened more to what they were telling us and put more work into

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<sup>21</sup> In several cases, mothers were very keen to have their children restored to them and went to considerable lengths, including letter-writing campaigns to various Ministers, to achieve restoration. When they were finally told that restoration was unlikely, they withdrew from contact with the child.

proper restoration rather than have self-restoration.

Other factors which clearly influenced the extent and success of biological family contact were the attitudes of foster carers and the willingness of workers to challenge carers who undermined contact. As Hess and Proch (1988: 16) stated:

Visiting also depends on the child's carers, who can either support or undermine the visiting plan. ... carers can be uncooperative in arranging visits and reluctant to assist with transport. They can show their dislike and distrust of a child's parents through words and actions. They can refuse to accept that a child's negative behaviour or withdrawal following visits indicate healthy attachment and distress over separation, and instead insist that visits occur less frequently in order to minimise the problems with which they must contend. Because of their ability to influence the child and the implementation of the agency plan, the willingness of substitute carers to facilitate visiting is critical.

Training and appropriate support for carers and proper assessment of the effects on children are all important tools in managing carers' concerns and maintaining birth family contact. While there were cases in which this was done well (see Sarah's case study later), there was also clear evidence of inadequate training for foster parents and poor management of difficulties with birth family contact. District Officers indicated, for example, that because of the shortage of appropriate placements for children, and especially for adolescents, they are sometimes forced to place children with foster carers who they would prefer not to 'use' or who have not received training.<sup>22</sup> It was also clear in some cases that foster parents opposed and undermined children's contact with their birth family and that workers relied on foster parents' accounts of the children's reactions to the contact and their wish for no further contact without a proper assessment of the effect on the children. In several cases, workers admitted with hindsight that they should have been more insistent with foster carers who resisted birth family contact. Young people commented on the conflict of loyalties they had experienced. They wanted to see their parents and siblings but worried that they were making their foster parents uncomfortable or even angry. For example, one young man in foster care said:

She [foster mother] used to get really funny, jealous when my family rang up. It was easier not to see them.

Another placed with relatives said:

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<sup>22</sup> Placing children with untrained foster parents clearly contravenes Departmental guidelines which state: Before a Foster Family may provide a placement for a Ward, Protected Person or Child in Care, they must have:-

- (a) completed Departmentally Approved Foster Parent Training Programme, and
- (b) been assessed as foster parents in accordance with current Departmental guidelines, together with a Police check, and
- (c) been approved to foster and provide care for a child in Departmental care by the District manager of the Supervising Unit.

I hated her [foster mother]. She was a real bitch. She wouldn't let me see my father. *Do you know why?* No. I found him but she could get really cross. I got a real hiding. They tricked me into believing they were my real parents.

Several birth parents were also very critical of the Department for their lack of support and perceived inaction in the face of foster parent resistance to their contact with their children. Although parents were not interviewed as part of this study, in several cases in which young people were living with parents, the mothers were keen to voice their criticisms during our contact with them. One was particularly angry about the obstruction she said she had faced when she was attempting to gain access to her children. Despite continued calls to the Department, she was unable to see two of her children for nearly 15 months. She eventually wrote to the Minister of Family and Community Services but she was angry that she was unable to have this matter reviewed without this action. It is significant that, unlike the English *Children Act 1989*, there is currently no legislative basis to parental access rights, and that prior to the establishment of the Community Services Commission, there was no avenue of appeal, apart from the ministerial approach taken by this mother.

Sarah entered care when she was three and a half years old. Her mother requested help because she was afraid she might kill Sarah; she was admitted to wardship four months later. After a failed trial restoration and several short-term foster placements, she entered long-term foster care.

Her mother visited her regularly on weekends until she argued with Sarah's foster parents who were finding it difficult to manage the frequency of her visits. When Sarah was nearly seven, contact with her mother was suspended for six months because Sarah was reportedly becoming upset. Contact was resumed, however, after a psychologist's report recommended continuing contact to 'avoid a major adolescent crisis'. Her mother's attitude was erratic, first wanting more contact but not taking it up when it was approved. She wanted Sarah to remain with her foster parents and also said she was willing to consent to adoption. Another psychologist's assessment recommended against adoption but suggested Sarah adopt her foster parents' surname to overcome confusion at school.

When she was 10, Sarah rejected contact with her mother when her mother was pregnant but resumed visits a year later. Several years later, however, she again refused contact after an argument with her mother when she accused her mother of lying to her about the reasons she entered care. Her mother made several attempts to make further contact and when she was 17, they had a meeting which helped clear up several misunderstandings, and visits were successfully resumed. Throughout, her foster mother was supportive and discussed her conflicting feelings with her. Sarah's wishes about contact and its timing were respected. Sarah continued to live in the same stable foster placement after she was discharged from wardship.

Lindy entered wardship and long-term foster care when she was 13 months old after being hospitalised with a broken leg and a fractured skull. Her mother was 17 when Lindy was born and an ex-ward herself. She constantly sought contact visits and applied for Lindy to be restored to her care. Her applications were refused and she was described in the file in the following terms: 'Instability like a gold thread weaved its way throughout her case...aggression, low frustration tolerance, permissiveness, drunkenness and a general inability to manage her own affairs, let alone be a mother to two pre-school children.'

Lindy's foster mother was very anxious about her having contact with the birth mother, fearing possible restoration. The office dealing with the birth mother made a number of requests for visits but the foster mother's ill-health and several bouts of sickness among the children led to their cancellation. It was six and a half years after Lindy went into care before her mother had her first contact visit. Although the mother was very nervous and had tried to commit suicide before a previous planned visit, the visit went well. Lindy's foster mother agreed that the visit went well but said that Lindy was very upset that night, had rejected her mother's presents and had nightmares every night since.

The supervising office for Lindy recommended against further visits, leading to comments from the office supervising Lindy's mother that the other workers 'cannot help but see their role as an advocate for the foster parents'. A psychological report recommended further contact, contesting the foster mother's story that the child had rejected the mother's presents; apparently Lindy kept the toy in a safe place so it would not get dirty.

The next visit occurred 15 months after the first, and was followed by a further two. The fourth visit could not be organised in accordance with the plan because both supervising District Officers were on leave or about to go on leave, and the Child Protection Officer was transferred. The next visit did not occur until 26 months later. Later that year, when she was 13, Lindy asked about visiting her mother during the holidays but her foster father said 'If you go to visit your mother, don't bother about coming back'.

Lindy's behaviour became increasingly difficult. She finally ran away from her foster home to another relative when she was 15 and it emerged that she had been physically abused by her foster parents. According to the file, 'There was also evidence that the foster mother has actively undermined her relationship with her birth mother'. She had, for example, burned or forced Lindy to burn letters and photographs from her mother.

After 15 months in various foster homes and refuges, she went to live with her mother. Her District Officer then recommended early discharge although Lindy said she felt 'safe under the Department's care'. She was finally discharged at 18 after further stays in refuges.

While there were obvious problems in managing biological family contact, there were also examples of good management and successful outcomes (see comments and case study below). Nearly 60 per cent (58.1 per cent) of young people could remember their worker organising visits for them, and 65.2 per cent were satisfied with what the Department had done, especially in relation to respecting their wishes. In most cases where young

people were dissatisfied with the amount of family contact, they wanted more contact with their parents and siblings, particularly when they were too young to initiate it themselves; in two cases, however, they would have preferred less contact.

**Do you think the Department should have done anything to change how often you saw your parents or your brothers/sisters?**

**NO**

- . DOCS used to organise for us to see Dad which was good. If we didn't want to go, DOCS would have agreed.
- . DOCS have kept me in contact with my family after I asked them to. They pay for me to go there in holidays and for funerals. [Aboriginal ward]
- . I think the Department have done an all right job. It's up to me if I want to see her, it's my choice. If they forced me, I would have been like really ... Before I was about 12, I think they were more like 'Oh, everyone's going to see Mum, let's go.' I guess if I put up a protest, I wouldn't have had to go.
- . They encouraged me but they didn't push me. For a time, I didn't have any contact with my mother, none at all. They concentrated a lot on mending the relationship between me and my mother and that helped a lot. [NGO] did most of that stuff. [Father?] No, I didn't see him for quite a while- FACS told him to stick his nose out, none of his business. So he just waited for me to call him and that took me five years because I was in a stage of my life where I had a lot of bigger problems than him.

**YES**

- . See them more often. Sometimes they didn't know where I was. They weren't told but I didn't realise. Mum was hassling my foster parents.
- . She [NGO worker] hasn't done much about my father but I want to track him down. I'd have liked to see my sister and father more.
- . They took Mum off us and we went to the children's home and Mum was in hospital [diagnosed schizophrenic]. Mum rang us but we didn't see her. It would have been good if they organised a bus for us, or someone took us to see her.

In summary, then, most young people had at least some contact with one parent, usually their mother, during their time in care. Contact was, however, seldom regular and frequent and rarely consistent throughout. In some cases, contact was regained after years of no contact, and in others, contact had stopped after earlier sporadic contact.

**4.3.2 Natural parent contact just before discharge.** Just before they were discharged from wardship, 61.7 per cent of young people in the interview sample were still in contact with at least one of their birth parents. Nearly one in five young people (19.1 per cent) were living with both parents. Consistent with the patterns of contact during their time in care, most contact was usually with their mother. Where their mother was still alive, 69.4 per cent of young people had at least some contact with her whereas only 36.5 per cent of those whose father



was still alive had some contact with him. As indicated earlier, most had had some contact, albeit erratically in some cases, with their parents during their period of wardship but two young people in the interview sample ‘found’ their mother late in their wardship after no prior contact since their admission to wardship.<sup>23</sup> Both mothers were living interstate. The attitudes of the young people towards the reunion were quite different. One, a young man, met his mother for the first time when he was 17, eight years after he entered care, and 15 years after being taken from her by his father. The Department of Community Services paid for him to travel interstate to meet her and spend Christmas with her. He said: ‘I might consider living with her one day.’ In contrast, a young woman met her mother and her maternal grandparents for the first time when she was 16 but she was not keen to have further contact. Several other young people were still looking for their fathers.

Two factors had some influence on parental contact prior to discharge: the age at which children were admitted to wardship and, for contact with fathers, the stability of the young person’s placement at discharge. Contact with both mothers and fathers was significantly more likely for young people if they entered wardship as adolescents rather than at an earlier age. Eight out of nine (88.9 per cent) young people who became wards when they were adolescents had some contact with their mothers just before they were discharged compared with just under half (16 out of 34, 47.1 per cent) who became wards before they were 12.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, for fathers, 7 out of 9 (77.8 per cent) ‘adolescent-entry’ wards had contact with their fathers compared with 8 out of 31 (25.8 per cent) ‘early-entry’ wards.<sup>25</sup> In addition, there was a trend for those **not** in stable placements just before they were discharged to be more likely to have contact with their fathers (9 out of 20, 45 per cent) than those in stable placements (2 out of 13, 15.4 per cent).<sup>26</sup>

Not only were young people more likely to see their mothers than their fathers, they also had more frequent contact with their mothers (see Figure 4.10). Nine were living with their mother just before they were discharged from care (25 per cent of those whose mother was alive) but only three were living with their father (7.3 per cent), and of these, all three were also living with their mother (Figure 4. 10).

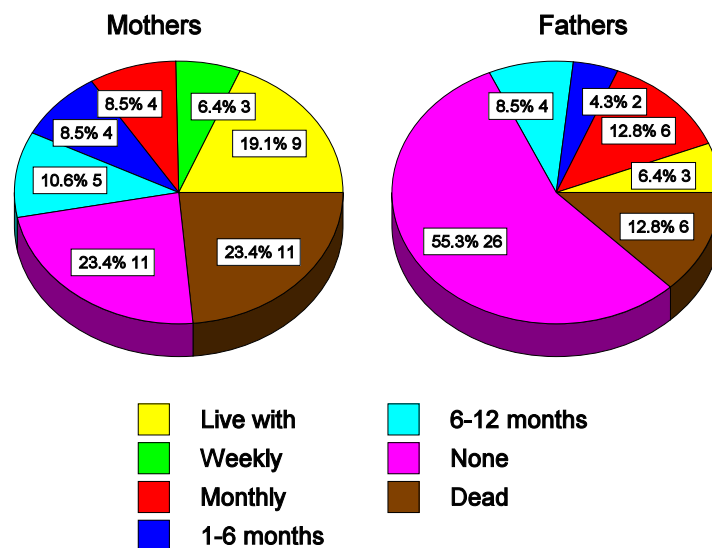
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<sup>23</sup> In one case, contact occurred after the girl’s mother put her name on the adoption contact register, believing that her daughter had been adopted.

<sup>24</sup>  $\chi^2 = 3.50, 1 \text{ df}, p < .06.$

<sup>25</sup>  $\chi^2 = 5.97, 1 \text{ df}, p < .008.$

<sup>26</sup>  $\chi^2 = 2.9, 1 \text{ df}, p < .09.$



**Figure 4. 10 Frequency of contact with natural parents before discharge**

This pattern of greater contact with mothers than fathers was also found among the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group but the difference was less marked. Whereas 15 young people in this group were in fairly frequent contact with their mothers, 10 were in contact with their fathers; these figures include eight cases in which young people were in contact with both parents. The less marked difference for contact with mothers and fathers in this group where all left home as adolescents is consistent with the greater likelihood of contact among wards who entered care as adolescents. The most likely explanation is that, despite the obvious problems in the relationship causing most of the young people to leave home or enter care at this age, these young people had still had a number of years living with their parents and still sought contact with them. Only two young people in the comparison group had no contact at all with either parent. In both cases, this was because they wanted to distance themselves from previously abusive parents. Most did not want more contact than they had at that time with their parents. Of the three who would have liked more contact, two lived interstate and could not afford the travel, and one other was ambivalent, saying she would like to see her family more but wanted to get on with her own life ‘instead of worrying what her mother would think’.

**4. 3. 3 Contact with siblings.** Departmental policy is to place ‘children of the same family together in a foster home, unless the needs of the individual children are not able to be addressed by one placement’.<sup>27</sup> The policy is soundly based on research which shows that siblings can be an important source of support and reassurance and provide a sense of continuity and family identity. From a practical point of view, arranging contact visits is also much more complex for workers if children are placed separately and any attempts at reunification then require ‘not only a reconstruction of parent-child relationships, but also reconstruction of sibling relationships’ (Hess & Pooch, 1988: 18).

<sup>27</sup> NSW Department of Family and Community Services *Substitute Care Administrative and Procedural Handbook*, Volume 2 on Placement Procedures.

In practice, however, most young people in the interview sample who had siblings who were also in care (31, 65.9 per cent) were separated from at least some of their siblings for some of the time they were in care (n = 20, 64.5 per cent). Seven were separated for part of their time in care, and 14 for the whole of their time in care; in six cases, this was because their siblings entered care much earlier or later than they did.<sup>28</sup> In four cases where young people had not had any contact with older siblings, they made contact late in their wardship. In three cases, this was facilitated by Department of Community Services workers but in one case, contact was hindered by lack of action by Departmental staff. In this case, the young woman's older sister attempted over several years to contact and meet her; the worker's cautious approach in requiring the initial contact to proceed via letters passed on by the Department was interpreted as unnecessary obstruction by the young woman and her sister. As the young woman said:

I wasn't allowed to see my sister. Sally [DO] said I had to write to her first, then do a telephone call and then go and see her but I thought it would have been easier if I just saw her straight up. My sister wrote a letter to me but I was only allowed to read it when I turned 16 though she wrote it when I was in Year 7. I wrote to her and she wrote back but now we've lost contact all of a sudden. [Fortunately, they made contact again later.]

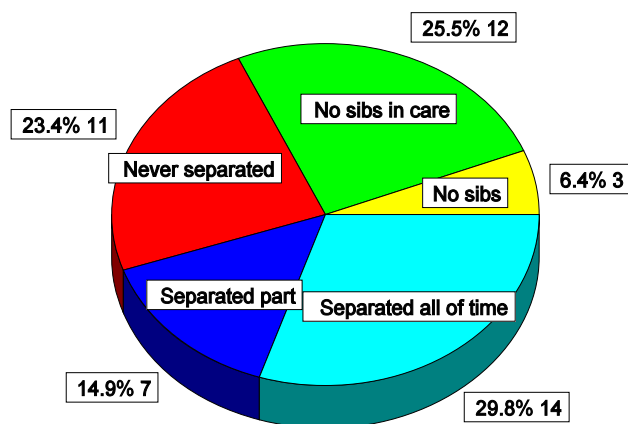
Several young people who did enter care at the same time as their siblings indicated that they were not particularly upset by this separation, but for some children who were old enough at the time to realise what was happening, being separated from their siblings was of great concern.

I tried to stop them making us wards because I was scared they were going to separate me and my brother.

Some young people who were initially placed together were separated when carers were not able to cope with the children together or when the placement later broke down for either the young person or for their sibling. In several cases, where the younger sibling remained with the foster family, and was adopted by the family, contact between the siblings was not encouraged or was actively discouraged by the foster family. In these cases, the District Officers said they thought the Department should have put more work into ensuring that contact was allowed, especially because the children involved had no contact with other members of their immediate family.

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<sup>28</sup> Three young people did not have siblings.



**Figure 4. 11 Siblings in care**

For a significant minority (n=12, 25.5 per cent), the young person in the sample was the only child in the family admitted to wardship.<sup>29</sup> A number of these young people (n = 6) were the victims of sexual abuse, taken into care because they could not return to unsupportive families. Unfortunately the very reason for their removal also meant that their ties with their whole family were often severed. As one young woman said:

Mum wouldn't let me see the family so there is nothing anyone can do to change that.

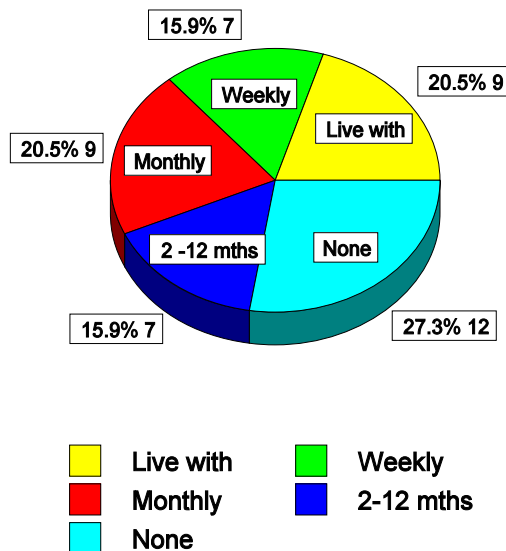
In several other cases, the young person was the only child **not** to be restored to their family and this left them feeling very rejected. One young woman, for example, who entered care at 11 because her mother was a substance abuser and unable to care for her, was later diagnosed as being clinically depressed and having very low self-esteem. She was unable to understand why her brother who was placed with her in a family group home was 'rewarded' for bad behaviour by being returned home to their mother when she was 'good and couldn't go home'. Her later return home was not successful and she then moved through 17 placements before she was discharged from care.

Figure 4.12 shows the frequency of contact with siblings just before the young people in the interview sample were discharged from care. About one in five (20.5 per cent) were living with a sibling at this time and most of this group (7 out of 9) had not been separated while they were in care; just before discharge, they were either living with foster parents or their birth parent. A further 16 young people (36.4 per cent) had frequent contact with at least one sibling, and seven (15.9 per cent) had infrequent contact (less often than monthly). With the exception of the young people who were living with siblings, there was little relationship between separation from siblings during wardship and their frequency of contact just before discharge. Furthermore, the frequency of

<sup>29</sup> In addition, two young people (4%) were only children.

their contact with siblings, unlike parental contact, was unaffected by the age at which they entered wardship; whether they entered wardship early or as adolescents made little difference. It was also little different from that of the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group.

In summary, just before they were discharged from wardship, most young people (72.7 per cent) had at least some contact with one or more of their siblings. In fact, they were more likely to have contact with their siblings than with their fathers.



**Figure 4. 12 Frequency of contact with siblings just before discharge**

**4. 3. 4 Contact with extended family.** Nearly half the young people in wardship (n=22, 46.8 per cent) had some contact with members of their extended family - grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins - just before they were discharged from care although again their contact during the earlier stages of their wardship was often infrequent and not regular. Five were in fact living with relatives although this was a long-term arrangement for only two. For ten (21.2 per cent), contact was fairly frequent (at least monthly) but it was less frequent for another seven (14.9 per cent). In two cases, contact with either an aunt or a grandparent was the only contact young people had with any member of their family.

The two comparison groups provided an interesting contrast for the wards in the amount of contact with members of the extended family. While there was little difference between the wards and the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group (30 per cent of this comparison group had contact), young people in the ‘*at home*’ comparison group were much more likely to see their grandparents and other relatives than either of the other two groups, although less frequently. Seventeen (85 per cent) of the ‘*at home*’ group saw their relatives, but for most (14, 82.4 per cent) this was only once every 6-12 months. While fewer young people in the ‘*away from home*’ group saw their relatives, when they did, it was generally weekly or monthly, and all were still in contact with their parents.

#### 4. 4 Experience with workers

The number of workers or District Officers a child has to get to know and deal with during their time in wardship is likely to have a significant effect on their experience in care. If children are to trust and confide in their worker, they need time to build up a relationship. This is jeopardised if they have a number of changes of worker; unfortunately, this was the case for the majority of wards. Only a quarter (25.6 per cent) had only one or two District Officers during their time in care, and 25 per cent had five or more. The average number of District Officers each ward had during their time in care was 3.9, with a range from one worker (12.8 per cent) to ten (6.4 per cent) (see Figure 4.13).<sup>30</sup> The number of District Officers children dealt with during their time in care was not simply a function of the length of time they were in care ( $r = .31$ ) or of the number of placements ( $r = .29$ ) but there was a trend in this direction. Not surprisingly, young people had significantly fewer District Officers if they had been in one long-term placement than young people who had not, after taking into account the length of time they were in care.<sup>31</sup>

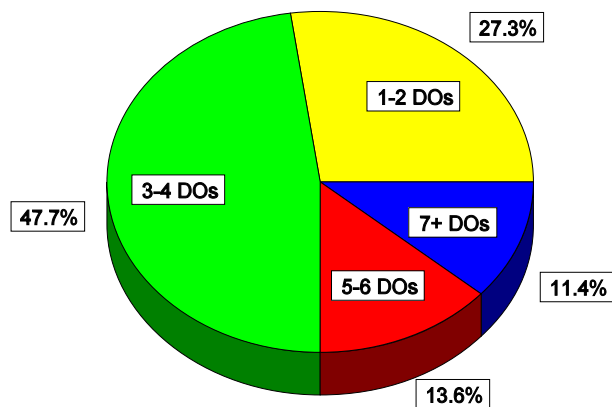
A few wards did not even know the names of their current District Officer. There were several reasons for this. In some cases, this was because the foster parents providing long-term stable care acted in an advocacy role for the wards, securing assistance and support for them, so taking over the role of the worker. In other cases, young people in residential care were left in the hands of the youth workers and rarely saw their District Officer. One young woman, admitted to wardship at 11, said, for example:

When I was in state wardship down there [in Renwick at Mittagong], I had a District Officer but I saw her once in three years, and I didn't hear from anyone after that ... and then I had another District Officer and I didn't have her any more. And then I come to Sydney... District Officers are pretty hard to come by for kids these days.

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<sup>30</sup> These figures are based on the number of District Officers children reported having dealt with. Assessing the number of District Officers from the B files was difficult because a number of workers may deal with the case in the absence of the supervising worker. Whether or not children's reports are accurate, what children report and experience is ultimately what is most important.

<sup>31</sup> Analysis of covariance using time in care (in months) as a covariate yielded adjusted means of 2.95 DOs for young people who had one long-term placement compared with 4.86 for those who had not:  $F(1, 43) = 9.09, p < .004$ .



**Figure 4. 13 Number of District Officers per young person**

Finally, in some cases, and often in the case of homeless state wards, the relationship between the young person and the Department had broken down to such an extent that the young people never saw their District Officer.

**4. 4. 1 Young people's perceptions of workers.** The majority of young people found most or all of their District Officers helpful. About a third (31.9 per cent) said only one had been helpful, and a small number (6.4 per cent) said none of them were helpful. Again, it is not surprising that the more District Officers young people had during their time in care, the less helpful they found them to be ( $r = -.32, p < .05$ ).

In commenting upon their District Officers, some young people singled out particular District Officers for praise:

They were really easy to talk to and they listened to me, I felt more comfortable with Mark, he was down to earth, you could relate to him as another human being.

or criticism:

I had a real bitch for a DO. She was just telling me at a case conference I had to learn to be responsible. And I was sitting there and thinking "Well, you're meant to be on my side." Then she turns around and she says "Oh, it doesn't matter, I'm leaving in a week's time so it doesn't matter".

Young people were also asked to rate their workers on four aspects: (a) the extent to which they believed the District Officer/worker cared about them; (b) was easy to talk to; (c) could be depended upon to help with their problems, and (d) listened to them. As with the placement ratings, not all District Officers were rated - only those who had made an impression one way or the other and so were remembered. A total of 118 District Officers were rated. Once again, there was considerable variability within young people's ratings for different District Officers with some rated favourably and others poorly. The frequencies of their ratings for the 118 District Officers on the

four aspects, shown in Table 4.4, indicate that most District Officers rated quite well, with between 57 per cent and 67 per cent being rated on the positive end of the scale (3 = a fair bit, 4 = a lot).<sup>32</sup> A significant number of young people, however, were clearly dissatisfied with the support they had received from their District Officers. Between 33 per cent and 42.7 per cent of District Officers were rated poorly, being perceived as not at all or not very caring, as difficult to talk to, not dependable and as not listening to the young people involved.

**Table 4.4 Frequency of young people's ratings of their District Officers**

|                     | A lot<br>% | A fair bit<br>% | Not much<br>% | Not at all<br>% |
|---------------------|------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| DO care about you?  | 20.7       | 46.6            | 12.1          | 20.7            |
| DO easy to talk to? | 20.3       | 40.7            | 12.7          | 26.3            |
| DO dependable?      | 17.1       | 40.2            | 14.5          | 28.2            |
| DO listen to you?   | 16.9       | 50.0            | 11.0          | 22.0            |

Again, young people's evaluations were affected by the stability of their time in care. Those who had not been in a long term placement were more likely to be negative about their District Officers than those who had experienced a long-term placement. For example, where District Officers were evaluated as not listening to their young clients at all, most (84.6 per cent) were rated by young people who had not been in long-term placements. The other aspects of evaluation were similar, with figures ranging from 75 per cent to 83 per cent.

Several issues emerged from these ratings, and especially from the positive and negative comments that were made by the young people. The first is the need for District Officers to listen to their young clients, and inform and involve them in the decision-making process. When asked what the Department should do differently, for example, one young woman said:

Listen more, understand more and care more, the worst thing is being kept in suspense about everything in wardship.

District Officers who did listen were appreciated while workers who were perceived to exercise control with little consultation were resented, especially because their intervention was then seen as an invasion of privacy. For example, several young people commented:

- . I knew they were trying to do their job and they had to come around but I didn't want them looking at my world, invading my privacy ... whenever they felt like coming around they would come around and tell you what to do.
- . I wish they would stop hassling me ... I know they have to tell me what to do until I'm 18 but don't tell me constantly I have to do this and I have to do that.

<sup>32</sup> Average ratings for District Officers ranged between "not much" and "a fair bit" and the four aspects were highly intercorrelated, with correlations ranging from .74 to .89.



In contrast, two young women spoke positively about their District Officers in the following terms:

- . June was different. If I wanted something, she'd try to get it. At a case conference, she'd talk to me like I was there whereas the others talked about me. She'd say "I think Jenny feels .. is that right?" And she always let me know when she was coming to visit, or when she was going to be away on holidays, and she visited me when I was sick.
- . If I want to move, I say to my District Officer, "What do you reckon about this idea?" and he points out what's in my best interests and I make the decision.

A closely related issue is the need for workers to pace their support to suit the needs of the children and young people. Several young people told stories of District Officers doing things either faster or slower than they would have wished. One young woman was forced to make choices quickly about where she would live when moving from a children's home to independent living. The District Officer chose the flat, paid the bond and drove her around to see it from the outside - in that order. Although she was unhappy that the flat was so close to her mother's place (she had a restraining order against her mother), she felt she could not say so because the bond had been paid. She was also unable 'to make ends meet' and is now in a woman's refuge. She then had to pay \$50.00 a week from her AUSTUDY payments to pay the rent she owed on the flat which did not work out. The pace of support for another young woman was too slow. When she became pregnant, she was no longer eligible to stay at the refuge where she had been living and wanted to move immediately. She was not prepared to wait as the District Officer advised and decided to pursue the private rental market on her own. Unfortunately, this did not work out and she was evicted when she lost her job and was unable to pay the rent.

The second issue which emerged from young people's comments is the need for District Officers to maintain regular contact and to follow through on requests but it seems they generally did not have time to do this. Children and young people need to see their workers on a regular basis in order to develop some trust in them and make their needs known to them. That trust cannot develop if children's perceptions of their contact are like the following child's:

At the beginning of my foster care, the only reason they came around was to tell me they'd changed DOs on me. That's what it seemed like anyway...

For other young people, their experience of their District Officer was more positive but still limited by restricted contact:

She's been helpful, but she's forgetful and has lots to do. She's a good friend but she could be in contact more often.

In contrast to the difficulties outlined by a number of young people, some District Officers clearly did an excellent job and their attention and effort were appreciated. Generally, their efforts involved considerable unpaid work. In one case, for example, the District Officer attended her client's debut after hours, took her camping on weekends, received phone calls in the evening and so on. This District Officer provided her client with a lot of support and consistency in care. She wrote several submissions, persisting after the initial submissions were unsuccessful, to enable her client to go to America as part of a cultural exchange program. She successfully submitted an application for \$4,000 worth of goods to set her client up in independent living in a flat, and she has maintained

regular contact in her own time to make sure the young woman has the support she needs. As a result of the efforts of this District Officer and the workers in the children's home, this young woman is now confident and happy, and established in independent living. She has completed her HSC and is going on to TAFE studies.

### **Young people's comments about their District Officers**

#### ***Listen to you?***

They didn't normally talk to me, only [to] my carers.

One was OK but others... they didn't listen... that was my impression .. like they were asleep. They ask you two questions, you answer them, and then they say "Bye".

At first they tried to control me by telling me what to do and I rebelled against that, then they tried listening and talking to me and no it never worked. I never talked to them about my views so I gave them no grounds to work on. I resent them because of what they have done - it changes your whole life.

... not class them as real downers but they try to rule my life without listening to me.

The only time we ever really had a good talk was about 5 months ago when we had all gone down to her house to sort out some situation and what I told her compared to what she thought I told her was different. To me, she twisted it, like this big psychology, which is not true. I was very surprised she read more into it than I was telling her.

#### ***Care about you?***

I used to say "No", that she was walking through the gate, looking at her diary at who I was and what my situation was so she could quickly figure it out but, no, I guess not .. she didn't care for me as a person -just that I'm another child in need.

One of them when she dropped me off at a foster home, she virtually told me I was really lucky to get into a foster home and that I should put up with it, and behave myself.

#### ***Depend on them to help with your problems?***

I guess she listened but I don't think she's a strong person in the sense of getting something done but then again she knew I was a confused teenager who wanted to do things. If I could have contacted her, she was there but I couldn't ring from home.

Really good relationship with District Officer - she is always there through bad times and as a friend ... she has given me a lot of support.

#### **4.5 Young people's suggestions for better practice**

Two-thirds (67 per cent) said they would have liked the Department to have "done things differently" while they were in care. Their most common suggestion (provided by 50 per cent of respondents) was that their worker, in most cases the District Officer, maintain regular contact with children in care and monitor and respond to their needs. Several young women expressed a common view in the following way:

- . More contact to see how the placement is working out. Not leave me in an unhappy placement. I told them twice.

- . Checked things more often with me. For the first year or so, she [the DO] came out every few months and did the usual thing, all the formalities etc. ... but it never seemed to go anywhere. I mean I would say things to her like "I don't know if I want to stay with Sarah" and she'd just say "Yeah, I can understand that it's hard" but she'd never take it anywhere. That was it and I wouldn't see her for another few months. If it was me, I'd hope I'd go back to that person and say "How are you going?" Three months later, she'd say "Last time you mentioned it was hard about this. How is it now?" but it could be too late by then.

Similarly, other young people complained about a lack of information about what they were entitled to and a general lack of communication. Some complained that they had received no indication that their requests, especially in relation to possible adoption by foster families, had been heard or attended to. They expressed frustration and anger about the lack of information and action by the Department and could not understand why nothing had been done. One young man, for example, who had lived with the same foster family since he was one, and whose parents had both died said when asked what the Department could have done differently:

Listen more. When I was 14 years I wanted to be adopted by my foster parents and asked several times and never got a reply.

Several other young people indicated they would have liked a clearer explanation of the Department's role. One young woman responded to the question asking her what the Department could have done differently in the following way:

Told me what they can do for me. I have no idea what the Department does, what services they provide.

In addition to regular contact and better communication, young people also suggested that District Officers and other workers make and keep appointments with them. Several young people complained about the District Officer not keeping appointments or not making appointments but intruding on their privacy without notice. For example, several said:

- . Come around when they say they will. They make appointments and then they don't turn up.
- . ... you know he asks you to come up for meetings and you get up here and he is not here ... he is at lunch ... he always gives you the run around.
- . They put too many demands on me ... I was in work experience and the District Officer came over without phoning and asked to see me for 10 minutes and she was with me for an hour. [When I leave care], I won't have DOCS on my back.

A second concern and suggestion was the need for stability and quality of care. Six young people said they would have liked the Department to have found them "good foster parents" and kept them with one family, rather than "shifting me from place to place all the time". For example, one young woman who had experienced multiple placements, including homelessness, said, "See if I could have been adopted out. I would have probably stayed there". Several other young people were quite critical of the Department in relation to adoptions that did not

progress and several others were confused.<sup>33</sup> For example:

- . I wanted to be adopted but DOCS didn't follow it up for us. They said they would get back to us but they never did. It seemed as if it would have been too much work.
- . FACS never followed up on it - my foster father wanted me to be adopted before he died.
- . I wanted it to happen but it never did. *Do you know why?* No, not really.

Not surprisingly, young people who said that the Department could have done things differently had significantly more placements than those who were satisfied. Those who thought the Department could have done better or differently had an average of 8.4 placements compared with 4.9 placements for those who were relatively satisfied with what the Department had done.<sup>34</sup> No other factors such as age at admission to wardship, the length of time in care nor number of District Officers predicted young peoples' responses to this question about better practice.

Another common issue was the need for sensitivity to the young person's wishes about family contact. Some young people wanted more contact with their family while others wanted less or none at all, at least with some family members. One young woman, in relation to the Department's involvement of her mother, said:

Keep my mother out of it! She's already destroyed my life before and now she's trying to do it again.

The common theme then throughout these responses was the desire for the Department to listen and be sensitive to the needs of their young clients. In the words of one young person:

Listen to me. Throw away the book and ask me how I want to live and be treated, what my problems and wishes are.

As we have already seen, however, that practice can only work if young people have regular contact with their workers and build up some trust and a relationship with them over some time. As one young woman said:

At first they tried to control me by telling me what to do and I rebelled against that, then they tried listening and talking to me and no, it never worked. I never talked to them about my views so I gave them no grounds to work on.

The need to listen to what they had to say as children and as older adolescents was then a major issue, and one clearly expressed by a number of young people.

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<sup>33</sup> While Departmental inaction was apparently the reason for adoption not occurring in three cases, other reasons were a change in circumstances (eg., foster parents separated, became ill or died), foster parent reluctance because of the financial implications (eg., losing the fostering allowance) and birth parents refusing consent.

<sup>34</sup>  $F(1,43) = 3.73, p < .05$ .

### Young people's comments about being listened to

In the beginning the Department should have listened to me more, they should listen to what kids have to say. They didn't listen to me.

Until I got Tricia (current District Officer) I was angry and confused because no-one listened to me or told me what was happening.

We needed someone to talk with, to work things out but they just take you away. And then they expect me to turn to them again. So in that respect I don't think they're really listening to what people are saying about what's really needed.

Interestingly, young people's responses to the question, "What should the Department have done differently?" also predicted several aspects of their ratings of their District Officers. Young people who rated their District Officers as easy to talk to, as someone who listened, and as someone who could be depended upon to help with problems were less likely to say that the Department should have done things differently.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4.6 District Officers' views about better practice for children in care

An almost universal complaint among the District Officers who were interviewed was the lack of time and resources that restricted their ability to do their job as they thought it should be done. The main areas where a lack of resources was seen to be especially problematic were the scarcity of suitable placements for adolescents and the difficulty of obtaining financial assistance, both because of a shortage of available funds and because of the associated 'red tape'. For example:

- . The main concern is that there are really no places for kids like this - adolescents who are difficult. Little children can go into foster care but older ones like Ben aren't really fosterable. I'm really concerned what's going to happen as all these places close down. I think we're going to have more kids out on the street and they're going to be state wards. We have 14 and 15 year-old state wards in this office and we can't place them anywhere and we're trying to maintain them by giving them a few \$\$ a day to survive on. These kids do the rounds of refuges and they won't take them anymore because their behaviour is so bad. Personally I will do everything in my power not to have a kid made a ward. With adolescents, it really doesn't achieve much, except to make sure they have some clothing when there's some money around and that's always been a problem.
- . One of the main problems has been when they've needed more financial assistance and it gets knocked back eg., they need a pair of shoes and the request is knocked back. To get extra money for wards or a subsidy, the DO has to write a proposal, then it goes to the office manager, then to the regional manager for approval. The Department has to be realistic about allowances for foster parents and contingency money eg., for school uniforms and school shoes. One pair of shoes every two years is not realistic for

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<sup>35</sup> Regression analyses predicting young people's ratings of their District Officers using a series of questions found that the only significant predictor of their ratings was their response to the question asking whether the Department should have done things differently while they were in care. The beta coefficient for being "easy to talk to" was  $-.32$ ,  $t = 2.36$ ,  $p < .02$ . The respective figures for "depend upon them" were  $.29$ ,  $t = 2.12$ ,  $p < .04$ , and for "listen to you",  $-.28$ ,  $t = 2.06$ ,  $p < .04$ .

growing feet and they wear them out.

Other District Officers spoke of the need to 'know the system' and 'how to bend the rules a bit', knowledge that tends to come with experience. For example:

- . I usually find a way to do things if I think the child needs it. I've been in the Department since I was 16 and there's no system there isn't a way around.
- . Another child I'm dealing with at the moment, I've just put in a claim for tutoring that will cost \$110 per week. If you put a good case, you can get things. When I was younger and less experienced, I probably would have taken 'no' for an answer; now I don't.

A number of District Officers echoed the young people's comments about the importance of continuity and the difficulty of establishing relationships with children and young people when they are under constant pressure from a high case load of child protection work. For some, the problems lay, not in policy, but in competing and excessive demands on time and resources, whereas others were critical of policies which discouraged a more personal approach.

- . I suppose the worst thing with substitute care is that it always sits in the background. Substitute care usually takes a back seat, and when things are going well, they take a further back seat because we've got so much child protection stuff on that you just wait till that quietens down and you can get back to substitute care .. And that rarely happens, so it just waits.
- . There's no time to put things we know we should do into practice. But the policy is OK. The problem is time and resources, and the fact that the priority is not with the wards but with little children being notified for child protection. The case load prevents us having much contact with wards and breaks down the relationship; relationship building contact is not possible. It's all crisis management.
- . Without being too critical of the Department, we're not encouraged to have conversations with wards to any great depth, but that's important to build a relationship.
- . Too many rules - the bureaucracy is uncaring. I didn't give Sam the letter on discharge because it's too impersonal. The procedures manual says we can't buy birthday or Christmas presents and we don't have the time to do all we'd like to do.

A number of District Officers (n = 9, 21.4 per cent) specifically mentioned specialist substitute care teams and policies to encourage staff continuity as possible solutions to some of the problems facing the management of substitute care. For example:

- . We need more specialist staff because wards have to fit in around emergency cases (category 1 and 2 CAR) and we need good regular training. DOCS is an easy mark to throw shit at. The common belief is that charities do a good job and the Department does a bad job.
- . Probably able to do a better job in the country that way because the turn-over of DOs is not so high. Without some consistency eg one placement, one DO and the extra attention and bonding, Jenny could have turned out totally differently.

As several District Officers pointed out, a good relationship between children in care and their workers is essential

if abuse in care is to be detected and prevented. Children need to be able to trust someone outside their placement if they are to be able to disclose abuse.

- . Abuse in foster care and so on is not uncommon - we've had two or three cases here in the last couple of years - and we can only weed it out by more support, and more regular contact visits in the short-term to build up trust and support.

## 5 LEAVING CARE

### 5.1 Age at discharge from wardship

Young people were included in the study if they were aged between 16 and 18 and were to be discharged from wardship in the 12 month period from 1 September 1992 to 31 August 1993. A total of 105 young people were initially included in this overall group but four were excluded on the basis of their intellectual disability and ten were not finally discharged within the specified period. Four of the ten who were not discharged before the end of the 12 month period were contacted and the first pre-discharge interview was conducted<sup>1</sup>; the other six could not be contacted. The final group and indeed the population of young people leaving wardship in the set period therefore comprised 91 young people.

Table 5.1 shows the number and percentage of young people who were discharged at 16, 17 and 18 for both the interview and non-interview groups. Overall, and in both groups, about three out of four young people were discharged at 18, generally on or around their 18th birthday. In several cases, the official discharge letter was not sent until some time later, or not at all, if the young person could not be found. A small number were discharged earlier - at 16 (n = 16, 17.6 per cent) and at 17 (n = 7, 7.7 per cent) - for various reasons. All who were discharged at 17 were in placements that either were stable or were expected to be stable and they requested that they be discharged - in one case, the Department's consent was required to allow a minor to marry. In the interview sample, for example, nearly all the young people who were discharged before they were 18 were living at home with their parents (n = 7) or were in what was thought to be stable foster care (n = 2); they had asked to be discharged before they were 18 or were due to be discharged at 16 unless an application for an extension was made. In only four of these cases, however, were they still living at home three months after they were discharged from wardship. Several moved out within a week or two of discharge.

Presumed stability or maturity and requests for discharge were not prerequisites for discharge in all cases, however. One young woman was discharged while living in a short-term woman's refuge; and another young woman, with a history of multiple placements including long periods of homelessness, was discharged at 17 into independent living without secure accommodation. At this time her District Officer described her as *immature, lacking security and bonding, and as having little education, low self esteem, and no employment*. Within months of leaving wardship, she had been evicted from a housing commission flat due to the behaviour of others there and was living temporarily in her parents' very sparsely furnished garage.

Similarly, in the non-interview group, young people were discharged at 16 and at 17 when they were in unstable circumstances. Five who were discharged at 16 were due to be discharged at 16 but another three whose orders were due to expire at 16 continued in wardship after an application for an extension was made with their consent. In addition, as already outlined, the decision to discharge ten young people who were about to be discharged was reversed, so removing them from the study.

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<sup>1</sup> As indicated earlier, no further interviews were conducted with these young people because issues concerned with their discharge from wardship are obviously not relevant until they have been discharged.



**Table 5.1 Age at discharge by group**

| <i>Age (years)</i>                | Interview |              | Non-Interview |              | Total     |              |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|
|                                   | n         | %            | n             | %            | n         | %            |
| 16                                | 6         | 12.8         | 10            | 22.7         | 16        | 17.6         |
| 17                                | 5         | 10.6         | 2             | 4.5          | 7         | 7.7          |
| 18                                | 36        | 76.6         | 32            | 72.7         | 68        | 74.7         |
| <b>Total</b>                      | <b>47</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>44</b>     | <b>100.0</b> | <b>91</b> | <b>100.0</b> |
| <b>*Not discharged as planned</b> | 4         |              | 6             |              | 10        |              |
| <b>Time in wardship (years)</b>   | 9.5 (5.2) |              | 8.5 (5.5)     |              | 9.0 (5.3) |              |

The reason for the reversal of the decision to discharge four young people in the interview sample was in all four cases a change in the young person's circumstances. In two cases, the change involved a change in placement or placement breakdown. In the other two cases, the Department was about to discharge two 16 year-olds because they considered they could do little for them owing to their instability or lack of contact. One had moved interstate to live with a relative and, when this broke down, moved several times to live with older friends or to live independently in a caravan. She lost contact with the Department and saw no point in remaining a ward. She decided to remain in wardship when she was informed as part of her involvement in this study that she could receive assistance with her school fees, glasses and clothing; she then contacted the Department and has since received support. The other 16 year-old had been very unsettled, with 52 placements indicated in his file during wardship and another 12 beforehand. Most of these were short stays in various refuges, a number of which he was later banned from as a result of his violent and aggressive behaviour. The Department was considering discharging him because they could not see what they could offer him but when he settled down and returned to live with his mother, the decision to discharge him was reversed.

For the non-interview group, the reasons for the decision *not* to discharge young people who were about to be discharged were similar in several cases but there was a greater incidence of earlier discharge in this group both as a result of orders expiring at 16 and not extended (n = 5) and of early discharge being considered or completed before the orders expired at the age of 18 (n = 8). In nine cases in which young people in the non-interview group were discharged at 16, six were very unsettled and had a variety of problems at the time they were discharged. These young people included one young woman who was depressed and bulimic and had attempted to commit suicide, an Aboriginal young woman who had been acting out sexually and gave birth at 14, and a young man with drug dependency problems.

In nine cases in the non-interview group and in four in the interview group, the B-files include references to the Department being unable to help or 'to do anything further'. This is in line with the higher incidence of behaviour problems in the non-interview group but also indicates the frustration of workers or even their unwillingness to persist in difficult cases. In some cases, the District Officers' recommendations for discharge

seemingly recognised the limitations of wardship in helping young people. In one case, for example, the District Officer recommended discharge at 16 with ongoing support in the 'adolescent program' and in another, the District Officer reported that there was 'little to be gained by wardship as long as financial assistance was maintained'. Unfortunately, this was not the case for this young man or for another in similar circumstances. After both young men were discharged, they failed to gain any further assistance from the Department. The first young man was living with his birth mother when he was discharged but this broke down and he moved from staying with a friend's family to a refuge, back to his foster parents, and then again to a refuge. The other young man, whose guardianship was transferred from another state was discharged early when he went to live with his mother but he was later 'kicked out of home' [his words] and directed to St Vincent de Paul when he returned to the Department, asking for assistance to pay his fare so that he could return to his former foster parents.

In several other cases, District Officers recommended early discharge despite the fact that the young people involved stated that they felt vulnerable and did not wish to be discharged at that stage. In one case, the District Officer wrote a report recommending the discharge from wardship of a young woman, then aged 16, and not due for discharge until she was 18. The reasons for this recommendation were that 'this District Officer and the Department have little to offer Sally ...'<sup>2</sup> The recommendation was made despite the fact that both the young woman and her (relative) foster carer stated that they wanted 'the Department to remain involved', and despite the knowledge that her mother apparently told 'Sally' that 'even the Department doesn't want you'. The recommendation was supported by the Assistant Manager but not approved at the case conference. 'Sally' refused contact with this District Officer but remained in wardship until she turned 18. In another case, a young man, due to be discharged at 16, was discharged one month after the case conference recommended a 12 month extension with provision for a further 12 months. The case conference notes read:

Jason was invited into the meeting and asked whether he wished the wardship to be extended. After much discussion re the financial assistance and that NGO required wardship for placement, Jason and the meeting agreed that an extension [sic] of the wardship order for one year be applied for and that this would be reviewed at the end of this period. The reason for this decision was to support Jason to become independent ...

Ten days later, a memo approved Jason's discharge from wardship 'as agreed at the case conference'.

In summary, there were a number of young people who were discharged at 16, or earlier than their expected discharge date, whose circumstances and problems at the time they were discharged clearly left them very vulnerable and without adequate support. The majority of young people, however, were discharged at 18 according to the orders under which they were committed to the care of the Director-General of the Department, and others were discharged earlier at their own request. The following sections provide some detail as to the young people's circumstances just before they were discharged from wardship. They outline where they were living, what they were doing, and what support networks they had.

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<sup>2</sup> This report also states that 'She has been reported missing to the police ... and on her return home, has refused to divulge where she has been ... She has also continually refused to accept offers to counsellors and vocational guidance.'

## 5.2 Accommodation

Figure 5.1 shows where young people in both the interview and non-interview groups were living just before they were discharged from care. Foster care was the most common arrangement (interview, 22, 46.8 per cent; non-interview, 16, 36.4 per cent), and included relative and self-selected foster care. In self-selected foster care, young people themselves arranged to live with former foster or group home parents. More young people in the interview group (9, 19.1 per cent) had returned to live with their parents (mothers, n = 5; fathers, n = 4) than in the non-interview group (4, 9.1 per cent), but more young people in the non-interview group were living independently and in other independent and semi-independent accommodation than in the interview group. The whereabouts of five young people in the non-interview group (11.4 per cent) was unknown. This followed the break-down of the foster relationship for two young people but the others had a fairly long period of instability before this. Overall, then, the majority (72.3 per cent) of young people in the interview group, but just under half of the non-interview group, were living in familial settings with foster parents, natural parents or with relatives or friends' families just before they were discharged from care. The degree to which they were integrated into the familial setting varied, however, with some young people very much at home in a stable long-term foster placement and others living like boarders and maintaining a fairly separate co-existence in, for example, a garage at the family home. Once again, a higher proportion of young people in the interview group (31.9 per cent) compared with the non-interview group (22.7 per cent) were in long-term stable foster care just before discharge from wardship. A somewhat higher proportion of young people who entered wardship *before* adolescence were also in foster care just before discharge (37.5 per cent) compared with those who entered as adolescents (23.1 per cent).

At the time of the first interview, more than one in three of the young people in the interview group (38.3 per cent) had been in the same place for less than six months. When asked where they expected to live following discharge from wardship, 24 (51.0 per cent) said they intended to stay in the same place. This included all the young people in independent living, but less than half those in foster care (7, 41.2 per cent) or living with parents or other family members (6, 42.9 per cent). Most who expected to be elsewhere after discharge intended to move into independent living or share accommodation from foster care or the family home (16, 69.6 per cent) or into college accommodation (n = 2). Two, however, who had been restored home hoped to move back to their foster families. In total, then, only just over a third (17, 36.2 per cent) of young people expected to be living in a familial setting after discharge, indicating a high level of vulnerability and instability for a significant number of young people at the time of discharge. It also indicates that state wards begin independent living earlier than the general population. In 1991, for example, the majority of young people aged between 15 to 19 in the general population were living with their parents (80.8 per cent males and 76.8 per cent females); even at age 20 to 24, the figure was 40 per cent (ABS No. 2821.0, 1991). Furthermore, wards generally do not have the supports and the option to return home that young people leaving stable homes have.

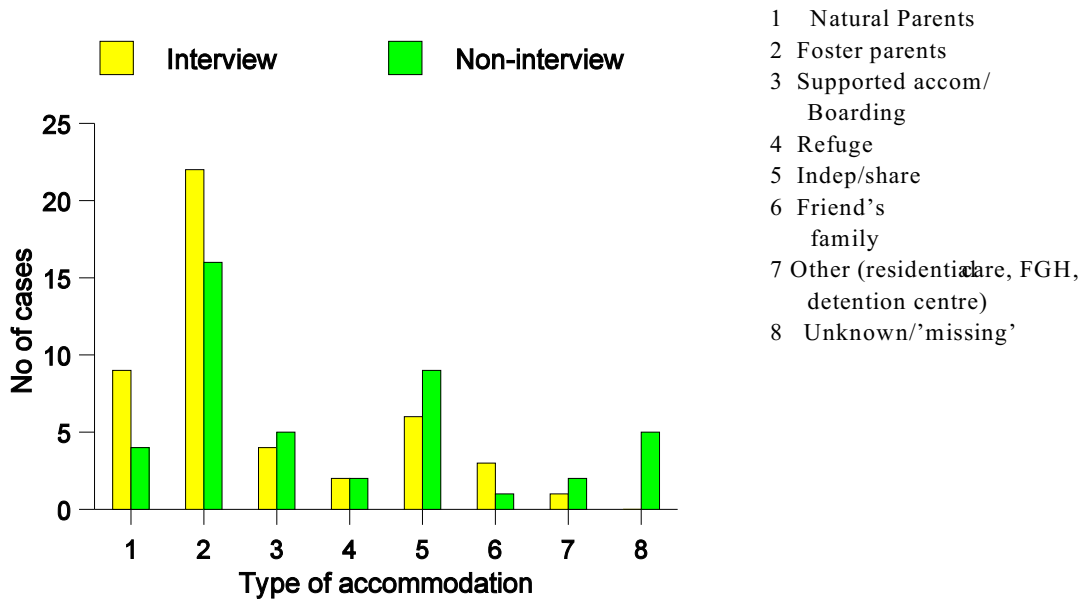


Figure 5.1 Accommodation before discharge from wardship

### 5.3 Education and employment

Figure 5.2 shows that the majority of young people in the interview group were at school or in further education (55.3 per cent) or employed full-time (8.5 per cent) just before they were discharged from wardship. Thirty-six per cent were unemployed although several had occasional casual work as waiters or shop assistants. Since on average about 20 per cent of their age group are unemployed, wards are clearly over-represented among the unemployed (Shaver & Paxman, 1992: 4; Boss, Edwards & Pitman, 1995). There were no significant gender differences. Unfortunately, there was insufficient information in the Departmental files to allow a comparison between the interview and non-interview groups.

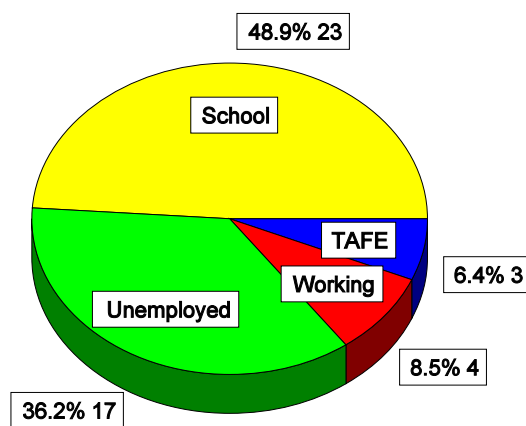


Figure 5.2 Main activity of wards (interview group only) before discharge

Just before leaving wardship, most young people in the interview group were at Year 10 level or above (78.7 per cent) compared with only 50 per cent of the non-interview group. The lower retention rate to Year 10 in the non-interview group is consistent with the greater incidence of behaviour problems and school suspensions, and with the greater number of placements per young person in this group. Although the Departmental files did not provide sufficient data in all cases to ascertain the number of schools young people in this group attended, the greater number of placements and the difficulties some young people had in finding a school that would accept them suggests that they may have been to more schools on average, taking into account their shorter school life. Once again, this is consistent with the picture of the non-interview group being in general a more vulnerable and more unsettled group of young people.

In the interview group, all the young people who were working at that stage or who were still studying either at school or at TAFE had completed or were doing Year 10 or above. Nearly three-quarters (72.7 per cent) of the 26 young people still at school or at TAFE were interested in gaining further education; about a third wanted to complete Year 12 and another 40 per cent hoped to go on to some form of tertiary education at university, TAFE or in the police or armed services.

Nearly a quarter of the young people in the interview group (n = 11, 23.4 per cent), however, left school before they completed Year 10; for some, it was as early as Year 7 or 8. One was attending Year 10 at TAFE but the other ten were neither working nor studying at that stage, although three said they were interested in going back to school or doing further study at TAFE. Their reasons for leaving school were mixed but only one, a young woman who entered wardship at 14 as a result of sexual abuse, was doing well at school at the time she left school. Seven of the 11 entered wardship as adolescents, and all except two had more than the average number of placements during their time in care; four had over 20 placements each.<sup>3</sup> Comments from these young people give some idea of the difficulties they were having at school and why they left:

- . Only done two weeks in Year 9 at school ... I completed a Year 9 certificate course at Sydney Tech ... which was better because they had more time for you, explained what you had to do better, etc.
- . Some days I just didn't go, I'd go one day and not the next ... then they [school] asked me to leave.
- . They [DOCS] didn't know why I wouldn't go to school anymore. Of course they wouldn't know why because I wouldn't tell them, but they'd come around and we'd go around in circles ... I wasn't interested in the subjects. Listen, you know, give children a chance to say what they are thinking, too much authority at school.
- . I've been to heaps of schools ... I've been three years trying to get my Year 10 because I've moved around so much.
- . I'm picking up now, I changed in Year 8 to three different schools.

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<sup>3</sup> At the first interview, six were living with foster parents or parents and five were in independent accommodation or a refuge.

**Table 5.2 Last year of school completed prior to leaving wardship**

| <i>Year completed</i> | Males     |            | Females   |            | Total     |            |
|-----------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
|                       | n         | %          | n         | %          | n         | %          |
| Below Year 10         | 5         | 27.7       | 6         | 20.7       | 11        | 23.4       |
| Year 10               | 6         | 33.3       | 9         | 31.0       | 15        | 31.9       |
| Year 11               | 6         | 33.3       | 12        | 41.4       | 18        | 38.3       |
| Year 12 & HSC         | 1         | 5.5        | 2         | 6.9        | 3         | 6.4        |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>18</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>29</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>47</b> | <b>100</b> |

Not surprisingly, students and non-students tended to evaluate their schooling somewhat differently<sup>4</sup>. Most school-students said they 'got on well', 'fairly well' or 'OK' with their teachers (95.8 per cent) and in their grades (83.3 per cent) whereas the figures for non-students were 68.1 per cent and 59.1 per cent, respectively. There was little difference, however, in their reports of how they 'got on with their classmates' (83.3 per cent compared with 81.8 per cent).

At the third interview, young people were asked further questions about their schooling, and with the perspective of some greater distance, whether their school experience had helped them in any way during their time in wardship. For this discussion and the comparison of their experience with that of young people in the comparison groups, see Section 6.3.

***Work experience, aspirations and expectations.*** Five young people were employed full-time at the time of the first interview, and were generally fairly happy with the work they were doing. Several others had casual employment or had been working but were either retrenched or left because they did not like the work, wished to return to school or were pregnant. Those who were unemployed were not optimistic about their chances of getting a job; only one young woman believed that she had a 'really good chance' of getting a job as a cashier or in child care. Others were looking for work as labourers, receptionists, packers, waiters and in child-care. In contrast, young people still at school or at TAFE were more optimistic and had more definite ideas about what work they wished to do. Their aspirations were very varied and included various trades (mechanic, painting, carpentry), nursing, child care, agricultural science, horse training, fashion design and photography.

***Traineeships.*** Nine young people had participated in traineeships in various areas such as the media, retail sales, child-care, metal work, carpentry and computer/secretarial work. Most said they would consider doing a traineeship if it was in an area they were interested in, but there was some cynicism about their value. One young man, for example, said he might be interested in doing a traineeship but that depended on the type of course.

Most of them don't qualify you for the jobs anyway. It gives you an outlook on it, it

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<sup>4</sup> These differences were not, however, statistically different at  $p < .05$ .

doesn't say you are qualified for this job. It says you know a little bit about this job ... I think if I was going to do something I'd do a course that gave me qualifications, not just an outlook on it. They're [traineeships] a bit of a waste of time.

#### 5.4 Income and income support

Just before they were discharged from wardship, most state wards (68.1 per cent) were receiving Commonwealth income support related to education (AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY: 48.9 per cent) or to unemployment (*Job Search Allowance (JSA)* or *Newstart Allowance*: 19.1 per cent) (see Tables 5.3 and 5.4). Several were on other forms of Commonwealth income support such as *Sole Parents' Pension* (n = 2), *Sickness Allowance* (n = 1) and *Young Homeless Allowance* (n = 2). Two received a subsidy from the NSW Department of Community Services as a 'top-up' to the Commonwealth payment, or in the case of one young woman, as the equivalent of a Commonwealth benefit because she was not an Australian citizen and therefore not eligible for Commonwealth benefits. Three were receiving no regular form of income support at the time of the interview because they were in the waiting period for unemployment benefits after leaving school or work.

Only five young people were earning a full-time wage (6 per cent of females, 16 per cent of males). Of these, three were engaged in positions created by or subsidised by special schemes such as *Skillshare* or *Jobstart*.<sup>5</sup> All were still working in these positions three months after they were discharged from care but by the time of the third interview (12 months after discharge), one had been retrenched, the hours for another had been reduced so that she found it difficult to manage financially, and the other had stopped working because of a work-related back injury.

Most of the young people who were on AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY were in foster care or other family-based accommodation with their parents, relatives or with a friend's family (82.6 per cent) but AUSTUDY/ABSTUDY was the most common form of support for wards in non-family based accommodation also. Young people in non-family based accommodation were, however, more likely than those in family-based accommodation to derive their income support from other types of benefit from the Department of Social Security, including unemployment benefits and *Special Benefit*.

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<sup>5</sup> They were not all aware of this at the time. One young woman was later upset that her employer did not tell her that he was receiving Commonwealth support for her position because she was 'a ward of the state'.

**Table 5.3 Source of income in the last months of wardship  
by type of accommodation**

| Income source             | Accommodation type |              |                  |              |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------|
|                           | Family based       |              | Non-family based |              |
|                           | n                  | %            | n                | %            |
| Full-time wage            | 4                  | 11.7         | 1                | 7.7          |
| AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY        | 19                 | 55.8         | 4                | 30.7         |
| Jobsearch Allowance (JSA) | 5                  | 14.7         | 4                | 30.7         |
| Other benefits *          | 3                  | 8.8          | 4                | 30.7         |
| None                      | 3                  | 8.8          | 0                | 0.0          |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>34</b>          | <b>100.0</b> | <b>13</b>        | <b>100.0</b> |

\* Other Commonwealth or NSW Department of Community Service benefits.

At the time of the first interview (late 1992), sixteen was a significant age in terms of the way income support was paid for wards at the time. Until the age of 15, the minimum school leaving age, young people in wardship did not generally receive independent financial support but received support via their carers. Foster parents receive an allowance for foster children in their care, adjusted according to age and disability. At 15, however, wards became eligible for AUSTUDY if they were still at school or at TAFE; alternatively, they were eligible for *JSA*, *Sickness Allowance* or *Special Benefit* if they were not working or studying and met the eligibility criteria. The age of 15 was significant for two reasons. First, there is a shift in responsibility for payment from the state welfare department to the Commonwealth. Second, AUSTUDY and *JSA* are paid directly to the young person whereas the foster parents allowance is paid to the carers or foster parents. At both ends - the actual payment and receipt of the money - there were difficulties for some of the wards in this study.

The unclear boundary between State and Commonwealth responsibility for income support for state wards caused problems for a number of wards.<sup>6</sup> The difficulty was outlined by one young person :

DSS said it was a disadvantage [being a state ward] because I could get the money from the government [DOCS] if I needed it so they weren't going to pay me my DSS money. They (DSS) reckon state wards can get money from the government [DOCS] instead. That lasted a couple of weeks and then I wrote letters to Senator Richardson ... Wyatt workers helped me ... and in the end they gave state wards the money as long as they weren't getting money from FACS.

Another said:

FACS and Social Security had a big fight when I turned 16 over who was going to pay me.

<sup>6</sup> This is an area of contention between the Commonwealth and State governments which recent policy amendments by the Commonwealth are expected to address (Shaver & Paxman, 1995). An outline of the 1995 *Commonwealth and State/Territory Government Case Management Protocol for Young People* is presented in Appendix 7.



In at least one case, however, it appears that Department of Community Services staff were uninformed about the benefits available to wards in their care because one young woman commented that:

They [Department of Community Services] just found about a month before I turned 16 that you can get AUSTUDY when you're 15 and in care.

Becoming eligible for receipt of income support in their own right also caused problems between some young people and their foster carers. When the young person received AUSTUDY or JSA, their foster parent 'lost' their foster allowance or, in the case of relatives, the *Family Payment*. As one young woman in relative foster care said, 'It was good for me but not so good for my foster mum because she lost her child endowment money'. While the transition was apparently smooth and trouble free in some cases with the young person willingly paying board or allowing their parent or foster parent to manage their allowance, in others there was resentment and frustration. Notes in B-files indicated that several foster parents were very unhappy that the money was paid directly to the young person whom they believed did not have the experience to manage it and resented having to pay board. In some cases, it seems the change in the payment arrangement brought into focus the issue of whether foster carers were looking after them 'for love or money'. As one young person said, 'It makes it seem like they were only looking after you because they got paid'. Several also admitted that they had not known how to manage the money responsibly and had, in their words, 'gone wild' at first. Allowing foster parents to manage the money did not, however, avoid problems. In one case, one young person received \$30 per week in pocket money and his foster mother 'got most of it' - the remaining \$150. When he received notice from the Australian Taxation Office detailing the tax owed on the money he received from AUSTUDY, he was very unhappy that he 'was being taxed on all this money but only got \$30 a week'. He recognised the need to pay board and was aware of his own lack of experience in handling money but believed that his foster parents could have shown him how to manage it or 'put some of it in the bank and saved it for me so when I needed a car or a fridge or furniture, I could have bought something.'

### 5.5 Money management

Overall, nearly half the young people (46.8 per cent) said they found it difficult to 'make ends meet'; 21 per cent ran out of money on a regular basis, 40 per cent said they ran out sometimes, and ten per cent said they could not 'make ends meet'. If they were unemployed, they were more likely to report difficulty than if they were working or on AUSTUDY. Half who were working or studying indicated that they never 'ran out' of money, compared with only 16.7 per cent of those who were unemployed.<sup>7</sup> This was despite the fact that the average reported fortnightly income of those on *Job Search Allowance* (\$300) was greater than the average for AUSTUDY (\$212.90).

Money alone, however, is not the only, or perhaps even the most important, determinant of whether they could make ends meet. As we saw earlier, young people who were on AUSTUDY were more likely to live with foster families and, as we will see later, they were also more likely to have someone to call upon for support when they needed financial help. Several young people on AUSTUDY who lived with their natural parents or foster parents, for example, received only \$10 to \$40 per fortnight as pocket money even after they were 16; half considered themselves better off than others their age and did not usually run out of money, but half thought they were worse off and could not manage on the money they received.

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<sup>7</sup>  $\chi^2 = 5.75, 2 \text{ df}, p < .05$ .

**How would you compare yourself financially with your friends?  
Are you better off, worse off or about the same?**

***Better off***

- Because I'm working full-time and they're [friends] mostly still at school.
- Some haven't got jobs and they've got kids and they're very young.
- Most of them don't get AUSTUDY and most of their parents aren't too well off.

***Same***

- I don't have much of a social life so I can save because I don't drink or smoke.
- We're all on benefits - unemployment.
- My friends are very different. They range from people who are scraping it to get their school fees together to people who are quite well off. I'm about in the middle.

***Worse off***

- Their parents both work. My foster mum's on a pension.
- I'm worse off than them because they're healthy, have a family and have a job .

Compared with their friends and other young people they knew, only eight young people (17.0 per cent) said they were 'better off' than others; all were living in family-based accommodation and seven of the eight were working or studying. Just over half (n = 25, 53.2 per cent) said they were in similar circumstances to their friends or that it depended which friends they compared themselves with because some were better off, some were similar, and others were worse off. About a quarter (n = 13, 27.7 per cent) said they were 'worse off' and their main reason was that their friends lived at home with both parents who were working and provided them with the financial assistance they needed. They were living in a variety of situations, either with relatives (n = 4), parents (n = 3), foster parents (n = 2), or in supported (n = 2) or independent accommodation (n = 2).

The circumstances of three young women living independently attest to the difficulties young people have in coping with limited financial support and budgeting.

If you live in a youth hostel like here, you only pay \$40 a fortnight ... so they're easy off, and your friends that live at home, they're pretty well off, but the people that live in an independent sort of situation, it is a lot harder because you've got other bills to pay.

One young woman who was pregnant and living independently remarked when asked whether she could usually make ends meet:

Not always, no, the other day from Monday all the way to Wednesday we had no money for cigarettes, we didn't have any food for Tuesday, we finished our meat on Monday, and we were just hanging out for Wednesday to come ... you get hard up at the end of the week. *What do you do when you run out?* You go and hock something or bludge money off someone. If you hock something, you go and buy back your stuff and if you borrow from a friend when you get money again you pay it back. *Would you ask DOCS?* It would be like pulling water out of a dry sponge. *What if you got really stuck*

*for a larger sum?* I think I would be in deep shit.

Another young woman living independently and receiving AUSTUDY gave an account of her financial situation:

When I moved down [from seven years in the Children's Home, with a good District Officer] they [another DOCS office] put me into a flat and it was horrible. I'd be having \$150 rent out of my AUSTUDY and paying bills and food a fortnight and then have to live on \$15 a week - now I'm in a refuge [short term] ... I think they should give me more financial support and advice ... I asked for another District Officer and they said 'No' ... I can't talk to this District Officer without getting upset, I don't feel that she understands. *What do you do when you run out of money?* Just survive or ask the refuge - I can't ask the Department for more. When I have run out of money before, they refused. They said it's too much paper work.

This young woman is now living in a woman's refuge and the Department is taking \$50.00 a week from her AUSTUDY to pay back the rent she owed on the flat, where arrangements broke down.

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**Table 5.4 AUSTUDY, Job Search Allowance and Young Homeless Allowance rates March to September 1992**

|                               | JSA                 | AUSTUDY<br>\$ per week | YHA                 |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Maximum 'at home' rate</b> |                     |                        |                     |
| 16-17 years                   | 64.15               | 64.15                  | -                   |
| 18-20 years                   | 77.10               | 77.10                  | -                   |
| 21+ years                     | 140.95              | 77.10                  | -                   |
| <b>Independent rate</b>       |                     |                        |                     |
| 16-17 years                   | 105.90 <sup>1</sup> | 105.90                 | 105.90 <sup>2</sup> |
| 18-20 years                   | 117.10 <sup>1</sup> | 117.10                 | -                   |
| 21+ years                     | 140.95 <sup>1</sup> | 117.10                 | -                   |

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Notes <sup>1</sup> Student Homeless Rate AUSTUDY

<sup>2</sup> YHA only available to those aged under 18

Source: Thomson (1993).

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Given the fact that the current levels of benefit (see Table 5.4) are all substantially below the Henderson poverty line,<sup>8</sup> it is not surprising that young people living independently found it difficult, on the income provided by their support payments, to pay for everyday expenses such as food, transport, clothing, bills and rent, let alone the cost of a bond and furnishing a home for the first time. While income support is age-related, the cost of accommodation,

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<sup>8</sup> A measure developed by the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1972 to 1975, to reflect the amount required to meet basic living costs at an 'austere' level (Trethewey & Burston, 1988 in Thomson, 1993: 6). The poverty line during the same period for single people in the labour force (including the unemployed) was \$191.80 and for people not in the labour force (for example, students) was \$155.50 (Thomson, 1993: 6). Clerk state awards (gross per week) are: under 17 years \$146.00; 17 - 18 years \$182.80; 18 year olds \$224.00; 19 year olds \$253.90; and 20 year olds \$298.90 (Department of Industrial Relations Information Service on award rates, January 1994).

food and other expenses are not necessarily less for young people living independently. Those who were able to find supported youth accommodation were, however, better off financially, as rent is usually set at 20 to 25 per cent of income (Thomson, 1993, p. 6). In contrast, those in the private rental housing market could expect to pay up to 50 per cent of their income on rent (Hartley, 1989 in Thomson, 1993, p. 6).<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, however, the availability of medium to long-term supported youth accommodation is very limited.

Problems with obtaining benefits or being overpaid and then being required to repay the money also contributed to the financial difficulty of some young people (42.5 per cent). Some had problems or delays in obtaining their birth certificate and establishing their identity because of their change of name from their birth parents' to their foster parents' name. The delays occurred both in the NSW Department of Community Services in organising papers or birth certificates and in the Commonwealth Department of Social Security. One young person also had difficulty actually filling in the forms because of 'dyslexia'. Others had to repay money overpaid as a result of administrative mistakes or changes of address or circumstance. The repayment of an AUSTUDY debt left one young woman with \$44.00 per week to live on, forcing her to leave school and take a job in a fruit and vegetable market so she could make ends meet. She had planned to study law. Her comments on AUSTUDY were:

They [AUSTUDY] overpaid me so I'm getting \$44 a week ... hassles you know, you've got to have your tax file number, and if you send your application they send it back because you haven't got this and that ... I had to go like two months without anything ... I came up and saw my District Officer and he gave me a few counter cheques but I had to pay him back ... Jesus, it was hard ... that's one thing they have to fix is AUSTUDY .

Similar difficulties obtaining or repaying benefits also occurred after young people were discharged from wardship. They are outlined later.

## **5.6 Sources of financial and emotional support**

Fortunately, most state wards reported that they had someone to turn to if they 'ran short of money' or needed to talk to someone. They were, however, more confident that they could ask for emotional support (95.1 per cent) or for help if they were in trouble (97.5 per cent) than for financial support (88.9 per cent). The main sources of this anticipated support were parents and foster parents, members of their extended family, friends, siblings, and workers (District Officers and non-government agency workers). Friends were the most frequent choice for emotional support and were also important sources of support for small amounts of money and in case of trouble. For larger sums of money and when they were in trouble, young people were most likely to go to their foster parents or to their birth parents. Other relatives such as brothers and sisters, including some foster siblings, and grandparents and aunts and uncles also provided support.

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<sup>9</sup> The median rent for housing authority is \$55.00 per week; for private rental it is \$125.00 per week. Sixty-six per cent of renter household with low incomes under \$231.00 per week paid less than \$78.00 per week in rent (ABS No. 2821.0, 1991).

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**Table 5.5 Sources of financial and emotional support (interview group only)**

| Support source                           | Type of support |      |           |      |                    |      |
|--|-----------------|------|-----------|------|--------------------|------|
|  | Financial       |      | Emotional |      | In case of trouble |      |
|  | n               | %    | n         | %    | n                  | %    |
| Parents                                  | 13              | 27.7 | 7         | 14.9 | 7                  | 15.2 |
| Foster parents                           | 17              | 36.2 | 17        | 36.2 | 19                 | 41.3 |
| Relatives                                | 5               | 10.6 | 7         | 14.9 | 11                 | 23.9 |
| Siblings                                 | 4               | 8.5  | 8         | 17.0 | 4                  | 8.7  |
| Friends/partners                         | 18              | 38.3 | 23        | 48.9 | 18                 | 38.3 |
| District Officers                        | 9               | 19.1 | 5         | 10.6 | 11                 | 23.9 |
| NGO workers                              | 6               | 12.8 | 7         | 14.9 | 5                  | 10.9 |
| Authority figures<br>eg teachers, church | 0               | 0.0  | 3         | 6.4  | 3                  | 6.5  |
| No one                                   | 9               | 19.1 | 4         | 8.5  | 2                  | 4.3  |

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Note. The number of respondents was 47. Percentages relate to the number of cases, not the number of responses because respondents generally mentioned more than one source of support.

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As Table 5.5 shows, young people mentioned Departmental District Officers and other youth and non-government agency workers as a significant source of support when they were in trouble (34.0 per cent) or needed money (31.9 per cent) or emotional support (25.5 per cent). Going to their District Officer was, however, the last resort only for a number of young people, and it seems from their comments that their reason for not referring to District Officers was that some saw their District Officers so infrequently that they did not think of them as an option for support; others felt their District Officers were too busy to have time to help.<sup>10</sup> When they did see their District Officer as someone they would go to for help, the more likely they were to say they expected to keep in contact with them after they were discharged from care; 14 of the 16 (87.5 per cent) who referred to their District Officer as a source of support said they expected to keep in touch with them compared with 50 per cent who did not.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Typical comments were:

- I talk to my DO sometimes but she is very busy.
- I have never really gone to my District Officer if I need money.
- I never talk to my DO, I haven't seen her for about a year.

<sup>11</sup>  $\chi^2 = 2.84, 1 \text{ df}, p < .10.$

### Comments re sources of support

#### ***Is there anyone you can turn to if you're stuck money-wise?***

I'd ask Len and Mary [foster parents] if I was really stuck but I don't like to ask.

I can always ask a friend for a bit of money to tide me over but if I needed more I'd have to go to my foster parents.

#### ***Is there anyone you can talk to if you're not feeling too good?***

My friend's mother or if it was something to do with their family, I'd go and talk to another friend.

Friends, or if it was really important, foster parents.

If it's just emotional stuff, I just think through that myself. I'd like to have a father to talk to.

#### ***Is there anyone you can go to for help if you're in trouble?***

My sister - I go to her for everything.

Tell my best friend first, then talk to my foster parents. DOCS only as a last resort.

My foster parents, my grand-parents, or my aunty and uncle. They've said they'll always be there for me if I need help.

My foster family often say 'We hope you kids can come home no matter what you've done or where you're at' but they don't tend to offer that when it comes down to it. If there was no way out, yes, I'd go to them but I'd prefer not to.

The importance of Departmental support is brought further into focus by the small but significant minority of young people leaving care who had no one or no one apart from the Department or workers they could call on for help. Just over a quarter (27.7 per cent) said there was no one or no one other than workers they could turn to for financial help. Their circumstances were varied, with several living in foster care or with parents (n = 5) and others living independently (n = 4). Similarly, nearly one in five young people (n = 9, 19.1 per cent) had no one or no one apart from a worker to confide in. Significantly, 36.2 per cent of young people said they wished there were more people they could call on for financial support, and 23.4 per cent wished they had more avenues for emotional support. Living in family-based accommodation was no protection from feeling a lack of adequate support. Although nearly half of those wishing they had more financial and emotional support were living independently, half were living with either their birth parents, with foster parents or with a friend's family. Unfortunately, seven young people felt they had insufficient support in both spheres; four were living independently and five were on *Sickness Benefit*, unemployment benefits or *Young Homeless Allowance*.

In summary then, while the majority of young people had people they could call on for support, it is clear that some young people about to be discharged from care had inadequate support networks to fall back on in times of need. In particular, a small group of young people leaving care were without financial and emotional support outside Departmental sources and must be considered a very vulnerable group.

## 5.7 Expectations of ongoing Departmental support

At discharge from wardship, state wards receive an official Departmental letter stating the 'door is open' for further assistance. Less than half (44.7 per cent), however, believed that the Department of Community Services could help them after they had been discharged from wardship. The same proportion (44.7 per cent) did not know. They either had not been told what was available or had been told in very general terms or in terms they could not understand ("I can't understand what they say mostly"). Ten per cent were quite certain that they could not get any help once discharged, saying for example:

- . No, I can't, I won't be able to. They'll be glad to see the end of me.
- . My DO said once I've been discharged, that's it ... the Department is out of my life.
- . I suppose they've been taking care of me for so long now, they're probably getting sick of it.
- . No, I can't get help, and I wouldn't ask. I hate their guts.

Regardless of their views about the possibility of help, just over half said they felt comfortable asking the Department for help. It was clear from several comments that some young people did not see it as asking the Department for help but as asking their District Officer, someone they had developed a relationship with. For example, one young woman said explicitly "It's not like asking the Department, it's asking Sally ". Another said "I'd go back to John, but only John". A significant number (n = 13, 27.7 per cent), however, indicated that they would be very reluctant to ask for help and would do so only if they were "really desperate" or "in dire straits". There seemed to be several reasons for their reluctance to ask the Department for help. These included not wanting to be seen as not coping, being relieved to see the end of wardship and any associated stigma, and wanting to make it on their own. Several indicated that earlier requests for help had been rejected and that they had not received the help they needed while they were in wardship so they had no expectation of any help after they were discharged and were not willing to risk further rejection. As the comments above indicate, while some were prepared to keep in contact with their own District Officer, they were not willing to approach workers they did not know. Given the high turnover rate of workers and their large case loads, this may not be possible. For others, however, the District Officer they know may provide a disincentive for asking for help. One young woman said, for example :

I asked for another District Officer and they said "No" ... I can't talk to this District Officer without getting upset, I don't feel that she understands.

There was also generally little awareness of the help that the Department could provide. The main areas of expected help were financial advice and assistance and emotional support or assistance with making decisions. Only two young people mentioned assistance with accommodation or housing advice.

### Expected Departmental help after leaving care

#### *Do you know whether you can get help after care?*

- . My DO told me if I was in trouble, I could walk in there or in any office of the Department and they would be willing to help.
- . They can help move me into a flat and help pay the expenses for the cultural exchange program I'm going on over the summer holidays.
- . My DO told me but I didn't really understand.

I asked them to help me out with something a couple of weeks ago and they said 'Oh no, we don't help you out with those things [couldn't remember what it was]. So I can't really see they'd do anything for me if I wasn't a ward any more.

#### *Would you go to the Department for help?*

- . I probably wouldn't want any help. If I need help, I'll get it from my friends first, then my family.
- . I hate the idea of having to ask but I'd go to Marianne for a shoulder to cry on or for advice.
- . If I was in total devastation, yes, but otherwise, no way!

Young people's lack of awareness of the help they could get also extended to a lack of knowledge about their rights and in particular their right to have access to their Departmental 'B- file'. Several young people mentioned that they wanted to see their 'B-file' but had not been able to. For example:

I always wanted a copy of my files. Why should they [DOCS] have a copy of my life and I don't?

I'm not allowed to look at my file yet - I've only seen selected bits which the District Officer flicked through with me really quickly ... District Officer claims she has files on my Mum when she was pregnant and when I was little but we don't know if that's true because I haven't had a look at them ... I mean I don't know what's in my files properly.

It is significant that this issue arose spontaneously; the subsequent interviews included specific questions in this area so this issue will be discussed in more detail later.

### **5.8 Attitude to leaving care**

Young people about to be discharged from wardship were mixed in their attitudes to leaving care. Just over half (n = 26, 55.3 per cent) expected that leaving care would not make much or any difference to them, either because they were going to continue to live in the same place (n = 9), would keep in contact with their District Officer (n = 4) or because they had had little contact with or help from the Department anyway (n = 13).



### **Will discharge make any difference to your life?**

- . Not much difference because I will stay living where I am. There will be less support and less visits from DOCS but they'll still be able to provide me with financial assistance and advice if I need it.
- . Support from DOCS will keep going but less often. Now I see my DO once a week - once I get discharged I'll see him once a month.
- . No, it's just another piece of paper that gets put in my file. *Will support be the same?* Yeah, next year they are going to pay for my schooling and I get an allowance [from DOCS on top of AUSTUDY].
- . Things won't change much because they [DOCS] didn't really play an important role in my life.
- . No difference at all. The last time I saw a visitor from state care was when I was 16. I told them I'd come in when I needed them.
- . No, and there's no point in being a ward 'if you don't get nothing like you're supposed to'.

The main expected change for those who thought discharge from wardship would make a difference was a greater sense of autonomy and privacy (n = 13, 25.5 per cent) and these young people looked forward to discharge and a life free of the restrictions imposed by wardship. Typical complaints were the need to obtain permission before they went away on holidays or to stay with someone and the need to be available for interviews with the District Officer at their convenience. Another complaint concerned a lack of privacy, both in terms of access to their files and information about them and intrusions by Departmental officers and others who 'poke their noses' into their affairs.

### **Positive views about leaving care**

- . It's something I suggested a long time ago .. because I don't want anything to do with them. It means I don't have to have Jean coming around and asking questions, and I don't have to ring her up and ask her "Can I do this, can I do that?"
- . I feel as though I belong to the government. I'll be my own person and do my own thing.
- . I've been looking forward to it for about 3 years, and I think they probably couldn't wait to get rid of me too. I just kept being passed from one DO to another. They never did anything anyway. I felt restricted being a ward .. I felt threatened by FACS. They told me where I could live, and were always checking up on me.
- . Just having the Department away from me. I think they're a bit pushy and nosey. Sometimes I just get frustrated because they want to know everything all the time and I'm the type who likes to keep things to myself.

Others (n = 8, 17.2 per cent), however, were less positive about the expected change and more concerned about "being on their own". While some were ambivalent, others were more clearly negative. For example, one young man said 'It means that if I'm in real trouble, DOCS are no longer there' and a young woman said 'I'll have to fend for myself and be more careful with money and where I live'. Eight young people (17.0 per cent) indicated that they were not looking forward to leaving care at all and six (17.6 per cent) said they were scared.<sup>12</sup> Their main concerns were their ability to manage financially and to make decisions without support, and for several young women who had been sexually abused, the loss of the Department's 'umbrella' of protection. Indeed, 11 young people (30.6 per cent of those who responded) said that they would not leave care at that time if they had the choice because they appreciated the security of having the Department there as a back-up in times of need. Nine of these 11 young people were not living in stable accommodation with either their natural parents or foster parents.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Ambivalent or negative views about leaving care**

- . Before I would have thought 'Yeah, it'd be good to be discharged'. I hate being a state ward and then there are other times you need them [DOCS] so it's good having them there ... big questions come up like where are you going to live ... I loved them [DOCS] and I didn't ... you never think about them [DOCS] until you need help ... I can't go to them any more [once discharged]'.
- . I hated the Department and didn't want to be a ward but at the same time I needed their support.
- . I won't get free clothes any more.
- . I have never had a mother or father - I get all my support from DOCS. I'd say I'm a fairly lonely guy.
- . It'll mean not having someone there to talk to, to support you. They won't have time for me when I'm not a ward ... if I had a choice to stay on, I would.

As their comments show, young people's attitudes to leaving care were influenced by several factors - their experience of the Department's intervention, their expectation that help would continue or the interference would stop, and their circumstances at the time of discharge. Predicting attitudes to leaving care was not simple, however, because being indifferent about leaving care, for example, could be the result of several different combinations of factors. The best simple prediction was based on an interaction between their circumstances or where they were living at the time of discharge and whether or not they thought they would be comfortable approaching the

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<sup>12</sup> These percentages relate to responses to separate questions (see questionnaires in Appendix 2).

<sup>13</sup> There were, however, no other easy predictors for this group. Of the eleven, four said they were looking forward to leaving care but seven were not, and three were scared about leaving care.

Department for help after they were discharged.<sup>14</sup> Feeling comfortable about asking for help was more significant than whether or not they knew that the Department could help them after discharge and reflected to some extent their experience with the Department.<sup>15</sup> Knowing that help was available and feeling comfortable about asking for it were also related; most of the young people who felt comfortable about approaching the Department knew that help could be available (68 per cent), and vice versa (80.9 per cent;  $r = .37, p < .01$ ).

A model combining young people's stability at discharge and their attitude to asking the Department for help was quite a good predictor of attitudes to leaving care. If young people were stable in their place of living and secure in the support they could receive from the Department (or from their own network) after they were discharged, they could be expected to be generally unconcerned about being discharged from care. In these circumstances, discharge would make little difference. This was the case: 9 of the 13 young people in this group said that being discharged would make no difference and were neither looking forward to being discharged or scared about it. For example, one young man in long-term stable foster care said:

Nothing will change. Leaving care does not affect my foster arrangements and I have a couple of relatives that live locally so I could always go and live with them... I have no plans to move... I will never be alone. My foster parents will stand by me through good and bad.

In another case, the source of the expected support was not the Department but the non-government agency which had supported her through stable residential care into associated stable supported accommodation:

I know I will never be alone with the support I've got ... Sister Mary won't just put me out in a flat and leave me ... they are always concerned about how we are living, they always check up on us ... we have kids that are living by themselves and one of our part time carers drives down to visit and see if they are all right [Children's Home] ... because they know how hard it will be ... DOCS will support me also into a house ....' Leaving care won't make much [difference] because I didn't ever feel like I was a state ward ... and because I can have the support if I need it. The relationship I have with Kim [District Officer], I know she is going to support me 100 per cent as well. ... the protection they gave me in my experience was really good ... also they [DOCS] are going to help me help me financially move into a flat and they are paying for me to go on a cultural exchange overseas [America].

Similarly, if young people were stable and did not feel comfortable about asking the Department for help, they might be expected to be keen to leave care or unconcerned, and in fact, they were evenly split in this respect. One young woman who was restored to her mother said she was very keen and had asked to be discharged. Another in long-term stable foster care said:

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<sup>14</sup> Both factors - where they were living at discharge ( $\chi^2 = 13.85, 2 \text{ df}, p < .001$ ) and feeling comfortable asking the Department for help ( $\chi^2 = 11.31, 2 \text{ df}, p < .005$ ) - were significant by themselves. Five times as many young people in unstable accommodation (43.5 per cent) were scared or ambivalent about discharge as those living with their natural or foster parents (8.3 per cent).

<sup>15</sup> Most of the young people who were reasonably satisfied with the Department (84.6 per cent) also said that they would feel comfortable going to the Department for help whereas only 41.9 per cent who said the Department should have done things differently while they were in care said they would feel comfortable asking for help again. This difference was not statistically significant, however.

It'll be good not to be a state ward but I didn't see them much before and don't intend to see them now so it's not like it's any big change. [*Why will it be good not to be a state ward?*] It's just that people are so nosy and ask 20,000 questions.

On the other hand, if young people were unstable and not confident about approaching the Department for help after they were discharged, they might be expected to be resentful towards the Department and keen to be discharged. Indeed, most in this group were. One 16 year-old said, for example:

I hate being a ward. It stops me doing some of the things I want to do. Once I'm discharged, I'll be right.

Finally, young people who were unstable but felt comfortable about approaching the Department might have a range of attitudes towards leaving care, depending upon their experiences; in fact, the most common attitude among young people in this group was ambivalence. One young man in supported accommodation said, for example:

I'll have to fend for myself and be more careful with money and where I live. DOCS are looking after me at the moment and have been great but it is hard to say what will happen.

One young woman living in supported accommodation was ambivalent about being discharged, saying she was scared but looking forward to it "in a way" although she expected to have to cope on her own "because I can't go back to Sally [District Officer] for help".

In summary, then, young people expressed a range of views about leaving care - from eager anticipation through nonchalance to disquiet. Their experience of the Department's intervention, their expectation that help would continue or the interference would stop, and their circumstances at the time of discharge all influenced their views. It is clear therefore that practice in relation to young people leaving care needs to be able to accommodate such a range of experience and expectation.

## **5.9 Future expectations, mental health and happiness**

The optimism amongst the young people in the interview group, after their generally disrupted childhoods and just before being discharged from wardship, is striking. On a scale of 1 to 10, their average rating for how happy they were just before they were discharged from care was 8.0 (sd = 1.9). There was no difference in the ratings by gender<sup>16</sup> but young people who had been in one long-term placement and those were significantly happier than those who were not.<sup>17</sup> When asked what the happiest part of their life had been, 14 young people said that it was 'now', living in stable foster care (n = 7), living with friends or a partner (n = 6), and having some control over their lives and money of their own. For seven young people, meeting or living with their birth parents or siblings had been the happiest part, and for three, it had 'all been fairly happy'. The security of a previous placement, including 'children's homes' (n = 2) and former foster placements before, for example, their foster father had died (n = 5) was

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<sup>16</sup> The mean ratings were for females, 7.9; for males, 8.2.

<sup>17</sup> The mean rating for young people who had been in one long-term placement was 8.75 compared with 7.4 for those who had not:  $t(42) = 2.45, p < .02$ . The mean rating for young people who were living with their natural parents was 9.00, for those living with foster parents it was 8.75, and for those not living with either at discharge, it was 7.45:  $F(2, 41) = 3.47, p < .04$ .

remembered by nine young people as the happiest period. For others (n = 8), specific events or activities such as their success in sport or horse-riding, the birth of their child, or the imprisonment of their father or step-father, constituted their 'best times'.

A small group of six young people, however, none of whom had ever been in one long-term placement (defined as lasting for at least 75 per cent of their time in care), gave ratings of 5 or less on the 10 point scale, and said there had not been 'a happy part'. Only one of these young people was in a stable placement just before they were discharged, and this one young woman was in relative foster care in which she was not particularly happy. When asked what the unhappiest part of their life had been, the typical response was 'all of it'. For example, one young woman who entered care as an adolescent as a result of being physically abused by her step-mother said:

Which part do you want to start from? There's not one part but lots of parts .. But probably if I was pushed, I'd say when I was being bashed. My friends would say 'My mother is a bitch' and I'd say 'You don't know what one is. But no one really believed me if I said what was happening at home.

For most young people, the unhappiest time in their lives tended to be associated with the events which led to state intervention and wardship. They included not knowing what decisions were being made about their lives in wardship; loss of family contact; unhappy placements and abuse in care; being a state ward; and the death of relatives (n = 4) or foster parents (n = 5) was remembered by some young people as the unhappiest part. For example, in response to the question 'What do you think was the unhappiest part of your life?', young people gave the following answers:

- . When I was 9, when I saw the true colours of my family.
- . Living at home was hell on earth. Filthy, full of papers, beer bottles ... the place was a mess, maggots in the kitchen and potatoes growing in the bath.
- . Living with my aunt and uncle and not having someone who really cared about me.
- . In the foster home when I was about 12. I told my sister but there was nothing we could do.
- . When my foster father died .. That was really hard. I didn't know if I could still stay and I really missed him.
- . At my foster place - I seriously thought about killing myself.

Despite their difficult backgrounds, most young people regarded the future positively, expecting 'things' to be 'good' or 'better' (n = 25, 53.2 per cent) or 'scary but exciting' and 'challenging' (n = 12, 25.5 per cent). They mostly believed that there were few or no substantial barriers to their future happiness and that their personal characteristics, including their ability to work hard and their motivation, and also their circumstances in terms of the support of family and friends, were 'factors going for them'. Two young Aboriginal women, however, believed that racist reactions to them constituted the main barriers they had to confront.

**What do you think the next 5 years will be like?**

- . A lot of decision-making, a lot of getting my act together, sorting out my career. [*Are you looking forward to that?*] Yes. In 5 years, I think I'll be working in a permanent job [animal tending or photography] and travelling with it. I don't see myself in a relationship.
- . Confusing but I'll get through it. Have a job, office work. Have a job.
- . Whatever I make it, good, possibly uni or apprenticeship or small business. Working in fashion - maybe I'll be retired in 5 years if I do everything well! - family after I'm 25, live near beach/bush.
- . Hopefully good - have a job or be at uni. Looking forward to it. At 23, a job, in nursing, teaching, police - an active job, not married but have a boyfriend now, living in same house. Graduated from uni and employed.

Again, however, a small group of around ten young people were less positive, and either had no clear idea of what the future held for them or were pessimistic. When asked what they thought the next five years would be like, they tended to say that they did not know because they 'hadn't really thought about it' or did not make any plans. They did not think they had 'anything going for them' but believed that there were a number of barriers, including unemployment, a lack of money, and a lack of trust in others.

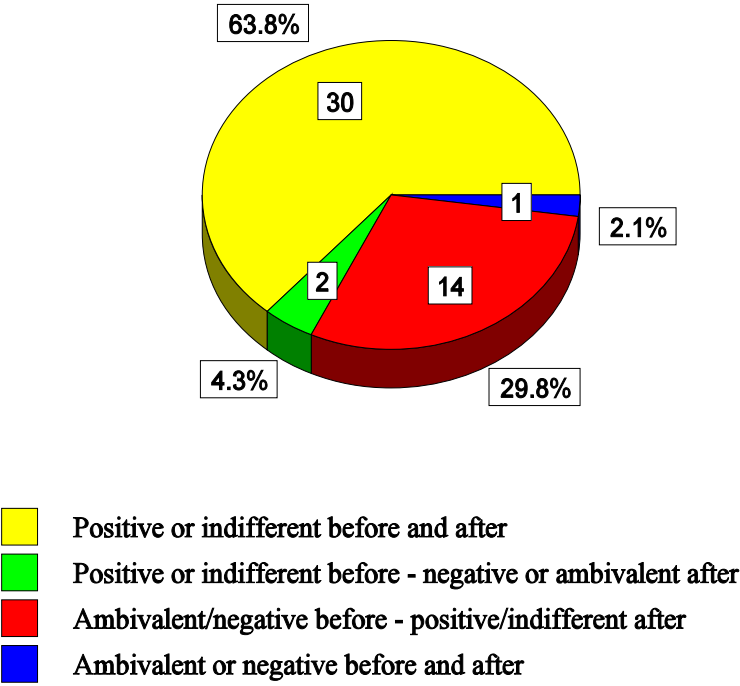
**What do you think the next five years will be like?**

- . If my mother's dead, great - no worries with her interfering etc. But I don't look forward to the future. I only see it day by day because I can't plan my future. I make decisions on the spot, with a flip of the coin.
- . I'm scared - every year brings something more worse. I don't even know if I'll be alive by then. He can't give me advice - it's not that simple. I'd like to have a good husband, someone who understands me, treats me right, loves me .. A real husband. Own life, own money.
- . Horrible.. (*Why?*) Because I can just see it at all. (*What can you see?*) Nothing (slight laugh).
- . Fairly hard DK...I don't really map out my life. I take my life day after day.

**6 LIFE AFTER CARE**

**6.1 Attitude to being discharged after the fact**

Just before they were discharged from care, young people’s attitudes were mixed. About half were unconcerned saying it made little difference, whereas others were more positive and were looking forward to leaving care. About one in five young people were ambivalent or scared. Three months after they were discharged, they were asked whether being discharged from wardship had made any difference to their lives and whether they would prefer to be still in care. Twelve months later they were asked whether they thought they had been ready for discharge and at what age they thought they should have been discharged.



**Figure 6.1 Attitude to leaving care before and after discharge**

**6.1.1 Just after discharge.** Three months after leaving care, nearly all the young people (93.6 per cent) were either positive (25.5 per cent) or indifferent to being discharged from care (68.1 per cent) and most had felt the same way before they were discharged. For some, that was because they continued to live in the same place and had had little contact with the Department before their discharge. A typical comment was ‘It feels the same. I never really had much to do with them anyway’. In line with their expectations, others were positive about their sense of freedom from scrutiny and direction. One young woman said, for example:

Yes, it’s better. I’ve got my freedom. I don’t have to ask their permission for anything and I don’t have to see them. I’m free to do what I want.

Another commented that it was easier to get services now that she was no longer a ward because it was not

necessary to have the forms processed through the Department of Community Services first.

For other young people (29.8 per cent), the positive aspects or the lack of difference were unexpected. One young man living in supported accommodation when he was discharged from care said:

I thought I wouldn't have anyone to back me up - I'd be on my own completely. But it hasn't been like that. We've gotten support, especially from St Mary's, and DOCS said I could always go and see them after I was discharged.

Three young women felt that being discharged from wardship had at least some negative effects; these were mostly financial. They referred, for example, to the loss of 'someone to buy clothes', pay for dental and other expensive service or to be there as support in times of need. Two were living independently and one was living in her mother's garage. In the words of one:

It's better in some ways - people not watching you and telling you what to do.  
And it's worse in some ways - no one to buy clothes and things for you.

For two other young people, however, discharge had resulted in or coincided with greater financial independence because as one said, "I get to look after it [money] now, not my foster parents".

In line with their generally positive or indifferent attitude to being discharged, few young people said that they would prefer to be still in care (n = 7, 14.9 per cent) and two others were uncertain. Of these, only two had said before they were discharged that they would not leave care if they had a choice. Both had moved out from living with relatives (parent and foster grandparent) and were living independently after discharge. The other nine young people who had said before they were discharged that they preferred not to be were either indifferent or positive about it at the second interview.

**6.1.2 Twelve months after discharge.** Consistent with their views just after discharge, most young people (n = 37, 82.2 per cent) said nearly 12 months later that they had been ready for discharge, but eight young people said they had not (17.8 per cent) and two others would have preferred to leave care at 21. Again, only two of these young people had views which were consistent with their earlier view three months after discharge - that they would have preferred to be still in care. In fact, only one particularly vulnerable and isolated young man maintained consistent resistance to being discharged, but the best predictor of young people saying 12 months after discharge that they had not been ready for it was their ambivalent or negative reaction beforehand. Seven of the eight young people who said during the third interview that they had not been ready for discharge were ambivalent or scared about it before they were discharged, but only half those who said they were ambivalent or scared at the first interview said later they had not been ready. Overall, across the three interviews, 21 (44.6 per cent) indicated at some stage that they were not or had not been ready for discharge. Nearly half the young people who were leaving care then, at some stage, felt unsure and vulnerable about doing so, although they maintained indifference or enthusiasm at other times.



### **Ready to be discharged (Interview 3)**

It was good on my own. It would have been good if they were in the background though. I wasn't ready before for help but maybe I am now that I'm discharged. There have been times when I'd like to have gone back since discharge.

No real effect on us. Nothing was going to change. Still at a secure home and we never had much to do with the Department.

I asked for an extension of my wardship from 16 because I didn't feel sure of myself and I wasn't sure that I could cope. Like handling making decisions for myself at only 16 but it had started getting me down so I thought 'What the hell? It's a big world out there, I'm getting to the age where I'll have to make my own decisions' so I might as well get used to the idea. It's worked out OK so far.

It didn't make any difference to me. My foster family really treated me like their own kid .. if I wasn't ready to go, I could stay but if I wanted to go, they'd still be there for me.

Since I left Renwick, I didn't feel like a state ward because I never saw them. It isn't the age, it's the support, and I never got any. It didn't make any difference because I never saw them any way. I got a letter that I was discharged and it said I could come back. They make promises and don't keep them.

### **Not ready to be discharged**

18 isn't old enough. I only wanted to be a ward to 16 but now I think it isn't old enough. If I was still living at home with my parents, they would be still helping me out and stuff. I just think you're too young.

I needed help with places to go. I was still moving between refuges when I was being discharged. And I wanted to see my B-file. I wanted to find out the truth about my past.

Couple of more years until I was 21 or 22 instead of just throwing you out before you're ready. Well, they never ever helped me with telling me about bills and, you know, the way to go about complaining if something has gone wrong in your house. They never helped me out with education.

Now I feel that I'm ready for it but last year I didn't. I just felt that I didn't want to have the Department on my back any more... because everything I was going to do, they knew even before I did.

**6.1.3 Departmental support.** Just after they were discharged, most young people (n = 33, 70.2 per cent) said that their District Officer had explained to them what discharge meant. The message they were given and their understanding of it varied, however. The most common understanding was that 'the door is open' and that they could still ask for help if they needed it (n = 19, 40.4 per cent). Others were told that they were 'on their

own' and had to 'stand on their own feet' but they may be able to get some help if it was really necessary. Exactly what help was available was generally unclear, and young people generally had no better understanding about what help they could get after they were discharged. At the third interview, most young people (n = 40, 88.9 per cent) did not know what support they were entitled to after leaving care. Few (n = 8, 17.8 per cent) knew that they could apply for assistance, as an ex-ward, with their university and TAFE fees and expenses. Indeed, one young woman found out only when her former employer rang asking for details so that he could claim re-imbusement for paying her fees.

Some young people were clearer about the help they could *not* receive. One young woman said her District Officer told her "they would not pay for dentist and medical bills... my operations... 'I have to pay for them myself.'" Another was very sceptical about the likelihood of any assistance with TAFE fees, saying:

The day I die! They wouldn't even pay my fees at school so why would they pay fees for me now. They'd probably turn around in six months' time and say "You owe us .." Who can you trust? I was supposed to trust them. They let me down. I never let them down.

**Did anyone talk to you about what being discharged means?**

- . Yes, she told me I had to stand on my own feet. DOCS was still behind me but not as much as before though I could contact DOCS whenever I wanted to.
- . Yes, she said if I was really, really stuck, I could call on her.
- . He just said what would happen when I got discharged. I can't really remember... he said I could go back for help.
- . I'm my own person now. No one to rouse on me. Support cut but if I need help, they would, but no guarantees.
- . No, she just said she wouldn't be looking after us any more. *Did that make you feel cut off? Yes. Does it make you feel uneasy about approaching them for help? Yes.*
- . No, nothing - just got a letter. Didn't give me any financial advice, what to do about housing, or living independently.

Young people's understanding about available Departmental support was consistently poor before and after discharge but it predicted their attitude to seeking assistance only before they were actually discharged. This indicates the importance of making sure that young people are well informed about what help is available. Two-thirds of the young people who said at the first interview that they felt comfortable about approaching the Department for help (n = 17, 68 per cent) said they thought they could get help whereas 80 per cent who said they

were not comfortable about seeking help were sure they could *not* get help or did not know.<sup>1</sup> Twelve months after discharge most young people were unsure what support they could receive but about half were still willing to ask for help if they needed it, and over two-thirds would have accepted help if it had been offered.

Young people's attitudes to seeking help from the Department showed several different patterns over time. The largest group (n = 18, 40 per cent of those interviewed three times) were consistent in their willingness to accept assistance from the Department after they were discharged. They said beforehand that they felt comfortable approaching the Department for help, and most said at the two later interviews that they would ask the Department for help if they needed it; five were willing to *accept* help if it was offered but would *not ask* for it.

Another small group (n = 8, 17.7 per cent) were consistently reluctant to ask for help. Three were uncompromising in their attitude - they were not comfortable about asking for help (first interview) and said they would not ask for or accept help under any circumstances (second and third interviews). All three had good support networks and were either living at home with their parents or foster parents. The other five were consistently negative but indicated 12 months after discharge that they might accept help although they would never *ask* for it. Their circumstances were varied; several had been in long-term stable foster care and the others had multiple unstable placements.

The remaining group included a mixed bag of changing views about seeking help. Some were willing to do so just before discharge but later said they would not go to the Department for help. That change was generally the result of a negative experience when they did ask for help. For example:

The first time I contacted DOCS was when we were at XX [long-term refuge] because we had nowhere else to go. They found us a flat at XX House. But I won't contact them again because every time we call them, they cause trouble over something. They gave me \$50 for the baby and then she [DO] notified us after that. I wouldn't ask them for anything ever again - they have caused too much hassle.

And:

It's not much use, you know. When I was supposed to have someone there to rely on, to talk to, it was just 'Sit down, take a card, make an appointment' and then finally they weren't there. They always used to say to me 'If you need anything, come down and see us' and then I'd go down there and get turned down.

Another reason for a change in willingness to seek help was reluctance to see another District Officer when their 'old DO' had left. Seventy per cent of young people said they preferred to see their 'old DO' rather than another. One said, for example: "If my old DO was there, yeah. He got around the red tape and I began to trust him". In contrast, a few said they would actively seek out another District Officer in preference to their 'old one' and that not getting on with them was one reason they were reluctant to seek help.

The other main change was from initial unwillingness to later willingness, and seemed to be related to a recognition by young people that they could benefit from some help and also to reduced concern about distancing themselves from the Department. For example, one young man said: "I wasn't ready before for help but maybe I am now that I'm discharged." Another said: "You don't know until you're in the situation whether and where you need their help - if I needed them, maybe."

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$\chi^2 = 11.4, 2 \text{ df}, p < .004.$

The implications of these findings for worker practice in relation to discharging young people from care are two-fold. First, it is important to explain clearly to young people exactly what help is available and what is involved in obtaining it. This needs to be done before they leave care because their willingness to seek help was best predicted by their knowledge of available support at this stage. One of the problems here is the vagueness of the related legislation. The *Children (Care and Protection) Act 1987* states:

- S 92 (1) The Minister may give to, or provide for, any person who has ceased to be a ward or protected person -
- (a) such assistance as the Minister was empowered to give to, or provide for, the person while the person was a ward or protected person; and
  - (b) such other assistance (whether financial or other),
- as, in the Minister's opinion, is reasonable having regard to the circumstances of the case.<sup>2</sup>

While the lack of definition has the advantage of allowing a breadth of interpretation, and while some District Officers were able to use this to the advantage of the ward in pressing for some unusual applications (such as assistance with an exchange overseas visit in one case), it also resulted in considerable uncertainty about what assistance might be included. It is also clear that most young people did not know what help they could obtain, even after it was supposedly outlined by their District Officer.<sup>3</sup>

The other issue concerns Departmental willingness to offer help rather than wait for young people to ask for it. Having to ask also means knowing that such help is available. In one case, not knowing led one young woman to 'drop out' of TAFE because she couldn't afford the fees. She said:

I didn't think I was entitled to anything. The official letter doesn't really say what is available. If they said they could give me financial help, I would try but they don't go out of their way to say that.

The lack of clarity and information about the help that is available was also criticised by several District Officers. One manager said, for example:

When kids leave care, I'm critical of managers who write those letters which say "If you need any help in the future, feel free to come into the Department...". What an ambiguous statement! It's so vague to be meaningless. Would you take them up on it? I wouldn't.'

It is also clear that a number of young people were very reluctant to ask for help but were willing to accept help if it was offered. In some cases, they indicated that they were not prepared to risk another refusal. Other young people also changed their views about seeking help from initial unwillingness, so timing may be critical. Before

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<sup>2</sup> S 92 (2) makes particular reference to assistance with education or training as follows:

For the purpose of securing education or vocational training on a full-time basis for any person who has ceased to be a ward or protected person, the Minister may, subject to such conditions as may be prescribed by the regulations and to such additional conditions as the Minister may determine, from time to time and for periods not exceeding 6 months at any one time, authorise the making of payments for that purpose as if the person were a ward or protected person.

<sup>3</sup> For this reason, the information sheet shown in Appendix 8 was given or sent by us to the young people who were interviewed after their third interview. The sheet was checked and approved by the Department.

they are discharged from care, young people may be overly optimistic about their ability to manage by themselves if they are living independently or with little support. They may also be very keen to distance themselves from Departmental influence. While they may reject help at that stage, they may be more willing later when their needs become more apparent. As one young man said:

I thought I'd be free as a bird when I wasn't a ward any more. But as it works out, I'm still in a refuge and not much has changed.

He was initially reluctant to seek any help from the Department but said later that he would accept help if it was offered and would perhaps ask for help if he knew what was available.

**6.1.4 Young people's suggestions for better practice in relation to leaving care.** Twelve months after they were discharged from care, young people were asked whether the Department could have made leaving care easier for them and what advice they would give to District Officers or workers on how to treat other wards leaving care. They were also asked what they would include in a Leaving Care package.

Nearly half (47 per cent) indicated that the Department could have done more and made it easier for them. Their advice focussed on three main aspects: explaining face-to-face what they needed to know and specifically what help they could receive, making the transition a gradual and flexible process with ongoing support and follow up, and, again, listening to what they have to say. Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) said that a brochure explaining the Department's services and what they could offer would be useful. Others were also concerned that District Officers should ensure that young people being discharged from care have somewhere stable and affordable to live, and that if they are in foster care, that they 'find out what the real situation is between them and their foster parents'. Several were critical of District Officers raising the issue of early discharge, saying that it had been unsettling and had made them feel that the Department wanted to 'get rid of them'. Indeed, a substantial number of young people (41 per cent) felt that the Department had been glad to 'get rid of them'. Several had no advice to offer except that workers should treat them in the same way as they were treated - with respect and empathy. Typical comments are outlined below.

**What advice would you give to DOs to make leaving care easier?**

If they did the same to them as they did to me. Go and see them. Once kids aren't wards any more, they go stupid. They know they can't get in trouble. Not all kids do, but a lot of kids do. They should make sure they're OK. Informal and positive support.

Be more nice about it. Be more sympathetic, more supportive. I felt like they just gave me a piece of paper and wanted me to piss me off.

They may need protection until they are older - those on the street. It's not their fault. So age needs to be flexible, to give some people more security.

Give them ongoing support, don't leave them out on their own. Explain to them face to face what it means, what's ahead of them. All we got is a letter.

The idea of a 'Leaving Care' package was generally welcomed by young people. The main requirement was that it should be flexible and tailored to meet the needs of individual people. Several young people said, for example, that they did not believe they were 'disadvantaged enough' to require money but that money should be available to help where it was needed, but in the words of one, 'not so much as to turn you into a bludger'. Money was seen as necessary for the establishment costs of independent accommodation including the bond on rented premises, linen, cooking equipment and crockery, bedding and furniture. Several young people also suggested that money to pay for driving lessons would be very useful because a driving licence is a requirement for some jobs and a number of young people do not have anyone else who could teach them to drive. Several also suggested that because young people are usually leaving school at the same time that they are discharged from wardship that it would be a good idea to allow some help in buying appropriate clothes for interviews and work. In addition, some young people wanted assistance with education fees to be included in any package, again showing the lack of information available to them about what is already available.

Non-monetary support in the form of information about services and follow-up contact was also seen as a useful element of the Leaving Care package. As one young man said:

It would be good if they still tried to keep in contact once in a while - ring or write - to show they'd still be there if that was necessary. They should check to see if your parents are still around or if they're still missing.

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**Table 6.1 Percentage of young people favouring inclusion of certain features in a Leaving Care package**

|                                    |       |
|------------------------------------|-------|
| Birth certificate                  | 95.6% |
| Money                              | 82.2% |
| Papers/reports from file           | 82.2% |
| List of agencies and phone numbers | 75.6% |
| Photos                             | 75.6% |
| Follow-up support/contact          | 73.3% |

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The possible inclusion of papers and reports from the Departmental and agency files also raised the issue of ownership of the files for some young people who felt very strongly that they did not want their files to remain in the Department.

I think you should be able to take your file. They have got rid of you so why should they have it? Why won't they give it to you?

A number of young people were also critical of the letter they received on discharge.<sup>4</sup> The main criticism concerned the impersonal nature of the letter ('it's the same letter everyone gets'), particularly when it was not

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<sup>4</sup> On discharge from wardship, young people should receive two letters - one from the Department of Community Services manager and one from the Minister but they generally did not seem to discriminate between the two letters. The Departmental *Manual on Substitute Care* sets out pro forma letters. Copies are shown in Appendix 9.

accompanied by a visit from their District Officer explaining what discharge would mean to them. For some, it seemed strange - 'the state wishing you "happy birthday"' -while for others, it was an unwelcome reminder of their status as a ward ('It just made me think about being a ward'). The suggestion that they should make a will was variously seen as intrusive, unnecessary and inappropriate. For example:

- . It [the letter] said you can make a will out now. That's my business.
- . I thought it was funny .. That bit about a will. I'm not planning to die yet.
- . That's a joke - what have I got to leave to anyone?

Some young people, however, were pleased to receive the letter although several foster parents were less impressed. For example, one young woman said:

I thought it was nice but I showed Jan and Michael (foster parents) and they got very offended. They got nothing in the letter - it was saying "I hope you found our care and support and everything helpful and they thought, 'It was your care?' 'We did it, we gave up our house for her, we clothed and feed you. They didn't, OK! They might have organised court and stuff, but as far as the rest goes, we did it and didn't get a word of thanks', so Jan wrote a letter back saying how she felt it wasn't fair.

In summary, young people were, quite reasonably, asking to be treated with respect, as individuals, and to be given the support they require through their transition to independent living. In essence, they wanted the same support that parents generally give most young people at this time. In this case, the main difference is that the parent is the state. The awareness of some young people of their disadvantaged position is poignant. As one young woman living independently after a history of unstable placements and unsatisfactory relationships said:

I see others who get everything from their parents. Why am I the unlucky one who can't have that too? I can't accept the fact of life. It's so unfair!

#### **6.1.5 District Officers' suggestions for better practice in relation to leaving care.**

District Officers' suggestions for improving the way young people are treated when they are discharged from care, like their earlier suggestions for better practice in substitute care (see Section 4.6), focussed on both the financial and human relationship aspects. The most common complaint was the difficulty of obtaining assistance for former wards, leading to the suggestion that young people leaving care should be entitled to a set amount of money and assistance to 'set them up properly' when they are discharged. This sum should be available to assist with the costs of educational and vocational training, and to cover the costs of setting themselves up independently with furniture, bedding and bed clothes, and connection to services such as electricity and gas.

While there was agreement as to what was needed, there was some difference of opinion as to the source of the problem. Again, for some District Officers, the problem was not with the policy but with the way it was implemented and with the availability of resources.

The provision for after care is appalling. The policy is there but it's not implemented. The guidelines are too broad. There's not enough emphasis on making it a priority and not enough focus on individual needs and the transition from care. Everything is focussed on crisis work, and DOCS don't assign anyone to follow up so no one is responsible.

There are financial problems but they're also stingy, especially at middle management. It's very hard to get requests for financial assistance to ex-wards approved. Lots of requests are refused but we didn't spend all of the budget last year.

Others were critical of the lack of policy in this area and stressed the need for known entitlements for these young people so that what young people are able to obtain does not depend so heavily on the particular officer and office they are 'attached to'. District Officers confirmed what was obvious from what the young people had already said about the variability of support available to them. While some young people were 'set up' with furniture and assistance with educational or vocational training costs, others had little or no help at all, partly as we have already seen, because they were not aware of what assistance they could ask for and were not told.

We do need clear policy on ex-wards. .. Give them a set amount of money on discharge rather than it being arbitrary and dependent on individual offices. We have a good manager so it's not that hard to get money for ex-wards - mostly for things like tertiary education or furniture.

DOCS should also have a set amount for all wards being discharged to get them up in independent living eg., \$5000 for furniture, bond etc. At the moment, it's arbitrary and they have to exhaust charities and NGOs; DOCS is the last resort. The Department needs to update the policies by asking DOs for feedback on current policies.

It's so hard to get money for ex-wards - you have to fight tooth and nail for it, write submissions over and over again, saying the same thing. Finally, she got a \$400 package to move into independent living for furniture etc.<sup>5</sup>

Money, though very important, was not the only concern of District Officers. Again, they echoed the comments of young people calling for some personal contact and follow-up for young people leaving care. Some District Officers continued to maintain contact with some young people for some considerable time after they were discharged from care but had to do so in their own time. In some cases, this meant taking phone calls after hours and meeting the young person for an occasional cup of coffee. As the District Officers who were interviewed said, the main problem is that this form of contact is arbitrary and depends on the type of relationship they had built up with the young person, whether they have the time, and whether they and the young person remained living in the same area. Time, the limited ability to maintain some consistency and continuity and staff turn-over rates were the main constraints.

We need a transition from care worker to follow up after discharge. DOs can't do it with their heavy workload.

The pity of it is that we don't have programs specifically to care for wards after they leave care. We need to have some process of following them up, even if it's only six-monthly, to make sure they're OK and have what they need rather than wait for them to come to see us. The other problem we have is that the staff change all the time and so wards and ex-wards don't want to have to go through the whole story again with someone else- apart from the fact that ex-wards are reluctant to show the Department they need anything. And they often get either very angry or

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<sup>5</sup> This same District Officer commented on the variability in the way Victim Compensation was dealt with in different offices:

Victim compensation varies from office to office - all victim cases should be established and referred to a solicitor.



don't say anything.

It is clear then that District Officers are generally conscious of the need to offer a better service to young people leaving care but are only too well aware of the constraints. These include vague legislation, unclear policy, variable attitudes to providing such support among management, and the lack of time and human and financial resources.

## 6.2 Accommodation after discharge

The ambivalence and uncertainty of young ex-wards is hardly surprising when their views and circumstances are compared with those of young people in the 'at home' comparison group. In general, ex-wards do not have the stability of accommodation and security of support that young people living at home with their parents have.

### Reasons for leaving pre-discharge accommodation

I thought it was time to try living in my own place (leaving long-term foster home).

I was having problems with foster family. Never really got along with them. The biggest problem was that the foster parents' natural child caused a lot of problems - different treatment, she goes to school and tells everyone we are wards and she didn't want us at her home. *How did your foster parents treat you?* They used to put us down.

I left because my cousins were leaving the house and there was lots of bitching going on and they hassled me, back-stabbing.

I moved out because my sister was having problems where she was living and asked me to live with her.

Staying there [in mother's garage] was only temporary because I don't get on with my Mum because of what she done with her boyfriend years ago when he attacked me and that and I've never gotten on with her.

Three months after they were discharged from wardship, just over half of the young people leaving care in the interview group (n = 25, 53.2 per cent) were still living at the same place they were in at the first interview (before they were discharged). This was generally in line with their expectations as only just over half expected to continue to live in the same place after they were discharged from care. Twelve months after discharge, this had dropped to just under a quarter (n = 11, 23.4 per cent).<sup>6</sup> Their reasons for leaving their last placement before discharge were varied but the two main reasons were conflict with the people they were living with (32.3 per cent)

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<sup>6</sup> If the two young women who could not be located for the third interview because they had moved again are included, that proportion is 25.5 per cent.

and a desire to be independent (23.5 per cent). The cause of the conflict that induced young people to leave was either that they had problems with the behaviour of the people they were living with or near (eg., fussiness, drinking, gambling, or abusive behaviour) or that the people they were living with had problems with their behaviour (not abiding by parents' or refuge rules). If conflict was the reason for leaving their foster home, this move was likely to come within three months of discharge whereas those leaving to gain independence were just as likely to do so after 12 months. In some cases, the accommodation arrangements at discharge had been temporary or circumstances changed (eg, the person they were living with sold the house or was evicted and moved), and in several cases, young people left to study elsewhere.

What type of accommodation did they move from and to? Just before discharge from wardship, just under half (46.8 per cent) the young people in the interview study were still in some form of foster care and one in five (19.2 per cent) were living with one or both parents (Table 6.2). Eleven young people left their foster homes: seven to move into independent living of some kind (shared rental or supported accommodation), three to live with a friend's family, and one to a juvenile detention centre. Two also moved out for a short time but returned when they found it difficult to cope with independent living. The move from their foster home to other accommodation was expected in all except three cases: one young woman was pregnant and moved out to have more space and to avoid becoming dependent on her foster mother after the baby was born, and 'things just didn't work out' for the other two young people.

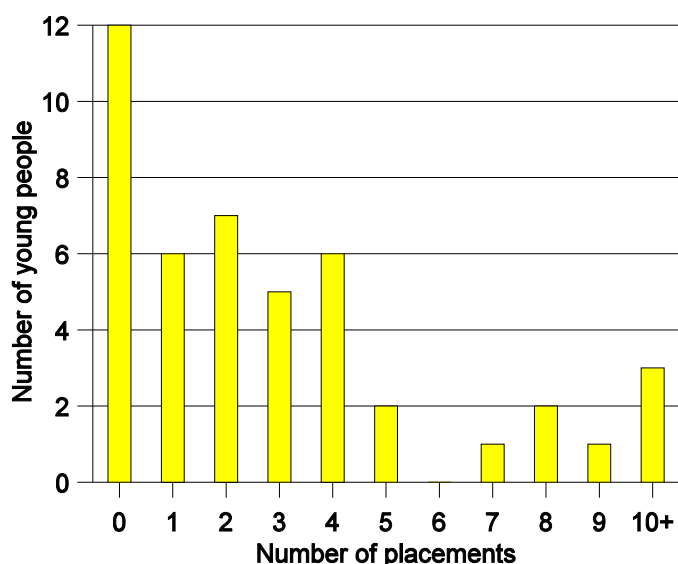
Of the seven young people who were living with their parents before discharge, four continued to do so, in line with their expectations, and three moved out because of arguments and difficulties. The move came as no surprise to two of them and had been predicted at the first interview. They had fully intended to leave if things became difficult. They moved to independent/shared living arrangements, with a period on 'the streets' or in a refuge for two of them in the interim.

Nearly all the young people (10 out of 12) who were already living independently before they were discharged from wardship continued to do so, though rarely in the same place. All but one had lived in at least one other place between the first and second interview. Two young people, however, moved back to their parents or foster parents from independent living after they were discharged.

**Table 6.2 Places where young people living at time of three interviews**

|   | Before discharge |              | After discharge |              |             |              |
|---|------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
|   | Interview 1      |              | Interview 2     |              | Interview 3 |              |
|   | n                | %            | n               | %            | n           | %            |
| Foster home   | 14               | 29.8         | 13              | 27.7         | 8           | 17.8         |
| Relative foster                                       | 5                | 10.6         | 3               | 6.4          | 2           | 4.4          |
| Self-selected foster                                  | 3                | 6.4          | 1               | 2.1          | 1           | 2.2          |
| Natural parent/s                                      | 9                | 19.1         | 5               | 10.6         | 4           | 8.9          |
| Supported accommodation/<br>refuge                    | 6                | 12.8         | 8               | 14.9         | 3           | 6.7          |
| Independent/shared                                    | 6                | 12.8         | 12              | 25.5         | 19          | 42.2         |
| Friend's family                                       | 3                | 6.4          | 5               | 10.6         | 3           | 6.7          |
| Other (college/detention centre/<br>residential care) | 1                | 2.1          | 1               | 2.1          | 5           | 11.1         |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>47</b>        | <b>100.0</b> | <b>47</b>       | <b>100.0</b> | <b>45</b>   | <b>100.0</b> |

Overall, three out of four young ex-wards ( $n = 34$ , 75.5 per cent) had moved from their pre-discharge place of living within a year or so of being discharged. During this time, they lived on average in about three different places (mean = 2.98,  $sd = 3.19$ ) with the number ranging between one to 12 (see Figure 6.2). Seven young people moved seven or more times. Significantly, the more placements young people had during their time in care, the more moves they were likely to make after they were discharged from wardship ( $r = .55$ ,  $n = 45$ ,  $p < .0001$ ).



**Figure 6.2 Number of places since discharge**

Table 6. 3 shows the total number of places young people lived in after discharge and the percentage of young people who lived in at least one of these. The most common was independent or shared accommodation, with over half the young people (55.5 per cent) having lived independently at least once since leaving their former accommodation. The next most common was living with friends or similar age siblings or cousins, generally on a short-term basis. This was not sharing in the sense of equal responsibility because the young ex-wards were not responsible for the rent, although they may have made some contribution to the cost of staying there. A third of the young people lived at least once, and several up to six times, in this type of accommodation since their discharge from wardship. One young woman, for example, moved from one friend's place to another in a series of short-term stays, lasting from a few days to five or six weeks. She met several different women at refuges or clubs but none of these arrangements proved to be very successful.

First I moved into a flat with a woman I met at the refuge but she drank and didn't look after her kid and was always yelling and carrying on. So I went to a friend's for about three weeks but we got evicted because my friend didn't pay the rent and she had animals and it wasn't allowed. The next place was just for a few days with another woman; that was only temporary. I moved back with Mum for four months and that was OK until the end; we had a fight and Mum put all my stuff on the verandah and locked me out. Next I lived with a lady I met at the RSL in her flat but then her son came back so there was no room.

At the time she was officially discharged from wardship, she was living in a refuge.

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**Table 6. 3 Total number of places since discharge from wardship (interview group)**

| Type of accommodation    | n  | % of responses | % of young people |
|--------------------------|----|----------------|-------------------|
| Independent/share        | 53 | 29.9           | 57.4              |
| Foster home              | 36 | 20.3           | 48.8              |
| Friends/friend's family  | 35 | 19.7           | 37.2              |
| Supported accommodation/ |    |                |                   |
| Boarding house/board     | 15 | 8.5            | 26.7              |
| Refuge                   | 15 | 8.5            | 17.7              |
| Parents                  | 13 | 7.3            | 15.5              |
| 'Street'                 | 6  | 3.3            | 13.3              |
| College                  | 2  | 1.1            | 4.5               |
| Prison/detention centre  | 2  | 1.1            | 4.5               |

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Eight young people (13.3 per cent) stayed in at least one refuge after they were discharged from wardship, and in fact, two, both young women, were living in refuges at the time they were discharged. One of these young

women was atypical of this group because she remained living at the one long-term refuge from before discharge to at least 12 months after it. She also had fewer placements in care (four) than the rest of the group, whose average number of placements was 12.8, with a range from 7 to 22. Their instability in care was also followed by considerable mobility after care with the number of times they moved ranging from 2 to 12, and averaging 6.6, well above the average of the interview group as a whole. In addition to refuges, these young people also relied on friends and relatives, and several also spent some nights on the streets.<sup>7</sup> In the words of one young woman, when asked where she had been living since the last time we interviewed her:

Lots of places .. Here and there, and round about. Refuges, on the streets [sleeping in train station], with friends, sharing. I couldn't stay in some places - trouble. Other places, I had no choice [about staying] because things didn't work out or it was only for a short time anyway.

One of this group also spent time in gaol, following time in several detention centres during wardship.<sup>8</sup>

The short-term or temporary nature of some living arrangements was clearly a significant reason for some young people moving from one place to another. The main reason for young people's moves after discharge, however, was conflict of some type or 'things not working out', with just under half moving at least once for this reason (47 per cent). Generally, this involved different expectations over issues like house-work, going out, or money but in several cases, the problems were very serious. One young woman was sexually assaulted by the land-lord, another had to leave the property she was working on because of sexual harassment by the owner, and another was advised to move (and did so) after she became involved as a witness when her neighbour in a supported accommodation scheme was sexually assaulted. One young woman said she left the flat she was sharing when she had 'a bad experience' and the 'neighbour came home drunk and tried to shoot me'. An Aboriginal young woman had problems with racism in a country town and was denied accommodation by one estate agency and made to feel uncomfortable when she moved into one set of units.

Poor quality accommodation and lack of maintenance, as well as insecurity of tenure, were other common reasons for moving, with one in four (24.4 per cent) young people leaving at least one place since discharge for this reason. For example, one young man said in relation to the boarding house he had been staying in:

I'm relieved to have left because I couldn't live there. I wasn't getting anywhere. It stinks, it's filthy, it's disgusting, he doesn't keep it clean for the tenants.

Another said:

It would smell, there was mildew on the walls and water downstairs, and we were without hot water for about a week and they never came around to fix it or anything and he was really rude to us.

It is clear then that while some young people had stable, secure accommodation, a number had problems finding somewhere that was affordable, secure and suitable. Within 12 months of leaving wardship, most had left their former living place, and about a third had moved at least three or more times. A substantial proportion of

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<sup>7</sup> In both cases, more young people indicated that they had been 'on the streets' or stayed in a refuge *before* they were discharged from wardship than afterwards.

<sup>8</sup> Another young man was interviewed for the second and third time in different detention centres.

young people were in or had been in temporary accommodation of some sort (friend's/friend's family, boarding, supported accommodation, refuge, boarding house, street) by the third interview. How comparable then is the experience of young people living away from home without having been in care?

**6. 2. 1 Comparison group of young people living away from home.** Most young people in the 'away from home' comparison group left home between the ages of 16 and 18, although some left home as early as 11 to 13; the average age was 15.5 years. The average length of time that they had been away from home varied from two months to six and a half years, and was fairly evenly spread across that range (mean = 2.48 years, sd = 1.85). During that period, they lived in a number of places, ranging in number from one to 51 (median = 5). Atypical of the group was the young man who had been at the one long-term refuge for 18 months and had moved there from home because he could not study at home; he was studying for his Higher School Certificate on AUSTUDY at the homeless rate and intended to return home after the HSC year was over.

The type of accommodation and the percentage of young people living in at least one of each type at some stage since they left home is shown in Table 6.4. The three most common forms of accommodation in terms of the number of young people using them were independent and shared living, supported accommodation, and refuges. Refuges were the most numerous, however, because they were generally short-term places and young people who did stay in refuges (n = 11) tended to stay in more than one. One young person, for example, listed at least 12 refuges among the various places she had stayed, including friend's places, 'squats', and several short stays with her mother and other relatives in the five years since she left home at 13. While not statistically significant because of the small numbers involved, there was a trend for young women, like the one mentioned above, to be more likely than young men to stay with parents (6 out of 9 compared with 1 out of 11) or relatives (5 out of 9 compared with 3 out of 11) on a short-term basis.

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**Table 6. 4 'Away from home' comparison group: Total number of places since left home**

| <i>Type of accommodation</i>                     | n  | % of responses | % of young people |
|--|----|----------------|-------------------|
| Independent/share                                | 24 | 21.6           | 65.0              |
| Supported accommodation/<br>boarding house/board | 14 | 12.6           | 60.0              |
| Refuge   | 32 | 28.8           | 55.0              |
| Friends/friend's family                          | 18 | 16.2           | 45.0              |
| Relatives  | 13 | 11.7           | 40.0              |
| Parents (short-term)                             | 9  | 8.1            | 35.0              |
| 'Street'   | 7  | 0.9            | 35.0              |

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Once again, conflict or 'things not working out' and the short-term nature of some forms of accommodation were the main reasons young people left the places they were staying. Eight young people in the

'away from home' comparison group were also evicted from at least one place because they were unable to pay the rent, especially when the person they were living with moved on. In contrast with the wards sample, several young people also mentioned that they had been asked to leave various refuges and supported accommodation places because of drug and alcohol involvement. One 17 year-old who left home at 12 and had stayed in 12 places said of one refuge or lodge:

I thought this place would be cool - swimming pool and my own room - but it had a 10 pm curfew and I got kicked out for 'tripping out'.

Several also complained of violence in some refuges and the same 17 year-old said she had been 'kicked out' of another refuge for 'beating up' another girl who 'got my friends kicked out'.

In summary, then, the type of accommodation and the patterns of movement of this group of young people who were living away from home were similar to those of the sub-group of wards who were least stable in their accommodation, both before and after they were discharged from wardship. Most were in or had been in temporary accommodation.

**6. 2. 2 *Young people's expectations about a place to live.*** At each of the three interviews, young people in the wards interview group were asked what they did and did not like about the place they were currently living. They were also asked what their idea of a home was, and if they had ever lived 'somewhere like that'. Young people in the two comparison groups were also asked the same questions.

The two main aspects that most young people, living at home and elsewhere, liked in their current place or wanted in a place to live were privacy, freedom to do things as they wanted, and the acceptance of the people they were they were living with. Their ideas of what constituted 'a home' were dominated by references to 'being with people you can be comfortable with', 'people who love you and care about you' and also, privacy and control. For one 18 year-old in the comparison group still living at home but rather unhappily, the wish for acceptance was particularly clear in his idea of what makes a home.

Just people you can feel comfortable with and you don't have to worry about what they're thinking and you can just be totally yourself and know they'll accept you for what you are.

Not all young people wanted to live with someone else, however. For several ex-wards and several young people in the 'away from home' comparison group, the most important requirement was not the size or quality of the place but the fact that it was theirs alone, and that they were not required to meet anyone else's expectations. One young ex-ward living in a caravan said, for example, when asked what he liked about his current accommodation:

Not much, but it's mine. I keep to myself. I don't clash with anyone because it's self-contained and there's no one looking over you.

Similarly, an 18 year-old living in a supported accommodation lodge said:

I've got this vision - a place where I can have a telly and, for the first time in my life, if there's something I want to watch, I can. That's a fantasy.

Other ex-wards said what they liked was:

The freedom .. Where I was before [boarding with older friends], Michael and Sandra were still like older brother and sister. Now we're all equal .. All our names are on the lease and we all moved in together. It's easier to have visitors and it feels more like home. [Shared house]

Privacy. It's my own place - and it feels different when it's your own place. [Flat]

It's comfortable, supportive and I've got freedom. [Stable foster home]

### What do you like about the place you're living in now?

#### *'Away from home' comparison group*

It's OK - good people and we get on OK. [Supported accommodation]

No one to tell me what to do .. Own space, own yard. [Rented house shared with partner]

It has its ups and downs. It's safe, I guess, and there's workers to talk to but I don't like the rules. [Refuge]

#### *'At home' comparison group*

Things are better now... because they pretty well let me do what I want as long as I tell them. Still don't like the questioning though. Like if I ring up, they want to know every little detail.

Mum and Dad are pretty good. They give us our space and help us out when we need it. They let us do mostly what we want.

It's been fine. When I was 15 or 16, I rebelled a bit, went a bit crazy for a while. But everything's worked out fine since. It's secure and comfortable and I live with people I love.

In summary, young people with and without experience of wardship generally wanted security, privacy and support and acceptance in the places they live. Unfortunately, despite or perhaps because of the number of places they had lived or stayed during their lives, a number of young people in the *'away from home'* comparison group, some ex-wards, and one person only in the *'at home'* comparison group did not feel they had ever lived anywhere that met their definition of a home and felt like 'home' to them. It is significant, however, that young people who had been in wardship were **less** likely to feel that they had **never** lived in a 'real home' than young people who left home early and had not had the support of the Department. Three-quarters of the ex-wards (n = 32, 74.4 per



cent)<sup>9</sup> said they had lived somewhere they would call 'home' compared with less than half the young people in the 'away from home' comparison group (n = 9, 45 per cent). For most of these ex-wards, the places they saw as 'home' were their former (n = 15, 34.9 per cent) or current (n = 130, 30.2 per cent) foster homes. Two additional young people said the same about the children's home they lived in, and the other places were their current independent/share arrangements or supported accommodation.

**6. 2. 3 Preparation for and required assistance with independent living.** Most of the ex-wards at the third interview (66.7 per cent) and most of the young people in the 'at home' comparison group (70 per cent) expected to be still living in the same place six months later compared with only just over a quarter of the young people in the 'away from home' comparison group (29.4 per cent). Indeed, the majority of those in the 'at home' comparison group (65 per cent) said they were not yet ready to leave home and did not intend to do so for some time or until they had completed their course of study or had saved more money. Several said their parents, and in particular, their mother, were not keen for them to leave home.

All were asked how well they were coping with or, if they had not yet left home, how well they expected to cope with independent living and what type of assistance with accommodation, if any, they felt they needed.

Young people who were about to be discharged from wardship were split into two groups - those who had never been in any form of independent living and those who had tried it or were currently living independently (including supported accommodation). When asked how well they thought they would or did manage several aspects of living independently, there was little difference between the two groups. Those who had already tried independent living and those who were yet to do so were quite confident about their ability to cook (70 per cent in both groups said they could manage fairly or very well), clean (already independent, 91.7 per cent; not yet independent, 75 per cent) and get on with other people (already independent, 83.3 per cent; not yet independent, 70 per cent). Both groups were much less confident about their ability to manage money successfully, with only about half saying they expected to cope fairly or very well (already independent, 42.1 per cent; not yet independent, 54.2 per cent). Just after discharge from wardship, most young people who were then not living with their parents or foster parents said that they felt prepared for independent living but again money management and finding somewhere to live were the two aspects of independent living that a number - about half- said were harder than they had expected. In contrast, only up to a quarter found other aspects such as cooking, shopping, claiming benefits and cleaning more difficult than expected. Young people in the 'away from home' comparison group gave very similar answers, and managing money was also the primary concern of young people in the 'at home' comparison group, and the main reason that they were not looking forward to leaving home. Typical comments for this group were:

- . When I have money, I just spend it.
- . I think the cost of living is going to hit me hard.

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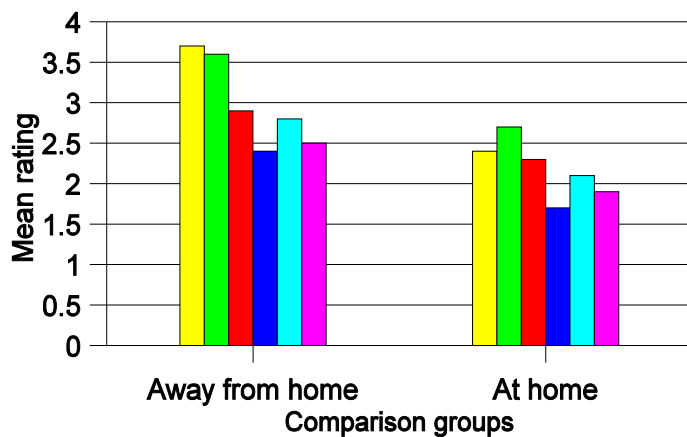
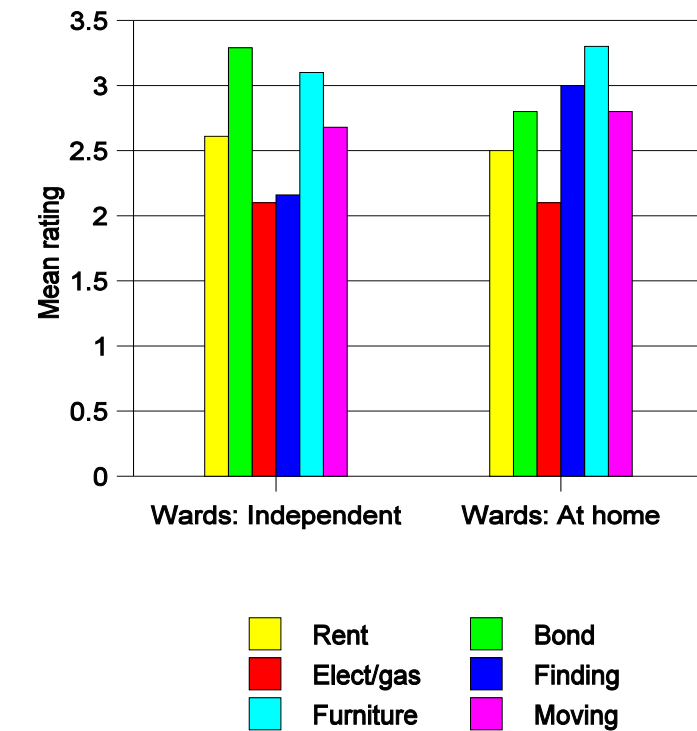
<sup>9</sup> There were two missing responses so the number of respondents was 43. If only the young people who entered wardship from the age of 12 are included, the percentage was slightly lower (63.6 per cent) but still markedly higher than the 45 per cent for young people who had not been in care but were living away from

- Money is a bit of a worry. I mean, obviously you have to manage your money so you can pay your bills on time. I'd end up doing it but at first, it would be difficult .. Realising I couldn't spend my money when I felt like it, like I do now because I have no bills or anything to pay for..

When asked what help they had had to prepare them for independent living, just over half the ex-wards said they had some form of preparation, and 70 per cent said it had been helpful. The primary source of this help varied but was primarily foster parents for independent living skills such as cooking, cleaning, looking after clothes, and budgeting. Schools were named as the main source of information about health. In all areas, however, a significant proportion of young people (30 to 47 per cent) said either that they had prepared themselves or that no one had. Again there was little difference between the groups.

Just before discharge, 60 per cent of young people indicated that they would attend living skills workshops if they were offered. Those who said they had already had some preparation for independent living were just as likely to say they would attend as those who had little preparation.

When young people in all three groups were asked how important various forms of assistance with accommodation would have been or would be (if they had not yet moved to independent living) there were clear differences between the groups (see Figure 6.3 and Table 2 in Appendix 6). Several comparisons were made: (a) between ex-wards who were in some form of independent living at the third interview and young people in the '*away from home*' comparison group; (b) between ex-wards still living with their biological or foster parents and young people in the '*still at home*' comparison group; and (c) between young people in the two comparison groups.



**Figure 6.3 Mean ratings of importance for aspects of assistance with accommodation for wards living independently and at home 12 months after discharge, and young people in comparison groups**

For young people trying to set themselves up in independent accommodation without support, the money required for commercial rent, for the bond and forward rent on the premises, and for connecting services is a prohibitive barrier. For the young people in the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group, the three main cash forms of assistance with accommodation - money for rent assistance, and bonds on the premises and the connection of services were therefore seen as the most important help they could receive. They rated them significantly more highly than any other group, including the group of ex-wards living away from home. Obtaining some help to pay the bond money on rented accommodation was rated as being more important by the two groups of young people

who were already living away from home than by those still living at home, but the only significant difference was between the two comparison groups.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to the cash forms of assistance, help with finding accommodation, furnishing it and moving were clearly rated by ex-wards who were not yet in independent living as being the most important forms of assistance. They rated these forms of help as significantly more important than the other groups did, with the exception of help with furniture for ex-wards already in independent living. Some wards had some help from the Department setting themselves up with bed clothes and several had been given some cheap furniture but a number mentioned that they would like to have their own bed and perhaps a wardrobe or a fridge. One young man living in a boarding house had no access to a refrigerator and therefore no means of keeping milk or cool drinks and perishables in summer.

The generally low ratings across the board by young people in the '*at home*' comparison group are explained by their comments and their expectation of support from relatives, especially in finding somewhere to live, moving, and furnishing the place. These young people were also not intending to move until they could afford to do so. While they were still studying or in apprenticeships, they intended to stay home, and since most were happy there, they had no reason as yet to move. Only one said he would have left home at that time if he had the means to do so. Several also said that they would not want any form of government assistance because they believed that other people needed it 'much more' than they did. These young people were also generally fairly secure with the 'safety net' of knowing that 'if things did not work out' and they could not cope, that they would be welcome back home again.

### 6.3 Education and employment

At the first interview just before discharge from wardship, 63.8 per cent of young people were studying or working, and 36.2 per cent were unemployed. Three months after discharge, 44.7 per cent were studying (or about to begin a new course), 19.1 per cent were working, and 25.7 per cent were unemployed. Another four young women (8.5 per cent) were pregnant or had a child, and were not in paid work, and one young man was in a detention centre.

Twelve months after discharge, the picture changed significantly, with more young ex-wards unemployed than studying or working. Ten were studying (or about to begin a new course), either at school ( $n = 2$ ), at TAFE ( $n = 4$ ) or at some other college or institution (e.g. business college, maritime college:  $n = 2$ ). All except one had been studying at the time of the previous two interviews - before and just after discharge. Nine (20 per cent) were working, and four young women were pregnant or looking after their child. Two young men were in correctional institutions (one in a juvenile detention centre and one in prison). The remaining 20 young people (44.4 per cent) were unemployed. This rate of unemployment is much higher than the overall rate for young people their age. Labour Force statistics in 1994 indicated that about 27 per cent of 15-19 year-olds were unemployed.<sup>11</sup>

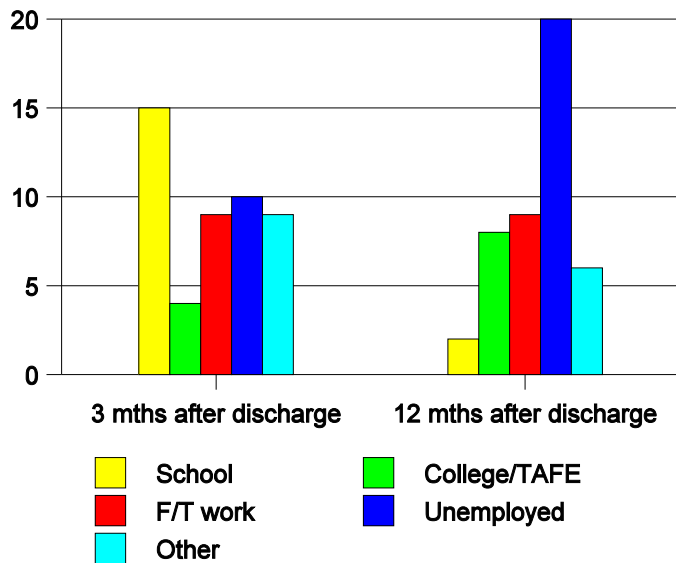
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<sup>10</sup> ( $t(34) = 2.3, p < .05$ ).

<sup>11</sup> Boss, Edwards, & Pitman (1995), p. 283; figures extracted from *Labour Force, Australia*, February 1994, ABS Cat No 6203.0.

In this group of ex-wards, the unemployment rate was 38.9 per cent for males and 55.6 per cent for females.<sup>12</sup> The young women in particular were very heavily over-represented, with about double the unemployment rate of their age-mates. The disproportion becomes even more marked when their completion rate of Year 12 (41 per cent) is taken into account since young people who complete Year 12 are less likely to be unemployed than those who left school before completing Year 12.<sup>13</sup>

Several main patterns of continuity and change in educational and employment status emerged between the earlier and later interviews. Positive or normative patterns involved remaining in work or study, moving from school to work or moving from unemployment to work or study. As outlined above, six young people continued to study, although most moved from school to some form of tertiary study. Three young people also remained in work, although not necessarily the same job, and four started work after leaving school. One young woman who had been unemployed found work in Melbourne through a friend, and one young man living in a refuge returned to complete Year 10 at TAFE after some time out of school and without work. He planned to complete secondary school and then study agricultural science. Less positive changes involved moving from school into unemployment (n = 8, 17.7 per cent) and from employment into unemployment. Five young people who had been working just after discharge were no longer working. Two had been retrenched, one was pregnant, and one had left her job as a result of sexual harassment. Another young man discontinued his apprenticeship because of back problems but continued with his part-time job at a child care centre; he was about to start a course in child care at TAFE.



**Figure 6.4 Educational and work status of ex-wards**

**6.3.1 Comparison groups.** Not surprisingly, the two comparison groups were very different from each

<sup>12</sup> This figure excludes the four young women who were pregnant or looking after young children.

<sup>13</sup> Boss, Edwards, & Pitman (1995), pp. 283-284.

other, with most of the *'away from home'* group neither employed nor studying (75 per cent). Five who were currently unemployed had been employed but two had been retrenched, one had stopped working because she was pregnant, one was fired for taking time off, and one left because of sexual harassment. The rate of unemployment in this group is therefore higher than that of the ex-wards, and again much higher than the overall rate for their age-mates. In contrast, most of the *'at home'* comparison group were either employed or studying (or about to start a course) (90 per cent); in addition, four students were working part-time. One young woman who was still living at home was about to move to Melbourne to take up a job with her uncle and one young man was still looking for work and prepared *'to do anything'* in the short-term.

**6.3.2 Work aspirations and expectations.** Most of the nine ex-wards who were working were happy with the work they were doing and saw it as long-term job. Two, however, were looking to move to other fields that interested them more (e.g. travel industry and the armed forces) and several others indicated that they might be interested in other areas such as photography, travel and the hospitality industry. Six of the nine were still living with foster parents, one was boarding, and two were in independent accommodation.

Similarly, the young people in the *'at home'* comparison group who were employed and saw that position as long-term were very happy with the work they were doing; two were apprentices (as a book-binder and as an electrician), and three were in traineeships in different fields (clerical, chef and hospitality). Four other young people working as sales assistants or in as storemen were in short-term and part-time employment to help support themselves while they were studying .

Ex-wards who were still studying 12 months after discharge and young people in the comparison groups who were still studying were interested in a wide range of areas such as agricultural and marine science, social work, nursing, music, child care, the police service and several trades (auto-electrician, electronic technician, painting). All believed they had at least some chance of getting a job and were therefore more optimistic than other ex-wards who were unemployed. They were still mostly living with foster parents or parents or had moved into college accommodation; one was living in a refuge and one was living independently.

Similarly, the young people still studying in the *'at home'* comparison group all believed they would eventually have a good chance of gaining work in the field of their choice. Again the range was wide and included similar choices (child care, welfare work, nursing, police service, audio-engineering, fisheries inspector, and the hospitality industry). Three young people in the *'away from home'* comparison group were also still studying while living in refuges and hoped to complete their secondary education before doing further study towards their long-term goal of working either in a trade or in welfare work.

The main difference between the ex-wards and the young people in the comparison groups appears among the unemployed in job expectations. Whereas most ex-wards who were unemployed (i.e. 60.8 per cent of those on *JSA, Newstart* but not on *Sickness Benefit* or *Sole Parent's Pension*) believed that their chances of getting a job were poor<sup>14</sup>, unemployed young people in the *'away from home'* comparison group were more optimistic; only 33

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<sup>14</sup> Just over 60 per cent of unemployed ex-wards were in some form of independent accommodation but 30 per cent were still living with foster parents, parents or with a friend's family.

per cent believed that their chances were poor. In both groups, while some young people indicated that they were interested in working in specific areas (such as the hospitality industry, in child care, office work, art or working with horses), a number said they would ‘do anything’ to get work experience and money, and several said they would like to work as volunteers to gain experience. Most unemployed ex-wards (75 per cent) and most unemployed young people in the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group (70 per cent) were interested in further training, and several who were then living in refuges wanted to return to school the following year, despite the recognised difficulties of trying to study while living in this type of accommodation (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness, 1995).

**6. 3. 3 Schooling.** The difficulty some of these young people were having and had gaining employment is at least partly attributable to the problems they experienced at school and to their consequent lack of qualifications. One of the ‘side effects’ or concomitants of children moving from one placement to another while they are in care is that they often need to change schools as well. This is likely to affect their friendships, their rapport with teachers and their familiarity with the curriculum.

At the third interview when most young people who had been in wardship had completed their schooling, they were asked about the number of schools they had attended, and with some hindsight whether their time at school had been ‘happy’ and whether their school experience had helped them in any way while they were in care. They were also asked earlier how well they ‘got along’ with their teachers, their class-mates and how well they had been doing. Young people in the comparison groups were asked similar questions.

**Table 6.5 Last year of school completed at time of (last) interview**

| <i>Year of school</i> | Wards     |              | Comparison groups |              |           |              |
|-----------------------|-----------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|
|                       |           |              | Away from home    |              | At home   |              |
|                       | n         | %            | n                 | %            | n         | %            |
| Below Year 10         | 11        | 24.5         | 4                 | 20.0         | 1         | 5.0          |
| Year 10               | 13        | 28.9         | 7                 | 35.0         | 2         | 10.0         |
| Year 11               | 5         | 11.1         | 6                 | 30.0         | 1         | 5.0          |
| Year 12 & HSC         | 16        | 35.6         | 2                 | 10.0         | 16        | 80.0         |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>45</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>20</b>         | <b>100.0</b> | <b>20</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

Table 6.5 shows the last year of schooling completed by young people in the three groups at the time of the last (wards) or only interview (comparison groups).<sup>15</sup> Eight out of ten young people in the ‘*at home*’ comparison group had completed Year 12 compared with 35.6 per cent of ex-wards and only 10 per cent of those in the ‘*away from*

<sup>15</sup> See Section 5.3 for information on the last year of schooling completed before wards were discharged from wardship.

*home*' comparison group. The overall difference was statistically significant and there was also an indication that young people who had been in wardship were more likely to complete Year 12 than those in the '*away from home*' comparison group ( $p < .07$ ).<sup>16</sup> The most obvious factor in these differences among the three groups of young people in their completion rate for secondary schooling is therefore whether or not they had somewhere stable to live. Not surprisingly, stability of placement was also a factor within the wardship group. The more placements wards had lived in while they were in care, the fewer years of high school they completed ( $r = -.42$ ).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, those who had lived in one long-term placement (at least 75 per cent of their time in care) were more likely to have completed at least Year 10, even if they were no longer in that long-term placement just before they were discharged from care.<sup>18</sup> Ten of the 11 young people who did *not* complete Year 10 had *not* lived in one long-term placement. It is clear then that completion rate was related to stability of placement or living arrangements; so also was the number of schools attended.

**Table 6.6 Mean number of primary and high schools attended**

|                                | Primary schools |     | High schools |     | Overall number |     |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-----|--------------|-----|----------------|-----|
|                                | Mean            | sd  | Mean         | sd  | Mean           | sd  |
| <i>Wards</i>                   |                 |     |              |     |                |     |
| All                            | 3.4             | 3.2 | 2.2          | 1.1 | 5.4            | 3.3 |
| In long-term placement         | 2.5             | 2.5 | 1.7          | 0.9 | 4.1            | 2.8 |
| No long-term placement         | 4.5             | 3.6 | 2.7          | 0.9 | 6.8            | 3.2 |
| Adolescent entry into wardship | 4.3             | 1.1 | 2.7          | 2.3 | 5.8            | 1.8 |
| <i>Comparison groups</i>       |                 |     |              |     |                |     |
| Away from home                 | 4.1             | 3.2 | 2.8          | 1.8 | 6.9            | 3.9 |
| At home                        | 1.2             | 0.4 | 1.1          | 0.2 | 2.3            | 0.5 |

Table 6.6 shows the average number of schools attended by young people in the three groups, and in several sub-groups of the wards. Clearly, most young people in the '*at home*' comparison group who were still living at home with their parents, and generally in very stable circumstances, attended only one primary school and one high school. This was significantly fewer than the average number of primary and high schools attended by young people who had been

<sup>16</sup>  $\chi^2 = 21.87, 4 \text{ df}, p < .001$ ; ex-wards were also more likely to complete Year 12 than those in the '*away from home*' comparison group:  $\chi^2 = 5.3, 2 \text{ df}, p < .07$ .

<sup>17</sup> The total number of placements following entry into care was negatively correlated with the number of years of school completed ( $r = -.42, n = 47, p < .005$ ).

<sup>18</sup>  $\chi^2 = 8.32, 2 \text{ df}, p < .02$ .



in wardship<sup>19</sup> and by young people in the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group.<sup>20</sup>

Looking at the wards alone, placement stability and school continuity were closely related. The more placements children experienced as wards, the more schools they attended ( $r = .49, p < .005$ ). Not surprisingly, wards who had been in one long-term placement for at least 75 per cent of their time in care attended fewer schools than those who did not experience such a long-term placement. In several cases, it is clear that the stability of a long-term placement in wardship allowed some young people to settle into one school community after considerable movement between schools before wardship.

When young people were asked to assess how well they ‘got on’ with their classmates, their teachers and in their schoolwork, there were no significant differences, although overall young people tended to be more positive about their relationships with their classmates than about their relationships with the teachers or their grades. Young people in the ‘*at home*’ comparison group also tended to be more positive than the ex-wards or the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group. About nine out of ten young people in the ‘*at home*’ group, two-thirds of the wards, and two-thirds of the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group said they ‘got on’ well with their classmates. The figures for ‘getting on well’ with their teachers were 70 per cent (‘*at home*’ group), 61.7 per cent (wards) and 45 per cent (‘*away from home*’ group). The figures for doing well in their school-work were lower, with between 30 per cent (‘*away from home*’) and 40 per cent (‘*at home*’) saying they had done well or fairly well. Although trends are apparent in these figures, the lack of difference between the three groups is somewhat surprising since more of the young people in the ‘*at home*’ comparison group completed Year 12 than in either of the other two groups. In addition, within the wards group, those who were still at school at the first interview said they did better at school than those who were not still in schooling (Section 5.3). Once again, the number of schools they attended and the number of placements they lived in were related to how well wards got on with their classmates ( $r = .37$  and  $-.34$ ) and how well they thought they did at school ( $r = -.45$  and  $-.33$ ). The more schools and the more placements, the poorer their performance and the poorer their relationship with classmates.

Where there was a difference, however, was in young people’s happiness ratings for their time at school. The ‘*at home*’ comparison group were significantly happier at school than young people who were either wards or in the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group.<sup>21</sup>

**When you think back on your time at school,  
do you think of it as a happy time or not?**

**Wards**

- . Social side of things was good, academic side not so good.

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<sup>19</sup> The difference in the number of primary schools was significant:  $t(43 \text{ df}) = 3.27, p < .005$ ; so also was the difference between the groups in the number of high schools:  $t(37.1 \text{ df}) = 5.22, p < .001$ .

<sup>20</sup> Primary schools:  $t(18.7 \text{ df}) = 3.90, p < .001$ ; high schools:  $t(18.7 \text{ df}) = 4.05, p < .001$ .

<sup>21</sup>  $F(2, 82) = 4.36, p < .02$ ; in multiple comparisons, the ‘*at home*’ comparison group was happier (mean rating of 3.05 on 4-point scale,  $sd = 0.99$ ) than either the wards (mean rating of 2.38,  $sd = 1.05; p < .02$ ) or the ‘*away from home*’ group (mean rating of 2.15,  $sd = 1.05; p < .005$ ).

- It was quite hard because I was moving on all the time and I never got time to settle in. If I did settle in, it was time to go [pre-wardship]. I went to about seven schools all up and I always felt different but I became quite a star at high school because I was really good at sport.
- Not really, the younger days weren't [happy]. I kept moving schools. Years 7, 8 and 9 were probably OK. I had a few laughs. But then as boy-friends came around, everything became bitchy and I had a miserable time. Then I moved high school and the next school was probably all right but I didn't go out of my way to make girlfriends because of the girls at XX, I felt they had it in for me.

***'Away from home' comparison group***

- I didn't like school much but the good thing about it was that I was away from my father. But I used to lie at 'news' and say how he took me out because otherwise all I could talk about was how he abused me.
- It was more fun at school than at home - early on anyway. But I didn't get on with the teachers at high school mostly ... They used to walk in and say 'I'm paid to be here, not to teach you'.
- I was always a problem at school. Always up at the office. I tried hard but I could never get an 'A'. I tried so hard and got really angry with myself, and then I'd just say 'Oh, stuff it'.
- It's pretty hard trying to keep going to school when you're in refuges.

***'At home' comparison group***

- I hated school - I was never very good at it.
- I actually miss it. I thought at the time I'd be glad, that school was hard but now I'm at uni, it looked pretty easy. And it was good because everyone knew everyone else.

When specifically asked whether teachers or their school experience had helped them through any of the difficulties of being in wardship, just under a quarter (24.4 per cent) said 'yes'. There were two main ways they thought they had been helped. The first was by being treated in 'the same way as everyone else' and the second was by support from the school counsellor or from an understanding teacher. This support was not always appreciated at the time though. For example, one young woman said:

I think they did [help] .. Or tried to. It was just me. They talked to me about my life but I was going through shit and I told them to get lost.

A number of young people, however, said that school had certainly *not* helped, and had in some ways made things worse. A common complaint was being stigmatised or treated differently, but the reasons for feeling they had been treated differently were varied and only in a few cases related to being in wardship. For example:

If anything, it's a bit harder because I had a different name to my foster parents and kids wanted to know why. I didn't want to tell them.

Another young woman who had been sexually abused by her father commented on a breach of confidentiality by the principal and the effects on her:

The last six months of school was the worst. The social workers where I was living had to tell the principal I had to be picked up to give my statement and to go to counselling and he got up and told all the teachers in the staffroom though he was told not to tell anyone. And they really paid out on me. All the teachers treated me like dirt, even ones I got on well with before.

Other young ex-wards commented on 'being picked on' because of their colour, pregnancy, weight and appearance, or inability to read. For example:

- . Not really [happy at all]. I was teased a lot about my colour. The teachers weren't compassionate about that. No support about my learning and colour, better at university.
- . Last year wasn't very good because of the teachers and their old fashioned attitudes (concerning pregnancy)
- . I hated school. I was always ridiculed and bullied because I'm not that sort of person and my weight... I was really big. I had to work hard to lose that weight. School did nothing for me but teach me to read and write. It taught me to be ashamed, to stand in the corner... it was meant to make me the right sort of citizen, on the dole, but now I'm just nothing.
- . I couldn't read and write and everyone used to call me lazy.

When asked whether there was anything else the school could have done, ten young people (22.2 per cent) said 'yes'. Their suggestions mostly concerned teachers showing greater understanding and being willing to talk to them, not 'getting on my back all the time if I haven't done my homework'. For example:

They could have sat me down and talked to me about it. That sort of stuff, they never did. Just sat me in the headmaster's office all the time.

In summary, young people's experience at school varied within and between groups but young people in the more stable '*at home*' comparison group had attended fewer schools and were more likely to complete Year 12, and they were more positive about their schooling.

#### **6. 4 Income and income support after discharge**

Money, and the ability to manage it were significant concerns for young people in all three groups, as the preceding discussion on leaving home and being prepared for independent living shows. Table 6.7 shows the main source of income for ex-wards and young people in the two comparison groups. The differences between the three groups are in line with their employment and educational status, discussed earlier (Section 6.3). While most ex-wards and young people in the '*away from home*' comparison group were neither working nor studying and received unemployment benefits, most young people in the '*at home*' comparison group were either working full-time or were receiving AUSTUDY. Seven students in the '*at home*' comparison group did not receive AUSTUDY, however, because their parents' income was above the means-test cut-off point; they relied on money from their parents (n = 3) or from part-time work. Four ex-wards also were without income; three were in the waiting period for AUSTUDY (n = 2) or unemployment benefits (n = 1) after leaving school or work. Two had exhausted their savings and were reliant on foster parents or a friend's family for delayed rent or board until they received further money from AUSTUDY. Both had been in agency foster care and neither were aware that they could apply to the NSW Department of Community Services for assistance during this break in income support.<sup>22</sup> Another young man was also paying his own

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<sup>22</sup> This is one example of where research in this area sometimes leads to intervention. The workers concerned were contacted and did not know that the young people involved were in financial difficulty or that any assistance was available from the Department of Community Services.

way and living off his savings while studying at TAFE, although he was intending to apply for AUSTUDY.

My DO told me to go to DSS and get on *Job Search Allowance* after I finished school. I never got around to it because I never get much of a chance to get into town and when I did I forgot .. so I lived off my savings. I am going to get on AUSTUDY soon.

**Table 6.7 Main source of income for ex-wards and comparison groups**

| Income                            | Ex-wards<br>(3rd interview) |              | Comparison groups |              |                |              |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
|                                   | n                           | %            | Away from<br>home |              | At home        |              |
|                                   | n                           | %            | n                 | %            | n              | %            |
| Full-time wage                    | 9                           | 20.0         | 1                 | 5.0          | 7              | 35.0         |
| AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY                | 7                           | 15.6         | 3                 | 15.0         | 5              | 25.0         |
| <i>Job Search Allowance</i> (JSA) | 16                          | 35.6         | 10                | 50.0         | 1              | 5.0          |
| Other benefits*                   | 7                           | 15.5         | 6                 | 30.0         | --             | --           |
| None                              | 4                           | 8.5          | --                | --           | 3              | 15.0         |
| Other                             | 2**                         | 4.4          | --                | --           | 4 <sup>+</sup> | 20.0         |
| <b>Total</b>                      | <b>45</b>                   | <b>100.0</b> | <b>20</b>         | <b>100.0</b> | <b>20</b>      | <b>100.0</b> |

\* Other Commonwealth or Department of Community Service benefits (eg *Sickness Benefit, Special Benefits, Young Homeless Allowance*).

\*\* Two ex-wards were in correctional institutions (detention centre/prison).  
+ Four students worked part-time (as sales assistants).

Problems related to income support including periods without any money coming in were not restricted to ex-wards who were not receiving any income at the time of the third interview. Other young people who had been in wardship and those in the 'away from home' comparison group also reported problems with delays, with establishing identification, and with files that were lost by the Department of Social Security or DEET (see also section 5.5). These problems related to AUSTUDY and *Job Search Allowance* and *Young Homeless Allowance*. The recent Morris Report (1995) on youth homelessness and the Discussion Paper by the Youth Justice Coalition (1994) reported similar difficulties for young people in relation to AUSTUDY.

- . AUSTUDY was stuffing me around. I had to prove my mother was dead, that my father was missing. I had to prove who was looking after me, who I was living with. Anyway I sent my form in late because I had to get everything together.
- . *Job Search* was hard to get. When I changed from AUSTUDY to *Job Search*, I got no money for 5 weeks. I was lucky at XX House. She let me off the rent until I got paid again. It's hard to live when you don't have any money. Before that, they said they had paid me too much so they stopped the payments. The Department [of Community Services] wrote to DSS when I was 16 saying I was a ward and I could go on the independent rate. Then when I turned 18, they rang me and said I had been on the wrong rate and shouldn't have been getting that much and I owed them nearly \$2000. They take it out of my payments - \$40 per fortnight. I've got bills and they just don't understand, I sent a declaration 2 months ago saying could I pay \$10 a week and they said 'No'. I rang them up and abused them, and they reviewed it and said it had to be 14% or \$40.

- . I had a fair bit of trouble applying for AUSTUDY when I changed my name. When I put in the forms, they wanted the evidence and so on and then they lost it. I had to wait for about six months before I got paid. Mum and Dad helped me out.
- . I got cut off my *de facto* allowance because they lost my file and I had no ID and then it took DOCS 2 months to write the letter. In the end, I went in to the office and said I was staying until I got it.

Some young people in the '*away from home*' comparison group also reported difficulty in divulging sensitive information and problems with breaches of confidentiality.

For example:

- . I got mucked around a lot at first. I didn't know I was entitled to anything until the refuge told me. DSS and AUSTUDY told me I was too young. I went back to CES and saw the lady at the counter. I was shit scared. I'd never met her before in my life and I was expected to tell her my life story. I was by myself - 14, nearly 15. She was so rude - said if I left home just because I had a fight with my parents, go away! I was so scared I just left and didn't go back for a year. [Now on AUSTUDY and doing Year 11]
- . It was really hard trying to get any money. I had to get letters from counsellors and so on. And I had a problem and had to move because my parents found out where I was - my aunty works in XX [suburb] Social Security.

On the other hand, several young people had little or no trouble and were happy with the help they received from the Commonwealth departments and from the NSW Department of Community Services. For example:

- . I went from AUSTUDY to *JSA* to a full-time wage - it all synchronised perfectly.
- . DOCS helped me during the gap when I was transferring from AUSTUDY to *JSA*.

## 6.5 Money management

Just before their discharge from wardship, most young people were having some problems managing financially because of their limited income, the expense of independent living, and their inability to budget. The situation was not very different 12 months after their discharge from care, although the actual financial circumstances of some young people had changed. Forty-six per cent of young people said they could only 'make ends meet' sometimes or not at all. The five ex-wards who said they were unable to 'make ends meet' were, however, different from the ones who had said so in the earlier interviews, with the exception of one young woman. Their reasons for not managing were varied. One young man, for example, was retrenched from a full-time labouring position and was then receiving \$70.00 *JSA* per week. At the time of the third interview, he had been trying to 'sort out' the underpayment for a couple of months without success. The \$70 covered food and rent but nothing else so he borrowed from his flat-mate and was in debt to him for about \$200.00 at that stage. He said financial assistance from DOCS would have been really helpful because his foster parents, with whom he was still quite close, had financial difficulties of their own. Two young women were pregnant and were having problems managing the rent, and another had her full-time job restructured to part-time work and found it difficult to manage on the reduced income. The other young woman who said she was unable to 'make ends meet' at each of the three interviews left her mother's place within several months of being discharged from wardship and had to 'drop out' of her TAFE course because she could not afford the fees.

While some young people were having trouble 'making ends meet', other young people said they were 'better

off' 12 months after discharge from care that they had been before. This was due to various changes in circumstances, such as gaining employment, completing repayments on overpayments of AUSTUDY or in the case of several young women, having access to money from Victims' Compensation awards.<sup>23</sup>

Young people's reported ability to 'make ends meet' also reflected their average income and also whether or not they had been in a long-term placement. Eight out of ten young people who had been in one placement for at least 75 per cent of their time in care said they could usually manage to 'make ends meet' whereas only 43 per cent of those who had not been in a long-term placement said they could manage. The average income for those who said they could not 'make ends meet' was \$177.20 per fortnight (sd = \$88.40) compared with \$312.75 per fortnight (sd = \$187.20) for those who said they could 'usually make ends meet'.<sup>24</sup> The income pattern was similar for the '*away from home*' comparison group, with an average of \$196 per fortnight for those who could 'not make ends meet' compared with \$264.40 for those who said they could usually manage.<sup>25</sup> In the '*at home*' comparison group, only three young people said they could not 'make ends meet', and nearly all (95 per cent) said they were at least 'as well off' as other people their own age. In contrast, just over a quarter of the ex-wards (27.3 per cent) and nearly half the '*away from home*' group (45 per cent) said they were 'worse off' than others their age. This was despite the fact that the average income for the '*at home*' group (\$239.85) was lower than that of the other two groups (ex-wards, \$357.47; '*away from home*' comparison group, \$352.80), though the difference was not statistically significant. Once again, it is clear that money alone is not the only determinant of how well young people manage financially.

What did this mean in practice for their day to day life? Table 6.8 shows the percentage of each group of young people who reported having to go without or cut back on various goods and services, most of which are generally regarded as necessities. The items are listed in order of increasing frequency for ex-wards. There are quite marked differences between the three groups, with few young people in the '*at home*' group reporting the need to go without or cut back on anything apart from their social life, dental services and clothes. No young people in this group had to cut back or go without electricity or heating, whereas over half those in the '*away from home*' group (58.8 per cent) and a third of the ex-wards had to go without heating. Some young people were living in converted garages and poorly insulated accommodation without any heating during winter. Others were unable to afford to pay for medication for acute conditions, such as ear and throat infections, or for chronic conditions such as asthma. In several cases, they reported using others' prescription drugs without any success.

The essential service that young people commonly went without, however, was dental treatment. Nearly two-thirds of the '*away from home*' group and nearly half the ex-wards went without or cut back on dental visits because they could not afford them. As one said, 'There's not much point going for a check-up when you know you can't afford to pay to have anything fixed up.' One ex-ward said that she saw a dentist only once while she was a ward after entering wardship at age 7.

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<sup>23</sup> It should be noted, however, that applications for Victims' Compensation had not been made for several young women who would, on the available information, have been entitled to some compensation. Once again, intervention occurred as a result of the research study and a late application has been allowed for one young woman who was sexually assaulted by her father.

<sup>24</sup>  $t(27 \text{ df}) = 2.64, p < .05$ .

<sup>25</sup> The difference was not statistically significant because of the small numbers involved ( $n = 5$  and  $10$ , respectively).

I never went to a dentist when I was a ward except once, after months of asking Mum [foster mother] when I had an aching tooth. It cost \$83 and Mum hit the roof. That was when I was 16 and I haven't been since.

Other wards had expensive dental and orthodontic treatment even quite late in their period of wardship but one young woman who was pregnant at the time said that when she complained about problems with her teeth several months before she was due to be discharged, she was told to go to the public hospital where there was a long waiting list.

**Table 6.8 Percentage of young people going without or cutting back on living items**

|                           | Comparison groups |                |         |
|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------|---------|
|                           | Ex-wards          | Away from home | At home |
|                           | %                 | %              | %       |
| Medicine                  | 15.8              | 52.9           | 11.8    |
| Personal items/toiletries | 17.7              | 85.0           | 5.9     |
| Use of electricity        | 24.4              | 22.2           | 0.0     |
| Haircuts                  | 26.6              | 29.4           | 5.5     |
| Food                      | 28.9              | 66.7           | 11.7    |
| Heating                   | 33.3              | 58.8           | 0.0     |
| Dental services           | 44.4              | 64.7           | 29.4    |
| Use of telephone          | 48.9              | 64.7           | 11.7    |
| Clothes                   | 68.9              | 82.3           | 23.5    |
| Social life               | 68.9              | 88.2           | 41.2    |

Being short of money also had other consequences, especially for young people living away from home. Several ex-wards indicated that they would like to attend various courses (e.g., first aid, photography, music, business college or TAFE) but could not afford the fees. They were not aware that they could ask the Department of Community Services for assistance, although several said they may have been told but could not really remember. Others, as indicated earlier in relation to young people's suggestions for a 'Leaving Care' kit (see section 6. 1. 4), said they found it very difficult to dress appropriately for job interviews because they could not afford 'that type of clothes'. Several also said that they had fines that they could not hope to pay and were concerned about the consequences of defaulting. Others - both ex-wards and young people in the '*away from home*' comparison group - admitted to resorting to stealing food and clothing for themselves or for their child.

In summary, 12 months after being discharged from wardship, a number of young people were still having problems managing on the money available to them, as were a number of young people in the '*away from home*' comparison group. Some were worse off than they were before because of changed circumstances and a few were better off because they had obtained employment or in several cases had received fairly substantial sums from Victims Compensation payments. In contrast, young people in the '*at home*' comparison group were more likely to say they could make ends meet and that they were better off than other young people their age, although their average money per fortnight was less than that of the other two groups.

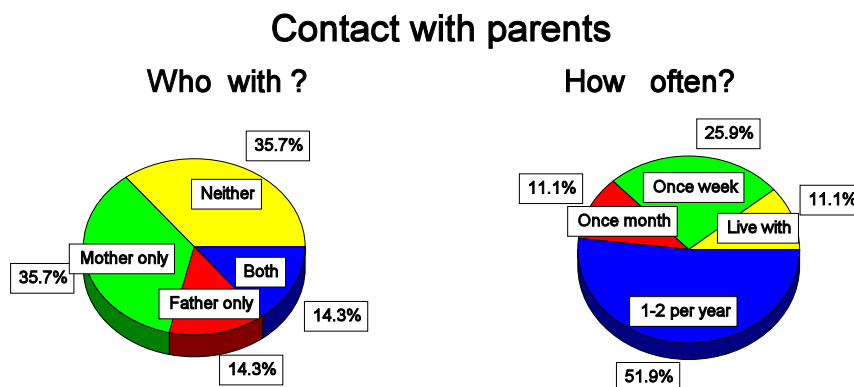
## 6.6 Contact with birth family

Soon after they were discharged from wardship, the majority of young people had some contact with one or both parents. Again it was more likely to be with their mothers than with their fathers. In both the post-discharge interviews, about half had some contact with their mothers (second interview, 48.8 per cent; third interview, 50.0 per cent), but only a quarter had contact with their fathers (25.6 per cent and 28.6 per cent). Five young people had no contact with any family members but three were still hoping to locate their parent(s). One young woman regretted her previous refusals to see them, saying:

I can't find them. DOs kept on asking about whether we wanted to see our parents and they kept on talking about it when we didn't want anything to do with it. Now I regret it .. that we didn't want to see our parents when we were younger. [*How old were you?*] About 12. [*Why didn't you want to see them? Were you angry with them?*] Yeah, and also because my foster-parents ... she wasn't really happy about it. I want to see them before they pass away so I can see what my parents were like.

Another young man said:

I don't know where they are. I ask DOCS but nothing's happened.



**Figure 6.5**  
Contact with birth parents one year after discharge

Two of the nine young people who were living with their birth parents before discharge were still living at home with at least one parent (one with his mother, one with both parents) a year later, and another had moved from her



mother's place to live with her father after living independently for several months.

The best predictor of whether young people had contact with their parents after discharge was, not surprisingly, whether they were in contact with them before discharge. Excluding the cases where parents were no longer alive, only three of the 10 young people who were not in contact with either parent just before they were discharged had some contact with them after discharge. In two cases, this was with their mother only and in all three cases, the contact was very limited. In one case, a young woman who had two periods of wardship resumed contact with her mother after she was discharged at 18 but her relationship with her mother was very stressful and difficult. The other young woman received a card and a phone call from her mother for her nineteenth birthday for the first time in seven years and was not 'really sure what the go is'. In the other case, a young man occasionally saw his father but their chance encounters in the same country town were hardly constructive. As he said:

I've seen my father around town a few times but he just tells me to 'fuck off'. I've tried to talk to him but he won't. I don't know why.

Of the 29 young people who had contact with at least one parent before discharge, 23 (79.3 per cent) continued to have at least some contact by the time of the third interview, 12 months after discharge. For 13 of these 23 young people (56.5 per cent), contact was frequent (3 lived with a parent, 10 saw them at least monthly) but for 10 it was only once or twice a year. Of those who were in contact with their mother only before discharge, most (11 out of 14) remained in contact, two had contact with their fathers and one stopped seeing either parent. Where their only parental contact just before discharge was with their father, half (2 out of 4) remained in contact.

Figure 6.6 shows the frequency with which young people had contact with their siblings 12 months after being discharged from care. Nearly three out of four (72.5 per cent) had some contact with at least one of their siblings; just over a quarter - almost the same proportion as at the first interview - had no contact with any of their siblings. Indeed, there was little change in contact overall with siblings since the earlier interview. Once again, the best predictor of contact after discharge from wardship was, with a few notable exceptions, contact beforehand.

Four young people lost contact and were no longer seeing their siblings 12 months after they were discharged. In several cases, older siblings left the foster home to move to independent living and had little or no contact since. In the other case, a young woman who entered care as a result of sexual abuse had seen her brother and sister just after she was discharged from care but not since. Three young people, however, resumed or had their first contact with their siblings after they were discharged from care. One young woman, for example, finally located her sisters and met them for the first time after problematic attempts to make contact during wardship. This was very important to her, especially as it came at a time when her relationship with her long-term foster mother was under strain. Another young man had very limited contact with his younger half-sister who also became a ward but was placed in another foster home and then restored to her father. He was not particularly concerned about maintaining contact with her, saying:

I haven't been with her most of my life and I don't have much in common with her. I've got my family now. She's just like another person.

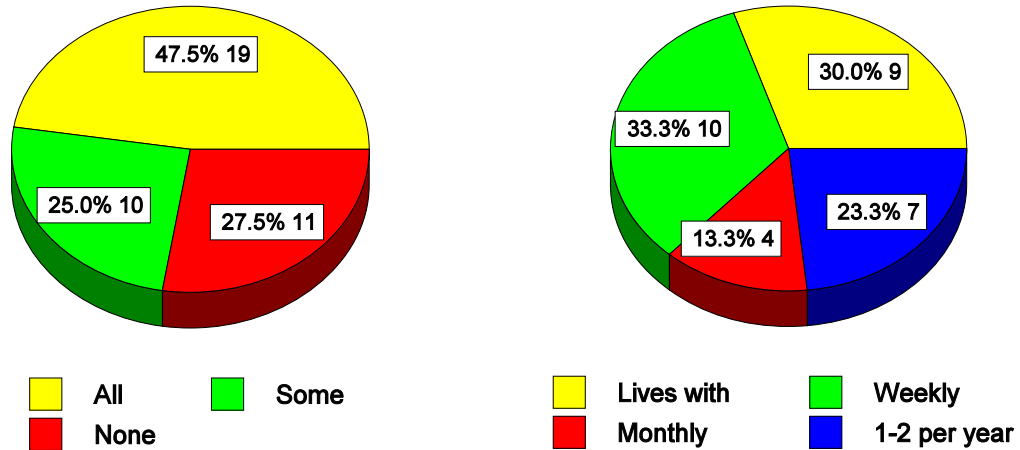


Figure 6.6 Contact with siblings 12 months after discharge

The pattern was also similar for contact with members of the extended family. Most young people (80 per cent) who had some contact with grandparents or aunts and uncles just before they were discharged from care still had contact with at least some of them 12 months after they were discharged, but none resumed contact after discharge if they had not had contact beforehand.

**6.6.1 Satisfaction with family contact.** At the third interview, young people were asked whether they would like more contact with their birth family than they currently had, and if so, what prevented more contact. Just under a third (29.5 per cent) said they wanted more contact, and a further two young people were unsure. One young woman said, for example,

Yes and no. I would love to see my Dad because he is really sick. I don't know where he is but I'd love to see him before he dies. But I never want to see my sister again. Mum's a hard one - sometimes I want to see her, sometimes I don't. I have been away from her for 15 years and I feel that there is a lot of catching up to do but I'm afraid she will hurt me again and I can't afford to be hurt again.

The main barriers for those who did want more contact were distance and the costs of travelling to see them or of keeping in contact by phone. Even where the distance was not great, one young person was reluctant to travel by train to see his sister because he had been bashed on the train the last time he visited her. The other problems were resistance by their relatives or by the foster parents of their siblings. In other cases where young women had entered care as a result of sexual abuse, the problem was the presence of the perpetrator - in several cases, now released from prison. Other young people were still not able to locate parents or siblings.

Other young people were quite clear about not wanting any further contact or any contact at all, and others were happy with 'things as they were'. For example,

- . I don't want anything to do with them.
- . I guess 'no'. Because I don't want to keep bringing up the past. It's not something I want to think about. I want to get on with my life. I get worried about things like when I get married, how am I going to invite my Mum to my wedding and if I should. I'll feel slack

if I don't but if I do, everyone's going to say who's that? It's just going to be complicated.

- . I'm quite happy the way it is. We have a funny relationship. We often call at about the same time .. talk on the phone but don't see each other much. Different values, different people. We just don't get on over a long period of time.

In summary, most young people had some contact with their biological parents and siblings, and to a lesser extent, with members of their extended family. They were more likely to have contact with their siblings than with their parents, and with their mothers than with their fathers. While their contact during wardship was generally irregular and infrequent, and young people often seemed ambivalent about seeing their parents, having some contact, especially late in wardship, was the best predictor of contact after discharge. Twelve months after discharge from wardship, most young people were happy with the amount of contact they had with members of their family but a significant proportion were not; some were still looking for parents, but others could not afford to see their parents and siblings as much as they would like, and some were denied access.

### 6.7 Contact with foster parents

Most of the young people in the interview sample (72.3 per cent) had been in at least one foster placement of some length that they could remember during their time in care; 46.8 per cent had spent at least 75 per cent of their time in care in one long-term placement. At both the post-discharge interviews, they were asked whether they were still in contact with their former foster families, if they were no longer living with them. Eleven young people were still living with their foster families and had been there on average for 12.4 years (with a range from 2 to 18 years).

Just over half (16, 55.2 per cent) the young people who had left their foster home were still in contact with their foster family. Several factors influenced the likelihood of this contact. The first concerned timing - how long they stayed there, and how long ago they were there. The second concerned the reasons for leaving - the terms on which they left and how happy they had been while they were there. Not surprisingly, the length of stay was significantly longer for young people who remained in contact (an average of 9.9 years,  $sd = 5.7$ ) than for those who did not (3.5 years,  $sd = 2.9$ ). Because of the length of time involved, the stay was also likely to be more recent. If the placement had broken down or they had left on bad terms, young people were less likely to stay in contact, sometimes through their own choice but sometimes regretfully. In one case, for example, a young woman wanted contact with her foster family but unfortunately lost their new address.<sup>26</sup> While some young people clearly felt rejected and would like more contact with their former foster parents, others felt no connection to their former foster parents and wanted no further contact. For example:

- . They don't want any contact with me - they've turned their backs on me. [*Would you like more contact?*] Yes, with the Smiths. I was closer to them than any one else.
- . I don't particularly want contact with them. They were using me for the money. But I like

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<sup>26</sup> Our own experience in the research showed us the problems of ensuring that young people received messages and retained notes sent to them. For example, in this case:

[*Do you still see your foster family?*] No. [*Is that your choice?*] No. They got in contact with the children's home and left their address with the nun. She passed it on and I lost it. The nun has gone now, she's moved onto Yamba and I don't know where they [foster family] are. But I would like to see them. They're people we [includes boyfriend] would like to spend holidays with.

some of the workers from residential care though I've recently lost contact with them - places have closed down and others have moved on.

- . I left my foster family on bad terms and don't see them any more. I had contact a while ago and they didn't want to know about me. [*Is it mutual?*] No, I'd still like contact. My foster mother talks to me but my foster father doesn't want to know.
- . I'm thinking about seeing them soon. [*Do you send each other Christmas cards?*] No. If we got together, I think we could begin that. They got hurt when I left. [*Do you think time would have helped heal that?*] Yeah.
- . We write every week. I like it as it is, not too much. [*Why is that?*] I tend to clash with them, we don't understand each other. I'll stay in contact but I prefer the company of others more.

Their comments indicate some ambivalence about their relationships with their foster families but the complexities of these relationships and young people's struggle to come to terms with their own situation were clearly expressed by several young people.

- . My foster mother said when I left she thought I'd stay forever. It's still a sore point. She knows she can't expect any more of me. We still love each other but it's not the same as it was. It's a fine line. I spend time with Mum which she appreciates but I think she feels betrayed and she won't go over that border and we stay in our own worlds. [*How often do you see her now?*] I hadn't seen her for 2 to 3 years when I saw her 2 to 3 weeks ago. [*Why then?*] Because I thought it was high time we did. [*Would you like more contact?*] I'm quite happy the way it is. These days I don't see my foster parents as a necessity. I can't afford to have too many necessities. I'm taking care of me now. If everyone thinks I'm a real bitch, that's fine .. call me a bitch. I'm not proud of it, but I have to get a grip on things.
- . This year has been confusing. When I grew up, I felt like part of the family. Now my views are changing. I don't know how much I owe them now, how much they mean to me. All along I hated the idea of being fostered. I wished I was like a normal family, but that's the way it happened and I'd like to forget about it.
- . I was ready to move out of home at the time I was discharged. It was great for me. I wanted to be independent. It removed the guilt I would have felt if I wanted to leave my foster family but was still a ward.

## **6.8 Sources of financial and emotional support**

Three months and twelve months after discharge from care, most young people again reported that they had people they could turn to for financial assistance, for emotional support and for help if they were in trouble (Table 6.9). The post-discharge pattern was very similar to the pre-discharge pattern, with foster parents again being the most frequent choice for financial support and for help in times of trouble. Not surprisingly, where young people had stayed in one long-term placement for most of their time in care, they were much more likely to keep in contact with their foster parents (or to be still living with them) and to ask them for both financial and emotional support than young

people who had not been in one long-term placement.<sup>27</sup> Five young people, however, who mentioned their foster parents in the first interview as people they would ask for help no longer saw them as possible sources of support 12 months later. This was due to conflict because the young person chose to leave home, to marry or to make contact with their birth family or to ‘act out’ and commit criminal offences.

**6.8.1 Parents.** Parents were a less frequent but still significant source of both financial and emotional support for young people after they left care. In some cases (n = 4), this support continued after young people were restored to their parents or returned to live with them before they were discharged from care. Several made contact with their parents or members of their extended family just before they were discharged and cited them as sources of financial or emotional support. Just as many (n = 6), however, did not continue to have support from their parents after discharge, and in some cases reported that there was no one they could call on for help or to talk to if they had problems. Most (87 per cent) said that they would be expected to pay the money back.

**Table 6.9 Sources of financial and emotional support for ex-wards**

| <i>Support Source</i> | Type of support |      |           |      |                    |      |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------|-----------|------|--------------------|------|
|                       | Financial       |      | Emotional |      | In case of trouble |      |
|                       | n               | %    | n         | %    | n                  | %    |
| Parents               | 8               | 18.2 | 5         | 11.2 | 8                  | 19.0 |
| Foster parents        | 14              | 31.2 | 10        | 22.2 | 11                 | 26.2 |
| Relatives             | 4               | 9.1  | 5         | 11.1 | 11                 | 23.9 |
| Siblings              | 4               | 9.1  | 5         | 11.1 | 5                  | 11.9 |
| Friends/partners      | 8               | 17.2 | 26        | 59.1 | 12                 | 28.6 |
| District Officers     | 2               | 4.5  | 5         | 11.1 | 6                  | 14.3 |
| NGO workers           | 2               | 4.5  | 4         | 8.9  | 3                  | 7.1  |
| No one                | 9               | 20.5 | 7         | 15.6 | 3                  | 7.1  |

A greater proportion of young people in the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group but still less than half (45 per cent) said they could ask their parents for (generally) small amounts of money if they really needed it but most said they would have to pay it back. Only one in five said they would go to their parents for emotional support; 29 per cent said they would go to their parents if they were in trouble.

In stark contrast, all except one of the young people in the ‘*at home*’ comparison group indicated that they could ask their parents for money if they needed financial assistance. Whether or not they were expected to pay the money back reportedly depended upon the amount of money involved and the reason for the loan. Several, for example, had borrowed money from their parents to buy a car and were in the process of repaying the loan. One young man, for example, appreciated his parents’ approach, saying he was ‘better off’ than his friends because:

Some of my friends have had cars bought for them. I had a loan and have had to pay it off.

<sup>27</sup> 72.7 % of young people in long-term stable placements reported that they would ask their foster parents for help if they needed money, and 40.9 per cent said they would talk with them about a problem compared with only 9.1 per cent and 4.3 per cent respectively not in a long-term placement.

My parents have made me responsible about money so it makes me work harder and be more responsible with money.

The exception in this group was one young person who was working part-time while he was at school because he was reluctant to ask his parents for money because ‘there’d always be a catch to it’.

I could ask them for money but whether they would give it to me, I don’t know. My parents helped me pay a fine and to get my car fixed up and then a few weeks later, they use it as a threat. It’s like they give it to me so they can use it against me. It’s just heaps hard because you see friends on AUSTUDY and they don’t have to work, and you think ..’My parents have got the money’ but they’re very tight with it. They earned it and it’s theirs.

Young people in the ‘*at home*’ comparison group were also most likely to talk with their parents about problems (70 per cent), especially more serious problems, though this was often after consulting friends or friends’ parents. They were also selective in their choice of parent. For example:

I couldn’t go to Mum. Like I said, she’s always got to be right. You can’t reason with her. When you talk, you want someone who’s sympathetic. Dad’s much more understanding.

**Table 6. 10 Sources of financial and emotional support for two comparison groups**

| Support source   | Type of support |              |                |              |                    |              |
|------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|
|                  | Financial       |              | Emotional      |              | In case of trouble |              |
|                  | Left home<br>%  | At home<br>% | Left home<br>% | At home<br>% | Left home<br>%     | At home<br>% |
| Parents          | 45.0            | 100.0        | 20.0           | 70.0         | 29.4               | 73.7         |
| Relatives        | 0.0             | 22.3         | 5.0            | 10.0         | 0.0                | 21.1         |
| Siblings         | 14.3            | 16.7         | 5.0            | 20.0         | 5.9                | 0.0          |
| Friends/partners | 21.4            | 11.1         | 64.7           | 89.5         | 17.6               | 52.6         |
| NGO workers      | 42.9            | 0.0          | 20.0           | 0.0          | 52.9               | 0.0          |
| No one           | 0.0             | 0.0          | 15.0           | 5.0          | 0.0                | 0.0          |

**6. 8. 2 Friends.** Friends or partners were the most likely people to be called upon for emotional support - as someone to talk to when they had a problem - for all three groups of young people. They were less likely to be asked for financial support than parents or foster parents. One notable exception, however, was the older friend (her ex-boyfriend’s mother) of a young woman at a residential college who collected money from her friends to raise the deposit for college fees when the young woman became very depressed because neither she nor her foster parents could afford to pay them.

In relation to emotional support, more young people in the ‘*at home*’ comparison group (89.5 per cent) than ex-wards (59.1 per cent) and those in the ‘*away from home*’ comparison group (64.7 per cent) said they had friends they would talk to. They were also generally less reluctant to talk with others about their problems, although several young men still living at home either said that they were scared about saying what they really thought or that they did not find male friends very helpful as confidantes.

- . I can discuss some things with my friends but you never get as deep as you want to because you feel 'Oh yeah, what will they think of me if I spill my guts out?' No one can really discuss things completely.
- . I've never really had anyone like that so I don't know what it would be like. Pretty scary, I reckon.
- . Male friends aren't any help. You could be dying and they'd say you're laughing!

Several young women who had been in wardship or were in the '*away from home*' comparison group also expressed reservations about same sex peers, saying, for example:

- . Girls can be heaps bitchy. They don't seem interested in knowing me. I feel more comfortable with older people and with guys.
- . I don't have any female friends. I don't usually get on with them.. They accuse me of being a flirt or don't keep what you tell them to themselves.

These young people were among a group of ten ex-wards and five young people in the 'left home' comparison group who were either very reluctant to talk to anyone about their problems or said there was no one they could trust. Typical comments by ex-wards when asked whether there was anyone they could discuss any problems with were:

- . There's no use talking about my problems. I keep putting it off. When I open up to people, I always seem to get hurt.
- . I used to talk to my sister lots but she'd always tell my mum or everyone else she thought needed to know and then they'd say 'Oh Martin, I heard the bad news' or whatever.
- . I don't really discuss it with anyone. I guess that's part of the problem. Sometimes I wish there was someone else. I sort of feel like going to a shrink or someone to pour out my heart and take some of the pressure off me. But then I'd think if I go to them, there must be something wrong with me even though I just want to talk .. get rid of the burden on my chest. I don't really have many friends.
- . No one - It'd be good to sit down with someone and say this is how I'm feeling.

Similarly, some in the '*away from home*' comparison group said:

- . I've been told to [talk to someone] but I don't want to. I don't want to get upset and have to deal with it.
- . Around here, you don't talk much. Lots of questions you don't ask. On the street, you learn because it's complicated.
- . No. I don't really have any problems.
- . Usually Mum but only occasionally. I don't like talking to her. I'd rather talk to a perfect stranger.

**6.8.3 Workers.** A small but significant number of ex-wards indicated that they would still seek support from their District Officers or from other workers 3 and 12 months after discharge from wardship, especially for advice or if they were in trouble. Four who were living independently also looked to their worker for financial help. Seven others had already done so and received financial assistance from the Department of Community Services since they were

discharged from wardship. This included payment for counselling undertaken after discharge, for books and a desk and chairs for studying, money during the waiting period between receiving money from AUSTUDY and JSA, and a loan to pay for car registration.

When young people who had been in care sought advice and emotional support from their worker, this was generally only in cases where they already had a good relationship with their worker and maintained contact with them. It made little difference whether the young person was still living with foster parents or had moved into independent accommodation. In several cases, however, the worker was still only 'a last resort' and confidentiality and the relationship with a particular worker were important considerations in the decision.

- . Probably talk to my friend's mother or perhaps my DO, but with the DO, I know it would go on paper and into a file and I don't like that so probably only go to him as a last resort. But it's still nice to know DOCS is there as a last resort.
- . I don't tell the workers anything because the professionals all talk.
- . I still go and see Cathy [DO] but when I go in and she's not there, I have to see a duty officer which is bad because I don't know them.

Young people in the 'away from home' comparison group were also likely to seek support from workers, especially for financial support (42.9 per cent) and for help when they were in trouble (52.9 per cent). Again confidentiality was an important issue for them.

- . No. I'd like to have one person I know really well and one I don't know at all so they can't gossip to anyone.
- . I talk to some people - workers- from the refuge cos I know they won't take it any further.

**6.8.4 Ex-wards who were pregnant or had children.** A special group of young people who had particular need for assistance both before and after discharge were the nine young women in the interview group who were pregnant or had young babies. These young women constituted 30 per cent of the young women in the interview sample, and as indicated earlier (section 2.6), this proportion is much higher than that for young women in the general population who had become pregnant or given birth by that age (2 per cent). This is consistent with the findings of overseas research. Biehal et al. (1994) reported, for example, that nearly a quarter of young women were parents by the time they moved to independent accommodation or were legally discharged from care. Like the young women in that study, most young women in the current study were in independent accommodation but only one had completed high school. Similarly, in line with the higher risk for teenage pregnancy associated with sexual abuse, three young women in the interview sample had entered care as a result of child sexual abuse (Butler & Burton, 1990; Rainey, Stevens-Simon, & Kaplan, 1995).

Of the seven young women whom the Department knew to be pregnant or to have a child, only four reported receiving any assistance, and they were not particularly satisfied with the extent of that assistance.

- . They [DOCS] said they would pay for the baby's clothes and things like that but Julie [DO] turned around and gave me \$60 which isn't going to go far when you think about all the things you need for a baby.
- . No, they [DOCS] didn't really help. They just talked about it, what to do. That's all.



- I would have liked some help with furniture and clothes and so on. Having a baby is very expensive.

They did not report receiving emotional support in relation to their pregnancies or the care of their children. Indeed, five of the nine were worried that their children might be taken into care, as they had been themselves.

- I was really terrified of them taking our kids. Michael [son] fell over the other day at a friend's house and banged his head on the cement. He started getting really dozy so I took him up to the hospital and I thought 'That's it! They're going to think I knocked him up against the wall'. It sounded stupid - 'He fell over onto a cement slab'.
- They [DOCS] think just because we smoke pot that we're neglecting him. They sat in my lounge and said 'If you don't cooperate and we find he is not getting all he needs, we can take him away'.
- They [DOCS] think if you were neglected, that you'll neglect your own kids. But not everyone who's been abused abuses their kids.
- They took us off Mum but I'm not saying they will, but you just don't know.

In fact, two children were fostered but in both cases, the young women consented after realising that they did not feel able to cope. As one of these young women said:

He went into voluntary care. I went through really bad stages when I was depressed and then I faced myself and said 'Look, you're not ready to be a mother so give him to someone else who is. He got really bonded to XX so I wanted him to stay there.

**6.8.5 Summary.** In summary, most young people in the three groups reported being satisfied with the amount of support they received from others although there was some suggestion of young people in the '*at home*' comparison group (95 per cent 'very satisfied' or 'mostly satisfied') being somewhat more satisfied than ex-wards (82.2 per cent) and young people in the '*away from home*' comparison group (78.9 per cent), though the difference was not statistically significant. While parents or parent figures tended to be the support persons of choice for financial help and for help in times of trouble, all three groups of young people were most likely to talk to friends if they had a problem they wanted to discuss. A significant group of ex-wards and young people in the '*away from home*' comparison group, however, were distrustful and reluctant to talk to anyone about their problems. The importance of knowing there is such support available was clearly expressed by one young person:

I wish there was someone I could turn to. You'd have more confidence if you knew there was someone there for you. I have no family, no nothing.

The importance of social and emotional support was evident in its association with young people's reported happiness and their attitude to the future, indicated by their score on Beck's Hopelessness Scale.

## 6.9 Mental health and happiness, and future expectations

At the third interview twelve months after leaving care, young people were asked to rate how happy they were on the scale used previously, from '1' (not happy at all) to '10' (very happy). They were also asked to complete Beck's Hopelessness Scale; so also were the young people in the two comparison groups.

Most ex-wards rated themselves as being fairly happy, although their ratings were not quite as high as they were just before they left care; on a scale of '1' to '10', the mean rating before leaving care was 8.0 (sd = 1.9) compared with

7.4 (sd = 2.2) after care.<sup>28</sup> Within the leaving care group, there were trends but no significant differences between young people who had been in stable long-term care (mean of 7.8) and those who had not (mean = 7.0), and between those who entered wardship as adolescents (mean = 7.6) or earlier (mean = 6.3). Similarly, those who had not felt they were responsible for entering care tended to be happier (mean = 7.6) 12 months after leaving care than those who had felt responsible (mean = 7.6), and they also expected to be happier in the future (mean = 6.9 compared with 7.9) although the differences were not significant.

**Table 6.11 Mean ratings of happiness for 3 groups of young people**

|                              | Mean | sd  |
|------------------------------|------|-----|
| <b>Leaving care group</b>    |      |     |
| Before leaving care          | 8.0  | 2.0 |
| 3 mths after leaving care    | 7.6  | 2.6 |
| 12 mths after leaving care   | 7.4  | 2.2 |
| In long-term placement       | 7.8  | 1.8 |
| Not in long-term placement   | 7.0  | 2.4 |
| Happiness in care *          | 6.2  | 2.9 |
| Expected future happiness ** | 8.4  | 2.2 |
| <b>Comparison groups</b>     |      |     |
| 'Away from home' group       | 6.3  | 1.8 |
| 'At home' group              | 8.5  | 1.7 |

\* At the second interview, 3 months after leaving care, young people were asked how happy they had been while they were in wardship.

\*\* At the third interview, 12 months after leaving wardship, young people were asked how happy they expected to be in five years' time.

There was, however, a significant difference between ex-wards who wished they had more social support and those who were satisfied with the level of social support they were receiving; young people who wished they had someone (else) to discuss problems with were significantly less happy (mean rating = 5.75) than those who were satisfied (mean rating = 7.92).<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the Hopelessness Scale Score was significantly lower for ex-wards who were satisfied with their level of social support (mean score = 2.4) than for those who were not satisfied (mean score = 5.6).<sup>30</sup> In addition, the Hopelessness score of young people who had felt responsible at some stage for going into care (mean = 6.4) was significantly greater than that of young people who reported never feeling responsible in this way (mean = 3.5).<sup>31</sup>

Compared with the young people in the two comparison groups, young people leaving wardship were happier (mean = 7.4) than those in the 'away from home' comparison group (mean = 6.3) but not as happy as the young people

<sup>28</sup>  $t = 2.2, 40 \text{ df}, p < .03.$

<sup>29</sup>  $F(1, 41) = 9.17, p < .005.$

<sup>30</sup>  $F(1, 37) = 7.00, p < .02.$

<sup>31</sup>  $F(1, 37) = 6.25, p < .02.$

in the 'at home' comparison group (mean = 8.5).<sup>32</sup> The mean Hopelessness scale score of the ex-wards was also intermediate between those of the two comparison groups; it was lower (mean = 4.5) than that of the 'away from home' comparison group (mean = 5.9) but higher than that of the 'at home' comparison group (mean = 2.9) but not significantly so.<sup>33</sup>

Like the ex-wards, the association with perceived social support was also evident within the 'away from home' comparison group, with those who were satisfied with their social support having higher ratings for happiness (mean = 6.6) and lower Hopelessness Scale scores (mean = 5.0) than those who wished they had more support (mean happiness rating = 5.0; mean Hopelessness score = 8.8). There was no relationship with social support within the 'at home' comparison group, whose mean happiness ratings and Hopelessness scores were more positive than either of these sub-groups of the 'away from home' group.

When asked what they were and were not happy about, young people who had left care focussed on their relationships with family and friends, their satisfaction with where they were living, and their ability or inability to do what they wanted to do in relation to money, employment and personal freedom. The main things they were happy about were their jobs or courses, the time they spent with partners and friends, and their newly found independence. The main 'things they were not so happy about' were their family background, problems in their personal relationships, and their lack of money and good accommodation. For over half (55.3 per cent), however, there was little or nothing they were unhappy about three months after they were discharged from wardship. Twelve months later, fewer young people but still over a third (17, 38 per cent) said they had little or 'nothing to complain about', nothing they were *not* happy about. For some, however, happiness was merely the absence of things to complain about or of things that had gone wrong.

***Is there anything you're really happy about?***

- . The traineeship made me feel really happy. Before that, my spirits were really down about getting a job. Like it was like 'I was no good' and then something like this pops up and you're in such a good mood. Makes you feel like you're wanted. [Former ward]
- . Being with people I like and having a normal life. [Former ward]
- . Finally got somewhere settled to live and safe, TAFE course, OK financially. [Former ward]
- . Yeah, I'm here. I've gotten this far. ['Away from home' comparison group]
- . Nothing in particular. ['Away from home' comparison group]
- . Just doing what I want to do. ['At home' comparison group]
- . Well, I think I'm doing OK now. I've got a job, training, things are pretty good with Dad. ['At home' comparison group]

The comments of young people in the two comparison groups were similar in many respects. Both comparison

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<sup>32</sup> F (2, 82) = 5.77, p < .005.

<sup>33</sup> F (2, 73) = 2.87, p < .065.

groups included young people who were happy with their personal relationships with family, friends or partners and satisfied with their current circumstances and with having increased freedom and a sense of direction in their lives. Young people in the *'away from home'* comparison group, however, were, not surprisingly, more concerned with where they were living and with money, or the lack of it, and with the effects on them of some of their experiences. Several indicated that there were things they were unhappy about but that they did not want to talk about them. For others, like the former wards, their 'happiness' consisted of nothing being wrong rather than what was 'right' and positive. As one young man in the *'away from home'* comparison group indicated, this may be the result of some difficulty in feeling and dealing with emotions:

I wouldn't say 'happy'. You just don't have emotions. For so many years, you don't have 'sad', 'bad' and 'happy'. If you're crying, it's 'rat-shit'. Now it's whether I'm warm, got something in my stomach, my nails aren't bitten to the quick ... Now I can talk, walk, I've got clothes, a watch - and all those things make me feel good.

***Most people have things in their lives they're not so happy about.***

***Is there anything like that for you?***

- . I feel lost basically at the moment because now I'm learning how important it is to have your family roots, to know where you're from and to know who you are. I know everyone has to figure it out for themselves - but it's hard. It's up and down feelings all the time and it's driving me around the bend. It's got a lot to do with my past and I have to figure that out to move ahead - but it is just difficult if nobody talks [ie family]. I can't get any answers. [Former ward]
- . Yeah, my mum left me. Why is the world so miserable and lonely? [Former ward]
- . The way we live, where we are living. My life - there isn't much of a life, just stay home and watch TV. Everything takes money and trust and we've got neither. [Former ward]
- . Obviously .. the way things are with my family. And the effect it's had on me. [*'Away from home'* comparison group]
- . Not having a normal family. Miss my Mum and my Dad has problems with his mental health. Not getting a job. I go to job interviews and I start shaking with nervousness. [*'Away from home'* comparison group]
- . At the moment, I just think about what I've done. I don't regret the past. The past is .. well, it's got me here and I feel good about it. But I think about some of the things I've done and things I've seen ... just things like that you don't want to have in your past. [*'Away from home'* comparison group]
- . I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing ... doing the course I'm doing now. I wonder if I wouldn't be better off leaving and getting a job as a trainee. [*'At home'* comparison group]

6.9.1 ***Suicide thoughts and attempts.*** In line with the pattern of happiness and hopelessness ratings among the three groups of young people (the ex-wards and the two comparison groups), ex-wards were more likely to have thought about suicide or tried to commit suicide than young people in the *'at home'* comparison group but less likely than those

in the *'away from home'* comparison group (see Table 6.12).<sup>34</sup> While the numbers are small, the proportion of young people in the *'at home'* group who have had suicidal thoughts is similar to that found by a recent large survey of Western Australian adolescents. In the six months prior to the survey, 11.5 per cent of 12 to 14 year-olds and nearly double that proportion, 23.5 per cent of 15 to 16 year-olds, had thought about killing themselves (Zubrick et al., 1995).

**Table 6. 12 Suicide attempts and thoughts for ex-wards and comparison groups**

|                       | Ex-wards |      | Comparison groups |      |         |      |
|-----------------------|----------|------|-------------------|------|---------|------|
|                       |          |      | Away from Home    |      | At home |      |
| Attempted suicide     | 16       | 35.5 | 7                 | 38.9 | 0       | 0.0  |
| Thought about suicide | 26       | 57.7 | 13                | 68.4 | 5       | 29.4 |
| Before discharge only | 8        | 17.7 |                   |      |         |      |
| Since discharge only  | 3        | 6.7  |                   |      |         |      |
| Both before and after | 15       | 33.3 |                   |      |         |      |

The disturbing aspect is the very high proportions of young people in the *'away from home'* comparison group and in the ex-ward group who had had suicidal thoughts and had attempted to commit suicide. More than one in two ex-wards and two out of three in the *'away from home'* comparison group had thought about committing suicide, and more than half of these young people had actually tried to do so. Of continuing concern are the young people leaving care who considered suicide both before and after being discharged from wardship. Few young ex-wards considered suicide for the first time only after they were discharged from care, but less than half (46.2 per cent) who had considered suicide had received any counselling. This is consistent with the lack of recognition of depression and feelings of helplessness among children and young people in care (Zimmerman, 1988).

Within the group of ex-wards, the proportion of young people who had tried to commit suicide was even higher among two related sub-groups - young people who had had no long-term placement while they were in care (50 per cent compared with 23.8 per cent who were in a long-term placement)<sup>35</sup> and young people who entered wardship as adolescents (58.3 per cent compared with 30.3 per cent of those who entered wardship earlier).<sup>36</sup> Those with higher Hopelessness scale scores were also more likely to have attempted suicide than those with lower scores; those who had tried to commit suicide had mean Hopelessness scores of 6.0 compared with 3.7 for those who had not.<sup>37</sup> In addition, young people who felt responsible (when they were younger) for going into care had higher Hopelessness scores and

<sup>34</sup> Notes on 11 of the 91 (12.1 per cent) Departmental B-files indicated that six young people in the interview group and five in the non-interview group had attempted suicide.

<sup>35</sup>  $\chi^2 = 4.49, p < .10$ .

<sup>36</sup>  $\chi^2 = 6.51, p < .05$ .

<sup>37</sup>  $F(1, 36) = 3.93, p < .05$ . Young people's happiness ratings, however, 12 months after leaving care or for the future were not strongly predictive of suicidal thoughts or attempts.

were also more likely to have thought about or tried to commit suicide (81.3 per cent) than those who had not felt responsible in this way (51.7 per cent).<sup>38</sup>

#### **Comments about suicide**

##### ***Ex-wards***

I tried to when I was a ward, and I've thought about it since. My situation gets to me - my family, no money, no work etc.

Tried to - I took tablets. And when I had anorexia, a nurse came in and said 'If you don't eat, you are going to die' and that is literally what made me not eat because I wanted to kill myself. Nothing was going right and I was tossed between two families.

I'm not scared to do it .. About the pain. I'm just scared it wouldn't work so I'd make sure I did it properly so I didn't have brain damage. That's why I take tablets and drink so I just sleep and don't feel any pain.

Tried twice - but I didn't succeed. Once was when I was locked up in Ormond because I was depressed about being locked up. Also when I lost a girl-friend in a car accident.

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<sup>38</sup>  $\chi^2 = 4.05, 1 \text{ df}, p < .05$

***'Away from home' comparison group***

I felt like committing suicide - you know, you see everybody, stand by the window watching people, going to work, loving each other, people with families - and you look back at your bedroom and you see what you've got ... and it hurts. You haven't got any money ... you go to the shops and you see something you'd like. You know I was pregnant and I only had one pair of track suit pants and a shirt and a jacket.

When I was 15, I slit my wrists and swallowed tablets. When I was 17, I stopped thinking about it - but I continually thought about it for 2 years. I decided not to ... better revenge to get on with things and show them.

Thought about it, yes. Talked myself out of it. A girl I stayed with here tried to o/d - that brought me back to reality.

Every year for a couple of days... I just sit around and play funny music. But I stopped myself. Up till last year, I used to cut myself all the time. When I tried to commit suicide, I just cut deeper and bled everywhere. Deep down I didn't really want to die.

I wanted to, but I didn't do anything. Not because I was unhappy but because I did something bad that I shouldn't have and I didn't know how to get out of it ..

It's not worth it. I wake up every day now and think I'm still alive -that's good enough for me. To be alive is good because I've had a few close shaves.

***'At home' comparison group***

I didn't do anything but I really felt like it. It was just when I was going through high school. I just didn't feel I could cope and I got really stressed. Had stress classes at school - they really helped and some tapes.

I've thought about it but when it came down to it, I was too scared and thought 'what a stupid thing to do!'. It was serious but I backed off from it.

What young people had to say about their reasons for considering or attempting suicide, their associated feelings and the methods they used clearly indicate their despair and loneliness. They also point to the urgent need for social support and counselling for these young people.

**6. 10 Looking back on childhood and time in care**

When asked three months after they left wardship how happy they had been while they were in care, young people indicated at all three interviews that they were significantly happier than they had been while they were in care (see Table 6.11).<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, while all the other happiness ratings were highly inter-correlated,<sup>40</sup> the correlations

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<sup>39</sup> Young people's ratings for their happiness at the first interview were significantly higher than their retrospective ratings for their happiness while they were in care:  $t = 3.73, 44 \text{ df}, p < .001$ ; similarly their ratings at the second and third interviews were significantly higher:  $t = 3.85, 47 \text{ df}, p < .001$  and  $t = 1.97, \text{df} = 43, p < .055$ , respectively.

<sup>40</sup> The correlations between the ratings for current happiness at the three interviews ranged from .48 ( $p < .001$ ) to .74 ( $p < .0001$ ).

between the retrospective happiness rating and the other happiness ratings were lower, except for the rating given at the same time at the second interview.<sup>41</sup>

6. 10. 1 **Better off in care?** Twelve months after being discharged from wardship, young people were also asked to consider in retrospect whether they thought they would have been better off left with their family or going into care. While most (77.8 per cent) said they were better off in care, some were also ambivalent, wishing there could have been other options or that they had been treated with more care while they were in care; a few (17.8 per cent) wished they had been left in their own homes or were not sure. Those who entered care as adolescents were more certain that they were better off in care (90 per cent) than those who entered care earlier (73.5 per cent), probably because they could more clearly remember what life at home had been like and possibly also because wardship has become more of 'a last resort' than it was ten to fifteen years ago when some children entered care. Stability and type of placement at discharge was also a factor. All who were in stable foster care at the time they were discharged from wardship said they were better off in care compared with half those living with their parents and 73 per cent of those not living with either.

**Better off left with family or going into care?**

**Better off in care** - protected from Mum with drugs and violent boyfriend. But I also thought I was getting punished because I didn't get much help from DOCS. I thought I was to blame for my mother's problems - no one explained anything to me.

I was better off going into care .. but I don't know if it would have made a lot of difference. It's not right to take children away. They could have just kept an eye on us, put her into 'rehab' courses .. but I would have turned out rougher than I am. I've seen friends of Mum's - died of drug overdose. So it's good in one way and bad in another.

I would have been a mess, probably dead because I would have killed myself.

Definitely better to have been left with my family- if my mother and father hadn't screwed up the way they did. I wish at times that it had never really happened .. but that's life. I think if I'd been with my real family I would have turned out differently. Maybe I wouldn't have a criminal record, a tattoo, no real education.

In a way I'd have been better off being left with my family because FACS didn't care. I was just a number to them.

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<sup>41</sup> The correlations between happiness ratings while in care and current happiness at the first second and third interviews were .38, .56 (p , .001) and .03, respectively. This means that young people who gave high ratings in one interview were more likely to give high ratings in other interviews.



**Table 6. 13**  
**Mean ratings by ex-wards for Department's fulfilment of its duties**  
**and by comparison groups for parents**

|                                    | Ex-wards                        |                                    |                     | Comparison groups                |      |                            |                     |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|------|----------------------------|---------------------|
|                                    | Long-term placement<br>(n = 22) | Not in long-term place<br>(n = 23) | Overall<br>(n = 45) | Test of significance<br>F      p |      | Away from home<br>(n = 18) | At home<br>(n = 17) |
| Financial support                  | 3.8                             | 2.6                                | 3.1                 | 10.4                             | .003 | 2.6                        | 4.7                 |
| Decent, safe place to live         | 4.5                             | 2.5                                | 3.5                 | 47.8                             | .001 | 2.9                        | 5.0                 |
| Good education                     | 3.6                             | 1.9                                | 2.7                 | 21.0                             | .001 | 2.7                        | 4.8                 |
| Care, advice                       | 3.5                             | 2.3                                | 2.8                 | 10.9                             | .002 | 2.3                        | 4.5                 |
| Preparation for independent living | 1.4                             | 1.2                                | 1.3                 | NS                               |      | 1.9                        | 4.0                 |

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Ratings were on a 5-point scale where '1' was 'not at all' and '5' was 'really well'.

**6. 10. 2 The Department as guardian.** At both the second and third interviews, three and 12 months after they were discharged from wardship, young people were asked to rate the Department (on a 5-point scale) according to how well they thought it had fulfilled several aspects of its duties as guardian/parent to them, as children in state care. These two sets of ratings were highly correlated ( $r = .51$  to  $.66$ ) and very similar, except that the ratings for 'education' were significantly reduced from the second to the third interview.

The Department was clearly seen to have fulfilled some of its 'parental' duties better than others. In particular, the provision of a safe place to live was rated highest and the preparation for independent living lowest. Not surprisingly, young people's ratings also varied as a function of their experience while in care. Those who had a long-term placement that lasted for at least 75 per cent of their time in care were significantly more positive than those who had not been in a long-term placement - except for the preparation for independent living, which was rated equally poorly by both sub-groups (see Table 6. 13). Similarly, those who were still living in foster care at the time they were discharged rated the Department more highly than did young people who were living with their parents and those living elsewhere. Whether or not they entered care during adolescence or beforehand made no significant difference.

Young people in the two comparison groups were also asked to rate their own parents on these aspects of the parental role. As Table 6.13 shows, young people in the '*at home*' comparison group consistently rated their parents the most positively, followed by the ratings (for the Department) by ex-wards who had been in a long-term placement. Almost equally poor ratings were given by young people in the '*away from home*' group who had generally left home because of abuse or conflict and by ex-wards who had not had the stability in care provided by a long-term placement.

**6. 10. 3 Love and security.** Most young people in all three groups (ex-wards and the two comparison groups) were able to say that there had been at least one person that they felt had really loved them (Table 6. 14). Similar proportions of the three groups said there had been someone they had felt secure with. Once again, young people who had been in a long-term placement were more similar in their responses to young people in the comparison group still living at home; those who had not had a long-term placement were similar to the '*away from home*' comparison group.

For both comparison groups, parents were the first and most frequent choice as someone who loved them, despite the fact that the young people in the '*away from home*' group were unable to live at home. For the ex-wards, foster parents were as likely as parents to be mentioned in terms of love, and more likely as someone they felt secure with. Only 13 ex-wards (28.9 per cent) said they thought their parents loved them and only five said they had felt secure with them. In contrast, the figures for foster parents were 44.4 per cent (felt loved) and 46.6 per cent (felt secure). Once again, being in a long-term placement was important, either as cause or effect. For ex-wards in long-term placements, 68 per cent said there had been up to three sets of foster parents each who loved them; for those who had not been in a long-term placement, only four young people (17.4 per cent) indicated that their foster parents had loved them.

The same pattern of similarity between ex-wards with a long-term placement and the '*at home*' comparison group on the one hand, and the less stable ex-wards and the '*away from home*' comparison group, on the other hand, was also evident in relation to young people's perceptions of what, if anything, they had missed out on during their childhood. Very few mentioned material things such as toys, clothes or money as what they had missed most. A feeling of being in their own family and of feeling care-free, with memories of birthday parties, family outings and photos, were the most commonly mentioned 'missed' aspects. For some young people, their experiences meant they 'grew up faster', which was seen as having both positive and negative aspects. The perceived benefits were learning to be responsible earlier

and ‘having it over’ other young people their age. For example:

I’ve met a lot of idiots out there who are my age but a lot of people have told me I’m quite mature and have my head screwed on right.

The disadvantage was the feeling of never having a childhood. Several mentioned re-visiting their childhood through toys and birthday cakes to make up for what they had missed as children.

There’s never been a photo of me and I never had a birthday party. I’d like to have all the things I missed out on as a child. I’d like to have a birthday party, and just once I’d like to have a birthday cake and blow out all the candles.

I find that when I see dolls and things, I’d really like to play with them because I never got to. I even play cars with Matt [son]. I can’t even remember being little.

**Table 6. 14 Percentage of ex-wards and comparison groups responses re love and security**

|                          | Ex-wards                        |                                    | Comparison groups          |                     |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
|                          | Long-term placement<br>(n = 22) | Not in long-term place<br>(n = 23) | Away from home<br>(n = 18) | At home<br>(n = 17) |
| Anyone love you?         | 100.0                           | 65.2                               | 70.0                       | 95.0                |
| Anyone feel secure with? | 90.1                            | 72.7                               | 70.0                       | 100.0               |
| Miss out on anything?    | 40.9                            | 69.6                               | 50.0                       | 20.0                |
| Miss out on affection?   | 18.2                            | 69.6                               | 47.1                       | 10.0                |
| Needs met?               |                                 |                                    |                            |                     |
| Less than others         | 13.6                            | 60.9                               | 61.1                       | 5.0                 |
| Same                     | 77.3                            | 39.1                               | 38.9                       | 75.0                |
| More                     | 4.5                             | 0.0                                | 0.0                        | 20.0                |

Sadly, a number of young people felt they had missed out on affection during their childhood and some attributed some of their current difficulties in relationships with partners and children to their own difficulty in expressing affection. For example:

At certain times, I didn’t get much affection. I suppose that’s what has made me a hard person. I can’t show affection except on special occasions, and when I have to.

I can’t let Martin [son] kiss me on the lips... because being abused, I feel uncomfortable about it. I missed out on ordinary affection in my whole childhood.

I’m not an emotional person any more.

I didn’t get any. That’s why I look for love in men and can’t be alone.

In one case, the lack of affection from foster parents was apparently due to their interpretation of guidelines they were given about relating to a young girl who had been sexually abused. For example:

Foster parents never ever really showed us much affection... until after I was 18.

They said 'We're not supposed to give you hugs. We're not allowed to because we're foster parents and because of what's happened to you. We'd get into all sorts of trouble.' I finally gave Dad the first hug in seven years a few months ago. [*Did you know they were not supposed to hug you?*] No. [*Feel strange?*] No, because I've never been hugged by my real parents ..

### 6. 11 Future expectations

As Table 6.11 shows, most young people who had left wardship 12 months beforehand expected to be happier in five years' time than they were then,<sup>42</sup> and their mean rating for their expected future happiness was in fact higher than any of their previous ratings. For most young people in all three groups, the most important aspect of the future was having a [good] job and enough money to live comfortably. The second most frequently mentioned aspect was having a home of their own or sharing with friends or a partner. Most expected to get married but perhaps not for some time, and those still living at home in the comparison group expected to do so (90 per cent) more than the ex-wards (73 per cent) or those in the '*away from home*' comparison group (61 per cent). For example, when asked what they thought they would be doing in five years time, young people said:

- . I hope I'll be working in a kitchen as a chef. [Ex-ward]
- . Working - I'm not sure where or what I'll be doing. [Ex-ward]
- . Taking my kids to school. [Ex-ward]
- . Hopefully a well-paid job, living in a house. [Ex-ward]
- . Hopefully working, trying to earn a living. [*'Away from home*' comparison group]
- . I'll have finished my apprenticeship so I might travel , work my way around but I've also thought I might get married and settle down.

A number of young people, however, were much less certain about the future and indicated that they did not plan or think that far ahead. While this may reflect their personal style, a number of these young people seemed to feel as if they were at the mercy of events and did not have a sense of having any control over events in the future. For example:

I wouldn't have a clue. Maybe less happy than I am now - because you don't know what life's going to be. [Ex-ward]

I don't think about it much. I take each day as it comes. [*Away from home*' comparison group]

I've got an old habit. I don't plan the future. Like when you're a kid you hope for things like presents, but maybe what you want won't happen so why hope for things. I don't have a set future. I don't have a sense of time. I just live day by day. [*'Away from home*' comparison group]

Given the lack of control that many had over the negative events they had already encountered, these feelings are not surprising but because of the link to suicide risk and the few who had had counselling, they are disturbing (Charles & Matheson, 1991). All except one of these young people were ex-wards (n = 12) or in the '*away from home*' comparison group (n = 10). Most gave current and future happiness ratings below the mean and all except one had thought about

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<sup>42</sup> t = 3.42, 36 df, p < . 002.

suicide. Some were not even sure that they had a future. For example:

I hope I'm not living the same way - must be more to life. But the future isn't worth thinking about now. I've got enough problems to last me for a few years. I can't see a future now. [Ex-ward]

I don't think I'll make it to five years. I think it could be worse because every year something bad happens. That's why I can't really think positive - so far, everything's been going bad. [Ex-ward]

In summary, the mental health, happiness and expectations of the future for the young people who had been in wardship without a long-term placement and for those who had been forced to leave home early in the comparison group have clearly been compromised by their experience. A number of these young people feel that the future is uncertain and uncontrollable, like the past had been for many of them. Their experience and the belief of some that they were somehow responsible for going into care fits the learned helplessness model of depression (Zimmerman, 1988). Their need for social and emotional support is clear, but unfortunately few had received counselling while they were in care, and even fewer had any after leaving care.



## 7 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This study used several sources of information - interviews with young people leaving wardship, and with age-mates living at home or in refuges, departmental files, and interviews with workers - to examine the circumstances, experiences and needs of young people aged 16 to 18 who were leaving wardship in New South Wales. It documents young people's perceptions of being in care and of making the transition from care and their 'voice' provides the most powerful evidence of their needs. It should be noted, however, that while the interview participants were representative in demographic terms of all the young people aged 16 to 18 leaving wardship at that time, they had, on average, a more settled history than the young people leaving wardship who did not participate. The findings should therefore be interpreted in this light - as perhaps underestimating the needs of young people both in care and after care. Issues arising from these findings in relation to children's experience in care and their discharge from wardship and transition to independent living will be dealt with in turn.

### 7.1 Issues arising from experience in care

*Placement quality and stability.* The two over-riding issues relating to children's experience in substitute care are the quality and the stability of care. Their importance lies in their long-term implications because children's history in substitute care and wardship is a good predictor of young people's circumstances at discharge and beyond. Concern has mostly focussed on the lack of permanence or continuity children often experience in substitute care as they move through a series of placements (Fein, Maluccio, Hamilton & Ward, 1983; Steinhauer, 1991; Usher Report, 1991). This concern is well based. Research has substantiated the ill effects on children of a lack of continuity in care-giving. They include poor school performance, chronic depression, antisocial and asocial behaviours, and an impaired capacity to form and maintain intimate relationships (Berridge, 1992; Steinhauer, 1991).

The two basic measures of stability in care were the number of placements and the proportion of the time in care spent in the longest placement (whether or not there was a long-term placement which lasted for at least 75 per cent of the time in care). Both measures, but especially the '75 per cent proportion' were significant predictors of other aspects of young people's experience in care and after leaving care.

Consistent with other findings (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987), the more placements children had, the more schools they attended. Furthermore, the more schools they attended, the less well they did at school by their own assessment, the less well they got on with classmates, and the fewer years of schooling they completed. It appears then that this lack of continuity in living and school arrangements compounds the difficulties facing children in care and contributes substantially to their well-known poor educational attainment (Aldgate, 1994; Stein & Carey, 1986). Other factors are the 'poor start' young people coming into care have educationally, and the low priority that education generally assumes during their time in care, with workers, foster carers and the children themselves often holding low expectations and limited aspirations (Aldgate, 1994; Aldgate, et al, 1990; Triseliotis, 1980).

The number and stability of placements also had effects beyond the period of wardship, beginning with their accommodation at the time they were discharged and their attitude towards being discharged from wardship. If they were living with foster parents or with their birth parents at the time they were discharged, they were much less likely

to feel scared or ambivalent about being discharged. If they had been in a long-term placement while they were in care, they were more likely to be settled after leaving care, with about half those in foster care remaining there after they were discharged from wardship or returning there after a short period in independent living. Overall, the more placements young people had during their time in care, and in particular during wardship, the more places they lived in after leaving care.

Not surprisingly, young people who had been in a long-term foster placement were more likely to keep in contact with their foster parents, to say they had felt loved by them and secure with them, and to be willing to ask them for financial and emotional support. They were more likely to say their needs were met at least as much as those of other children, and they were less likely to say they had missed out on affection and things that other children had. Significantly, they were less likely to have tried to commit suicide. They were also happier after being discharged from wardship than young people without a background of a long-term placement and more able to 'make ends meet' financially. Finally, their attitude to the Department was more positive and they rated the Department as having done a better job in relation to key 'parental duties' such as providing them with financial support and a safe and secure place to live. In summary, then, it appears that young people who were in a long-term placement were in Fanshel et al's (1990) terms 'in better condition at exit' from care and that benefit continued through into the after-care period. Indeed, the profile of ex-wards who had been in stable long-term foster placements was closest to the young people in the '*at home*' comparison group, and the ex-wards who had not had the stability provided by a long-term placement were most similar to the comparison group of young people who left home early without the intervention of the Department.

Establishing cause and effect in relation to stability, however, is very difficult. Several other inter-related factors are involved as well - the pre-placement history of the child, the age of entry to care, and the difficulty of the young person's behaviour. For example, young people who entered care as adolescents with a longer pre-placement history were less likely to have one long-term placement than those who entered care earlier. There are several likely reasons. First, it is more difficult to place adolescents than younger children, especially in foster care, so they had less chance of 'finding' a successful long-term placement. Second, since there has been a move towards using wardship as a last resort, it may well be that adolescents enter care more 'damaged' than children who enter at younger ages. Their behaviour may therefore have been more challenging, and more likely to result in placement break-downs. On the other hand, the lack of stability of placements may also have resulted in more difficult behaviour.

While it may be difficult to disentangle cause and effect, it remains clear that the stability of placement in care is critically important. Unfortunately, however, as we have seen, discontinuity in one aspect of the lives of children in care is generally compounded by changes in other areas. Thus, a change in placement often means a change in school, and sometimes a change in worker, although the transfer and turn-over of workers is more often the reason for a change in worker. If children are required to change schools when they move into a new placement, however, the placement is more likely to break down, necessitating another move for the child. As Berridge & Cleaver (1987) pointed out:

It seems unrealistic to expect ill-prepared children to cope with such profound social, emotional, geographical and educational change in their lives. Indeed ... when certain aspects of children's



lives are held constant, change in *other* areas is more easily endured. (p. 178)

It is not just the actual long-term nature of the placement that is important, however. Children's and young people's perceptions of its permanence, as well as the perceptions of the carers, are also important (Lahti, 1982; Rest & Watson, 1984; Steinhauer, 1991). This may explain why foster children who are adopted do better than children who remain in long-term foster care without being adopted (Fein, Maluccio et al., 1983; McDonald et al., 1992; Triseliotis, 1989), and why young people leaving foster families at discharge from care were more ambivalent about it than young people leaving birth families (Bichal et al., 1994). It may also explain why a restoration to the child's birth family was found to be significantly related to the stability of the following placement. Returning home seems to have dispelled children's hopes or fantasies about living successfully at home, allowing them to settle better in substitute care (Fein, Maluccio, Hamilton & Ward, 1983). Remembering that permanence is in the eye of the child is helpful too in understanding that residential care may provide that sense of security for some young people. Several young people in this study who did not wish to be fostered spoke very positively about their sense of security in good residential care.

While the primary focus has been on continuity of care for very good reasons, there has often been an implied assumption that long-term care means quality care. Although the length of placements and their quality, at least as perceived by the young people themselves, were positively related overall (see 4.1.4), and the length of a placement was therefore a good predictor of its quality, this was not always the case. In some cases, for example, the break-down of a long-term placement in early to mid adolescence followed quite long periods of difficulty or ill-treatment although all seemed well according to reports in the files until the break-down.<sup>1</sup> Several of these cases involved relative care, and the feedback from the young people in this study indicate that it should not be assumed that relatives necessarily provide the best option. While placements with relatives are generally longer than other types of placement (Fein, Maluccio et al., 1983) and are increasingly being seen as the first choice, they need to be properly assessed and monitored. Various criteria for such an assessment have been outlined by Schneider and Groat (1989), cited by Le Sueur (1990).

**Monitoring.** The second and related issue concerns the need for consistent monitoring of placements and regular contact between children in care and their workers. Although most young people were fairly satisfied with the attitude of their workers, they were less satisfied with the amount of contact they had with them and with the number of changes of workers which undermined their relationship. A consistent theme in their suggestions for better practice was that their worker - and preferably one rather than a series of different workers - maintain regular contact, monitor, and respond to their needs. It is likely that if this had happened and if the young people in this study had felt confident of their workers' ability to listen and respond, then some of the placement break-downs and much of the abuse in care could have been avoided or stopped.

Placement break-down was the main reason that placements ended during wardship and it is clear that in a number of cases there were problems, even in apparently stable long-term placements, that remained undetected

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<sup>1</sup> While some problems may be expected with adolescents as they try to come to terms with issues of identity and their emotional attachments, it is clear that there were other reasons for the break-down in these cases.

or unresolved. When workers did not have sufficient contact with the children and the family, they were often unaware of what was happening or unsuspecting of the severity of the problem until the placement broke down. In some cases, lack of action in relation to adoption appears to have been the catalyst for problems in apparently stable placements which broke down in mid-adolescence. Indeed, some District Officers were well aware that monitoring the placements of wards in care, especially wards in long-term apparently stable care, was a low priority in competition with increasing case loads of child protection notifications. In the words of one District Officer cited earlier:

Substitute care usually takes a back seat, and when things are going well, they take a further back seat because we've got so much child protection stuff on that you just wait till that quiets down and you can get back to substitute care .. And that rarely happens, so it just waits.

***Abuse in care.*** Abuse in care constitutes the most serious breach of the duty of care owed to children who have been separated from their birth parents. The extent of abuse in care revealed by the young people in this study, and generally confirmed by file information, is disturbing and covers the range, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect. Given that the young people in the interview sample were representative of children in care, and indeed may even represent the 'better end' because they were able to be located, the figures on abuse in this sample indicate a disturbing risk of abuse.

While several incidents occurred in group homes or residential care, the majority occurred in foster care. Although this is a probably largely a function of the fact that a large proportion of children in substitute care (85.5 per cent) are in foster placement, it also reflects the relative isolation of children in foster care and the constraints on public scrutiny of foster care placements. This highlights the need for the careful selection, thorough training and appropriate monitoring of foster carers.

Regular monitoring and independent reviews are particularly important because of the reluctance of children to complain (Lindsay, 1991; see also 4.2.1). Research findings could be used to target or give priority to particular groups of children such as those who have run from a placement or who have had four or more placements. In particular, these monitoring and review processes should include procedures which ensure that children are able to speak to their workers or 'official visitors' privately. They should also ensure that children are protected against retaliation if they do make a complaint. Furthermore, children need to know that there are other avenues such as the Community Services Commission if they have a complaint against their carer that is not addressed by their worker.

***Quality of relationship with workers.*** The relationship with Departmental or agency workers may be quite important for children in care. Where children move through a series of placements, workers may provide the only continuous relationship for the child. Ideally, they should act as the child's advocate in procuring services for the child, assisting them to maintain contact with their parents and family, and monitoring the quality of their care. In practice, their ability to work on behalf of the child is severely constrained by their lack of continuity and turn-over, by limited time and other demands, and by their concerns about maintaining a relationship with foster carers. For the wards, this means having a number of workers during their time in care (an average of about four) and having

insufficient contact and time with them to develop a trusting relationship. It is hardly surprising then that the more workers young people had while they were in care, the less helpful they reported them to be.

Unfortunately, changing placements tended to compound the lack of continuity of workers since a move to another departmental area also meant a change of office, even when the new placement was in a nearby suburb. This is difficult for workers as well as for the wards. When children and their files are transferred from one office to another, workers usually do not have the time to go through the file properly so they often do not know the background details of the child, their family and their placement, details that are often carried in the worker's head. Well-documented and organised files, with good up-to-date summaries of the most important information are therefore very important, as are 'good practice' procedures to ensure that changes occur only when they are really necessary and to smooth the transition from one worker to the next when a change in worker is necessary.

When children and young people in the study did establish a good relationship with a worker, this was often quite important, providing them with a significant source of support and advice, and making them more likely to seek help from the Department after they left wardship. Many young people said they wanted to keep in contact with a person, not the Department, and some 'followed' District Officers when they transferred to new offices or even to new jobs, going to them for support and assistance in preference to their 'new' official worker.

***Departmental and agency support.*** There was clearly considerable variability in the level of support that children and young people received while they were in care. While some young people received considerable support, others received little. Whether they received a lot or a little seemed to depend on several main factors. These included the availability of resources and particular practices in different offices, the quality of the relationship between the worker and the young person, and the time and commitment of different workers and carers. Garnett's (1992) comment in relation to the level of after-care support in three English local authorities applies equally well to in-care support in New South Wales:

Any young person who required more than this basic minimum was therefore dependent on the time, commitment and good will of individual social workers, managers, foster carers and residential staff. (p. 117)

While some variation might be expected, it is inequitable that the level of support children and young people in care receive is so variable and so dependent on the commitment of individual workers and managers.

***Need for information.*** The need for information for children and young people in care arises in at least two contexts. The first concerns children's right to be informed about what is to happen to them while they are in substitute care and the second concerns information about their history in care and access to their files.

A clear message from the young people who were interviewed as part of this study was their need to be informed and listened to. They wanted to know what was going to happen to them, when they could see their parents and other family members, and what they were entitled to. Some were unclear about the role of the Department and what they should be able to expect, and others did not know why some of their placements had changed. This lack of knowledge across a range of areas affecting their lives indicates that some young people were not properly and appropriately informed. As one young person said, "The worst thing is being kept in suspense about everything in

wardship". As Stein and Carey (1986) point out, decisions are often made on their behalf and "it is frequently assumed that they are too young to be given full explanations or to grasp the full implications of them. ... Not knowing where they are going gives rise to fears, fantasies, resentment and bitterness, especially when they are lied to" (p. 16). It also reinforces feelings of helplessness and a lack of control which in turn is further conducive to depression (Zimmerman, 1988).

The second issue relating to information concerns issues about identity. The importance of children in care understanding their family background and personal history is now widely accepted, especially as a result of work in the area of adoption. It is particularly important for children of Aboriginal background. As Thorpe (1974) stated some time ago:

Knowledge of personal history is crucial for identity formation and emotional adjustment and, moreover ... it is a basic human right (p. 691).

Understanding and coming to terms with the reasons they entered care is therefore an important task for young people during adolescence and at discharge from care. A small but significant number of young people who entered care early in their lives were unsure why they had come into care although they were now nearly 18 and about to be discharged. Some had no contact with some or all of the members of their families and so had lost vital information about their own family history and identity. Others were still in contact or had resumed contact with members of their family but were unable to understand why they had been removed from their family or were confused by differing accounts.

There are at least two ways that children and young people in care can be informed about their family background and their history in care. One is by making a 'life story book' which records in an age-appropriate way the child's life including photos and documents and information about the various places the child has lived. Although the preparation of a 'life story book' is included in the Department's *Substitute Care Practice and Procedural Manual* (vol. 3), and the advantages and problems are clearly outlined, the fact that they are little used is also recognised. This recognition is an accurate reflection of reality for the young people leaving wardship during this period. Few had heard of 'a life story book' and very few had actually helped to prepare one. In several cases where case conferences or psychologists recommended the preparation of a 'life story book' to help children (usually presenting with behaviour problems) understand what had happened to them, there was little evidence that any progress was made. The main reason seemed to be a lack of time for workers to help do this. Life story books held some appeal, however, since those few who had one found them useful and had a very clear idea of their history of placements since entering substitute care. Other young people who did not have such a record were keen, however, to include photos and other personal documents in a 'Leaving Care package'.

Another way of helping young people to understand their history in care is to give them access to their Departmental or agency files. The right of young people to have access to and to peruse their file is recognised by the Department. Indeed the *Substitute Care Practice and Procedural Manual* (vol. 1) states:

The Department has responsibility to assist current or former Wards and Protected Persons to come to terms, in a positive way, with their background. Basic to that responsibility is the right of a current or former Ward or Protected Person to information about himself / herself. The provision of this information is limited *only by the right of others to privacy* and in the case of

younger children, by their age and capacity to understand. ... The age of 12 years is generally considered to be the age that a child develops the ability to reason, and therefore the capacity to make responsible decisions regarding the perusal of their file.

In practice, however, rights or entitlements cannot be exercised if there is no knowledge about the right and this was the case for a substantial minority of young people in the interview study who did not know that they could have access to their files or even that such files existed. Furthermore, when some young people did approach the Department to look at their files, they encountered various obstructions and difficulties. These included delays associated with the need to find a suitable time when a worker could sit with them, being asked to pay a fee (\$30), and a lack of privacy in having someone else sitting there or controlling what they were allowed to see in the file. The other problem they faced was not unique to them. It was the difficulty of reading large, often poorly organised files which contain a mass of documents relating to the financial and funding arrangements, medical and dental treatment, school reports, annual reports, psychologists' reports and various memoranda. The importance of well-managed files is referred to elsewhere but also has implications for wards and former wards understanding what they say about their lives in care.

Access to information alone is not sufficient, however. The information is not an end in itself but a means to an end. It provides a means for young people to understand why they entered substitute care and wardship, to clarify any misconceptions and to establish their identity. This is particularly important given the number of young people who felt responsible at some stage for going into care and the link between this and their feelings of hopelessness and their greater likelihood of thinking about or attempting suicide. According to Departmental policy, young people should know their legal status, the circumstances of how they entered care, and their family background well before they leave care. Reading the file and becoming aware of the full circumstances was, however, clearly difficult for a number of young people. Some help or counselling to come to terms with what they learn about their families and themselves is therefore likely to be valuable, especially given the relatively high proportion of young people leaving wardship who have tried to commit suicide or thought about it.

## **7.2 Transition from wardship**

The main issues in relation to the transition from wardship concern the age at which young people are discharged from care and the extent to which they are prepared for it, both in terms of their maturity and their level of living skills.

*Timing of leaving care.* The criteria for including young people leaving wardship in the study was that they were aged 16 to 18 and due to be discharged within the specified 12 month period. The two most common ages at which young people under long-term wardship orders are discharged from wardship are 16 and 18; 18 is the upper age limit for wardship and the age at which most wards in the current study were discharged. A small number were discharged at 17 at the request of the young people concerned. They were all in stable placements or in placements that were expected to be stable. In contrast, a larger number of wards (double the number discharged at 17) were discharged at 16 even though they were in unstable circumstances, and in some cases had indicated that they did not wish to be discharged. File notes in these cases indicated that there was 'nothing further that the Department could

do to help them’.

Departmental action in discharging young people whose circumstances and difficulties clearly left them vulnerable and with inadequate support may be a result of several factors. These young people were invariably very difficult to manage, and even to find. Resources for difficult adolescents are limited, especially for those with multiple problems (eg. substance abuse, behaviour problems, learning difficulties, mild intellectual disability, juvenile offending). Discharging them may variously indicate realistic recognition by the officers that there was indeed little they could offer such young people or it may indicate frustration and an unwillingness to continue to work with them and to be held responsible when they had no control. Either way, it is inappropriate for the state as guardian to ‘give up’ their responsibility and abandon such young people to their own limited resources.

Most of the young people in the study, however, were discharged at 18 as required by the legislation. Although most were looking forward to leaving wardship prior to discharge and felt fairly confident, some were not looking forward to it and others were scared. A sizeable minority, about a quarter, said they would *not* leave at that time if they had a choice. Most of these young people were *not* living in stable accommodation with either their birth parents or foster parents. They were concerned about their ability to manage financially and to make decisions and bear the consequences without having the Department there as a back-up in times of need. They were not alone in their concern about managing money. Young people generally in the comparison groups as well as the wards were less confident about their ability to cope financially than about other aspects of independent living.

There is reason then for concern about an inflexible policy and about current practice which takes little or no account of young people's maturity, wishes or preparedness for independence and does little to ensure that they are prepared. Young people differ in their maturity and preparedness for independence. They also differ in the circumstances surrounding their discharge and in the support they can expect to receive after discharge. They should not be discharged when they are worried about their ability to cope and feel unprepared or when they have inadequate support and their circumstances render them very vulnerable. As indicated earlier, young people now tend to remain living with their parents until their early to mid 20s and often leave and return several times before establishing final independence (McDonald, 1993; Hartley, 1989, 1993; Young, 1987). Only the relatively few young people leaving wardship who have established a secure place in a foster family or in another supportive environment have this option. The state as guardian does not allow this possibility for the wards for whom it is responsible and it currently provides little support once the guardianship ceases.

An inflexible upper age of 18 for leaving wardship when there is little support available after wardship is particularly problematic when leaving wardship coincides with leaving school and a move into unemployment. Just before and after they were discharged from wardship most young people were still at school or were working, but 12 months later, more young people were unemployed than were either working or studying. Even when they did not move into unemployment but from school to post-secondary education, several experienced financial hardship as they were not eligible for AUSTUDY over the holiday period and were not aware that they could obtain support from the Department of Community Services.

***Preparation for leaving care.*** Ideally, young people’s transition to independence is a process that occurs during the child and adolescent years with the support and guidance of their family. It is a complex process that

involves separating psychologically from family or caregivers, becoming financially independent and developing work skills, securing appropriate accommodation, developing and maintaining a network of support and friends, learning how to access services, and developing a variety of skills to do with budgeting, cooking and nutrition, cleaning and health care (Maluccio, Krieger, & Pine, 1990; Spence, 1994). These tasks are not unique to young people leaving care but for those who have been in care and physically separated from their own families, there are the additional tasks of coming to terms with the reasons for their separation and dealing with the associated emotional and psychological issues. The difficulty of these tasks is compounded by their 'lower levels of educational achievement, higher rates of unemployment' and possibly by 'problems of substance abuse, depression, and physical and mental illness' (Spence, 1994: 38). Furthermore, despite a frequent history of multiple placements and educational disruption, they are expected to become independent several years earlier than their peers who live at home with their families without these problems.

While successful foster care has provided a similar process of preparing some young people in care for independence and there are some formal programs, there is an urgent need to provide a more systematic and long-term approach to preparing young people for leaving care. In particular, preparation needs to be responsive to the needs and preferences of young people. According to the young people in this study with and without a background in wardship, their primary concern is budgeting and managing money, and finding and establishing themselves in appropriate accommodation. Most were more confident about other independent living skills such as cooking, cleaning, and self-care but most young people leaving wardship indicated that they would be interested in independent living skills workshops if they were offered. In setting up any such programs, it is important to learn from the experience of those who have tried a number of different preparation and independent living models in England, the United States and Canada (Bichal, Clayden, Stein & Wade, 1994; Iglehart, 1994; Maluccio, Krieger, & Pine, 1990; Spence, 1994; Waldinger & Furman, 1994).

It is also important to retain realistic expectations in relation to preparation and specific preparation programs. As Maluccio, Krieger, and Pine (1990) have pointed out from their US experience, there is:

a temptation to believe that these young people, through participation in a single training program or similar effort, can progress through a complex set of adolescent life tasks at accelerated speed. Efforts to 'fast-forward' youths through a process that takes less vulnerable adolescents years to complete creates expectations that few foster youths can meet. Effective independent-living policies and programs create spring-boards, formed at the point of entry to the foster care system, from which youths can gain experiences that promote readiness for adulthood.

Indeed, Maluccio, Krieger and Pine (1990) are keen to change the terminology from 'independence' to 'interdependence' and to challenge unfair and unrealistic expectations that 'place the 'burden of preparation for adulthood ... largely on the adolescent' rather than seeing it as 'the shared responsibility of policymakers, practitioners, biological and foster parents, and others' to help young people become 'participating adults in that community'; that stress 'hard' skills in 'tangible' areas such as housekeeping and budgeting without recognising the importance and the need for help in 'intangible areas' such as social skills and self-image; and that do not take account of young people's needs for continuing assistance and 'connectedness'.

Similarly, Stein and Carey (1986) challenged the notion of independence for young people leaving care and their

findings confirmed the significance of inter-personal skills and the resolution of identity issues. Young people leaving care need the opportunity to 'graduate' from care through a gradual, flexible process and to have continued support beyond care to manage these and other issues in the same way that most young people living with their parents continue to have support.

### 7.3 After care and beyond

Underlying the concern about the timing and preparedness for leaving care is considerable concern about the level of support that is available to young people after they have been discharged from wardship. If, as is currently the case, little or no support or after-care is available, then there is greater reason for concern about the inflexibility of the timing and the abruptness of the transition from care than there would be if adequate and appropriate after-care was available.

There are several issues associated with young people's ability to receive help from the Department after they leave wardship. The first concerns the adequacy of that support. The second is the level of awareness among young people and their workers as to what is available. The third concerns the accessibility of that support, including the willingness of young people to seek help.

**Legislation and policy.** The availability of adequate and appropriate support is crucial. In the face of the many barriers that confront young people when they leave wardship, particularly during times of economic recession with high youth unemployment, high rents and limited places in further education and training, the state offers only limited discretionary support. As mentioned earlier, the legislation allows former wards or Protected Persons (or an advocate or worker on the young person's behalf) to apply to the Department for the same assistance as they were able to obtain as wards. There is no entitlement to assistance after leaving wardship<sup>2</sup>, and apart from the reference to 'education and vocational training', the legislation is non-specific about exactly what assistance is available or for how long.<sup>3</sup>

While the lack of specificity allowed some workers to obtain wide-ranging benefits for a few wards, it meant that other wards received little, if any, financial or other assistance apart from the payment of fees for those continuing their education. Once again, what help young people could obtain as former wards depended upon the knowledge and commitment of their workers, and upon the particular interpretation and practice of the office they applied to. As Garnett (1992: 90) pointed out, the discretionary nature of after-care support leads to "considerable variation in the levels of financial support and assistance available to care-leavers" (Lupton, 1985; Stein & Maynard, 1985).

Unclear or non-existent policy and variable practice also contribute to the passive role that the Department and substitute care agencies play in after-care (Spence, 1994). Not surprisingly perhaps, given the tenor of the

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<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the United Kingdom, the United States, and various provinces in Canada have legislation which impose some responsibilities - powers and duties - on the state for after-care.

<sup>3</sup> S 92 (2) of the *Children (Care and Protection) Act 1987*.



legislation, the stated Departmental policy<sup>4</sup> in relation to services to former wards does not encourage the provision of assistance to former wards. The policy provides little more than a re-statement of the legislation and makes no reference to contact between District Officers and wards after they are discharged from wardship. In contrast to the UK, where Local Authorities under the UK Children Act 1989 (Sections 20 and 24) have a duty to 'advise and befriend' young people aged 16 to 21 if they were 'looked after' at or beyond the age of 16, District Officers in NSW are generally not encouraged to keep contact with former wards; some have been told that any contact must occur in their own time. In some cases where the District Officer and the young person had developed a good relationship, this did occur and contact was maintained despite a number of changes of location by both the worker and the young person. Once again, the level of support was dependent upon the goodwill of particular workers but the possible long-term preventative value of this 'mentoring' relationship is not generally recognised. Ironically, it may be the unofficial nature of this relationship that makes it more valuable for the young person because that may signal that their worker cares for them and is not just doing their job.<sup>5</sup>

The role of foster parents after young people officially leave care is even more undefined, and the tension between 'love' and 'money' more marked. In a number of cases, this tension first surfaces when young people begin to receive AUSTUDY and the foster allowance ceases or is reduced to a supplementary payment. It is at this stage that young people generally begin to pay 'board' to foster parents out of 'their own' money. In a number of cases, this caused some young people to question their status in the family and their foster parents' motives in fostering them; were they doing it because they were paid to do so or because they cared for them?<sup>6</sup> This uncertainty can become even more problematic when the young person is discharged from wardship. While most young people in long-term stable foster care felt that they were able to ask their foster parents for emotional support and their foster parents were willing and able to provide it, this was certainly not the case for all. Some young people were ambivalent about their relationship with their foster family or lost their support within the first year after discharge from care as a result of conflict or because the young person made life-choices that the foster family disapproved of.

There are several interpretations of this pattern. Downes (1992) found a similar pattern and provides one explanation:

The adolescents in the study had ... little confidence that their foster parents would be reliably available to them when needed. This sometimes led to forms of attachment behaviour which put a greater physical or emotional distance between themselves and their foster parents at the very point they were faced with a situation that threatened to overwhelm their coping capacity. (p. 33)

It also seems that some foster parents were unclear about where their responsibility for young people who

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<sup>4</sup> NSW Department of Community Services *Substitute Care Practice and Procedural Manual* (vol 1).

<sup>5</sup> There are of course potential dangers in such relationships so it is important to preserve some boundaries.

<sup>6</sup> This is despite the fact that age-related fostering allowances barely cover the direct costs to foster carers, and rarely cover damage, 'wear and tear', or carers' time (Downs, 1990).

had been in their care ends, and that in some cases they were not willing or able to continue to provide the financial and emotional support that the young person needed. In terms of willingness, Iglehart (1994) found, for example, that care-givers believed young people who ask for help after leaving care to be less responsible than those who did not ask. While young people might be expected to see their foster parents as part of their support network, it appears, as Iglehart (1994) noted that, 'In the caretaker's opinion, responsibility means not asking ... for help' (pp. 167-8). If, as is likely, young people are aware of this attitude, their ambivalence about their relationship with their foster parents is quite understandable. It is important therefore that young people, their foster parents and the supervising agency clarify their expectations about each others' role in after-care and that other support is available. This may include some proper recognition, encouragement and financial assistance for foster carers to help them continue their involvement with young people after they are officially discharged from care. Since many foster families have low incomes, they may not be able to cover the financial costs of continued involvement and should not be expected to do so (Maluccio, Krieger, & Pine, 1990).

***Young people's expectations and willingness to seek help.*** To receive help, young people need to know that help is available and they need to be willing to ask for or at least accept help. Some young people did not meet either one or both of these conditions - that is, they were either unaware that such help was available or they were unwilling to ask for it, unless they were 'desperate'. Nearly half did not know whether they could get help from the Department after they were discharged, and a small number were certain they could not. Even if they did think that they could obtain some help, many were unclear about what form that assistance could take. Typically, it seems that District Officers tell wards that they can contact the Department in the future if they need to, but they are not specific about what assistance might be available. This is hardly surprising because any assistance is discretionary and subject to the perceived 'merits' of the case and to variations in practice from one office to another. There are no guarantees or promises because young people leaving care are not *entitled* by legislation to assistance.

The uncertainty about what help is available adds further complexity to another issue - whether or not young people are willing to ask for help. If young people are uncertain about the response to their request for help, they are less likely to risk rejection by asking. This is even more likely if they were unhappy with the level of support they received when they were in care. It is therefore important to have some clarity and certainty about what help is available and what is involved in obtaining it. As indicated earlier, this information needs to be given to young people before they are discharged from care because the more they knew about available support at this stage, the more likely they were to seek help later. This information also needs to be repeated and probably available in brochure form, a suggestion made by several young people.<sup>7</sup> Telling them once is not informing them, especially if they are stressed or the information is difficult to receive. In addition, the timing may be critical. A number of young people changed their views from being unwilling initially to seek help to being willing at least to accept help, if not to ask for it. Immediately after they left care, a number of young people were keen to distance themselves from

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<sup>7</sup> A booklet *A Guide for Children and Young People looked after by Leeds Social Services Department* produced by that department provides a useful model for such a brochure. It is user-friendly and provides information on a wide range of issues relevant to children and young people in care and after care. (Mike Stein, first author of Stein & Carey, 1986 was based at the University of Leeds.)

the Department and to make their own decisions without Departmental 'interference'. While offers of help at this time may be rejected, they are more likely to be successful later if and when the difficulties of living independently become more pressing and alternative sources of support disappear (Carbino, 1990; Anderson & Simonitch, 1981). As Aldgate (1994) points out on the basis of similar findings, it is important for workers and carers not 'to close the door' if young people reject help because a number do come back for help at a later stage (Garnett, 1992; Stein & Carey, 1986; Stein, 1990).

#### 7. 4 The need for after-care

**It must be ensured that all children for whom the state assumes responsibility benefit from an adequately supported transition into productive adulthood... Where the state has intervened to rescue a youth from inadequate parenting, the obligation exists for the state to properly complete the undertaking. (Meston, 1988, p. 633)**

Young people leaving wardship are not a homogenous group. They vary in a number of ways: in ethnicity and race, how old they were when they entered care, how many placements they have had, the type of placements, who they are living with when they are discharged from wardship, whether they are working, studying, looking after their children or unemployed, and what support they have had, if any, from their family, foster family, workers or friends. What they need upon discharge and at various stages beyond discharge will therefore depend on their circumstances at that time. Thus while the overall requirements for young people in their transition to independence contain a number of elements, outlined below, young people's need for them will differ and vary over time.

*Preparation for independent living.* As indicated earlier, young people need to be adequately prepared for independent living, and that means being discharged from wardship at a time that is flexible rather than strictly age-determined. It also means making the transition from care a gradual process rather than a single event, and ensuring that young people have the appropriate skills and supports to allow them to cope.

*Accommodation.* One of the main problems facing young people leaving care is the lack of affordable, long-term accommodation, with appropriate levels of support. Without secure accommodation, it is very difficult for young people to focus on the long-term activities involved in studying or looking for work (Neil & Fopp, 1992). It is hardly surprising then that the young people in long-term stable accommodation with their parents or foster parents in the wards group and in the comparison group completed more years of schooling, were more likely to be continuing studying into post-secondary education, and were more likely to be working even if they were also studying. Consistent with the findings of other research, a substantial proportion of young people in this study in unsettled living arrangements, whether they were former wards or 'early home leavers' in the comparison group, left school early and were unemployed (Morris Report, 1995; Shaver & Paxman, 1995; Taylor, 1990). These unsettled living arrangements included refuges and supported accommodation of short tenure, boarding houses and hostels, and moving between families and friends (Neil & Fopp, 1992; Shaver & Paxman, 1995).

In England, Canada, and the United States where legislation has specifically recognised the state's duty to young people leaving care, a number of independent living schemes covering a range of housing options have been established (DeWoody, Ceja, & Sylvester, 1993; Spence, 1994). The housing options in these schemes include

special independence units within children's homes, supported lodgings or boarding arrangements, trainer houses, semi-independent housing, independent accommodation, and 'foyers' with integrated accommodation, training, and support. In various jurisdictions, Local Authorities (England) or state or provincial governments (US and Canada) have negotiated with public housing authorities to guarantee access to public housing for homeless wards (DeWoody et al., 1993; Le Sueur, 1991; Spence, 1994). Much can be learnt from the overseas experience, especially in terms of the value of guaranteed access, the need for continuing support and the normative role of legislation that outlines the continuing duties of state authorities. As Spence (1994: 40) concluded:

It is the provision of quality, affordable housing in the community combined with a close supportive agency role that is the key to helping young people successfully make the transition.

*Need for education, training, and employment.* According to Iglehart (1994: 167), "work may well be the single most important factor in the transition to adulthood because it teaches discipline and personal responsibility; creates a sense of social identification and status; and constitutes a source of meaningful life experiences. The empowering effects of employment cannot be overstated." Unfortunately, however, young people leaving care and those who leave home early to live in unsettled accommodation are not well-placed to compete in an increasingly competitive and restricted youth labour market. Only a small proportion of young people in this study - 35 per cent of ex-wards and 10 per cent of the 'early home leavers comparison group but 80 per cent of the 'at home' comparison group - had completed high school (to the end of Year 12) and few had any successful long-term periods of employment experience. These figures are similar to or even somewhat lower than figures reported by overseas studies. Cook (1990, 1991, 1994) reported that 44 per cent of 18 year-olds in the National Evaluation of Title IV-E Independent Living Programs for Youth in Foster Care in the United States had completed high school at the time they were discharged from care. Similarly, Barth (1988) found that 45 per cent had graduated from high school when they left foster care. A number, however, went on to complete high school after leaving foster care so that 62 per cent of 19 year-olds had done so (Cook, 1994).

The significance of completing high school was that it is associated with better outcomes. For example, young people who had completed high school were more likely to have held a job for a year or more, to be self-sufficient, and not to be a cost to the community (Westat, 1988). In recognition of the impact of education on the future life chances of young people leaving care, programs and services in both the US and Canada have focussed on education with 'notable... success in promoting the educational development of young people and in securing employment (Spence, 1994, p. 24).

There seem to be a number of elements in the success of these programs in helping young people gain employment and continue their education. First, there is "greater availability of alternative educational programs" than in Australia for young people separated from their families who have difficulty attending mainstream schools. The second aspect is the 'almost universal' requirement that homeless young people and care leavers' in support and accommodation services continue in or return to some form of education, often while working as well. The young people also have financial incentives to continue with education (Spence, 1994). Third, successful programs generally involve specialist employment and education workers who have contacts with local employers, and some

provide on-site child care for teenage mothers (Spence, 1994, p. 24). To date, there are no such broad-ranging programs in Australia to our knowledge that address these issues and provide this sort of assistance.

*Income and income support.* Because young people leaving wardship, and young people unable to live at home (but without the support of the Department of Community Services) are educationally disadvantaged and over-represented among the unemployed, income support is crucial. A number of reports (Daniel & Cornwall, 1993; Morris Report, 1995; Shaver & Paxman, 1992; Thomson, 1993) and various submissions to the inquiry into youth homelessness by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs have raised concern about the accessibility and adequacy of income support for these young people. As acknowledged by the Department of Social Security in their submission to the above inquiry, the level of income support available to young people without family support is determined more by conflicting policy considerations than by actual living costs.

"The rates of Departmental benefit payments to young people are not based primarily on their living costs. Issues of incentives, relativities, familial support and budgetary constraints all play a significant part in the setting of rates."

(DSS: Submission, p. 271 cited in the Morris Report, 1995, p. 108)

Furthermore, it appears that the *Commonwealth and State/Territory Government Case Management Protocol for Young People* in an attempt to clarify the blurred lines of Commonwealth-State responsibility for the welfare of children has not resolved the problems associated with inadequate support for young people unable to live at home. As the Morris Report (1995) concluded, the Protocol is "an inadequate response to a massive problem aggravated by:

- . inadequate legislation to protect and enforce the rights of children;
- . lack of adequate resources within State and Territory welfare departments to provide support services;
- . lack of national practice standards and administrative procedures; and
- . inadequate monitoring and accountability requirements by the States/Territories for meeting the terms of the Protocol." (p. 237)

*Independent living skills.* As Maluccio, Krieger, & Pine (1990) pointed out, preparing young people for independent living has often been interpreted very narrowly in terms of 'tangible' or 'hard' skills, specifically identified with the particular competencies needed to live independently. While these skills are obviously necessary, again much can be learned from overseas experience. In England, according to Spence (1994), a "number of the longer established leaving care and independent living services in the UK reported having tried and then abandoned structured group training to teach independence skills". Their experience was that it is generally more effective to work individually and directly with young people who need assistance in these areas as they need help. The difference in the type of last placement needs to be taken into account, however. A much higher proportion of young people in the UK - about half- leave care from residential care than in either the US or Australia where foster care is most likely to be the last placement in care (Biehal et al., 1994). As Mech, Dobson & Hulseman (1994) reported, young people in group homes or residential care were least prepared for independent living in terms of their assessed knowledge. Furthermore, in the United States, where structured independent living programs were and are more

widespread as a result of the *Title IV-E Independent Living Program* funding, training in separate skill areas by themselves was not as effective as a combination of training in money management, education and employment skills (Cook, 1994).

In addition to the need for independent living skills, a number of young women leaving care need considerable support and assistance in their roles as mothers to prevent their children entering care as they had done, and as had already happened in several cases. Pregnancy and parenthood is relatively common among young people leaving care (Bichal et al., 1994), especially among young women who have been sexually abused (Butler & Burton, 1990; Rainey, Stevens-Simon, & Kaplan, 1995). Unfortunately, however, these young women's needs were not well catered for, and they were unhappy about both the amount and type of assistance they received. Indeed, they tended to see contact with the Department as intimidating rather than helpful.

*Need for social and emotional networks.* Perhaps the key 'intangible' area in which young people leaving care need help is in developing and maintaining a supportive network of family, friends and parent figures, and professionals (Maluccio, Krieger & Pine, 1990). While most young people expressed satisfaction with the financial and emotional support they could call on from a variety of resources, again a small but significant number of ex-wards, mostly in independent living or restored home, and young people in the comparison group who had left home were not satisfied and would have liked more support. They were less happy, had higher Hopelessness scale scores and, not surprisingly, had less contact with their parents and foster parents than those who were satisfied. Some young women, in particular, who were without good support networks, remained in difficult, and sometimes abusive, relationships with partners rather than be by themselves.

The importance of children in substitute care maintaining contact with their birth parents has increasingly been recognised. Barth (1986) concluded, for example, that young people in independent living did better if they had contact with their birth parents and siblings during foster care. Similarly, contact with siblings has been found to be very important to former foster children and contact with other relatives has been associated with fewer problems at discharge from care (Festinger, 1983). Even when parent-child relationships are strained, adolescents in foster care seem to gravitate toward contact with their family, and as Anderson and Simonitch (1979) found, this can ease reactive depression, a relatively common problem among adolescents in care.

Since there is then some evidence that birth family contact has a protective function for young people beyond care, the issue is how to sustain it. As this and other studies have found, maintaining contact through the period in which children are separated from their families is the best predictor of contact after leaving care (Carbino, 1990; Stein & Carey, 1986). It is therefore very important that policies and practices while children are in care facilitate and support contact, and that the legislation provides a normative base by outlining the right of children to have contact with their birth families. The Departmental *Substitute Care Practice and Procedural Manual* states in relation to foster parents that they 'must assist in the development of the child's personal identity, including the maintenance of contact between the child and his/her natural family or other significant person to the child, in the context of the identified Approved Case Plan for the child.' Although some foster parents supported children in their care in this, it is clear that children's disturbed behaviour following family contact was not surprisingly a source of tension in a number of foster families and that contact was not supported and even undermined in others. Workers and District Officers need to have the time and resources to support foster carers, birth parents and children through

this process and to understand that they have the authority to uphold this policy where appropriate. They also need to support young people and birth parents in managing their expectations and developing their relationship as young people approach discharge and leave care. In some cases, young people will also need help in finding and approaching parents they have not seen for some time. As Carbino (1990) points out, birth parents may be an important resource for young people leaving care even in families where they cannot provide a home, and especially where the young person has no continuing relationship with a foster family.

Where birth parents and foster carers are unavailable, young people need to have access to other forms of support or 'befriending'. Once again, continuity and caring are important issues but some creative thinking around who might be available and willing to 'befriend' young people (eg., retired older people) might provide some valuable solutions.

In addition, young people in care and leaving care need access to appropriate counselling. Depression and learned helplessness are often not recognised and are overlooked as an explanation for behavioural problems and poor school performance (Anderson & Simonitch, 1981, Zimmerman, 1988). Counselling was not widely available and even though a number of young people had thought about or attempted suicide, few had received counselling. It is significant that the young people who had believed, and in some cases still did, that they were responsible for entering care were less likely to have gone beyond Year 10 at school, were less happy 12 months after leaving care, more likely to feel that the future was uncontrollable and hopeless, and more likely to have thought about killing themselves and to have attempted suicide. If these issues are not dealt with while young people are in care, they need to be resolved after they leave care.

**Conclusion.** Young people leaving care have a variety of needs that need to be addressed by changes to legislation, policy and practice. The experience of the young people in this study provides very clear evidence of those needs. While they reported on a number of positive experiences, they also highlighted a number of issues both in care and after care that are a cause for concern and need to be addressed with some urgency. Most importantly, these involve taking children and young people seriously and respecting their right to information and to be heard, and their right to support and protection that the state, as their guardian, should ensure both in care and after care. Their needs and concerns are consistent with the findings of an increasing overseas literature in the UK, Canada and the United States. These countries have, however, gone much further than Australia in recognising and addressing the needs and rights of young people leaving care in legislation, policy and practice.

As Le Sueur (1991) and others have pointed out, legislation and policy need to provide a clear and comprehensive statement of the range of post-guardianship and post-care responsibilities of the state and agencies in preparing and supporting young people in their transition from care. The current context of the 'contracting out' of substitute care to non-government organisations does not diminish state responsibility. As Le Sueur (1990) notes:

No devolution of day to day responsibilities for the care of children to other agencies, whether foster parents or residential facilities or others, in any way removes or reduces the ultimate State responsibility for their care and well-being. In fact, it increases it as vigilance has to be exercised

at second-hand and embraces a complex range of functions, including policy direction, needs assessments, resource maintenance, standards setting/monitoring and case managements, as well as the quality of day to day care. (p. 12)

While Le Sueur's comments refer primarily to children's out-of-home care, they are also applicable to after-care. It is the state's responsibility to ensure that this vulnerable group of young people have support that is similar to that which children generally receive from their families. This means that assistance needs to be available to young people until they are at least 21, and perhaps even 25. The main elements of assistance include the following:

- . Financial assistance based on assessment of need and outlined in an after-care plan;
- . Accommodation with an obligation on housing authorities to provide housing;
- . Assistance with education and training, possibly including access to tutors;
- . Personal support, practical advice or 'befriending', as in the *UK Children Act 1989*;
- . Access to costs of counselling services, especially given the issue of suicide;
- . Access to personal information and files, and copies of appropriate documents such as Birth Certificates, photos from files etc.;
- . Information about available resources from other government departments.

Such assistance might be provided for by an accessible and flexible 'Leaving Care' package. The challenge is to eliminate the problems associated with arbitrary discretion whilst maintaining flexibility (Garnett, 1992).

While the main concern of the current report is to try to fill in the gap in our knowledge about what happens to young people after they are formally discharged from state guardianship, it is also clear that a number of young people who have not been in care but are unable to live at home are also in dire need of assistance. These young people are, in fact, quite similar in many respects to young ex-wards who have not had a long-term placement. It is also important to remember, in view of criticism about the care that children receive in the 'care' of the state, that some children - those who were in a long-term stable placement (with appropriate support and birth family contact) - often do very well, and much better, in fact, as many recognised, than they would have done had they remained with families who were unwilling or unable to care for them (Fanshell & Shinn, 1978; Johnson, Yoken & Voss, 1990; National Research Council, 1993; Wald et al., 1988).



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