Queensland ejects hundreds of youngsters a year from state care as they turn 18

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Home not-quite-so-sweet home for Colin and his friend who live under the Riverside Expressway. Picture: Steve Pohlner

HALF of all young people leaving state care are homeless or behind bars within a year.

Others end up on the dole, as teenage parents or struggling with mental illness.

Shocking new evidence presents a damning picture of a nation failing to equip its most vulnerable youngsters for adult life.

And it has fuelled a push for the age at which they leave foster, kinship/family and residential care to be raised from 18 to 21.

Nationwide, there are about 43,000 children in such out-of-home care, more than 8000 of them in Queensland.
About 500 state wards no longer qualify for state care every year in Queensland after they turn 18 and for many, it’s a tough and lonely road.

Indigenous kids account for more than a third of the total.

Each year, about 2000 youngsters, including 500 in the Sunshine State, leave care when they turn 18 and for many, it’s a tough and lonely road ahead.

A national study of 400 homeless young people, led by Swinburne University, revealed that two-thirds of them had come out of state care.

Paul McDonald, spokesman for Anglicare – one of the charities which commissioned the report – said it “again shows that our care systems in Australia are abandoning children in state care too early”.
Salvation Army spokesman: “Most young people in normal situations receive assistance from their own families. It shouldn’t be a case that when someone turns 18 that support networks are cut, simply because the state sees them as being adults.”

“It is now estimated that 50 per cent of those who are required to leave state care at 18 years will either be homeless, in prison, unemployed or a new parent within their first 12 months of being out on their own.”

Anglicare is one of several groups now calling for Australia to follow the UK and extend state care until the age of 21.

“Modern families are holding and supporting children at home well into their 20s,” Mr McDonald said.

“Premiers and ministers of these systems around Australia will not be planning to kick out their own children at 18 to fend for themselves, so it is not reasonable that the state, as the parent, does so.”

Mr McDonald said young people should not be permitted to exit formal care unless they had secure accommodation and were in work, training or school.

The additional cost of funding three more years of care was nothing compared to the huge downstream savings that would be made in social services, welfare, health and justice system costs.

A Salvation Army spokesman said: “Most young people in normal situations receive assistance from their own families.”
“It shouldn’t be a case that when someone turns 18 that support networks are cut, simply because the state sees them as being adults.’’

Rachel Siewert, chairwoman of a current Senate inquiry into out-of-home care, said evidence presented was overwhelmingly in favour of extending the leaving age to 21.

“From a personal perspective, I definitely think the transition system leaves a lot to be desired and needs to be improved,” she said.

“You are talking about people who have already been traumatised.

“I don’t know of any other young person who gets told: ‘Get ready because you are out the door at 18’,” Senator Seiwert said.

A separate report – undertaken by La Trobe University for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education – highlighted the low number of former care kids who make it to university, estimated at about 150 per year.

“With over 40,000 Australians in care, the effective exclusion of that group from our universities is a national disgrace,’’ the report says.

Targeted policies and programs in the UK had increased the number of 19-year-old care leavers in tertiary care by six times within a decade but there was “no national agenda for improvement” in Australia.

“The soft bigotry of low expectations is omnipresent for care leavers.’’

Lucas Moore, Queensland co-ordinator for Create Foundation which represents current and former care residents, agrees that expectation and belief in young people is a key factor and has seen many success stories.

“Too often they are written off because of challenging behaviours.

“But it doesn’t mean they couldn’t go on and become doctors or whatever,’’ he said.

Create’s own research showed that care leavers were “significantly disadvantaged compared to their peers and likely to have poorer outcomes as a group.”

A 2009 study showed 35 per cent were homeless within a year, only a third completed Year 12 at school and 29 per cent were unemployed – nearly triple the national average at the time.

Two-thirds of young people said they were unaware of any plan for their transition out of care, despite the Queensland Government saying one is prepared for each person from the time they turn 15.

Mr Moore supports the idea of giving young people the option of remaining in out-of-home care until they reach 21 if they wish but not extending the state’s legal guardianship beyond 18.
But Create does want to see specific state-funded services to support care leavers to at least 21, and preferably 25.

In his final report, Taking Responsibility, Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry chair Justice Tim Carmody recommended post-care support to the age of 21, including priority access to government services in education, health, disability, housing and employment.

“The commission has found disconcerting gaps both in transition planning and in the targeted provision of post-care support,” the Carmody report said.

“There is also confusion over how long post-care support should last after a child leaves care.

“Queensland is the only state where legislation, policy and practice are unclear as to how long the state must continue to deliver support once young people leave the care system at 18 years of age.”

Meanwhile, the Royal Commission into the Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse this week heard that 3639 cases of sexual abuse in out-of-home care have been reported in the past two years.

That’s an average of five every day.

And Counsel assisting the Royal Commission, Gail Furness SC, said more than 40 per cent of the 3000 child sexual abuse survivors who had already given private evidence came from out-of-home care.

Queensland has recorded the highest level of substantiated complaints of physical, sexual or emotional abuse in care.

**One of the “lucky” ones**

BROOKE Scriven is one of the “lucky” ones, she has a roof over her head.

“I know other people are homeless or couch-surfing,” said the 21-year-old who left foster care three years ago.
Brooke Scriven, 21, managed to get a place to live as she left state care. Picture: Annette Dew

She said it could come down to what sort of child safety officer was assigned to you.

Her case worker secured a Department of Housing unit for her two weeks before she was due to move out of care and helped find furniture.

Support continued for a fortnight and then, because Ms Scriven has severe anxiety, she was referred to another agency.

“T would have had no hope otherwise,’’ she said.

Ms Scriven completed Year 10 through TAFE, but has not had a job since leaving care.

She said extending the care age to 21 would be a good idea for those youngsters who wanted it.