



INDIGENOUS CARE LEAVERS IN VICTORIA: FINAL REPORT

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACCO – Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation

ACPP – Aboriginal Child Placement Principle

AIHW – Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

CSP – Cultural Support Plan

DH&HS – Department of Health and Human Services

DHS – Department of Human Services

FG – Focus group

HREOC – Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

MUHREC – Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee

NAIDOC – National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee

Resi. – Residential out-of-home care

SNAICC – Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care

US – United States

VACCA – Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

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Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

Berry Street

Jesuit Social Services

MacKillop Family Services

The Salvation Army Westcare

Wesley Mission

Executive Summary

Australian and International data indicate that Indigenous children and young people are over-represented at all stages of child protection systems. Many factors contributing to this ongoing outcome are identifiable, including consequences of past policies of forced removal of Indigenous children from culture and community, intergenerational trauma arising from these policies and resulting socio-economic disadvantage. In spite of this longstanding concern there has been limited research concerning the needs of, and outcomes for, Indigenous care leavers in Australia. In the Victorian context, policy initiatives including the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, Cultural Support Planning and the Aboriginal Leaving Care Support Initiative each aim to ensure culturally appropriate supports and connections are provided to young people. Yet there has been little reflection on the impact of these policies for Indigenous young people transitioning from state care.

This report presents the findings of a 14 month exploratory study of Indigenous care leavers in Victoria. The study aimed to examine current leaving care and post-care systems available to Indigenous care leavers, paying particular attention to relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies, and differences in their approach to service delivery. Additionally, the project investigated the backgrounds and experiences of Indigenous care leavers, including their access to leaving care and post-care services. Finally, the study sought to identify programs or strategies that would assist Indigenous care leavers, in order to inform future policy and practice responses. The project was overseen by an Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from partner agencies as well as the Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

Data collection occurred in two phases. Eight focus groups and one individual interview were initially undertaken with a total of 36 staff of partner agencies and other child and family organisations (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) delivering Victorian out-of-home care, leaving care or post-care services. These were followed by individual interviews with two Indigenous care leavers who each provided in-depth accounts of their journeys during and since transitioning from out-of-home care.

The findings identified various systemic matters impacting on Indigenous care leavers, including issues identifying Indigenous status, complex relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous services, concerns around inadequate referral pathways to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), and limited funding for Indigenous-specific programs and supports. In particular, funding for completion of Cultural Support Planning and, just as importantly for resources to implement plans, was identified as a key barrier for cultural connectedness of Indigenous adolescents in care.

The study found that Indigenous young people face the same complex and compressed transitions as other young people leaving care, with additional attention required to address cultural needs. An unanticipated finding of the study was that many Indigenous care leavers adopt caregiving roles in the leaving care and post-care periods, not only for their own children but in some cases for younger siblings, and extended family. Cultural expectations regarding sharing of finances and other material resources (e.g. housing) may add further stressors during the transition from care. Conversely, cultural connectedness was also seen to support resilience, identity development, social connectedness and material sufficiency among Indigenous care leavers. Negotiating these potential benefits and challenges of cultural connection in the post-care period may be one of the more difficult aspects of leaving care for this group of young people. The potential value of family work for this group of care leavers was thus widely supported by the key stakeholders interviewed.

The study also found that many Indigenous young people were either absent from the placement or were discharged from care prior to being eligible for leaving care services. Anecdotal evidence from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous services suggested that many re-engaged in the post-care period seeking assistance and support. Earlier leaving care planning (e.g. commencing from age 14) and lowering the age-threshold for leaving care eligibility were also identified as useful strategies for supporting Indigenous adolescents in the transition to adulthood. This finding was reinforced by the voices of the young people who were involved in the study. Future research could ascertain whether the data supports the suggestion that Indigenous young people may miss out on leaving care supports for various reasons, but may be accessing (or attempting to access) post-care supports at higher rates.

Respondents from both mainstream services and ACCOs suggested that the main shortcoming of current systems supporting Indigenous care leavers was the under-resourcing of ACCOs, limiting the capacity for direct service delivery and secondary consultation. While participants were unanimous in their declaration of the need for, and value of cultural support and connectedness, a subtle though noteworthy divergence in belief systems emerged. The majority of participants from non-Indigenous organisations appeared to espouse the view that cultural connectedness and support is *one of many hierarchical needs* of Indigenous care leavers, but not necessarily the primary need. Conversely, the alternative position presented by many ACCO workers and some non-Indigenous staff from mainstream agencies is that cultural connectedness is *a primary and fundamental need* of Indigenous care leavers, through which their other needs may be fulfilled. Ultimately, the narratives of the young people involved in the study were able to demonstrate that these two approaches are not inherently incompatible. There is a critical need for attention to both mainstream leaving care planning and services as well as meaningful cultural connections for supporting the transition of Indigenous young people from care.

Background

Indigenous children in out-of-home care

International data indicate that Indigenous children and young people are over-represented at all stages of the child protection system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). For example, an analysis of provincial and territory data in Canada suggests the rate of First Nations children in out-of-home care (OOHC) is three to seven times higher than that of the general population. The identified risk factors included substance use, poverty, limited housing, family violence, lack of social supports, and the caregiver's own history of time in state care ([Fallon et al., 2015](#); [Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013](#); [Sinha et al., 2011](#)). Similarly, a New Zealand study found that Maori children comprised 51.7 per cent of those in OOHC in December 2012 whilst totalling only 15 per cent of the general population ([Fernandez & Atwool, 2013](#)). While this trend is visible in many developed countries with Indigenous populations, the disproportionality among Indigenous Australians is considerably higher ([Thoburn, 2008](#)). The most recent data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015a) suggest that Indigenous children and young people are far more likely to be the subject of substantiated child abuse and neglect, and also far more likely to be on a care and protection order. Furthermore, the rate of Indigenous children on care and protection orders has been steadily increasing; from 2010 to 2014, this rate grew from 40.3 to 53.1 per 1,000 children, while the rate of non-Indigenous children remained relatively stable over the same period (increasing slightly from 5.5 to 6.0 per 1,000 non-Indigenous children) (AIHW, 2015a, p. 43)¹. At 30th June, 2014 Indigenous children and young people were estimated to comprise just over one third (14,991) of the total of 43,009 children and young people in out-of-home care nationwide (AIHW, 2015a, p. 100). In 2014, the rate of Indigenous children and young people in out-of-home care ranged from 29.0 per 1,000 children (Northern Territory) to 71.3 per 1,000 (New South Wales) (AIHW, 2015a, p. 51).

Various underlying factors have been cited as drivers of the ongoing over-representation of Indigenous children in the Australian child welfare system, including consequences of past policies of forced removal of Indigenous children from culture and community, intergenerational trauma arising from these policies and resulting socio-economic disadvantage (AIHW, 2015a; [Baidawi, Mendes, & Saunders, 2013](#); [Briskman, 2014](#); [Gray, 2015](#); [HREOC, 1997](#); [Libesman, 2012](#); [Tilbury & Thoburn, 2009](#)). Other systemic factors have also been suggested as contributing factors, including *“an over-reliance by the statutory child protection system on high-end (tertiary) responses and a lack of meaningful collaboration between government services on the one hand and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies on the other”* (Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013, p. 351). Further evidence also suggests

¹ See also (SCRGSP) (2016) for latest figures

deficiencies in cultural competence within child protection services concerning Indigenous family, culture and traditions (Community Affairs References Committee, 2015; Fejo-King, 2015).

Jackson (cited in [Bamblett and Lewis \(2007, p. 45\)](#)) identifies five factors contributing to this over-representation, including:

- *“The child protection and placement system may be overly interventionist in relation to Indigenous children, due to limited understanding of cultural differences and the impact of history on Indigenous families;*
- *Fear, distrust and/or antipathy by Indigenous parents towards Child Protection authorities due to previous government policies, therefore reducing access to less-interventionist options which require cooperation;*
- *Indigenous disadvantage which creates greater risk of abuse and neglect;*
- *Absence of Indigenous specific universal and prevention services; and*
- *The disproportionately large population of young people in Indigenous communities creating greater pressures for care.”*

Though no data could be located comparing the average age of first entry to out-of-home care for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, the available evidence suggests Indigenous children are more likely to enter care at a younger age compared to non-Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015a; Cummins, Scott, & Scales, 2012; [Osborn & Delfabbro, 2006](#)). For example the *Report of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry* found that a significantly higher proportion of Indigenous children entering care in 2010-11 were aged less than 10 years (Cummins et al., 2012). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare similarly indicated that the over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care was most marked for those aged one to four years, who were 11 times as likely as non-Indigenous children to be in care in 2014 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015a).

There is a lack of consensus regarding the relative amount of time that Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people spend in care in Australia. However, two separate reports suggest that there is not a significant difference in the time each group spends in care (one South Australian report based on a research sample ([Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2000](#)) and a more comprehensive Victorian report based on official state data (Cummins et al., 2012)). The Victorian report found that Indigenous children and young people who exited care in the 12 months to June 2011 had spent similar periods in care as non-Indigenous children: 52.7 per cent had been in care for less than 12 months; 22.8 per cent one year to

less than two years; and 24.5 per cent more than two years (Cummins et al., 2012, p. 244). In contrast, Tilbury (2009) conducted a secondary analysis of AIHW data and determined that Indigenous young people tended to be in out-of-home care for longer periods; the author attributed this to the greater use of kinship care with this population, which tends to be associated with longer and more stable placements. Similarly, [Osborn and Delfabbro \(2006\)](#), in a national study of children with high support needs in out-of-home care, also found that Indigenous children in their sample (n=65) had spent a longer period in care (11.7 years) compared to the non-Indigenous children (9.99 years). However, this sample was not representative of all children and young people in out-of-home care, therefore limited conclusions can be drawn from this particular study.

The issue of relative time spent in care by Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people does warrant further investigation given the ambiguity of the available findings. Additionally, issues of location should be factored into such analysis as there is some evidence that Indigenous young people in care in metropolitan locations may spend longer in care than those in rural locations ([Barber et al., 2000](#)). Compared to non-Indigenous children, the available data indicates that Indigenous children and young people were more likely to enter the child welfare system as a result of neglect in 2013-14 (40.6% vs 22.1%) (AIHW, 2015a, p. 79). Conversely, non-Indigenous children were more likely to have been the subject of a substantiated notification relating to physical abuse (20.6% vs 16.9%), sexual abuse (15.3% vs 8.9%) or emotional abuse (42.0% vs 33.7%) (AIHW, 2015a, p. 79).

According to a report published by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2008, p. 13), the prevalence of neglect among the type of maltreatment experienced by Indigenous children in out-of-home care is reflective of *“what we know about the socio-economic conditions of many Indigenous communities”*, and it is the disadvantage associated with these conditions which *“breeds neglect”*. Yet other authors point out the need for social workers to query the extent to which subjectivity and cultural relativism influence definitions of neglect (Briskman, 2014; D'Cruz, 2004).

Briskman (2014) and others (Carriere & Richardson, 2009; D'Cruz, 2004; Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013, pp. 351-352) have argued that the continuing lack of understanding of Indigenous cultures (including the significance of extended family) has a role in perpetuating this over-representation, particularly in how neglect is construed. These issues have equally been raised in the context of the Canadian child welfare system, which has major parallels to Australian systems in relation to historical policies of Indigenous child removal and contemporary over-representation of Indigenous children and young people. One example given is the naming of extended family living together as

overcrowding (Briskman, 2014, p. 106). Additionally, child protection services' adoption of Western concepts of primary attachment (in preference to more Aboriginal concepts of belonging and connectedness) can result in viewing the care of children by multiple relatives as negligent (Briskman, 2014; Carriere & Richardson, 2009). These issues are worthy of consideration especially given the greater prevalence of Indigenous child welfare intervention relating to neglect, as opposed to other forms of child maltreatment.

Conversely, Briskman (2014, p. 107) also cautions that "invoking cultural relativism" and desire to avoid "further contributing to cultural decimation" cannot be used to justify ignoring children requiring care and protection. Similarly the recent Queensland Child Protection Inquiry (2013) warned that efforts to reduce Indigenous over-representation in child welfare systems should not result in a different standard of protection being afforded to this group. Bearing these contexts in mind, it is easy to recognise the complexity of the issue of child and family welfare responses in Indigenous families and communities. It is from this background that we begin to consider the transition of Indigenous young people from the statutory out-of-home care system.

Transitions from care and post-care outcomes

Despite the long-standing over-representation of Indigenous children and young people in out-of-home care systems, there has been limited research concerning the needs of, and outcomes for, Indigenous care leavers in Australia ([Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011](#)). While national data are lacking, information from Victoria suggests that Indigenous young people comprised 13 per cent of those aged 15 to 17 years who exited care in 2009-10 (Cummins et al., 2012).

Information concerning the average age of leaving care for Indigenous care leavers is not available. However data published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015a) indicate that Indigenous young people comprised more than one quarter (27.3% or 1,719 young people) of the Australian out-of-home care population aged 15 to 17 years. While [Maunder et al. \(1999\)](#) found only a slight difference between the proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers who were discharged from care before the age of 18 years (42% Indigenous vs 38% non-Indigenous), anecdotal evidence from peak Indigenous bodies suggests that *"many Indigenous children leave out-of-home care to live independently from an earlier age than non-Indigenous children, many for example from the age of 14"* (SNAICC, 2011, p. 6). Such young people may not be entitled to leaving care assistance if they were not subject to a formal statutory order on their 16th birthday (for example, those living under voluntary kinship arrangements). This issue warrants further investigation, given previous evidence associating earlier transitions from care with poorer post-care outcomes ([Stein, 2006](#)). Recent national data showed that

only 59.5% of young people aged 15 to 17 years in out-of-home care had a leaving care plan to support their transition to independence, as per statutory requirements, however no data could be located which compared the proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers having such a plan (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015b).

Data from generic leaving care studies and other sources outline particular challenges faced by Indigenous young people transitioning from care, including the following:

- **Poorer educational experiences:** The group of young people who are the focus of this study bear the compounding risks of both Indigenous status and out-of-home care status, two groups which tend to have poorer educational outcomes than the general population (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, & Luckman, 2015). For example, a recent evaluation of the Springboard leaving care program in Victoria found that 76.9 per cent of Aboriginal males and 75 per cent of females were not engaged in education, training or employment compared to 69.9 per cent of the young people overall ([Baldry, Trofimovsl, Brown, Brackertz, & Fotheringham, 2015](#)). Two separate national reports from the CREATE Foundation have found that compared to non-Indigenous young people in and leaving care, Indigenous care leavers were more likely to report attending four or more primary schools while in care ([McDowall, 2013](#)), and were less likely to have completed Year 12 (27.8% vs 35.3%) ([McDowall, 2009](#)). Conversely, a third study from South Australia found that Indigenous young people in care were somewhat less likely to have been expelled or suspended from school compared to non-Indigenous young people in care (20% and 30% respectively) ([Barber et al., 2000](#)).
- A recent study concerning higher education participation of care leavers similarly suggested that Indigenous care leavers experience the same “soft bigotry of low expectations” as other care leavers, in addition to cultural challenges and responsibilities (Harvey et al., 2015, p. 6). The report of the study recommended that specific strategies be developed to support the transition of Indigenous care leavers into tertiary education (Harvey et al., 2015).
- **Disproportionate levels of youth justice involvement:** Both Indigenous young people and young people in care are significantly over-represented in Victorian and Australian youth justice systems (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015c). For example, the Victorian Youth Parole Board (Youth Parole Board, 2015) reported that 39 of the 230 young people who received youth residential and youth justice centre orders during 2014-15 were Indigenous. Barber and colleagues (2000) similarly found that Indigenous young people in care in South Australia were more likely to report having a criminal conviction than non-Indigenous young people (27% vs

17%). In the 2009 CREATE Report Card, Indigenous care leavers across Australia similarly reported significantly higher levels of involvement with youth justice systems than non-Indigenous care leavers (McDowall, 2009). These outcomes are paralleled in Canadian research, which also found that Indigenous youth in custody were more likely to have come from care backgrounds (68.9% and 81.8% of Indigenous males and females, respectively) than non-Indigenous youth in custody (30.8% and 32.9% of non-Indigenous males and females, respectively) (Corrado & Cohen, 2002).

- **Variable connection to culture and community:** Despite policies which attempt to maintain links to culture and community for Indigenous children in out-of-home care, three separate Australian reports have found that approximately 30% of Indigenous children and young people leaving care report having a poor knowledge of, and connection to, their cultural heritage (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, 2010, 2012; McDowall, 2013). McDowall (2013) found that only 10% of Indigenous young people in care around Australia (n=310) were aware of the concept of a cultural support plan. A report from the Commission for Children and Young People in Victoria (2015) found that the residential care system eroded the connections of Aboriginal children to culture and community given that most of the staff had little cultural training. Similarly, the Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People warned that some Aboriginal children in care were isolated from family, community and cultural connections which left them vulnerable to further disadvantage (Jackomos, 2015). Research from Queensland found that Indigenous young people who had a carer from the same cultural background were significantly more likely to report feeling in touch with their community (80.3% vs 57.5%) and having a cultural plan (26.9% vs 13.8%), compared to those with a carer from a different cultural background (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, 2012). These findings were similar to those of a qualitative study from Canada (Rutman, Barlow, Hubberstey, Alusik, & Brown, 2001, p. 32), in which Aboriginal care leavers were appreciative of foster carers who *“actively facilitated their learning about Aboriginal traditions and who helped instil in them a sense of belonging and connection with their heritage”*.
- **Contact with family and returning to family post-care:** Indigenous young people in care appear to experience significantly more contact with siblings and grandparents than non-Indigenous young people in care (McDowall, 2009). This is likely to be attributable to the greater use of kinship care within the Indigenous care population, amongst other factors. Some studies have also drawn attention to the fact that Indigenous care leavers are likely to return to their biological families after leaving care, highlighting the need for ongoing family services, even after

the removal of a child ([Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005](#); [Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2012](#)). The strong ties to extended family and community are also identified as a protective factor for many Indigenous care leavers.

- **Identity:** Understanding one's personal history and having a positive sense of identity are understood as important components of positive transitions from care for young people (FaHCSIA, 2010; [Tweddle, 2007](#)). The 2013 CREATE report card found that compared to Anglo-Australian young people and young people from other cultural backgrounds, Indigenous young people knew less about why they were in care, and reported having received less information about what they could expect would happen during their time in care ([McDowall, 2013](#)).

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal And Islander Child Care (SNAICC) has issued recommendations in 2011 relating to the transition from care for Indigenous young people (SNAICC, 2011). Some specific suggestions included that:

- leaving care planning commence from at least age 14, and that it should include the identification of Indigenous young people having a likelihood of early independence;
- sustained support services be provided for the parents and extended family of Indigenous care leavers;
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) be mandated participants in leaving care planning for all Indigenous care leavers, and that ACCOs be adequately resourced to have this input;
- carers also be included as participants in the leaving care planning process;
- Cultural Support Plans are developed and adequately resourced, and that re-establishing connection with family, community and culture form a key component of leaving care planning and support for Indigenous care leavers; and
- mechanisms for monitoring leaving care planning be introduced.

Current Policies

The removal of Indigenous children has resulted in disconnection from not only family but from community and culture. Historically this severance was deliberate. Forcible child removal legislation and policy in each state and territory aimed to “merge” or “assimilate” Indigenous peoples following the European colonisation of Australia (HREOC 1997). The “overwhelming majority” of children so removed were not permitted contact with family, community or culture, including their prohibition from speaking Aboriginal

languages (HREOC, 1997). A sustained cultural genocide essentially resulted, the effects of which remain apparent (HREOC, 1997).

Today, child welfare jurisdictions in Australia have adopted legislation and policy that aspires to preserve Indigenous children's family, community and cultural connections when these children have been removed from their parents' care. Two key components encompass the notion of "cultural care". Firstly, children and young people require information regarding their own history and heritage, including the names of parents, family and ancestors, the country to which they belong, the clans to which they are connected, stories associated with their country and their totem (Libesman, 2011). Secondly, support and resources to initiate or maintain connection with their community and culture form an ongoing component of cultural care (Libesman, 2011). In the Australian state of Victoria where this study was conducted, legislative and policy provisions aiming to support cultural care include the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle and statutory mandates for Cultural Support Planning.

Aboriginal Child Placement Principle

Victorian government policy directs that Indigenous children and young people should be allocated placements in out-of-home care in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACPP). The principle outlines the following order of preference for placement of Indigenous children and young people in out-of-home care:

- with the child's extended family
- within the child's Indigenous community
- with other Indigenous people
- with non-Indigenous people

This principle aims to protect the right of Indigenous children to be raised within their own culture, and acknowledges the importance of family and kinship networks in raising Indigenous young people (Lock, 1997; Monohan, 2002). In accordance with the ACPP, recent data indicates that 67.4% of Indigenous children in out-of-home care were placed with relatives/kin, other Indigenous caregivers or in Indigenous residential care in 2014, and this figure had slightly decreased from 70.5% in 2010 (AIHW, 2015a, p. 101; 2015b). However, it is important to note that in 14.8% of these cases, Indigenous children and young people were being cared for by non-Indigenous relatives or kin (AIHW, 2015a, p. 101). The inference here is that placement of young people in accordance with the ACPP does not necessarily ensure connection to Indigenous community or culture.

Compared to the national average, Indigenous children and young people in Victoria are more likely to be placed within a non-Indigenous and unrelated placement setting (47.8% (Vic) vs 32.6% (Aust)) (AIHW, 2015a, p. 101). One of the issues in relation to the placement of Indigenous children in care is an apparent shortage of sufficient numbers of Indigenous carers to meet the placement needs of the growing Indigenous out-of-home care population ([Bromfield, Higgins, Higgins, & Richardson, 2007](#); [Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005](#)). This issue is compounded for Indigenous young people with complex issues, such as physical or intellectual disabilities and those requiring emergency placements, particularly in rural or remote locations ([Higgins et al., 2005](#); [McHugh & Valentine, 2011](#)). Additionally, it is unclear if and how the ACPP is applied in the context of leaving care and post-care planning and placements for young people.

Cultural Support Plans

In accordance with Section 176 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, a Cultural Support Plan (CSP) is required for each Aboriginal child in out-of-home care in Victoria who is subject to a guardianship order (DHS, 2013). CSPs form part of the child's or young person's case plan and aim to identify culturally appropriate strategies to maintain connection to family, extended family, community and culture. A Cultural Support Plan program is in place across the state and it provides funding to ACCOs to prepare CSPs for children and young people on guardianship orders (DHS, 2013). Information from the Department of Human Services also indicates that a CSP brokerage initiative is in place to enable Child Protection Services to action cultural experiences outlined in these plans (DHS, 2013). But a 2013 Victorian audit found that only eight per cent of Aboriginal children subject to cultural support planning under statutory obligations had a completed CSP (DHS, 2013). Additionally, only seven per cent of Indigenous children in Victoria were living in placements provided by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in 2013 (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Community Service Organisations, 2013).

At the same time, recent reports have noted difficulties with adherence to statutory obligations around cultural support planning for Aboriginal children and young people in care (DHS, 2014; Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Community Service Organisations, 2013). In its Five Year Plan for Out of Home Care Services the (then) Victorian Department of Human Services (2014) identified variable performance in the timely development of CSPs as a challenge for out-of-home care services, but did not provide specific explanation regarding potential factors driving this outcome. Similarly, the ACCO submission to the Victorian government plan drew attention to the failure to meet legislative requirements concerning cultural support planning for Indigenous children in out-of-home care;

this submission (albeit indirectly) suggested that the under-resourcing of ACCOs was a key reason why development of these plans are inhibited. The submission noted that effective implementation of CSPs was impeded by both a lack of resources and services to support such work, and by operational and skills deficits within the child protection workforce to action these plans (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Community Service Organisations, 2013).

Aboriginal Leaving Care Support Initiative

In 2012, the Victorian government introduced the Aboriginal Leaving Care Support Initiative, which involved the identification of one ACCO in each departmental region which is able to provide support to eligible Indigenous care leavers (Department of Human Services, 2012). The initiative involves the delivery of funding to ACCOs to facilitate or provide:

- advice on the identification of Aboriginal young people who require transition and leaving care support, particularly young people up to 21 years of age no longer in out-of-home care;
- cultural advice and consultation on the transition needs of individual Aboriginal young people whilst they are on custody, guardianship or long-term guardianship orders whether placed with Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal agencies;
- active support to Aboriginal young people who have left care up to 21 years of age including facilitating access to leaving care brokerage;
- liaison with regions, mainstream Post Care Support, Information and Referral Services and Housing and Community Building Leaving Care Housing and Support Initiative providers to build the capacity of these services to meet Aboriginal young people's needs and to ensure equitable access to these supports.

Recent Victorian Initiatives

In 2013, following recommendations arising from the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry (Cummins et al., 2012) the state of Victoria appointed its first Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Andrew Jackomos (DHS, 2014). To date the Commissioner has provided ongoing input into a number of policy-related documents and activities, including:

- The Victorian Department of Human Services' (2014) five year plan for out-of-home care;
- Current development of a complementary plan for Aboriginal children and young people;

- The activities of *Taskforce 1000*, co-chaired with the Secretary of the Department of Human Services, including a critical review of cases and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care, and taking action to respond to any identified needs. Consultations to date indicate that most Aboriginal children in out-of-home care are not placed with an Aboriginal carer; consultation with the Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice Support Service occurred in the majority of cases; and the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle was applied in the majority of, but not all cases (State of Victoria, 2015).

The current study is consistent with the key priority areas identified in both state and national child protection policy. Since the commencement of this study, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) initiated its Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children project, which has involved consultations with the child and family welfare sector to set long-term reform directions for the state's child and family services system. The Roadmap specifies the promotion of Aboriginal self-determination as one of five key priorities, with a focus on placement prevention, connection to community and culture, strengthening Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, and ensuring cultural safety of all organisations (Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). The Roadmap also highlights improving outcomes for young people leaving care as another priority.

On a national level, the most recent Third Action Plan (2015-2018) identifies improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families as a cross-cutting focus area under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (Department of Social Services, 2015). Additionally, the Action Plan emphasises the need for ongoing attention to supporting young people's transitions from out-of-home care into adulthood (Strategy 2).

Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Agency Partnerships

Support systems for Indigenous young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria function within partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous child and family welfare agencies. For example, CSPs are created by ACCOs and require both the work of ACCOs and mainstream service providers to be implemented, leaving care planning is delivered by either ACCOs or mainstream providers (drawing on secondary consultation with ACCOs), while Post-Care Support is either delivered by ACCOs (accessing brokerage through mainstream providers), or by mainstream services (potentially including referral to ACCOs).

While partnerships exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous services in a variety of sectors, such as health and housing, those in the child and family welfare sector are perhaps among the more complex, given the historical context of trauma inflicted upon Indigenous peoples through colonisation and the Stolen Generations of Indigenous children. Bamblett and Lewis from the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) (2007, p. 51) identify that such cross-cultural inter-organisational links require significant attention, and that these relationships must be understood in the context of:

- *Impaired trust;*
- *Indigenous people being reluctant to access mainstream services because of historical factors; and*
- *Mainstream services lacking culturally appropriate skills and understanding.*

Similarly, Halcrow (2014) explored some of the complexities and lessons learned in partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies in the New South Wales out-of-home care sector. The author acknowledged the necessity of a critical focus on relationship-building (including the acknowledgement that this takes time, and willingness to engage in healing conversations). These relationships are complicated due to both “non-Indigenous guilt for past wrongs, and intergenerational trauma amongst Aboriginal workers and families” (Halcrow, 2014, p. 69). It is suggested that building cultural competency in mainstream child and welfare agencies requires moving beyond basic training to ongoing learning in the context of trusting relationships with Indigenous services communities (Halcrow, 2014). [Bamblett and Lewis \(2007\)](#) suggest capacity building is necessary for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies in such relationships, in terms of adequate resourcing and supporting the capacity of Indigenous services, and supporting cultural competency in non-Indigenous services and programs.

Methods

This exploratory research project investigates Indigenous care leavers’ needs and outcomes, with a view to identifying areas of policy and practice change which can lead to better outcomes. The study received ethics approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) and was supported by a grant from the Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation. The project involves a partnership between Monash University and a consortium of child and family welfare agencies: the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), Wesley Mission, Jesuit Social Services, Berry Street, MacKillop Family Services and the Salvation Army Westcare.

Aims:

1. Examine the current leaving care and post-care systems available to Indigenous care leavers, particularly:
 - a) the inter-relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies delivering services to this group, especially the use of consultation;
 - b) The differences in approach and service delivery between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaving care and post-care services/processes;
2. Expand our knowledge about the demographic backgrounds, care experiences and post-care trajectories of Indigenous care leavers, particularly any differences in the needs and experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers.
3. Understand the access of Indigenous care leavers to leaving care and post-care services, and identify any hindrances to accessing supports and services. For example, which groups of Indigenous care leavers are accessing these services? Which groups are notably absent? What is the level of access to leaving care and post-care services by Indigenous young people who do not meet conventional criteria, but may still be eligible for support (for example, those whose statutory order lapsed before they turned 16 years of age)?
4. Enhance our knowledge of existing or potential programs or strategies that would assist Indigenous care leavers, so that this knowledge can inform future policy and changes in practice responses.

The study draws on multiple sources to gather data required to address these research aims. **Phase one** of the study involved focus group consultations held with staff of partner agencies and other child and family organisations (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) delivering out-of-home care, leaving care or post-care services.

Recruitment: The study was advertised to partner agencies and other organisations who invited staff to be involved in focus groups conducted by the researchers. Participants were therefore self-selecting (that is, a non-probability sample) from the project partner agencies and other organisations.

Data collection: Semi-structured focus groups were conducted with key stakeholders. Data were gathered around seven key issues relating to Indigenous care leavers, including:

- Strengths and limitations of leaving care and post-care systems for this group;
- Strengths and limitations of collaboration and consultation mechanisms between Indigenous and non-Indigenous services;
- Use and relevance of the ACP with Indigenous care leavers;
- Strengths and limitations of Cultural Support Plans and planning;
- Strategies for improving connection to community and identity, and challenges faced in this area;
- Post-care outcomes; and
- Experiences and ideas concerning good practice with Indigenous care leavers.

These topics were developed based on a review of the existing literature (Baidawi et al. 2013), and a consultation forum attended by both the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People and 16 representatives of 2 Indigenous and 10 non-Indigenous child welfare agencies. Aspects of the leaving care system unique to Indigenous care leavers, and data gaps in the literature base relating to Indigenous care leavers were identified based on these reviews and consultations, and these formed the focus group topics. Focus groups have been established as an effective method for qualitative data collection in social work research (Linhorst, 2002). This methodology aimed to stimulate discussion between agency staff around the key issues, in order to generate responses that individual participants may not have previously considered (Alston & Bowles, 2003).

Sample: A total of 36 individuals participated in eight focus groups and one individual interview during this phase of data collection, as shown in Table One. While there was one individual interview conducted, for the purposes of this report, phase one data are referred to as being focus group consultations. All agencies involved were delivering child and family services, primarily in the out-of-home care and leaving care sectors. Three of these agencies were ACCOs, while the remainder were mainstream child and youth welfare services. Note that multiple focus groups and interviews were held at different offices of Agency 8. Focus groups ranged from 39 to 84 minutes in length (average of 64 minutes) and were primarily conducted at the respective agencies' offices. The regional locations visited for the purpose of this study were kept private so as to maintain participant anonymity. While participants were not asked about their Indigenous status, a total of seven participants (five from ACCOs and one from each of two other focus groups) identified as being Indigenous.

Respondent source	Total participants	Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DH&HS) Regions*
Agency1	6	Northern & Western Metro
Agency2	8	Northern & Western Metro, Southern Metro
Agency3	4	Northern & Western Metro, Southern Metro
Agency4	5	Southern Metro
Agency5	3	Northern & Western Metro
Agency6	2	Non-Metro Region
Agency 7	4	Non-Metro Region
Agency 8	3	Non-Metro Region
Agency 9	1	Southern Metro
Total	36	

Table 1. Focus group consultations *DH&HS regions of participants' work at the time of data collection.

Focus group participants held a range of positions including case worker, support worker, case manager, program manager, team leader and regional director. The majority worked within the out-of-home care and leaving care sectors, including in kinship, foster and residential care programs, as well as lead tenant and post-care services, leaving care housing and mentoring, and youth justice support programs. Participants also had experience in a variety of former roles that brought them into contact with Indigenous care leavers, including work in kinship, foster and residential care, lead tenant and post-care services, adult and youth justice, specific Aboriginal programs, Aboriginal legal services, employment services, alcohol and other drug services, housing programs, and delivering individual and family counselling.

Data Analysis: Focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed and the data were then entered into NVivo10 for coding. An inductive content analysis approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) was adopted. Open coding, searching for the repetition of words, information and ideas led to the development of common themes and sub-themes, and any alternative viewpoints, that as closely as possible, reflect the agency staff's contributions to the focus groups. Such an approach is appropriate given the limited literature in this area and the study's exploratory nature. Data analysis and theme development were conducted by one researcher and a sample of focus group transcripts (four of seven) were then re-coded by a second member of the research team to enhance rigour (Barbour, 2001). Cross-checking of themes relating to cultural support planning found inter-rater agreement between the researchers. Themes reported in the findings constitute those most commonly recurring across focus groups. Alternative or unique viewpoints are also highlighted.

Phase two of the study aimed to access the perspectives of young Indigenous care leavers to generate a more in depth understanding of their experiences of being in care (particularly their connection to community and culture), their experiences of leaving care, and their post-care trajectories.

Recruitment: The study was advertised to a range of agencies (including partner agencies, 13 other child and family welfare agencies and programs, and to every Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation delivering leaving care and post-care services via an email supported by the Office of the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People).

Agency staff identified young people who met the following eligibility criteria, and who were currently or previously accessing the agency:

- Identify as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- Aged 18 to 23 years; and
- Previous placement in out-of-home care (at least 6 months in kinship care, foster care, residential care or lead tenant placements).

Convenience (non-probability) sampling was utilised given the difficulty of locating young people within the target group. Interview location and time was either arranged by agency staff or by the research assistant contacting the young person.

Data collection: Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the young people covering a range of topics, including out-of-home care history and experiences of out-of-home care, education and employment history and experience, leaving care experience, and post-care experiences. Young people also completed a short demographic questionnaire with the interviewer at the conclusion of the interview.

Sample: The sample comprised two young Koorie women aged 19 and 22 years who were interviewed in June 2015 and January 2016 respectively. The interviews ranged from 51 to 54 minutes. Visual timelines tracking events such as entry into care, changes in placement and schools, leaving care post-care outcomes including housing, education and employment were created with each young person using paper and pencil during the interviews. The young people were also asked about their connections to family, community and culture throughout their lives. The young people were able to refer to the timeline to describe temporal relationships between events.

Data Analysis: The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were reviewed by the research team, and case studies were developed from each transcript reflecting the major characteristics, events and turning points of each young person's account. Transcripts were then

analysed according to the themes emerging from the focus group consultations in order to determine where the accounts supported the identified themes, contradicted these themes and presented new information. Findings from the interviews with young people are presented in the next section, following those arising from the focus group consultations.

Findings

Focus Group Consultations

The findings of the focus group consultations are reported in six main sub-sections which primarily relate to the study's aims. Firstly data relating to current service provision and broad themes (including the place of the Aboriginal Placement Principle in transitions from care) are examined. The subsequent two sections outline the strengths and limitations of current leaving care and post-care systems for Indigenous care leavers from the perspective of key stakeholders. Next, themes relating to the experiences and outcomes of Indigenous care leavers are presented. The final section contains recommendations for improving outcomes for Indigenous care leavers which emerged from the focus group consultations.

Current leaving care and post-care systems available to Indigenous care leavers

Nature of systems and processes

Focus groups with non-Indigenous agencies were unable to outline differences in the leaving care services delivered by ACCOs compared to those delivered by mainstream child welfare agencies in supporting Indigenous care leavers. Respondents suggested that both service types adopt a voluntary model, and support Indigenous care leavers to identify their own needs. The services then attempt to access appropriate supports and resources to meet these identified needs (for example, housing, brokerage and the like).

Many respondents from mainstream services were not aware of any specific programs or differences in leaving care and post-care processes and services available to Indigenous care leavers. However, it should be noted that in some of these services, respondents had not experienced having Indigenous care leavers as clients in their programs.

“So we [agency] are not an Indigenous-specific service. However from time to time we do have Indigenous clients. I have to say that, even as the [Manager], I’m actually not familiar

[with] any specific Indigenous care leaver programs. My understanding is that it's all the same, so I would be interested to see with the ... the outcomes of this research, if there is something different that we don't know about." - FG4, A1

"I actually went back through all of, I can say for the last six and half years since I've been in this program. We haven't actually had any Indigenous young people that have left care. So the oldest we've had ongoingly [sic] was 14. And we start leaving care processes at 15. And then the one or two Indigenous young people that we'd had that were over 15, we'd only had for maybe a couple of weeks, and they were case managed externally. So we've, as a program in my six and a half years, we've never had a young person we've had to transition into independence who's been Indigenous." – FG1, A4

"We only had in our program, transitional services, we've only had in my time, which is almost three years, one young [Indigenous] person." – FG1, A6

Where service provision is available, Indigenous care leavers can opt to receive leaving care and/or post-care services either from an ACCO or non-Indigenous service:

"I know that if we did have an Indigenous child come in to out-of-home care one of the first things that we do is we do contact [the ACCO]. And then we, we're supposed to put, oh, well we do put in a cultural plan for that child" – FG4, A3

Other participants indicated that secondary consultation with ACCOs would ideally occur for Indigenous care leavers, and that this was the main difference between leaving care planning for Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers from the perspective of mainstream services. However it was not clear whether secondary consultation with ACCOs was standard practice for mainstream services in situations where Indigenous care leavers opted to not be directly involved with ACCOs.

In contrast to the responses from non-Indigenous agencies, respondents from ACCOs stressed that connection to family, community and culture is integral to the leaving care process. This appears to be a difference in emphasis between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaving care service provision. Some ACCOs in regional areas were able to highlight how the agency was best placed to facilitate these connections for young people:

“...obviously [non-Indigenous agencies] might not know much at all about Aboriginal culture. And then they’re going to have to try and sort out who their family is and ring up, and I can literally just go, “Hey, you know this one?” The person that sits next to me is that network, and that’s going to help me out. You know what I mean? ... we have unlimited resources here for that type of stuff. Because like, you know a lot of us are the community and the professionals. And that, I think that’s where it’s strength comes from.” – FG8, A3

Self-determination, partnership and power

Focus groups both with ACCOs and non-Indigenous agencies touched on concepts of Aboriginal self-determination within leaving care and post-care systems. A number of discussions concerning the complexities of power, partnership and Aboriginal self-determination emerged. For example, comments concerning access to funding and other resources included:

“There’s a few things they’re eligible for. They’re eligible to get some funding for uni. But we don’t hold the funding... We do the paperwork and then send it to [the mainstream child welfare agency], and [the mainstream child welfare agency] holds the money. I think that’s wrong myself” – FG6, A1

“I suppose as an organisation we see that we’ve got a lot of resources as I think I said before, that actually belong to [the ACCO]. And the CEO’s quite open and happy to talk about that, that we need to be thinking about the portability of those resources to follow over to [the ACCO] which provides the scale for them to be able to provide a service that Aboriginal kids need. That’s, you know, going to be more culturally appropriate.” – FG5, A2

“...one of the limitations is the fact that there’s not a great deal of self-determination... here we are saying if we had a mainstream response, we had an Aboriginal specific response. They’re questions for the Aboriginal service system, that ... you know that they haven’t yet got to answer for themselves. What does an Aboriginal leaving care system look like? It’s not for us to answer that question... So a lack of that self-determination I think is a big part of it, in that ... we in terms of our dominant white culture will continue to make mistakes while we try and make the rules.” – FG5, A2

Finally, difficulties in power-sharing in order to establish genuine partnership with ACCOs were described by non-Indigenous agencies:

“Something we need to get better at is actually working in partnership with ACCOs. So being led and guided by their work, and not necessarily always taking the driver’s seat. Recognising that we’re sometimes going to have to be in the passenger seat and, for CEOs and senior exec, that can be challenging sometimes to sit with that. So it’s about letting go, that if you want to work in this space, then you do have to fundamentally be respectful, and taking the driver’s seat ain’t necessarily respectful.” – FG2, A6

Aboriginal Child Placement Principle

When discussing the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, focus group participants pointed out the shortage (particularly in Metropolitan Victoria) of Indigenous carers. Furthermore, they noted the difficulty balancing the principle of placing sibling groups together with the priority of finding an Indigenous carer or placement:

“... we have such a small proportion of Indigenous people who identify as Indigenous living in our area... we probably have six or seven Indigenous kids on our list, but only one Indigenous carer ... there’s a disconnect. Because there’s so many children who are Indigenous in care, and [they are] five times as likely to be in care, but then you don’t have any of the foster carers.” – FG3, A2

“You have your Best Interests Framework, which [means] kids should be placed together in a sibling group. Then you’ve got the Indigenous framework, they have to be placed with an Indigenous carer. When you’ve got three siblings, you just find whatever you can get to keep them together. If there was an option for an Indigenous carer, [and] she only had capacity for one child, I wouldn’t be putting one child in there and splitting up with the others. It’s sort of like what ... you can find.” –FG3, A2

“...the first thing you’re thinking when you’re on duty... is where can I put these kids? Where can I keep them together? Where’s closest to their school? So there’s all these competing priorities of where the location is, [and] can they keep doing their extra-curricular activities? Because unfortunately if they want to play basketball, that sits higher than, for them, sometimes their culture. So it’s finding all these things. It’s just not realistic that you find an Indigenous carer when you’re factoring in all these other things. It’s just impossible.” – FG3, A2

In the leaving care and post-care periods, respondents commonly reported that finding any placement or housing option for young people was the most pressing priority, rather than placement with Indigenous carers or within Indigenous communities. It should be emphasized that this point was more commonly expressed by participants working within non-Indigenous agencies.

Some participants also pointed out that while the ACPD continues to guide practice in the leaving care and post-care periods, there is no legislative requirement to consider these issues after a young person leaves care:

“Aboriginal Childhood Placement Principle is in the vernacular of everyone in out-of-home care. It’s not in the vernacular of people in post-care. So it’s such a big, big, big thing. Why does it suddenly change when someone turns 18?” – FG5, A2

“Historically once... their order expires, society views them as independent individuals” – FG5, A1

Identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Status

The identification of children’s and young people’s cultural backgrounds is integral to the provision of culturally appropriate responses to young people in, and leaving, out-of-home care, systems. Respondents noted difficulties, both for systems and for individuals, in identifying children and young people’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, and the complexity inherent in this theme became increasingly apparent as the focus group consultations progressed.

‘Asking the question’: At a systems level, some respondents suggested that child protection and child welfare services’ professionals did not always ask individuals and families about their Indigenous status:

“A2: ...You know when they go in to do an intake, they don’t ask are they Aboriginal... and that’s what we’re trying to get through to DHS, that that should be the very first question that’s asked. Are they of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent? They’re not asking.

A1: Sometimes they’re ticking the box... Ticking the box that says they have, and ticking the box that they are Aboriginal. When we go to do Cultural Support Planning we find out that they’re not Aboriginal... Or we’re told that they’re not Aboriginal” – FG6

Though respondents were unsure, they indicated that some workers may feel uncomfortable asking this question of clients:

“A2: Well we’ve spoken to DHS workers and a lot of them don’t want to ask the question.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A2: You know, it’s like the white elephant in the room, isn’t it, you know? – FG6

Cultural confusion or denial: Participants also indicated that some young people, carers (including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous carers) and families did not wish to acknowledge their Indigenous heritage, preferring to keep it private. For example, workers from an ACCO spoke about working with carers who did not acknowledge their grandchildren’s’ Aboriginality:

“A2: Because they’re like... well some don’t even want to acknowledge the fact that their grandkids are Aboriginal ... you know they’re white so... or they’re light-skinned.

A1: So you don’t have to say that you’re Aboriginal.

A2: Just shoosh.” – FG6

Though a variety of drivers were suggested for such attitudes, many participants acknowledged both a fear of racism and cultural shame as being potential contributing factors:

“A3: ...young people often don’t want to identify with their culture. I remember one particular young lass, who didn’t particularly look Indigenous and she didn’t want to identify as being Indigenous.

Q: And what’s your understanding of the reasons behind that?

A3: She told me in no uncertain terms she hated being seen as a piece of shit. Yeah.

A1: Because a lot of them see it as, that as limiting their opportunities for employment and things like that as well. Which is not unrealistic.” – FG7

Cultural uncertainty: Again over the course of focus group consultations, the uncertainty of young people regarding their own Indigenous status was raised a number of times, often in relation to intergenerational involvement in child welfare systems, and families’ resulting loss of connection with their heritage, history and culture:

“I have another young person who identifies as Aboriginal..., but she’s not sure. She thinks that her Dad might be.” – FG5, A3

"Like we've had some phone calls from some workers saying, "We've got such and such, and we think they're Aboriginal. Have you heard of them?" – FG6, A2

Often this was raised in relation to intergenerational involvement in child welfare systems, and families' resulting loss of connection with their heritage, history and culture:

"It's really frustrating because most kids that are in care, their parents have been in care. So it's like a...

A1: It's generational, it's generational.

A2: And so they don't know, the kid doesn't know, the parents don't know. Because I ring everybody when I'm doing a [cultural support] plan ... the parents, the aunties, uncles, whoever's information I've got, I'll ring them and talk to them. And a lot of them don't know. And I suggest to them that maybe they go into [the ACCO] and another worker, who's the Bringing them Home worker and she can, you know, if she can take them on, which she can't because she's got how many clients? 60? And she's only supposed to have 12." – FG6

"But I've got [a young person] that I think might be [Indigenous]. And I'm trying to support her, if she's interested in going and learning about it... because her Mum, we've worked out her Mum was in care, and we believe she's Stolen Generation. So we're working with Mum as well." – FG7, A2

Confirmation of Aboriginal heritage: Finally, focus group participants stated that Indigenous care leavers may require confirmation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage in order to access some Indigenous-specific services or programs in the community. Given the aforementioned issues regarding identification of Indigenous status, participants noted that for Indigenous care leavers (particularly those coming from families with intergenerational child welfare involvement), meeting the requirements for confirmation of heritage could be difficult:

"A1: We have... quite a number of Aboriginal young people who are homeless. So we link them up and ... particularly to be eligible for housing, Aboriginal housing, you have to have confirmation of your Aboriginality. Which is a bit of an issue... You have to get a [Statutory Declaration] from someone..."

A2: ... you've got to have linear lineage. So you've got to be able to prove genealogy. And you've got to prove that you've maintained a connection with your community of origin. So someone from a co-op has to sign off to that effect." – FG5

Relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies delivering services to this group

Focus groups with mainstream child welfare agencies detailed that the relationship between their agencies and ACCOs, as well as between individual workers in both organisations was vital to working with Indigenous young people. All participating agencies believed the relationship between mainstream child welfare agencies and ACCOs was adequate. However, most recognized a need to nurture these relationships.

An historical legacy of a broken relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and communities

It was acknowledged that child and family welfare agencies had inherited an historical legacy of a broken relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and communities which had to be overcome through ongoing attention to the relationship between services:

“And I think that the question about relationship-building is primary in terms ... of the trust issue. So if you’re working with some of the ACCOs in Victoria that we’ve experienced there can be a fairly hostile kind of a relationship whilst you’re sussing out whether the mainstream organisation’s okay, and how to fit in with the cultural sort of needs and perspective of the Aboriginal organisation along the way.” - FG2, A2

“... we’re drawn to working in that space because we feel like we do have to leave something of ourselves on the table, too. That’s not easy. It’s a challenging space to be in, when you’re there. It takes time to build trust, and like anything, it gets eroded very quickly if you’re not careful. You have to care for the actual, and nurture the relationship. But I think, personally, my experience in working with ACCOs has been I’ve got a [lot] more out of it than I think they probably have. So the rewards are incredible when you step into that space in your own learning, both personally and professionally, and understandings around what it means to, you know, work with and alongside Koorie people.”- FG2, A6

“I know Aboriginal friends, when I first came to [this agency] couldn’t understand why I was coming here and I worked in Child Protection, right? And they said, “Why would you go and work there? They take children away. They take all the babies away”. So there’s still a big, you know, so whether there’s a remnant of a disconnect with that in terms of the services that the system has to connect with. They are very disconnected through generations ... and a great deal of distrust, which is starting to break down now, I would have thought. But you know it’s not that long ago.” –FG5, A2

Though only forming a minority of responses on this theme, some individuals expressed views and comments indicating higher levels of mistrust and misunderstanding between mainstream child welfare agencies and ACCOs. For example, certain participants expressed views of ACCOs as being disorganised rather than under-resourced. Additionally, perceptions of ACCOs being selective in services and supports offered depending on the family origins of young people were relayed. Conversely, there were consistent responses from ACCO staff believing mainstream child welfare agencies were not providing information or referral to ACCO services for young people, for example:

"They're all meant to come through [the ACCO], but we don't even know about some of them until they've been here in [this town] for years. We just got a family of five not long ago that have lived here for 8 years and have been in [the non-Indigenous agency's] out of home care system. But we didn't hear about them until they needed a CSP" – FG6, A1

"...there have been clients that just don't ever get the option of [the ACCO]. And because... I think it's up to the mainstream organisation, if they get the referral, to see they're Indigenous and let them know there is an Indigenous service, would you like that instead? – FG8, A1

"... the Leaving Care Programs wouldn't see them because Child Protection's not doing the referral to us. That's why we wouldn't see it... we have the privilege of having Lakidjeka which is, they're like a specialist team ... they have like a spreadsheet... this is how I get clients like, [X] our worker will kind of give me a spreadsheet of the clients of age in my area. And I'll like trace that, alright that's their worker, and I'll go contact them. So I have to backwards like, kind of go up the line and get the referral myself." – FG8, A1

However, respondents of non-Indigenous child welfare agencies tended to state that such referrals are made and may be refused by young people. It is beyond the scope of this report to either question or critique these matters. However it seems apparent that issues of concern reside in the relationships between the services which in turn may impact upon the efficacy of support offered to Indigenous care leavers. Simultaneously, examples of strong relationships and collaborative practice were also evident. For example:

"The young Indigenous boy I worked with in leaving care, his brother's still in a foster placement. His brother's 19, he's still there, getting... getting any sort of information out of this young fella's [like getting] blood from a stone... he first came in with [X]... his Indigenous [ACCO] leaving care person. When I spoke to the young fella, it was through [X], we were sitting in this room. And so I was just filling out a referral form, and he was just constantly

looking at [X] for, "Oh yep, yep, and then [X] would sort of relay what I was saying." – FG7, A4

Time constraints and a lack of strategic pathways

Ideas emerged of opportunities for future strengthening of these relationships, such as cross-agency learning about the services offered by each agency, and nurturing individual and team relationships. However, time constraints and a lack of strategic pathways by which to strengthen these relationships were recognised as limitations to developing stronger partnerships between services:

"I don't think that there are formal pathways for organisations to... I'm talking from my end, to kind of build each other's capacity and work together, which I think is, you know, needs to be focused on a bit more. – FG2, A1

We currently do a range of different things across Australia in the Aboriginal space, but we don't... we haven't nominated any kind of purposeful way of being able to negotiate that. So a lot of that happens through individuals and the sorts of relationships that they build. – FG2, A2

A strong value placed on the work of ACCOs

The other major theme to emerge from mainstream agencies regarding relationships with ACCOs was a strong value placed on the work of ACCOs including both consultation and separate work directly with Indigenous young people. The following example was given of secondary consultation with an ACCO for an Indigenous care leaver:

"My experience has been quite positive really, working in conjunction with [the ACCO] with the leaving care worker. Mainly in a secondary consult capacity, because our client didn't really want to engage with [the ACCO], so I can only speak to one young person that I've supported who identifies as Aboriginal and who has strong cultural connections and who has been supported by [the ACCO] for a long, long time... at times she's wanted to engage and at others she didn't, and at the time of leaving care she didn't want to. So we just negotiated with [the ACCO] and [the ACCO] still came to her care teams at that point in time the young person herself wasn't attending the care teams. So [the ACCO] came and just provided secondary consult to us, so the leaving care planning was done primarily by us, but with their input. And that worked really well... And so information was passed on to this young person

from [the ACCO] via us about things that were happening in community, things that she might be interested in, Aboriginal Housing Victoria... And that worked pretty well.” – FG5, A3

Perceived under-resourcing of ACCOs

This valuing of the work of these services was articulated alongside a frustration at the perceived under-resourcing of ACCOs, as indicated in previous sections relating to Cultural Support Planning:

“I’m just really aware that they are pretty under the pump, and understaffed and overworked and have ...all of Victoria to cover. So that’s a really difficult sort of environment to be working in and ... it’s been my experience that that’s been a real sort of impediment to doing the good work. And I think that yeah, in my experience, [ACCO] workers have been absolutely fantastic.” – FG5, A3

“They barely come to a case plan, really. You’re lucky to see them at a case plan, but then they don’t know the kid, because they’ve got a case load of like sixty or something, you know? You can’t get onto them, they don’t respond to emails.” – FG3, A1

Strengths of leaving care and post-care systems

Availability of ACCOs

The main strength identified of current leaving care and post-care systems for Indigenous young people was the availability of ACCOs providing specific services for Aboriginal young people in out-of-home care:

“I think one of the strengths is that we do have, in Victoria at least, an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation, that is funded to deliver Koorie-specific support to Koories who are in the out-of-home care system. I think they’re under-resourced, I think they face significant challenges in the work that they do. But I think as a starting point that’s not a bad place to be.” – FG2, A5

Dedicated workers

Participants also identified a range of Indigenous-specific housing, legal, and health services in the community which were highly valued as referral points for Indigenous care leavers. In addition to targeted services, the dedication of workers in the leaving care and post-care service system was seen as a key

asset of these systems. This was noted of mainstream staff, and also of Indigenous staff working in either mainstream agencies or Indigenous-specific services:

“...that’s been our experience too of many of our Aboriginal staff. They work 24/7. It just so happens we pay them between nine and five” – FG2, A5

“... If our [Indigenous] staff didn’t have a job tomorrow, they would still be doing things through obligation.” –FG2, A3

“... we’ve had incredible leaving care workers in our office downstairs... [X] does a huge amount of work. And she’s out there ‘till midnight some nights. And I know that she probably works 60, I would say that she works 60, 70 hours a week. And she’s there with them. If it wasn’t for her I would see weaknesses in the program, but you’ve got these committed staff... because the reality is you can’t do it within business hours. You know our job’s nine to five, and her job would be nine to five. The reality is you’ve got to be out there with the kids at eight, nine, 10 o’clock at night.” – FG3, A2

Increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity

Though acknowledged as an ongoing work in progress, participants of some mainstream agencies identified as a key strength the increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity of the organisation in its work with Indigenous communities, organisations and young people. This included basic initiatives such as the provision of cultural training for agency staff and in a minority of cases, the hiring of Indigenous staff in mainstream services. Actions taken at a strategic level were also cited as examples, including organisations’ issuing of formal apologies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and development of strategic plans concerning reconciliation and working with Indigenous communities.

“One thing that our agency here does is that they do offer, I think it’s once or twice a year through [an ACCO] they run ... an Indigenous cultural awareness one day training. And I’ve done a couple of them through here, and that’s where actually I’ve sort of learnt more about the history, and then my own sort of research.” - FG4, A3

“So one of the things that we’re doing at the minute, and I’m not sure about the model, but the intent I think is a good thing, is around the idea of putting together a reconciliation action plan. And really, the question in regard to this is not just about the issue of young Aboriginal people leaving care. It’s about our experience of care and about our experience of family

systems, and what we consider to be the solution, and how you marry that with where Aboriginal people are at in that respect as well. So you can't build relationship, and you can't build trust unless you're prepared to put your own cultural values on the line as well." –FG2, A3

"We've apologised, so there's written apologies to Aboriginal people for mistakes of the past, you know, those are up they are framed... So there were ceremonies and things that happened there was a whole process internally ... but they're markers as well for us as an organisation. Which is a marker for the people here who might not be on board, too, to say, "Well if you're not personally, that's your business. But at [this agency] you'll get the sack". So it's really clear, you know?" - FG5, A2

Interestingly, one focus group participant indicated that a young Indigenous client had become aware of the agency's public apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

That was really important as well. Because this young person knew about that, had read about it in the paper and we got to talk about that. She was like, "Oh, [the agency] apologised!". – FG5, A3

However, this positive perspective was not espoused by all focus group participants, some of whom believed that their workplace's efforts towards cultural sensitivity and awareness were somewhat tokenistic:

"I know at [Agency Office] ... probably about three years ago I approached someone to put up some... there was no Indigenous artwork anywhere. And the person, well two people I sort of approached just went, "Oh God, he's one of those". It's like, well "Nah, I'm not 'one of those' but it would be nice to see some Indigenous art in here". So just to please me they went and got on the internet and Googled some Aboriginal flag, printed it off and laminated it and stuck it up, and there you go. And I was just like, "Really?" To me ... that says to me a lot about their attitude towards Indigenous culture." – FG3, A4

Strong endorsement of Cultural Support Plans

Where they were available, CSPs were strongly endorsed by focus group participants. They were seen to benefit not only young people, but agencies (in providing a greater understanding of Indigenous young peoples' background) as well as families in some cases:

"[Cultural Support Plans are] a great tool for us, you know not only us to be able to work with that child or young person, but also for them to be able to see, you know, their genogram and see who's who, and look back on their heritage of where they came from." – FG5, A5

"I think we were able to gain some more understanding. I can't say that the cultural plan came up with anything different than we had been doing through the case plan. But ... we had a bigger understanding of the generational issues. We had more understanding of where family were." – FG1, A4

"I think for the young people to know a little bit more about their history. And in this case, the parents weren't forthcoming with the Department about a lot of information. And you know, their experience with the Department hadn't been the best, so there was a lot of fear and anger. And I think that the plan opened up some discussions, and They saw the [ACCO] worker as being independent. So they were a little more forthcoming with information about family history and things like that." – FG1, A4

"...it becomes part of your practice. When you've got a document that you're accountable for, it becomes just as important as health and education. Like it's always at the forefront that every time you plan for these kids that cultural identity always comes into it." – FG5, A3

"Well I've only ever seen one, and it was very thorough ... it was very thorough because the person that had created it had known this young person for a very long time, and had really good knowledge about her family and her links to community. So it was a really beautiful, really well-presented document ... it's got a lot of information in it. A lot of information about her family, about her culture, about her totem, lots of pictures, beautiful genogram, family tree, little sort of excerpts of things that her relatives have said, little quotes." – FG5, A3

Respondents from ACCOs also identified the importance of young people understanding their own history, for a number of reasons, including identity development and safety in future relationships:

"We really need more funding in the Cultural Support Plan area to keep the kids connected to their traditional areas and to keep them, to let them know what resources are there, what famous people come from that area. And we do have famous Aboriginal people, so ... it could be their cousins, and their aunties or their uncles. Kids need to know that, so that they've got something proud to talk about. Because our whole life really as Black people is put down, put down, put

down. This would build up, build up and make people more proud of who they are. Proud to succeed...that they're not just a kid in out-of-home care. That they do have connections, that they do have traditional country.” – FG6, A1

Aboriginal Commissioner for Children and Young People

Finally, the recent appointment of the Aboriginal Commissioner for Children and Young People was acknowledged as a strength of the Victorian leaving care system for Indigenous young people.

“I think the recent appointment of the Aboriginal Children’s Commissioner has been a significant piece of work in Victoria in terms of being able to get some overview and looking at some of the transitional patterns and I suppose some of the issues concerning transition.”
FG3, A3

Limitations of leaving care and post-care systems

There were seven key themes to emerge when respondents were asked to identify any limitations of leaving care and post-care services for Indigenous care leavers.

Leaving care and post-care system limitations largely similar for Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers

The main theme emerging from mainstream services was that the limitations of leaving care and post-care systems for Indigenous care leavers were largely similar to those experienced by non-Indigenous care leavers, and that these arose from generic shortcomings of these systems. In particular, the limited human and financial resources available to support care leavers in the post-care period were acknowledged, alongside the compressed and early transitions to relative independence expected of care leavers. Respondents highlighted the lack of developmental readiness of some care leavers to negotiate, with limited supports, the tasks expected of them, including the capacity to engage with a voluntary post-care service system. The lack of flexibility and resources of “overwhelmed” leaving care and post-care systems was seen as a limitation for all care leavers, regardless of Indigenous status.

Most leaving care and post-care services were seen to be equally accessible to Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers. However, the Springboard program, by virtue of primarily targeting care leavers in residential care and lead tenant placements, was seen to be inadvertently less accessible to

Indigenous care leavers due to a preference for placement in kinship arrangements in this group. This may explain why the numbers of Indigenous young people participating in Springboard (6.5 per cent of the total group) are relatively small ([Baldry et al., 2015](#)). Additionally, while access to identity documents is a central concern for all care leavers, focus group respondents in non-metropolitan locations noted that an anecdotally high proportion of Indigenous care leavers may not have birth certificates or a registration of birth, and many had arrived from other locations, including interstate, which complicated the process of obtaining these documents. This in turn creates difficulties accessing services, for example, income security payments from Centrelink.

Cultural considerations not a priority

A second and related theme emerging concerning limitations of leaving care and post-care systems centred on the observation that cultural considerations were not a priority in the leaving care and post-care period. According to most respondents from non-indigenous agencies, many care leavers, particularly those transitioning from residential care or lead tenant placements, were seen to be facing more immediate concerns (most prominently housing and financial issues) which took precedence over attending to cultural considerations:

“A significant number of young people that approach post-care are in crisis. And I think that when a young person is in crisis they don’t have any space for their cultural needs, they’re focusing on “I have nowhere to sleep tonight”, or “I can’t pay my bills and I’m about to be evicted”, or “my relationship has broken down” or “I’m experiencing family violence” - FG5, A1

“I don’t know that they’re not interested in it. I just think ... it’s not a priority at that point because there are other more stressful and pressing circumstances around their leaving care. So it’s not something that they have the space nor time to consider at that point. It’s the, it’s the more hierarchical, you know hierarchy of need, that is present when they’re leaving care. So... until they’re in a space where they are safe and comfortable ... there’s no room to even think about I think.” - FG5, A1

“...from my observations going to leaving care meetings and post-care meetings, is that, that organisations are stretched. And one of the main issues that they talk about at different meetings is housing. You know everything else comes second, for, you know obvious reasons. So I guess, talking about cultural identity at some of the meetings I go to, aren’t on the agenda. And I guess that they need to be on the agenda, but that housing issue’s up here and then it goes out. And the cultural identity is down here somewhere.” – FG2, A2

"I think the challenge too, is that we forget, you know in our work as mainstream providers we forget. We're too busy focused on you know, let's address the housing, the employment, the education the training, you know all these little tick-a-boxes in our head, that we forget about, you know what it means to be Koorie, and what that specific life experience might have been like, and that disconnection from family, and that no one actually, you know, as mainstream providers I think we're guilty, you know in ourselves. We just basically, we don't do... we're often too busy to step outside of it actually and do something differently, and actually analyse our practice." – FG2, A6

"...when a young person is leaving care, you've got to take into account housing and exiting, which is already limited as it is, so you're just trying to find something for them. So [culture is] not always going to be at the forefront of things." - FG1, A6

Shortage of referrals and resources for ACCO delivery of leaving care and post-care services

While respondents from non-Indigenous agencies tended to emphasise generic limitations of leaving care and post-care systems, simultaneously indicating that cultural considerations were not a priority in this period, ACCO staff more commonly expressed the view that their agencies were under-resourced to deliver leaving care services or were not sent referrals for leaving care planning:

"Their Child Protection worker might not realise there is [the ACCO leaving care service], they might be new. So they just go to whoever they know is leaving care. Yep. So I think it's about awareness within Child Protection. They're where the referrals come from." – FG8, A1

"Sometimes it's also though that the kids haven't necessarily been linked in with an ACCO before. And now because there's a bit more of a push that you know, mainstream orgs need to be linking kids in, we seem to find that there's quite a few you know, adolescents coming through that haven't had that connection ... we've also had quite a few come through that didn't necessarily know that they were Aboriginal for the majority of their lives. And then someone has connected them back to family in some way, and then they've found that information." – FG9, A1

"... our leaving care program is tiny. And I think that you know, if we actually had more resources and more workers, and bigger targets, we would be able to do better. Because I think we have nine targets in a year... And obviously you know, as they leave the program more will come in. But because the leaving care program is actually for such a long time, there's lots and lots of kids that in that time will miss out because if we've got a young person coming in at 15 and they

actually stay within the program for four years because ... leaving care is really complex, that in that four years we're holding that one vacancy and all of the other kids that have come through aren't able to get into the program." – FG9, A1

In contrast to non-Indigenous agencies, respondents from ACCOs expressed views indicating that connection to family, culture and community is – from their perspective – an integral part of meeting other leaving care goals, and fundamental to a successful transition from care, for example:

"I think especially being a culturally-specific service, I think that's a huge part of what we think about - that connection to the family is cultural stuff, and ... I think that's one of the main factors of a successful transition ... to independence" – FG8, A3

Discharge from care or absent from placement prior to eligibility for leaving care

A forth limitation of leaving care systems identified was that many Indigenous young people were seen to leave care or be absent from their placements prior to becoming eligible for leaving care. This theme was mainly raised by respondents in non-metropolitan areas, who gave anecdotal evidence of Indigenous young people who had been in care for many years then either being absent from placements and becoming homeless (for example, couch-surfing), or returning to kinship placements deemed as stable prior to age 16.

Participants observed Indigenous young peoples' orders lapsing after being placed in kinship arrangements which later broke down, or after being absent from placements after the age of 15. Such situations created issues for the engagement of young people in leaving care planning and service provision. For example, some young people become ineligible for leaving care services if they were not under a care and protection order, as per legislative stipulations, while others were not able to be located to engage in leaving care planning. Respondents observed these young people returning to youth services via homelessness or youth justice service pathways when their circumstances degenerated, and were identified as care leavers through these services. Participants also related that it could be difficult to access proof of a young person's eligibility for leaving care services under these circumstances.

"The thing I don't like about is the fact that if they leave care before they're 15 and nine months, then they're not eligible. Even though they might have been in care since birth. Why is that the case?" – FG6, A1

“So sometimes when they're coming up to sixteen if, you know they might have absconded or something, I don't know, and DHS might say or assume that they've returned to family, but it has broken down, but it hasn't been reported. And then there's this whole sort of, I guess grey area where they don't particularly chase it up because of their age, or I don't know, their circumstance. But there is certainly young people out there that don't... they will quite often just let it lapse” – FG7, A2

“I guess for us as service providers, one of the dramas when a kid comes in, and regardless whether they're Indigenous or not, comes in through the homelessness services. They can identify as being in care, or on an order at 16 or after 16. But if it's lapsed and closed or whatever, for us to get the evidence from the Department whether they be in Bendigo, or from Melbourne or in Gippsland or Horsham or wherever, is quite troublesome at times.” – FG7, A3

Difficulties accessing completed Cultural Support Plans

A fifth limitation of the current systems described was the difficulty in accessing completed CSPs for Indigenous young people and taking actions to implement the goals identified in these plans. Respondents from non-Indigenous agencies spoke of great difficulties in having CSPs developed in partnership with ACCOs, or in the case of clients who are not contracted to the agency, by the Department of Human Services², in conjunction with ACCOs:

“A2: I've never seen [a Cultural Support Plan]

A1: I've never seen one...I've heard of it.

A2: I've never seen one. They're supposed to and we're not supposed to take a contract for a kid until we've got one, never happens. Never seen it.

*A1: I presume it's just about how we're going to meet their cultural needs. But, what are they?”
– FG3*

“We can't actually kick them off. They have to be done by [ACCOs]. So they are mandated, is my understanding, for every Aboriginal young person in out-of-home care. But we're not able to start them. And even when we take on case management, we're not actually... we're allowed to be part of it, but we're not actually able to start it.” – FG1, A4

² Now the Department of Health and Human Services

“The Department have the responsibility to complete the cultural plans and they don’t do them. You can ask them what the reasons are, but I’d imagine they’re busy. And so I wouldn’t be surprised if [the agency] in the very near future starts to say, “We’ll just start doing them”. So you know, unfunded, outside service agreement... that sort of stuff is generally how you make change happen. You just start acting as if it is changed, yeah? So I imagine that’s what we’re going to have to do, because Cultural Plans are not routinely done and they’re really helpful, aren’t they?” – FG5, A2

“But we know of, you know, several young people who as a starting point wouldn’t have a cultural plan, you know. That’s a shocking indictment when we don’t have the capacity or the time... because clearly we’re not thinking in that space, if that’s not our starting point...” – FG2, A6

There appeared to be some role confusion with regards to who should or could initiate and complete Cultural Support Plans for Indigenous young people in care. The contention that only ACCO’s could initiate Cultural Support Plans was articulated by most non-Indigenous agency staff. However one ACCO staff member stated that:

“It was only legislated that children on GSOs needed to have a Cultural Support Plan. It’s not mandated that the Cultural Support Plan has to be done by an ACCO. They say mainstream can do that. [The Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS)] are supposed to endorse it, but that doesn’t always happen either.” – FG9, A1

Aside from questions about responsibility in relation to cultural support planning, a number of other barriers to completion of CSPs for young people were identified:

Under-resourced ACCOs. Participants both from non-Indigenous agencies and ACCO’s most frequently cited the fact that ACCO’s were under-resourced to deliver these plans:

“Cultural Support Plans you know I see as very important. However, they are a hefty document and they are to be completed in collaboration with [the ACCO]. And we you know, because they have huge caseloads and we don’t often get the support we sometimes require early on in the piece, because Cultural Support Plans should be done, you know, as soon as possible. Whereas they can be done quite you know years down the track, quite late in the piece. And I’m not criticising [the ACCO] at all, it’s just they’ve got you know huge caseloads and they’re clearly under-resourced.” - FG4, A5

"[The ACCO], I think I had difficulties as well in that again they were just completely overwhelmed with all their cases, that if they had more time I think they would have loved to sit down and really guide us to do a really comprehensive Cultural Support [Plan] but they just didn't have the capacity to do that. So we did it the best that we could, but I definitely think if there was more resources and more time we could have done a lot better ones." – FG4, A3

"... they're saying there's one [ACCO] worker for a certain region or something, and you've got however many.. you've got an over-representation of Indigenous young people, and there's one worker." - FG1, A2

Additionally, respondents from ACCOs outlined the degree of under-resourcing for completing CSPs and the reality of the workload involved in this task. First, difficulties accessing information required to create CSPs were described. This was attributed to the young person's family not knowing this information; the young person and their family coming from a different region to the one where the ACCO is located; and the gathering of information from family raising traumatic memories particularly for family members who are part of the Stolen Generations, and the subsequent emotional toll on workers involved in creating CSPs.

"... there are more kids on GSOs³ than we have capacity to make Cultural Support Plans for ... I think at the moment there's like 37 kids on the list for Cultural Supports and that's just this year." – FG9, A1

"A1: There's thousands of phone calls per document.

A2: It's exhausting and frustrating, and tiring and it's emotional... you ring the Co-Ops or the other ACCOs around asking, "Do you know this family? Can you tell me a bit about them? Do you have contacts that I can call?" – FG6

The limited capacity within ACCOs (which respondents attributed to resourcing issues), was also problematic in that mainstream services indicated a need for guidance and input from ACCOs in care planning for Indigenous care leavers and in implementing the goals identified in CSPs:

"The difficulty is you may not have the skills or the capacity or the knowledge or understanding to do anything about it. That's the challenge I think probably for mainstream providers in some ways. So you rely on, well I think we should rely on Koorie expertise and Aboriginal expertise

³ GSOs – Guardianship to Secretary Orders

to inform that, and help in the development of plans that actually make sense. And of course you've got to get the voice of the young person." –FG2, A6

"...all along the way leading up to those transitions are numerous care team meetings, um, involving Child protection, placement coordination... but traditionally we've struggled to get Indigenous people to those meetings from [ACCOs] those groups. So basically I think that's been an issue for us for a number of years." –FG1, A5

"... often you don't know enough, I don't know a lot about Aboriginal culture or heritage or what's important or even using the terms mob and things. You pick up stuff, but there isn't a lot of interagency work once you're hired." – FG3, A2

Similarly ACCOs agreed that having a CSP alone was insufficient to maintain a cultural connection for young people if resources are not available to action these plans:

"...there's no money for you know cultural resources. There's no money to run, you know, for VACCA, you know to be running cultural programs that we have for our kids to participate in, you know? There's certainly nothing aimed at youth. I know that in the whole Southern Region, that I'm aware of, is ... there's one Koori youth group. That's run in Dandenong, and it's like once a week on the school terms. I know it hasn't previously run because no one has volunteered to run the program. Um... but even if there was Cultural Support Plans, there's no resources to make sure that the Cultural Support Plans are enacted by whether or not it's the foster carer, the kinship carer, the resi. unit" – FG9, A1

"We need a full-time worker in Cultural Support Plans because once a Cultural Support Plan has been done, then there needs to be a support worker that will go out and make sure that the carer is keeping that child connected to their community... And also funding to go with that... Some kids are not able to go home to their traditional areas until they're maybe 16... We need somebody to monitor that, and that needs to be a full time role, and that needs to be funded with brokerage." – FG6, A1

Referrals not sent to ACCOs for cultural support planning. In contrast to the responses from non-Indigenous agencies, respondents from ACCOs were more inclined to indicate that they did not receive referrals for Cultural Support Planning at the frequency which they would anticipate.

"They needed a Cultural Support Plan. And they'd been here for eight years. Nobody ever tells us. Because all carers know each other, or they get to know each other and they let us know. They tell us. We hear about it through word of mouth, or a family member will say my Auntie's got so and so." – FG6, A1

Young people not motivated to engage. Thirdly, respondents from non-Indigenous agencies also indicated that some Indigenous young people do not wish to engage in cultural support planning or connection to community:

"I'd say that, you know I don't think that, and you know from all of us whether it be the Department of Human Services, agencies like [this agency], [ACCOs], that we um we don't put enough emphasis on Cultural Support Plans. And then in saying that, like I ... a comment I made earlier in terms of young people wanting to identify as Indigenous, and wanting to be a part of their Cultural Support Plan, because it's so much easier if we have young people and family being a part of and feeding into that Cultural Support Plan. But if we don't have people giving us information and [the ACCO] only know limited information as well it's actually really hard to complete the hefty Cultural Support Plan that does exist." – FG4, P5

However this was rarely reported by respondents from ACCOs, perhaps indicating that different populations of Indigenous young people are being seen by ACCOs and non-Indigenous services. For instance, one ACCO worker stated that:

"...the only reason really, they're not interested is in them being in out of home care, or them you know the stolen gen, their dad might have, their mum might have been a stolen gen and it's like intergenerational stuff. I don't think anyone who would actually know... you know, know some family and that would say, "I'm not interested". I think everyone would be" - FG9, A1

Family unable to provide information. The fifth barrier to completion of CSPs concerned information-gathering. As indicated previously, participants outlined cases where family were unable to provide information for CSPs, sometimes due to their own loss of connection to culture, or were otherwise unable to be engaged in cultural support planning:

"A lot of the information, unless you can get it from the families directly, it is really hard to fill out those, those documents. And you do the best that you can, and you resource it and you

try to put together this plan that you think is ... is right, but would be yeah... it would be great to have more family input where possible.” – FG4, A3

“Some of them I’ve found, you know they’ve had quite disrupted childhoods, the parents themselves. And for a lot of them ... there’s information in there that they don’t know either. And we’ve actually done quite well in terms of us then contacting other family and getting little bits and being that person that then puts all that together. But yeah, definitely directly from family, and for them too there’s potentially a lot of trauma there as well. So we could be opening wounds that they don’t want to talk about either. So it’s got to be very sensitively done as well.” - FG4, A3

Limitations of child welfare systems in facilitating connections with family

A sixth theme centred on limitations of child welfare systems in facilitating connections with family. Participants from both ACCOs and non-Indigenous agencies believed that Indigenous care leavers would benefit from systems which were better able to facilitate connections with extended family and community, and encourage family work even where children had been removed:

“A5: But it’s interesting because we’ve had referrals where workers have said, “don’t go near the Mum”, you know, “she’s really dangerous, and just don’t have anything to do with her”, whereas we tend to always work with the families. And in both those situations the workers have engaged with the Mum, and it’s turned out really well.

A7: Because she’s allowed to be included for a start.

A3: Goes way back to that idea about the principle of... you’ve got to understand who the people are you’re dealing with. Don’t fear because they’re different.” – FG2

“... we aren’t actually being proactive I guess, because we don’t have the resources to be like, we’ve got a 17 year old you know, they’re in resi. or whatever. Or they’re in a kinship placement with a non-Aboriginal family, or they’re in a foster care placement. How do we now start linking them back in with people who may not have been appropriate before, but because they’re now almost adults, and you know they have better skills to identify risks and make sure that they are safe? ... We need to hold another family meeting. We need to talk about what cousins do we have that maybe we can link this young person in with... and by doing that we can then look at going back to country, we can look at connecting back to culture. But I think we’re in a really good space at the moment where people are starting to actually take this on board, and starting to listen to the fact that without these things, you will never help this child.” – FG9, A1

“What concerns me about this is we put all that money there, and we don’t build family in a way. We completely ignore the issue of family because they’re too problematic, and we may have some judgements about family that aren’t kind as well. And in the extended framework you can always find people that are doing the right thing, that have a lot to give children that come from their own people, and that in the end you don’t delay the question about how we actually settle somebody in community, because it’s actually about being a part of your family and your community. That should be where we aim. Rather than leaving anything, where are we going to? And where have we come from?” – FG2, A3

Systems incompatible with Indigenous culture

The above quote illustrates a broader view embraced by a minority of respondents, comprising the sixth theme, which was an observation that out-of-home care systems (and their post-care extensions) are underpinned by principles, definitions and understandings which are at times antithetical to Indigenous traditional practices, understandings or value systems:

“when you take a culture and a people outside of their own systems, so family and community, and no matter how well-intended we are in terms of trying to provide... foster situations or Aboriginal-specific, out-of-home care circumstances, those young people still are in a system that’s alien to their own family and extended family systems...We fail in the primary acknowledgement, which is to acknowledge individual Aboriginal people in a family system. And in a family system that has an extended framework that promotes solutions that our system doesn’t look at.” – FG2, A2

Respondents gave various examples illustrating this theme, one of which was previously described in relation to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (see p. 11). Difficulties were described in balancing this principle with other Best Interests principles in out-of-home care, including keeping sibling groups together and prioritising placement permanency. In other examples, various participants raised the idea that Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures understood the concept of family differently:

““Where are you from?” is the question, more than “Who are you?” So I belong in Swan Hill. So someone from Swan Hill will have a connection to you that’s nothing to do with attachment - they don’t know you, they may never have met you...The system’s not good at facilitating those familial pathways in the same way as more traditional family, which is all about person and emotion and connection.” – FG5, A2

A further example given was the concept of 'leaving' or transitioning from care:

"In a sense that really illustrates the difference around, you know service system that's mainstream, even if it's Aboriginal people running that, there is a leaving component. Whereas if you're an Aboriginal person, and you live in this community, you always care, and you're always interested in what happens to your people. So there's no leaving anything." –FG2, A3

Others pointed out the disconnect within the idea of cultural support planning:

"It's a tool that the Department's developed and it's meant to be a conduit into an Indigenous community which there's no interconnection between. It's an imposed tool, not something that's been developed or had input or understanding by the communities that are meant to be working within that plan, or to that plan." – FG2, A7

A final example was given concerning financial management post-care, which is often only regarded from an individualistic perspective when considering economic outcomes for care leavers:

"Often for young people there's a responsibility or an expectation by community ... that their funds are pooled. So you know, part of our process when we're looking at approving applications for young people leaving care, is "What is their contribution?". So you know, they might say we need a household set up. Well, you know, "What is the young person's income? What are their expenses? Are they able to contribute towards something? What's a reasonable cost?". But for some young people, all their money is pooled. And so they don't have the resources, you know, like you go, "Oh well ... they've got a part-time job" or "they've got Youth Allowance" or whatever. And they should be able to afford such and such. But often we'll get feedback from the [ACCO] worker that the young person is supporting their extended family or, you know, this is post-care, so they haven't got any money. Even though they might have an income, their income is ...being guarded by ... or they're helping to support their younger brother or whoever." – FG5, A1

Limitations in cultural competency

Related to this was the seventh and final theme, which concerned limitations in cultural competency among mainstream child welfare agencies. This was primarily recognised by staff of these agencies, and

included staff concerns about their own level of knowledge and capacity to work with Indigenous young people and agencies. Additionally, while recognised as a key asset, certain respondents remarked on difficulties in recruiting and supporting Indigenous staff to work within mainstream non-government agencies.

"I feel tentative. I feel more confident now, but I'm much older now. But felt tentative, even though I was confident as a worker, [I] would feel less confident because there's all this history and this baggage and this stuff. You know and it's just hard. But when you realise that [when] you just start talking about it, it's actually easier." – FG5, A2

"A4: I think I'm pretty good at building relationships with young people. It's one of my strengths. And I am good with Indigenous kids, on a personal level, one on one. But just, my cultural background is so removed..."

A1: Yeah same for me. I didn't even grow up in a neighbourhood where there was an Indigenous person.

A4: I have cultural awareness and cultural understanding, but cultural competency and cultural connection - I don't have it." – FG7

Indigenous care leavers' transitional needs and experiences

Differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers' transitional needs

As in the previous section outlining participants' views concerning limitations of leaving care and post-care systems for Indigenous care leavers, many respondents (particularly from non-Indigenous agencies) believed there were few differences in the transitional needs and experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers. However, this should be qualified with the understanding that few participants reported working with Indigenous care leavers in the post-care period.

Conversely, respondents from ACCOs tended to emphasize the importance of connection to culture as a necessary, though neglected, transitional need:

"I think especially being a culturally-specific service, I think that's a huge part of what we think about. That connection to the family is cultural stuff, and I think that's ... one of the main factors of a successful transition" – FG8, A1

"... the only way that they cannot be lost is if they are connected to their country, their family, and their culture. But we've got generations of kids that weren't getting that, because it wasn't

in legislation... we're in this era where we've got you know, 17 and 18 year olds who have never been connected to anything... we actually need to address that. We can't just say. 'well the system stuffed it up, we can't fix it, there's nothing we can do'. Well yes, there are things that we can do, and that's part of the leaving care stuff" – FG9, A1

Identity confusion and the development of a sense of self

Others did note differences, particularly concerning some Indigenous care leavers' identity confusion and the development of their sense of self. Respondents noted that this could be particularly challenging for young people having a weaker connection to their culture.

"The needs of Aboriginal children leaving care are the same, but then I think the negotiation of your identity and some of the things that we've, when I say we, the system's done to children in terms of not knowing who they are, in a worse way, from coming into a substitute family... And then really hard to engage with the services, because the services also [question], "Who are you? You're now a white girl. We used to know you, you used to be a family name that we know". Do you know what I mean? And now it's a whole process of reconnection with that, which is nothing that other cultures have to negotiate. Now leaving care's hard enough, it seems to me that that's a layer and a dimension that's an added." – FG5, A2

"...to embrace your people from a country perspective I think is crucial to knowing that part of your identity, but to build your strength in identity as you go forward as well. Otherwise you're just being cut adrift from one system that unfortunately probably leads you into the adult justice system or somewhere else along the way." – FG2, A3

"... if they're connected to their community and their traditional area, with funding to support that, then the leaving care program becomes easier because they know who they are. And a lot of kids' problems when they leave care [has] stemmed from not knowing who they are." – FG6, A1

Respondents from mainstream agencies expressed the most concern for Indigenous care leavers in non-Indigenous foster or residential care placements, where connection to culture often was seen to be heavily dependent on foster carers' support.

“...the placement they’re in is with a [religion] church-goer, so she’s... they have to go to a [religion’s] church on a Sunday. So you’ve got these Indigenous kids who don’t have any connection to their own culture. And [the ACCO] hasn’t gotten involved ... and you’ve got these Indigenous kids sitting in a [religion’s] frigging church. They don’t want to be there! And it’s this struggle between respecting the carer and letting her know that it’s okay for her to follow her faith, and that’s her one time on a Sunday, that’s really important to her that she goes and connects with her culture. And you’ve got these kids who just sit there on their iPads. And so they identify probably stronger with [their religion’s] faith than they do with Indigenous faith.” – FG3, A2

“... we’ve got a great deal of flexibility, we’re federally funded for this, it’s a pilot... to have somebody like an [Indigenous cultural support worker] walk into, you know the residential care provider, they loved it. They just went, “Bloody brilliant!” Like they’re crying out, “We’ve got no idea, help us out.” So I think providers would be really open to that, but once again we need to resource, you know, Aboriginal people to be doing that in mainstream providers.” – FG2, A6

“I think there is something there about Koorie kids being in mainstream care without ... any connection to their culture that’s deeply problematic.” –FG2, A6

In contrast, respondents from ACCOs expressed more concern for young people residing with non-Indigenous kin who were not supportive of connection to Indigenous culture:

“It’s more the kids that are in kinship with their white families... We have foster carers who they’ve just got their kids permanent. They take their kids home to Torres Strait Island, you know? They learn about the kids’ cultures and I find more foster carers are more open to learning than ... [non-Indigenous] grandparents, say” – FG6, A2

Transgenerational effects

While the parents of non-Indigenous young people were also commonly seen to have had their own Child Protection involvement as children, respondents indicated that the added dimensions of history and culture resulted in a different experience of these transgenerational effects when working with Indigenous young people, particularly those in non-Indigenous placements:

“...we had [a young girl] in the residential setting, and I remember dealing with her family, her mother specifically. And it was very different. It was very different dealing with her than dealing with say kids that you know, aren't Aboriginal. And there were a number of comments that she made over the time that the young girl was in care, around racism and you know, being white and I guess, maybe reverse racism, as in being white and ... not understanding the culture.” - FG4, A1

“When an ... Indigenous child comes into care, first port of call is [an ACCO]. They always try and put Aboriginal children with Aboriginal families. If that is not available, that is when we would get those referrals. On the rare occasion when we have had an Indigenous child in a residential unit or in one of our resident- in one of our home based care placements, we don't actually have any Indigenous carers. So then that's when that transgenerational trauma might come up, where you've got you know an Indigenous child effectively being cared for by non-Indigenous carers... look I don't know what [the ACCO] does in terms of promoting carers and getting more carers, but it would be great if... if our service wasn't required. If that there were enough Indigenous carers out there that could actually take these kids.” – FG4, A3

Limited encouragement and support to engage with culture and community post-care

Participants noted that there was more time to work with connecting Indigenous young people to community and culture during their placement in out-of-home care compared to post-care, where services are entirely voluntary, and reliant on young people to drive the process in terms of identifying their own needs. In the post-care period, as indicated previously, the respondents noted that young people tended to present to services only with immediate needs such as housing. Thus, post-care, there was limited encouragement and support to engage with culture and community:

“...we can do everything we can while the child's with us and in care, but as soon as they hit that 18, and child protection services close, then they're pretty much ... they're on their own. So if we can set them up as much as we can prior to getting to that. But then who's going to remind them at 19? And prompt them and tell them when festivals are on? ... That's going to be another challenge that you're going to have... So I guess we do our best to get all that happening for them before they turn 18 so they can independently continue it.” – FG4, A3

Barriers to engagement with culture, community and Indigenous-specific services

Other barriers to engagement with culture and community and Indigenous-specific services were noted for Indigenous care leavers. Most commonly, participants reported that some Indigenous young people did not want to engage with culture and community for various reasons, including:

- Culture not being a priority for some Indigenous care leavers;
- A lack of experience and familiarity with traditional culture;

"We would encourage him. But we sort of found that this wasn't something that his parents, like he was Indigenous but his parents hadn't actually sort of ... he'd never done these things before. So we started introducing this to him, and he was like, "Oh this... this isn't me. This isn't... you know I might be Indigenous, but that doesn't mean that I want to do this Indigenous service that you've then, you know, now recommended that I do"." – FG4, A3

- Wanting to fit in or identify with non-Indigenous carers' culture. In some cases, carers lacked knowledge, support or willingness to assist Indigenous young people to engage with their own culture:

"It's difficult with this young person, because she was in a foster care placement that was not supportive of her culture. In fact was quite the opposite... just sort of growing up between two worlds, and not really having... I'm not sure if she's got much of an understanding about all of the sort of... the background behind why her family have struggled with drugs and alcohol." – FG5, A3

- Avoiding re-connection due to previous negative experiences of community, or concerns about engaging with family:

"I think adolescence is a hard time, whether you're Indigenous or not. We had a young person who didn't want to [connect with the ACCO] because they were concerned that their family would find out about where they were, because their family was still quite connected in with, in particular in the Aboriginal Health Service. So they, even though culturally we needed to take them there, they didn't want to be taken there because they knew that mum and dad still frequented that service, didn't want anything to do with it." – FG1, A4

As indicated previously, respondents from ACCOs presented a different viewpoint, indicating that they had rarely encountered Indigenous young people who were not interested in connecting with community and culture. Other identified barriers to engagement with culture and community included:

- Young Indigenous people not being from the area. This often compounded difficulties connecting with their own mob due to distance and local cultural activities potentially being inappropriate;

It's not easy finding the kids' families. [This is] a very transient town, and kids come from everywhere, even kids that are actually living here don't come from here." - FG6, A1

"...there were a couple of cultural things that we started with working on the land and things like that as well. But they were run by different branches of the community... if you weren't [from that mob] you couldn't do it. And a lot of ours weren't [from that mob], so they couldn't become involved in it. So there's that cultural thing, as well, is that division amongst themselves often because of where they're from. And if you come from out of town as well, the idea is you look after... your own here before you look after someone that may have relatives here, but wasn't ... doesn't, hasn't lived here, wasn't born here. You know they might come from Queensland or South Australia" – FG8, A1

"Majority of the kids that we work with are not from here ... we have a couple of [young] people from South West Perth ... we've got kids from Queensland, and we've got New South Wales, we've got Alice Springs. We've got some down from Gippsland, so there are some that are closer... we've got some South Australia... even if we had someone that was from even Mildura, that kind of stuff, that kind of area, we don't have any money to get them there... As a leaving care worker, you don't have the resources to do the family work, talking to the Elders and the Aunts and the Uncles and saying, "we want to bring this young person up, return to country"... you don't actually have the capacity as the leaving care worker. Because it doesn't really fall under leaving care, when it should." – FG9, A1

Additionally, participants from ACCO's described other barriers to engaging with culture and community post-care, including a lack of specific funding to support cultural connection for young people in the post-care period, and a lack of programs targeting the needs of older Indigenous adolescents and young adults:

"There's no money with the post-care funding orgs to do things like that. You know I can get them a couch and a bed, but I can't get them home." – FG9, A1

"There's no money to run, you know, for [the ACCO], you know to be running cultural programs that we have for our kids to participate in, you know? There's certainly nothing aimed at youth. I know that in the whole [X] Region, that I'm aware of, is ... there's one Koorie youth group. That's run in [suburb], and it's like once a week on the school terms. I know it hasn't previously run because no one has volunteered to run the program." – FG9, A1

Need for greater guidance in supporting Indigenous young peoples' connection to culture and community

Focus group participants from non-Indigenous services reported a need for greater support, knowledge and guidance in supporting Indigenous young people to connect to culture and community, while those from ACCOs similarly recognised a need to resource activities promoting cultural connection:

"...You may not have the skills or the capacity or the knowledge or understanding to do anything about it. That's the challenge I think probably for mainstream providers in some ways." – FG2, A6

"We don't have the resources to ... we do our best to do consultations... as the kinship care worker, being an Aboriginal person I tend to get pulled into quite a few different things, just because they try... you know we do our best to get Aboriginal people to do consultations. But I mean I've done consultations as the kinship worker for kids in resi. care, and how do we support the resi. care, you know, but they're very much ad hoc, very much whenever we can pull resources from somewhere I guess to do it ... and I mean it would be great if we could, but we don't have the resources to. So it's very much one of those, if we were to do lots of consultations what was to give in order for us to be able to do the consultations? I mean we can do it when we have you know, reduced targets." – FG9, A1

Indigenous care leavers' post-care outcomes

Post-care return to family

In terms of post-care outcomes, respondents observed that many Indigenous children (similar to their non-Indigenous counterparts), return to family post-care. Reunification was often seen to fail in the absence of any interim family work, or support to negotiate these attempts at re-connection.

"They go back to family in the end sometimes anyway, and yet there still hasn't been that building of capacity for family for them to go back. It's just remove them, artificial supports in

place for 10 years, and then, "Oh crap, you've got nowhere to go". Put them back into family and let them go. And that's not going to work." – FG2, A1

"We can do some amazing work with kids, but it needs to be a holistic approach, extended out to the family. You know, so if the families aren't progressing, then we're just putting these kids back into the lion's den." – FG3, A4

"When Koorie kids get older they generally go back to family. So ... we put lots of support in place on how we make sure that they're going to keep connected to their family ... in a safe way, and in a sustainable way, so that they're okay and they're linking back with their family, and potentially going home, and how we support them to do that when they're adults, and they can make those decisions." – FG9, A1

Indigenous care leavers' family responsibilities

After leaving care, Indigenous young people were often seen to take on caring and providing roles for siblings, parents, and extended family. Whether by choice or due to cultural expectations, these roles were seen to place additional stress on care leavers, including on their post-care accommodation and finances:

"We housed one boy who was leaving care with Youth Justice... his older partner moved in, his older partner's sister moved in, her partner moved in, and Mum moved in. So we housed one Indigenous leaving care boy and we ended up supporting four other people, ranging from the age of 53 down. And there was another brother in [regional town] that used to come over and stay for extensive periods of time as well. So you don't just look after one, you look after everyone." – FG7, A1

"We've got a young couple that have been, she was in care, he actually wasn't, but they quite successfully had their first child and they're doing really well. But the only time they access our service is when they've got family staying with them. Because often it's an Elder that will be staying with them. They will not ask them to contribute financially [for] being in their property. They will feed them... everything is provided for the older Aunty or you know cousin whatever. They will provide for them, and they won't ask them to contribute to the support of themselves. So you know two young people on parenting payments with a small child may have three elder relatives staying with them. They can become responsible for feeding them, and caring, like providing for their needs for whatever period of time they're staying there. So they can be doing really well with ... because you say to them, "Do you need a hand with your

budget?", "Oh no. We do really well, but Aunt Mary's down from Canberra and she's staying with us". "Well maybe Aunt Mary could buy a couple of meals?", "Oh no we can't do that. You can't do that. You just can't". - FG7, A1

Homelessness

While common among the leaving care population more broadly, focus group participants often remarked on homelessness as a common post-care outcome for Indigenous care leavers:

"I think lots of the Indigenous kids we see as well, that come through the homelessness intake, have had their order closed, because they've been placed with kin, but that's not been sustainable. Assessed as sustainable, but it's not been sustainable for very long. And then they've become transient and homeless." – FG7, A3

Poor educational outcomes and involvement in youth and adult justice systems

A number of focus group participants also commented on the poor educational outcomes of many Indigenous care leavers. While a final post-care outcome which was noted in focus groups was the disproportionate number of Indigenous care leavers having involvement in the youth and adult justice systems:

"Unfortunately, the harsh reality is that a lot of people don't manage that transition from out-of-home care well anyway, and a lot of Indigenous kids certainly don't. And if they don't have, if all that stuff that we've spoken about, the cultural planning and support and thinking, is really [imbedded] and wrapped around them, isn't in place, then I think the harsh reality is that a significant number of them end up in the criminal justice system. And they're already familiar with that having come through in the Youth Justice space." – FG2, A6

High levels of resilience and positive achievements

At the same time, multiple respondents spoke about Indigenous care leavers who demonstrated high levels of resilience and positive outcomes with regard to housing, education and relationships, for example:

"... my young girl [X], she's in her third year of nursing. But, she had been in care, her brothers were both in care, and... Somehow she came from Melbourne into [regional city], maybe family was here. But she was going to a [high school] and they had a fantastic support worker there for her. And she, she struggled, but she got through. And she's now doing, in her third

year of nursing. So with the right supports around them, if the intervention's early enough they can be quite successful with education. But they just need, whether it be housing or just mentoring or you know...She had an agreement with Child Protection that she could have her brothers, younger brothers, much younger... half-brothers again as well. They weren't full blooded. She'd taken on weekend visits. So she would pick the children up on a Friday and return them to their placement on a Monday. So every weekend, even when she was studying through her Year 11 and 12, and through her years in university, she's had them every weekend.” - FG7, A1

“I want to talk about two positive experiences [laughs], that one is a young woman who has gone into long-term stable accommodation, has a great relationship with her family, goes to Koorie youth group with her children, is doing amazing things, has gone back to study.” – FG2, A1

Practitioners’ recommendations for improving outcomes for Indigenous care leavers

Focus group participants generated a number of recommendations for improving Indigenous care leavers' outcomes.

A cultural support worker in the care team

The most prominent suggestion was to have a cultural support worker in the care team. Some respondents from mainstream agencies suggested that having a cultural support worker in-house (even part-time) might result in a better model for agencies in terms of being able to access cultural support for clients. It was argued that such a model worked for other areas of client support, including alcohol and other drug services and mental health services:

“If you had a specialised worker it would be incredible. And even if it wasn't in our office, if it was North or West or whatever, if you could contact and say, “Look I've got this young person that, we don't even know where to start with, and how do we go about looking, that would be wonderful.” - FG3, A2

“It's about involving a cultural worker in the organisation. Having one in-house, as we do with education support, as we do with the Royal Children's, as we do with AOD workers, yeah? Having something in-house.” – FG1, A2

General feedback from focus groups suggested that accessing cultural support and guidance from ACCOs in care team meetings was often difficult; while this was primarily seen to be due to ACCO under-resourcing, some participants queried whether there were other issues underlying this difficulty:

“I do wonder sometimes, and I may be wrong, that we will have a care team or a professionals meeting, and it could be six general services around a table and one [ACCO] worker, who may not be Indigenous, but may also feel marginalised by the fact that they're the only Indigenous service there. I don't... I've certainly wondered about that. Whether we're sort of perpetuating some of that stigma stuff?” – FG7, A3

Matching Indigenous care leavers with mentors

A second suggestion was to match Indigenous care leavers with mentors throughout the leaving care period, whether from Indigenous communities or not, as an added layer of support:

“It's really difficult for young people transitioning out of leaving care ... if they had of had someone in place as a mentor for them, you know, from their community early on, someone to look up to. And I think that that makes such a difference.” – FG2, A5

Staff training

The value of staff training within non-Indigenous child welfare agencies, was also strongly endorsed. Training was not only seen to benefit staff in working with Indigenous children, young people and families, but also in working in partnership with ACCOs:

“I think it's really important for everyone working in this space to have that training. Because you might not realise that this person's got this huge, huge caseload or you know in Aboriginal communities there are a lot more deaths, because Aboriginal people we know have completely different health sort of outcomes than white Australians, and so maybe they're going to 5 funerals in a month... So you need to be culturally aware and if you don't have the training then you're just not going to know.” – FG5, A3

Others suggested that the format of training should be regular, and could include participation in relationships and partnerships with ACCOs, Indigenous communities and activities:

"I'm thinking of things like, you know being part of community activities, going and visiting community, historical sites, getting a real sense of what that means, and developing relationships. Not going and sitting in a training session for one day, and then going, "Yep! Cultural awareness, 'tick', I've done it". I think that you get a much better understanding when you do it that way, and it's consistent and regular over time." – FG2, A1

Increase the resources targeted towards Indigenous young people

A fourth recommendation was to increase the resources targeted at Indigenous young people (both in-care and post-care). A repeated theme in this area, as indicated previously, was the need for better funding of ACCOs to deliver leaving care and post-care services, as well as the provision of secondary consultation to Non-indigenous agencies.

"There's a lot of money kicking around in the system, and there's a lot of Aboriginals in the system, so you sort of have... an Aboriginal response. The fact is that mainstream organisations like us, you could get [ACCOs] saying, "If we got the money that you got for the placements that you currently provide for Aboriginal children, then we would be able to provide a better response, and have a better cultural show, and have a better chance of them leaving care more effectively". – FG5, A2

Another specific issue which was frequently raised by ACCOs was the need for targeted Indigenous housing options, such as lead tenant properties and youth refuges:

"I'd really like to know if they've got a lead tenant that's actually supported with Indigenous carers. Because that, if that does not exist that would be the one thing that I would say that needs to exist. Because yeah, because basically it would be great to allow Indigenous kids to remain with Indigenous carers, keep that cultural connection going." – FG4, A3

"...we don't have you know, a housing service within [the ACCO]... so again we go to external agencies. But ... we don't have partnerships with [housing agencies] or something like that where we've got specific Indigenous beds, which would be wonderful." – FG9, A1

Work with families pre- and post-reunification

As highlighted throughout this report, the most prominent need identified in the consultations was for sufficient resources to provide cultural support planning and to support maintenance of cultural

connection for Indigenous young people. Additionally, engaging in family work, both prior to and to support reunification attempts, including supporting connection with extended family members was emphasised:

“...within the system that we’ve got now obviously housing is really critical and that needs to be improved. But I think that we need to definitely look, like you were saying earlier, much more closely at family reunification, and actually find a way to bring it to the table and really do some good planning around that, because it’s going to happen anyway.” – FG5, A3

Strengthening the partnerships between ACCOs and non-Indigenous child welfare agencies

Finally, as described in previous sections, strengthening the partnerships between ACCOs and mainstream child welfare agencies was put forward as a potentially helpful strategy for improving outcomes for Indigenous care leavers.

Interviews with Indigenous Care Leavers

The following section presents two case studies which highlight some of the experiences and reflections of the young people who participated in the study. The names and other specific details have been changed. However the case studies serve to illustrate the key themes generated by the interviews with the Indigenous care leavers.

Case Study 1: Tamara

Tamara is a 20 year old Indigenous woman who, with her two younger siblings, first entered out-of-home care at the age of 13. Prior to being placed in care, Tamara and her siblings resided with their mother and grandmother. Due to their mother’s substance use, the siblings were supported by their grandmother, with Tamara playing a substantial role of supporting her Nan parenting her younger siblings. Upon entering care, the three siblings were placed with a non-Indigenous foster family. Shortly after their placement, Tamara’s Nan – who had played a critical part in her life - passed away.

Tamara was generally positive about her experiences of out-of-home care, particularly the fact that she was able to remain with her siblings and had the stability of a single placement throughout her time in care. She appreciated having the parenting role removed from her responsibility: *“I was more like told to be a kid”*, she said. Tamara also reported that her foster carers were encouraging of her connection to

culture, and together with an ACCO supported her to attend cultural events, such as NAIDOC week, and to engage with various Indigenous community groups and programs. She was also heavily involved in leadership and mentoring programs as well as advocacy with various agencies supporting young people in out-of-home care. During her time in care, Tamara and her siblings also had monthly access visits with their mother, though Tamara revealed that her mother would sometimes not attend, to the great disappointment of her younger siblings.

Tamara was able to stay with her foster family until she was 18 years of age, provided that she remained in school. She did so, successfully completed year 12 Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), and obtained regular casual employment throughout her high school years. During this period, at times, Tamara also consulted a school counsellor. While her in-care experiences were very positive, Tamara's experiences of leaving care were not so positive.

She believed that leaving care planning started too late for her, stating that *"it wasn't started until before I turned, like just before I turned 18. Really it should have been started when I was like 15, 16"*. Tamara also described *"mixing in with the wrong group"* as she approached the time of transitioning care, indicating that she pushed boundaries with her foster family. For example, she said: *"I don't like being inside... by the end of my placement I liked being out all the time. Like going out and having fun"*. She felt that these experiences also compromised her foster care placement.

Tamara formally left care after finishing high school when she was 18 years and 9 months old. When given a choice of agencies to support her post-care, Tamara initially connected with a non-Indigenous agency but later switched to an ACCO after the previous agency worker left. She reported having nowhere to go after leaving care, and so she and her partner initially moved in with a drug-using relative, then with her mother who had recently been released from prison, and finally with a family friend. The couple sometimes stayed in Aboriginal refuges between these housing arrangements, each of which lasted less than 6 months due to conflict, and financial issues relating to rent and supporting others' and their own drug habits. For example:

"It was more the fact I was like supporting a drug habit, and I couldn't afford to feed myself or anything."

And:

"It was alright at the start, and she has a habit too. But she was trying to hide it, and things got messy. We had junkies coming in and out of the house all the time. And one night she had a bad hit and kicked me and my partner out."

"From the start, there at that house, we were meant to be paying for food. That was their deal. We buy food that like feeds us all, but as well she buys food. So we can all like eat during the week. And there was no rent involved, but by the end of it she wanted money and food and drugs and the rest of it."

Tamara reflected that one of the key things she would have liked when leaving care was, "...probably more support with housing... Really, there should be something after leaving care where the foster kids can get their own place straight away, instead of mucking around."

While she had not had any involvement in crime during her time in care, since leaving care she had been arrested and sent to court for drug possession, though the case was dismissed. At the time of interview, Tamara and her partner were residing in crisis housing. She had remained in touch with her mother, though she indicated that this continues to be a difficult relationship:

"It's still not the best, but we can get along. I don't know, there's still that thing there, like you hurt me, I'm going to hurt you."

Tamara remains in touch with an ACCO post-care worker, who has been supporting her to attend appointments. She has limited contact with her previous foster family, and Tamara described her foster mother as not being a person whom she felt she would approach for support. While not currently studying or working due to her housing situation, she is keen to pursue further study when she is in a more stable space.

Although Tamara indicated that her Indigenous culture is very important to her, she also reported little cultural connection, though she attends key cultural events. For example, she said, *"I have been to the VACCA marches, and the NAIDOC march last year and I got to go to the Dreamtime [Australian Rules Football] match this year. That was pretty good"*. These are highly important experiences for her in which she feels: *"Like proud of Aboriginal people really."*

Finally, Tamara reflected on her experience of leaving care:

"It's affected my mental health a lot, and my health as well. Like I've lost a lot of weight in the last eight months, being stressed out and stuff like that... The care plans need to be started a lot earlier, which is a constant issue that comes up with young people in care".

Case Study 2: Lena

Lena, a 22 year-old Indigenous woman entered care in infancy. She initially had a succession of respite and other short-term placements with foster carers, acquaintances and relatives, returning to her mother's care intermittently. She resided with her mother permanently from the ages of six until 11 years old, before formally entering out-of-home care. It was during this period that her father died following a drug overdose. After a brief foster care placement, Lena entered residential care at 11 years old, before finding a more permanent foster care placement from the age of 13 until 15 years old. Towards the end of this placement, she wished to move from the area due to bullying at school, and entered another foster care arrangement from the ages of 15 to 17 years old. According to Lena, both of these foster carers were non-Indigenous but supportive of her culture. At the same time, she recalls that her first foster mother's attempts to access cultural support were ineffective.

Lena described mixed perceptions of her residential care placement, in which she experienced both highly positive and highly negative experiences with different caregivers. She was more positive regarding her foster care placements, for instance:

"I call her [my foster carer] 'Mum'. So she made me feel like I was her own child. You know she brought me to family functions. I got to attend my foster niece's wedding ... it felt like home... and from this day I still go over there every Monday to have like a roast dinner and all of that sort of stuff. And same with [my other foster carer]. Like [X] she made me feel like her own daughter, even though like at the period of time [X] had me I was going through a really rough, really, really rough stage. But like [X] took me [overseas] as a foster child. So that was really cool."

She attributes her own positive outcomes to the love shown to her by her foster carers:

"They never had stability, they never had love. Maybe taking love to them, making them feel like, you know, you are loved, you are cared for, then maybe they might take a different path. I mean I was, like I said I was really lucky. I had [my foster carers]. If I didn't have them, then I'd probably be end up like the rest of them."

Throughout her time in care, Lena has held almost continual casual employment, and she completed Year 11 at school. She has continued to be regularly employed since leaving care, and has completed a traineeship through an Indigenous program at her current workplace. Near the time of leaving care, Lena moved interstate to reside with her sister for a few months, and then returned to a lead tenant placement. While her agency workers created a leaving care plan with her, and supported her through the process, it was still difficult for Lena:

“...when I was at that exact point of like having to move from the care to a different place ... I had a worker come with me, meet the carers, look at the house, all of that sort of stuff. So it was really good... It was still very hard though, coming from care, going from foster care to like nothing. [It was] scary, very scary.”

Lena then entered a youth supported accommodation program at the age of 18, where she was able to reside (moving between three different properties) until she accessed public housing at the age of 21. During this period, at the age of 18, Lena had her first child who was subsequently removed from her care for just over one year. This was a difficult period for Lena. However it was at the point of child protection intervention into the life of her own child that Lena was connected to an ACCO. While she is grateful for this involvement, she laments not having experienced it earlier:

“I would have loved to have them involved as a kid. But... because now I’ve got to go through the process on my own of trying to get my proof of Aboriginality and stuff like that. So if I had [been connected to the ACCO] when I was younger... they could have done that for me... I wish as a kid I got to grow up with the community, and I got to know, like you know, got to grow up with the community and got to be a part of the Aboriginal community... I’m only just starting now. So I’ll go to like Mum’s group with other Aboriginal Mums. There’s a painting class to do like painting and just a yarn with other people. So it’s just that sort of stuff.”

When asked to reflect what difference she felt it would have made in her life to be connected to culture at a younger age, Lena responded:

“I think it would have made a big difference. I mean you would have felt like you were part of the community... and just to have people around and support. That’s what you needed. You need support. It’s all... it’s all we want is support. And to be, if I was part of that community when I was younger, and got the support I have, what I’m getting now, I would have been so much better off, you know? I would have had the things I wanted. And I would understand my culture better instead of having to wait until I’m an adult. Now I’m having to figure out where I’m from, who I am, you know, how do I act around them, that sort of stuff.”

Lena has accessed a variety of Aboriginal-specific services, primarily for her child, through which she strengthened her cultural connections. She has also recently, at 21 years of age, had a second child and was able to access post-care brokerage and support through the ACCO over the past year. She described being fearful of having her second child removed:

“I lied to them for like ages. I was like, “I’m not pregnant”. I didn’t want to tell them, because I thought they were going to take my daughter away from me as well. Because I hear stories

like, you know they take your kids, just as you have them. So I didn't want to be one of those parents to experience that. Just because of my family history, doesn't mean that you know, I'm as bad as what my parents were."

Lena still has no knowledge of her own mob and describes having no contact with culture during her time in care. Still, culture has become a much more significant part of Lena's life since leaving care. She has also been able to connect to culture through her partner's mob, her workplace's Indigenous support program, as well as other ACCO programs and services:

"... we had an Elder come in, she was talking and then I felt really like I was like, "Oh my gosh, you know, I want to start understanding better about myself and who I am" ... I'm so part of the Indigenous program at [my workplace], and I'm part of the [ACCO] here, and I'm kind of starting to really want to understand who I am. Like my son, my son goes to an Aboriginal child care centre. So it's only for Koorie kids, and he goes there, and he learns... he also learns about like traditional dancing, traditional everything, and then they also do the modern day stuff as well..."

For Lena it has been important to provide her children with the connection to culture she felt that she lacked growing up:

"I didn't grow up in the Koorie community. As a kid, yes, kind of. I was accepted into the Melbourne community. So I'm technically, I have no tribe, like I don't know where my mob is. But my mob is Melbourne. And now... my partner's Koorie, so I'm actually now as a [X] mob member as well... all I know is, it's everything. I want my kids to grow up in what I didn't have. I want them to understand their culture. I want them to understand the traditions ... Yeah, it's really important."

While there is a strong and intentional connection to culture, Lena has little to do with her own family. She continues to be supported by both her foster carers, who provide assistance with babysitting and a sense of family through Lena's weekly visits. Despite the fact that both she and her partner are working, there are financial issues with respect to rental arrears which may threaten Lena's housing. While Lena is highly positive about many aspects of her leaving care experience, and has been highly successful in negotiating her transition, she indicated that more support is necessary:

"From 18 to 21, that wasn't enough time. You know you need the support ... you've lived in foster care all your life, that's all you know. All you know is the system, and then going from the system to nothing is really hard."

Reflection on the themes arising from the care leavers' stories

The accounts of these two Indigenous care leavers reflect some of the themes raised in the focus group consultations, and they raise other interesting points. In discussing the ways in which the focus group themes are reflected in the young peoples' accounts, the findings are divided into three broad topics: Cultural connectedness, leaving care processes, and post-care outcomes.

Cultural connectedness

In terms of their out-of-home care placements, it was not possible to ascertain from the young peoples' accounts whether they had been placed in accordance with the intent of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. However both of these young women ultimately experienced disconnection from their own Indigenous communities during their time in out-of-home care. The young people did not discuss the presence of formal Cultural Support Plans, however a connection to cultural activities was present for Tamara, but not Lena, during their time in care. Even so, Tamara's experiences exemplify some of the comments made by ACCOs which describe the generic connection to Indigenous culture experienced by some Indigenous children and young people in care, as distinct from a specific connection to their own mob, tribe, and history, including unique cultural practices.

The fact that Lena continues to be unaware of her own mob illustrates some of the concerns raised in the focus group consultations regarding identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Status, cultural support planning and – importantly – actions to connect young people with their culture. It is also noteworthy that both young women were highly motivated to connect to culture, as reflected in the experiences of Tamara whilst in care, and Lena since leaving care. This indicates that - in contrast to a key focus group finding - factors aside from young peoples' willingness generate barriers to cultural connection in state care. In Lena's case, the driver appeared to be her experience of placement with non-Indigenous carers and her lack of connection with an ACCO. This exemplifies the danger of cultural disconnection potentially inherent in the placement of an Indigenous young person with non-Indigenous foster carers and agencies, a point which was raised in some of the focus group consultations. The importance of cultural competency and supportiveness of (particularly non-Indigenous) foster carers, as well as referral pathways to ACCOs for young people in such placements was evident. Though it should also be noted that her experiences may not reflect current practices, given that the young person was 22 years old at the time of interview.

In contrast to Lena's experiences of cultural disconnection whilst in care, Tamara's account indicated a more significant disconnection *since* leaving care, which she ascribed to the crisis-driven nature of her

life post-care. The young peoples' narratives appear to affirm the focus group findings which suggested that the basic material needs of housing impact young peoples' capacity to achieve growth and stability post-care in any other area, including cultural connection. Conversely, Lena's immediate access to housing post-care seemed to provide a stable base from which she was able to continue to engage with culture, education and training, despite experiences of early parenthood and Child Protection intervention into her own child's life. It is worth noting that, for both of these young women, most of the cultural connections described were experienced *externally* to their own families, primarily through employment and community services, including ACCOs.

Leaving care processes

While both young people were discharged from care at 18 years of age, they had significantly different leaving care experiences. Although it is impossible to isolate a single factor which may account for their divergent trajectories, the impacts of leaving care planning and implementation are palpable in these accounts. As indicated previously, Lena's access to stable housing seemed to enable her to attend to parenting, employment and training goals, and Tamara was quick to identify the absence of available and appropriate housing as the primary deficiency of current leaving care systems. Contrasting with her stable in care experiences, Tamara's increasing substance use and initiation of contact with the criminal justice system appeared to be associated with (though not necessarily caused by) experiences of housing instability and a diminishment of supportive adult relationships. Additionally, post-care support from ACCOs was a key part of both young peoples' lives at the time of interview, though neither of them accessed this support when they had first received post-care support services. This resonates with the comments of ACCOs in the focus groups. These comments identified that Indigenous young people may not present for leaving care services at the anticipated rates, but they tend to return to ACCOs at a later date in much greater numbers for post-care assistance.

Post-care outcomes

Akin to findings reported in the focus group consultations, both young people initially returned to family members post-care and each of these arrangements did not last in the long-term. While the causes of this breakdown was clear in Tamara's case, they were less apparent in Lena's account. Additionally, the young people's stories also reiterated the focus group theme of Indigenous care leavers having significant family responsibilities during their transition from care. For Tamara, family obligations were part and parcel of her attempts to address housing needs, while Lena's presented in the form of her own parenting

responsibilities. Both interviews highlighted that these were significant additional stressors experienced by these young people during their transition from care. Finally, outcomes relating to homelessness were also typified in the care leavers' narratives, with Tamara experiencing homelessness at the time of interview and housing stability was becoming an issue for Lena.

There were also some uncharacteristic findings in these Indigenous young people's narratives. Firstly, the outcomes relating to education and employment experience – both in care, and in the case of Lena since leaving care - were outstanding and atypical of those commonly witnessed among care leavers. Additionally, the resilience of both young women also reflects the focus group participants' comments regarding Indigenous care leavers. Both of these young people were very mature in many respects. Tamara demonstrated great resiliency with respect to managing housing breakdowns and Lena, during early parenthood, regained custody of her children and participated in employment and training post-care. These experiences are remarkable outcomes not broadly seen among care leavers. Both individual agency (that is, resilience) and access to social and professional supports (that is, social capital) can be seen to be at play in facilitating these outcomes.

Discussion

This exploratory research project has investigated Indigenous care leavers' needs and outcomes, with a view to identifying areas of policy and practice change which can lead to better outcomes. Given the significant and rising over-representation of Indigenous young people leaving state care, these research findings constitute a timely contribution to the information base which can inform policy and practice in relation to this group of young care leavers. Additionally, the study provides an opportunity to understand the impacts, benefits and limitations of various Victorian policies relating to Indigenous young people leaving care, including Cultural Support Planning and the Aboriginal Leaving Care Support Initiative. Since their introduction, there has been little in the way of evaluation regarding how these policies operate in practice, particularly for older Indigenous adolescents leaving care.

The initial phase of this study involved exploratory consultations with staff of mainstream and Indigenous child and family welfare agencies to understand the relationships between these agencies, the nature of services delivered to Indigenous care leavers, as well as the experiences and needs of Indigenous young people transitioning from care. Later consultations with Indigenous care leavers were able to demonstrate consistency with many of these themes. The study uncovered a number of findings, some of which were

consistent with the previous relevant literature and others which enhance previous understandings in this area.

In terms of systemic issues, the focus group findings point to a degree of inconsistency in the relationships between mainstream and Indigenous services delivering services to Indigenous care leavers. While rapport between individuals and agencies appeared strong in some cases, other consultations revealed limited connection between services in terms of trust, understanding of roles and services provided by other agencies, and collaborative practice. Effective relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous child welfare agencies form a critical component of the overall systems aiming to support Indigenous young people in care, as identified in previous Victorian literature ([Bamblett & Lewis, 2007](#); Halcrow, 2014). This is equally true of current Victorian leaving care policy pertaining to Indigenous care leavers (e.g. the Aboriginal Leaving Care Support Initiative), which largely relies on collaborative relationships between these services for the delivery of culturally-appropriate support to this group of young people. There is therefore a primary need for ongoing attention to the relationship between services. Akin to prior reports, the respondents suggested that attention to these relationships at the strategic level, cultural training for staff of mainstream agencies and improved resourcing of ACCOs were helpful approaches to enhance agencies' capacity to work collaboratively with Indigenous care leavers. ([Bamblett & Lewis, 2007](#); Halcrow, 2014; Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Community Service Organisations, 2013).

The systemic concerns raised in this study regarding the identification and recording of Indigenous status for children in out-of-home care were previously described in the ACCO submission to the Department of Human Services' Five Year Plan for Out-of-Home Care (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Community Service Organisations, 2013). In this submission, as in the current study, the authors usefully suggest that child and family welfare services could look to systems adopted within health services to develop strategies for improving identification of Indigenous status. At the same time, the implications of being Indigenous within health services may be different to those within child welfare services. For example, there may be a potentially greater fear of discrimination within child and family welfare services, thus leading to either greater hesitancy on behalf of workers or families to identify Indigenous status. The failure or reticence to identify Indigenous status (either by staff or service users) in child welfare systems, including identification of potential drivers and consequences of not identifying Indigenous status, may be a useful area for future research. Additionally, an Australian Research Council

funded study is currently ongoing regarding the gap in Indigenous birth registrations⁴, which was identified as an issue in leaving care planning particularly in non-metropolitan areas.

Connection to culture

The findings illuminated a number of barriers to Indigenous care leavers' establishment or maintenance of cultural connection. Difficulties completing CSPs were primarily attributed to the under-resourcing of ACCOs, as described in other reports (see for example the joint submission from Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Community Service Organisations to the five year plan for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care (2013)). While previous studies have identified the lack of CSPs as an issue for cultural connectedness of Indigenous young people in care, the current consultations were able to illuminate some of the practical challenges to completing and actioning these plans. This has provided a greater understanding of why the resources required for effective cultural support planning may be greater than anticipated.

The study was also able to highlight additional barriers to completing CSPs. These included uncertainty regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, a lack of referrals for Cultural Support Planning, difficulty accessing information from family (for a variety of reasons), and barriers to completing and actioning CSPs for young people living far away from their traditional family and community. Other hindrances to cultural connection included Indigenous and non-Indigenous family and young people themselves being reticent to engage with culture and community, again for a variety of reasons. Some of these issues are also described in previous reports which identify that some Indigenous young people may struggle to acknowledge their cultural identity (Higgins et al., 2005; Jackson, Waters, Meehan, Hunter, & Corlett, 2013; SNAICC, 2008). SNAICC (2008, p. 16) have published advice for non-Indigenous foster carers of Indigenous children in such a position, which suggests that:

"While carers cannot force a child to acknowledge his or her Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture, if carers demonstrate a positive attitude towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, peoples and role models, the child may become more accepting and appreciative of their own Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage".

Similarly, non-Indigenous workers' and agencies' knowledge and attitudes towards Indigenous culture could be influential in promoting young peoples' exploration of their own cultural identity and connection.

⁴ See <http://www.onemda.unimelb.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/Birth%20registrations.pdf>.

Presumably, such attitudes and knowledge can be supported through active partnerships with Indigenous workers and agencies, as well as ongoing cultural education through these relationships, and agency training and support. Interestingly, these issues were not described by staff at ACCOs. It is unclear whether these differences reflected variations in the young people being seen at Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies, or whether Indigenous young people are more open to engaging with culture when approached by someone of their own cultural background.

Interestingly, the young peoples' stories demonstrated how connection to culture did not necessarily equate to connection with their own biological family, but rather an embodiment of their Indigenous identity in contexts which were culturally meaningful to them. Furthermore, the need for cultural support, and perhaps more importantly *the value of positive cultural connectedness* in supporting young people during their time in care, and throughout the transition from care were evidenced in the young peoples' accounts. This accords with other reports describing both the importance of culture in identity development, as well as the impact of cultural connectedness on young peoples' resilience, both due to identity factors as well as mediating access to social and other supports (Bamblett, Ferederico, Harrison, Jackson, & Lewis, 2012; deVries, 1996).

Leaving care and post-care planning and support

Throughout the focus group consultations, it was interesting to note that some respondents from mainstream agencies did not articulate any differences in service delivery approach or the experiences and needs of Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers. Many expressed the view that the most profound difficulties inherent in leaving care and post-care systems (for example limited services and housing options, and the voluntary nature of services) equally applied to all care leavers, regardless of their cultural background. Furthermore, considerations of cultural identity and connectedness were not seen as the priority in transitioning from care, where other issues (particularly access to affordable housing) appear to dominate. It is unclear whether such findings are reflective of there being few differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous care leavers, or whether such impressions are due to staff having limited experience with Indigenous care leavers.

These findings were, however, borne out in the experiences of the two care leavers who participated in the study. In many ways the experiences of these young people were similar to those depicted in generic studies of care leavers both in Australia and elsewhere, with safe and affordable housing and intensive post-care support seemingly contributing substantially to the trajectories of the two young women interviewed ([Mendes et al., 2011](#)).

In contrast to the perspective espousing generic leaving care difficulties equally applicable to young people, other focus group respondents saw the broader out-of-home care system as being inherently inappropriate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This was primarily owing to its operation from a largely Western individualistic paradigm. Such observations reflect findings of previous Australian and international reports which draw attention to this cultural dissonance (See, for example Bennett, 2015; Halcrow, 2014; [Higgins et al., 2005](#)). Notably, Carrière and Richardson (2009) describe cultural connectedness and cultural identity as more appropriate than attachment theory for guiding practice with Indigenous young people in care. The focus group respondents' insights enhanced this understanding by providing examples of how conflicts between Indigenous understandings and non-Indigenous leaving care systems manifest in the leaving care and post-care periods. For example, current systems tend to consider housing and income as belonging to an individual, while some Indigenous cultural understandings may view these as being resources shared by a family.

Echoing previous suggestions from Indigenous peak bodies (SNAICC, 2011), earlier leaving care planning (e.g. commencing from age 14) and lowering the age-threshold for leaving care eligibility were also identified as potentially useful strategies given anecdotal reports of Indigenous young people leaving care at a young age. This finding was supported by the voices of the young people who were involved in the study. At the same time, such anecdotal data would be better supported with comprehensive data investigating the age of leaving care for Indigenous young people as well as their access to post-care supports. Future research could ascertain whether the data supports the suggestion that Indigenous young people may miss out on leaving care supports for various reasons, but may be accessing (or attempting to access) post-care supports at higher rates.

The potential utility of family work for Indigenous young people transitioning from care has also been raised in previous studies ([Higgins et al., 2005](#)). These two points are further emphasised by another of the key findings of the study. While previous leaving care research has emphasised that many care leavers can call on little, if any, support from family, and some may have children of their own, this study has presented findings from both professional stakeholders and young people that Indigenous care leavers in fact may have substantial caring and helping roles within their extended families post-care. Indigenous care leavers' cultural obligations or expectations regarding sharing and pooling of finances and other material resources, caring or providing for siblings and elders, and travelling to visit community and family, including attendance at funerals were all discussed in the focus group consultations. Yet the systems aiming to support care leavers are broadly targeted towards supporting the individual, rather than seeing care leavers within a broader family context.

Finally, the findings relating to youth justice system involvement among Indigenous care leavers are supported by previous research which indicates that Indigenous young people involved with youth justice were more likely to have had child protection involvement or a state care background than non-Indigenous young people involved in youth justice (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). Analysis of data from the 1990-91 Victorian birth cohort has shown that 62% of Indigenous young males who had a child protection notification also experienced youth justice supervision by the age of 18, as did 17% of Indigenous young females (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). This compares to 14% and 5% of non-Indigenous males and females, respectively (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). This trend has continued, with recent Australian data indicating that Indigenous young people in out-of-home care are more likely to experience youth justice involvement compared to non-Indigenous young people in care. Specifically, 11% of Indigenous males (aged 10-17) in out-of-home care were also under youth justice supervision in 2013-14, compared with 8% of non-Indigenous males, 7% of Indigenous females, and 3% of non-Indigenous females (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). Some of the recommendations of a previous Victorian study focusing on care leavers dually involved with youth justice and child protection are also applicable to the current study, including a focus on trauma-informed and family-based therapeutic approaches to practice (Mendes, Baidawi, & Snow, 2014).

In the area of leaving care and post-care support, respondents from both mainstream services and ACCOs suggested that the main shortcoming of current systems supporting Indigenous care leavers was the under-resourcing of ACCOs, limiting the capacity for direct service delivery and secondary consultation (for example, involvement of ACCOs in care team meetings). While participants were unanimous in their declaration of the need for, and value of cultural support and connectedness, a subtle though noteworthy divergence in belief systems emerged. The majority of participants from non-Indigenous organisations appeared to espouse the view that cultural connectedness and support is *one of many hierarchical needs* of Indigenous care leavers, but not necessarily the primary need. Conversely, the alternative position described by many ACCO workers and some non-Indigenous staff from mainstream agencies is that cultural connectedness is *a primary and fundamental need* of Indigenous care leavers, through which their other needs may be fulfilled.

This discord is elegantly discussed by Native American child welfare expert Terry Cross (2007) who reinterprets Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) (Figure 1) through an Indigenous lens (Figure 2). Interestingly Maslow's work was apparently informed by time spent with the Blackfoot Indians of Canada (Blackstock, 2011), though these understandings were interpreted through his own male Eurocentric lens (Cross, 2007).

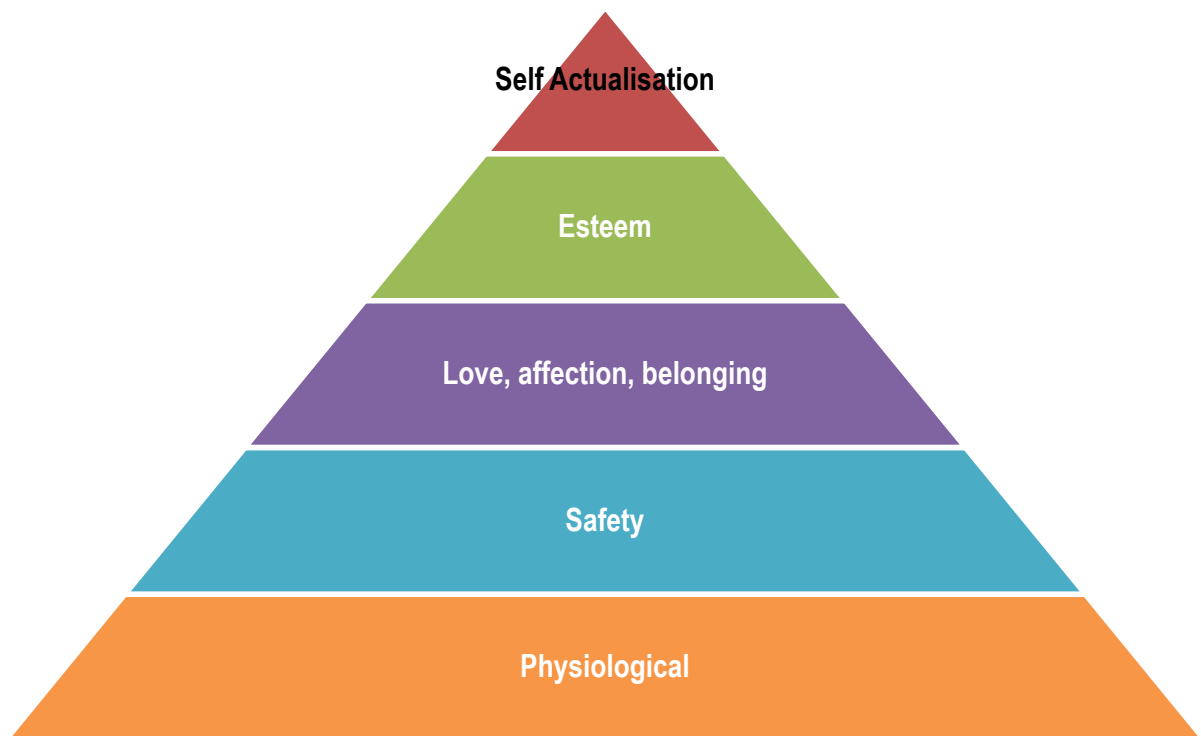


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)

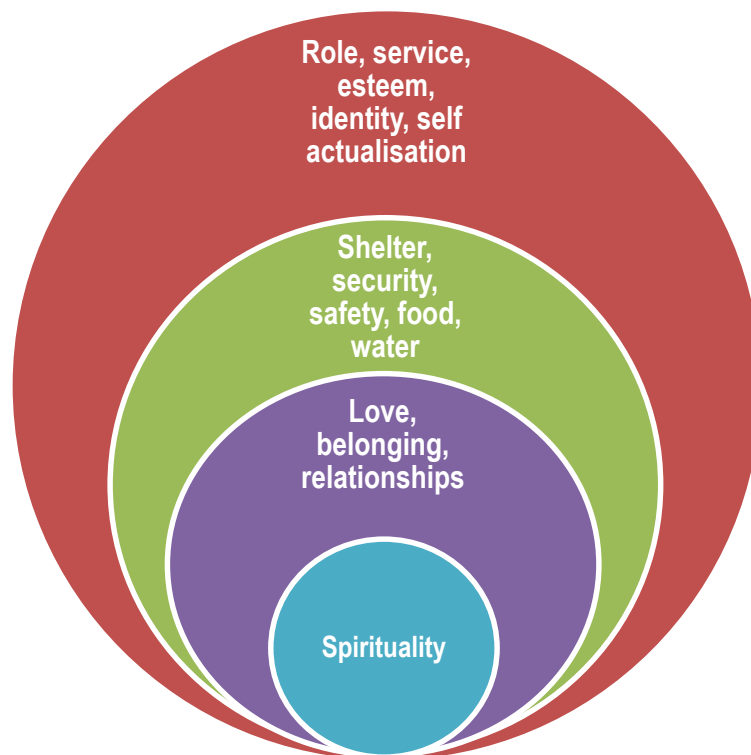


Figure 2. Maslow: Through Indigenous eyes (Cross, 2007)

In contrast to the hierarchical structure, beginning with physiological needs, described by Maslow, Cross (2007, p. 43) describes a more holistic approach which considers physical, physiological and other needs to be met *through* spirituality and relationship rather than independently of these; he states:

When I grew up I was taught that if I maintained a proper relationship with the Creator, I would eat. So that came first. I was also taught that if I maintained a proper relationship with my family I would eat. So that came first as well. Then come food and water, shelter, all of those things that emanate out of my proper relationships. Safety and security come out of my proper relationships, out of my spirituality. Self-actualisation comes from role and service, giving back to the community, and that's where my esteem and my identity come from; from my relationships, from my service.

This difference is perhaps a point of distinction between Indigenous and many non-Indigenous conceptions of leaving care and post-care support. Yet the experiences of the young people in the study seemed to illustrate that both approaches are helpful to supporting Indigenous care leavers, and need not be conceptualised as incompatible.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations, which should be acknowledged. The focus group respondents were drawn from a non-representative sample, and were primarily from non-Indigenous child and family welfare services. Unfortunately, there was limited representation of ACCOs in the data collection to date. To this end, the study has not been able to address one of its primary aims, which was to document the leaving care and post-care services delivered by ACCOs. Finally, jurisdictional differences in policy, practice and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures mean that findings cannot be generalised to other states and territories, though they could present a useful basis for comparative studies.

While the interviews with Indigenous care leavers were likewise useful in illustrating the themes raised in focus group consultations, these data were also not without limitations. First, we were able to speak with only two young care leavers, both of whom were female and had similar care experiences - namely that they resided in foster care placements with non-Indigenous care givers. It is fair to say that the breadth of Indigenous leaving care experiences cannot be represented in these young women's stories. For example, their accounts are unable to illuminate the experiences of young Indigenous people who return home prior to leaving care eligibility, who are male, who are currently in Youth Justice custody, or who are absent from care placements or otherwise do not engage with leaving care or post-care services.

At the same time, many of the experiences described were similar to those detailed in the previous literature concerning care leavers as detailed in various Victorian-based studies (Baidawi, Mendes, & Snow, 2014; Meade & Mendes, 2014; Mendes & Snow, 2014). Our findings build on the study by Crane et al. (2014) concerning care leavers in Queensland, which is one of the few Australian studies to explicitly report on the experiences of Indigenous care leavers.

Implications

Findings of this study raise implications for policy, practice and future research. Some of these implications focus on the concept of reconciliation. Perhaps the most commonly understood definition of reconciliation focuses on something akin to ‘a friendly restoration of relations’. Various activities such as issuing of public apologies by governments and individual mainstream organisations to Indigenous communities are targeted to this end, and may certainly be valuable. On another level, the word reconciliation derives from the word ‘reconcile’, meaning to make one belief or view compatible with another.

The findings from focus group consultations suggest a need for ongoing reconciliation, or attention to the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous child and family welfare services and systems. More importantly they raise questions about if and how leaving care and post-care services and programs could be modified to better suit the needs of Indigenous care leavers, particularly in being able to better promote connectedness and belonging to community and culture. It is beyond the scope of this report to dictate precisely how this should be achieved, beyond reiterating the suggestion of the majority of participants that more effective responses are likely to be achieved by better resourced ACCOs leading service design and delivery for Indigenous care leavers. As part of this, strengthening resources allocated towards and the emphasis placed upon connection to culture, family and community is a likely component of a more effective approach towards supporting Indigenous care leavers. Future research could examine the longitudinal trajectories of a large group of Indigenous care leavers from 16-21 years of age. It would be beneficial for such a study to examine the experiences of young Indigenous people who have experienced a range of out-of-home care backgrounds (e.g. foster, kinship and residential care) and various post-care outcomes.

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