Structural Disadvantages and Individual Characteristics Exacerbating Care Leavers' Housing Vulnerabilities: Overview of Research in Norway and Australia

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Abstract

Nordic and international research recognises the vulnerabilities and often poor outcomes for care leavers. However, their interrelationship with housing or homelessness as a specific outcome of concern is not well established in Norwegian or Nordic research. Conversely, housing for care leavers has been on the political agenda in Australia for several decades, with an increasing body of research highlighting both structural challenges related to, for example housing affordability and income security, as well as individual vulnerabilities related to individual agency, independent living skills, and supports. In this article we provide an overview of Norwegian and Australian studies to highlight the emerging research in this area and applicability to the Nordic context. Collectively, care leavers are less likely to be able to draw on their biological families for housing or financial support. This lack of a safety net constitutes an innate vulnerability. While support structures, including aftercare support for care leavers, may mitigate some of these vulnerabilities, it is also important to recognise and redress individual challenges related to independent living skills and personal agency. We argue for a more targeted support structure for care leavers, with housing and independent living skills as outcomes of explicit concern.

Keywords
care leavers, homelessness, housing vulnerability, transition to independent living

Introduction

Having a safe home creates a sense of security and accomplishment, which is an important foundation for personal growth, development, and participation in society. Housing may also impact other aspects of life such as health, education, social connections, and employment, as secure housing is a foundation to pursue other undertakings while insecure housing or homelessness may render such undertakings futile (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Johnson et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2019; Wade & Dixon, 2006). Being concerned about having a place to live or other financial commitments can create substantial insecurity for young people with child welfare experiences, and such concerns can hinder development and

planning for the future (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Care leavers – young people who have left out-of-home state care sanctioned by child welfare services (CWS) – experience multiple challenges in their transition to independence and adulthood (Martin et al., 2021; Mendes & Snow, 2016; Paulsen et al., 2022; Paulsen et al., 2020). Nordic and international research has consistently identified low educational attainment (Paulsen et al., 2022; Refaeli & Strahl, 2014; Zinn & Courtney, 2017), high unemployment (Paulsen et al., 2020; Zinn & Courtney, 2017), low income (Berg et al., 2017; Zinn & Courtney, 2017), high dependency on welfare or social security payments (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021; Paulsen et al., 2022), and poor mental and physical health (Kayed et al., 2015; Lehmann et al., 2013) among care leavers. Within this context, it is not surprising that people who have been in out-of-home care also experience housing vulnerabilities and homelessness (Bender et al., 2015; Wade & Dixon, 2006).

While there are different economic, social, and structural challenges and support mechanisms for care leavers in Norway and Australia, many of the vulnerabilities are common. These are not necessarily limited to a transition period to adulthood, but may be residual over the lifespan. This overview of research aims to unpack the different use of statistics in Norway and Australia which has important implications for both housing and care-leavers policy and practice. Drawing on our own research experience, we aim to problematise the approach, or lack of emphasis, on sustainable housing pathways for Norwegian CWS recipients.

Despite housing being identified as a challenge for care leavers in Norway (Paulsen et al., 2020), the link to homelessness is not well established. Nevertheless, the regular mapping of homelessness in Norway explicitly refers to care leavers as an equity group (Dyp & Zeiner, 2021). Furthermore, homelessness among persons with care experience has been identified as a major concern in Australia, adding to the utility of this overview across these two jurisdictions. The National Inquiry into Homeless Children in Australia (Burdekin, 1989) identified a disproportionately high frequency of persons with out-of-home care experience among the homeless population more than three decades ago. This high-profile inquiry has been instrumental in subsequent research in the following decades focusing on housing outcomes and homelessness among care leavers in Australia (cf. Johnson et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2021; Muir & Hand, 2018). It should also be noted that research has identified housing vulnerability among care leavers in several other jurisdictions, including in the UK (Wade & Dixon, 2006) and the USA (Bender et al., 2015; Tam et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, Norwegian and international researchers have identified research gaps related to housing for care leavers and emphasise the need to prioritise this area of research in the future (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Marion & Paulsen, 2019; Paulsen et al., 2020; Tam et al., 2016). A systematic review by Kääriälä and Hiilamo (2017) covering the Nordic countries did not identify any studies that included housing as an outcome variable for care leavers, suggesting that knowledge on housing and homelessness for this group in the Nordic countries is scarce. A recent international scoping review concerning housing for care leavers (Chavulak & Mendes, 2021) identified only one Nordic study, a qualitative follow-up interview study with nine care leavers in Denmark (Bengtsson & Mølholt, 2018). The international scoping review supplemented an Australian scoping review (Turnbull et al., 2021). The Australian scoping review identified 18 relevant Australian reports while the international scoping review identified 15 relevant studies, underscoring the emphasis on housing and homelessness in out-of-home care research in Australia.

Methods

In this article we aim to provide an overview of the research in the area of housing and homelessness for care leavers in Norway and Australia. As such, this is not an empirical study, but may be considered a form of review article. Grant and Booth (2009) presented a typology of reviews in which they identified 14 different review types. We have chosen to characterise this paper as an *overview*, which Grant and Booth (2009:94) describe as a 'summary of the literature that attempts to survey the literature and describe its characteristics'. Furthermore, overviews are 'typically narrative' with varied analytical approaches, including chronological, conceptual and thematic.

This overview presents a thematic summary of research related to housing and homelessness for care leavers in Norway and Australia. As it is not a systematic overview, no systematic searches or quality assessments were carried out (Grant & Booth, 2009). Rather, studies were identified through a number of strategies, including academic database searches and hand searches (e.g. ancestry techniques reviewing the reference lists of relevant publications) using search terms such as 'housing', 'homelessness', 'care-leavers', 'out-of-home [state] care', 'foster care', 'residential care', 'Norway', and 'Australia'. Our own research publications, as those of co-authors of these publications, were natural starting points for the overview.

Conceptualising homelessness

There are different approaches for defining or conceptualising housing and homelessness. If it is considered a continuum, with housed and homeless at either end, there is arguably a grey area in the middle. Others have argued that housing and homeless are culturally determined concepts, as cultural, social, climatic, and other local contexts are important points of reference. It should therefore not be surprising that there is no standard definition of homeless or housing internationally (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2008). In Norway, a periodic mapping of homelessness has been carried out since 1996. The latest mapping exercise was carried out in autumn 2020. All seven completed mapping studies have defined a homeless person in accordance with the following definition:

> A person is considered homeless if he/she has no privately owned or rented accommodation and is reliant on occasional or temporary lodging, lives temporarily with friends, acquaintances or relatives, lives in an institution or in a correctional facility and is due to be released within two months without access to accommodation, or who sleeps rough/has no place to sleep. Persons who live permanently with next of kin or in sublet accommodation are not considered homeless (Dyp & Zeiner, 2021:12).

The operational definition of homelessness in Norway includes persons who are sleeping rough, people couch-surfing, as well as persons in temporary accommodation and some persons in institutional care. However, the definition does not entail any minimum standards, such as legal leases or subleases; avoidance of overcrowding; a minimum level of privacy; access to cooking facilities, lavatories, or shower facilities; nor that it has to meet the legal housing regulation standards such as minimum ceiling height and emergency escape routes. It is likely that the proportion of homeless or marginally housed persons in Norway would increase substantially if these considerations were included. The latest periodic Norwegian mapping of homelessness only identified a few dozen persons who exited CWS in the preceding six months as homeless in the latest mapping study, which remained stable across the last three mapping studies in the time series (Dyp & Zeiner, 2021:46). However,

persons with CWS experience may be 'hidden' in other categories, including persons exiting institutions and/or treatment, victims of violence or discrimination, persons evicted including for economic or antisocial reasons, as well as persons experiencing relationship breakdown.

In Australia, homelessness is conceptualised more broadly, and a person is defined as homeless in the periodic estimates of homelessness by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018) "if they do not have suitable accommodation alternatives and their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate;
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations"

It is crucial that future mapping studies that attempt to identify the scope of homelessness and housing insecurity among care leavers or persons with CWS experiences in Norway adopt a more nuanced approach, aligned to the Australia approach. This can contribute to improved policies and practices to mitigate care leaver's vulnerabilities in the housing market.

Statistics

According to Statistics Norway (2022a), 9.8 per cent of persons in Norway, or 6.4 per cent of households, live in cramped conditions. The periodic mapping of homelessness in Norway only identified 3,325 homeless persons, a rate of 0.62 per 1000 persons (Dyp & Zeiner, 2021). It is carried out across a single week with government respondents across the human services responsible for social welfare services, housing, drug and alcohol, and mental health services. While it is considered as one of the better methodologies and approaches in Europe (Dyp & Zeiner, 2021), it relies on government service providers as respondents and may therefore miss 'invisible' homeless persons, such as those who couch-surf.

Other jurisdictions, such as Australia, derive homelessness rates from national censuses, with the latest census in 2016 identifying a homelessness rate on census night of 4.98 per 1,000 persons (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). It is unlikely that the methodology of homelessness mapping in Norway will change, particularly as since 2001 housing information in the Norwegian census has only relied on registry data rather than survey responses (Statistics Norway, 2013). However, it would be beneficial to include history of CWS support in the registration forms used for collecting sociodemographic characteristics of the Norwegian homelessness population. Care leavers may also require specific housing assistance as part of their transitional support. This may include how to access emergency housing, as there may be substantial variation across municipalities noting that after office hours, hospital emergency rooms and police duty stations have statutory responsibilities to assist with accessing temporary shelter in Norway. However, we also note that care leavers in Norway fare better than care leavers in other jurisdictions based on traditional indicators such as education, employment, income, and social security benefits (Backe-Hansen et al., 2014; Berg et al., 2017; Paulsen et al., 2022; Paulsen et al., 2020).

Child welfare services

In Norway, CWS may be provided as in-home support or out-of-home care. Out-of-home care is only considered if in-home measures are insufficient to provide a safe environment

and may be voluntary or mandated. Services provided to persons aged 17 years or younger are referred to as in-home services if they do not involve removing the child from biological parent/s or out-of-home care when the child is removed. Approximately four out of five CWS measures in Norway are support measures and, conversely, approximately one-in-five are being placed in out-of-home care (Statistics Norway, 2022b). Services provided to young adults aged 18 years or older are by default considered aftercare services, which may include both in-home services and out-of-home placements. Aftercare can be provided until the persons turns 25 years of age (extended from until 23 years of age, as was the case until 1 January 2021) (Paulsen et al., 2022).

While CWS in Norway have been characterised as a 'family-centred approach', the Australian system is often viewed as having a 'child protection' emphasis (Kojan & Lonne, 2012). Following suspicion or reports of child abuse, neglect, or maltreatment, CWS carry out investigations, and if substantiated, place the child or young person into out-of-home care. Individual States and Territories are responsible for child protection legislation and support, with some differences across jurisdictions. This includes newly introduced extended care policies or pilot projects in all but three jurisdictions (Mendes, 2022). Pertinent policies to the context of this article includes the White Paper on Homelessness, which explicitly aimed to half homelessness by 2020 and end exits into homelessness from institutions such as hospitals and prisons (Homelessness Taskforce, 2008).

Financial and emotional housing support

The transition to adulthood encompasses moving from the family home and establishing independent lives and households. Most young adults are supported by their parents in their transition to adulthood, and often depend on financial support. Among Norwegians in their twenties who purchases a home, half rely on parental support (Revold et al., 2018). Family and friends who provide emotional support are crucial in transitioning to adulthood (Barry, 2010), particularly for persons from vulnerable groups (Collins et al., 2010). However, one of the most fundamental challenges for care leavers is their limited social networks that can provide such emotional support and safety net in times of adversity (Blakeslee, 2012; Goodkind et al., 2011; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010).

While Langford et al. (1997, in Curry & Abrams, 2015) identified both emotional support and instrumental support, which includes financial support, as components of social support, we have decided to differentiate between these concepts. Participants articulated the need for both financial and emotional support in the transition to independence in the study by Paulsen and Berg (2016). Participants who appeared to manage well, particularly with regards to housing, wanted more emotional support. It was conveyed that it was assumed they had more social capital in their networks than what was the actual case, and transitional support was often limited to financial support. The need for greater emotional support was exemplified by a young woman in her early twenties. While she was initially referred to and supported by a mental health service through CWS, once this came to an end, she was left with very little support (Paulsen & Berg, 2016). Paulsen et al. (2020) also identified challenges with regards to emotional support. Concerns were raised by both case workers and care leavers for persons with high or complex needs. After care typically emphasises financial support, particularly rent subsidises, but individual follow-up and emotional support are often lacking. Emotional support is both a protective factor, creating resilience and enhancing wellbeing, as well as reactive, mitigating the impact of adversities.

Abuse and homelessness

Thoresen and Liddiard (2011) looked at the overlap between abuse and homelessness among care leavers in Australia. Just under half of the participants (38 of 77) volunteered information related to experiences of abuse – that is, the researchers did not question the participants of experiences of abuse, but it was disclosed by the participants during the interviews. In-care abuse was cited more often than pre-care or post-care (although a large proportion reported experiences of abuse at multiple stages). About one-quarter of the informants were primary homeless when interviewed (sleeping rough or living in improvised dwellings) and about two-thirds had at some time been primary homeless. When broadening the definition of homelessness to include couch-surfing and residing in temporary accommodation, 95 per cent of participants had at some point in time been homeless. Many participants who overcame challenges cited the support of an advocate as a determining factor. This could be a case worker or other person in a professional role, a close friend or family member, an intimate partner, and others in the person's network, including previous carers or foster parents.

While the substantial proportion of homeless participants in Thoresen and Liddiard (2011) is associated with the methodology, as participants were recruited through specialist service providers, including housing and homelessness services for youth and young adults, there are high comorbidities between out-of-home care and homelessness in Australia. Martin et al. (2021) utilised linked administrative data for the State of Victoria and identified that among all persons who left care at ages 15–18 in 2013 or 2014; 42 per cent had been identified as homeless in administrative records during the first four years after leaving care. Records were for example created when accessing government or non-governmental services, such as hospital or emergency room presentations, application for community services, and housing support. Fifty-four per cent of care leavers were recorded as either homeless or at risk of homelessness in these records.

We fully acknowledge that the Norwegian and Australian outcomes are markedly different, and they reflect both child and social welfare service differences across these two jurisdictions. Our assertion is that while research and administrative records in Norway do not identify care leavers within the homeless population, they are nevertheless innately vulnerable. This vulnerability is grounded in limited economic prospects and limited social networks.

Support measures

Support measures for care leavers in Norway (aged 18–25) are by definition considered aftercare. Paulsen et al. (2020) included an account of all 8,345 aftercare measures provided to 4,144 persons in 2014. This is presented in Table 1, sorted from the most to least frequent measure. Directly housing related measures are highlighted in *italics*. Almost half of the aftercare measures reported (47 per cent) were housing related, and 'Housing with support, including group homes' was the most common aftercare measure (37 per cent). However, interviews with the professionals indicated that multiple measures may have been grouped into this category. Partly, this may have been the result of CWS regulations, which cannot provide financial housing assistance that does not include support. The level of support may therefore have ranged from a sporadic compliance-style check-in to close follow-up multiple times per week.

Table 1: Aftercare measures[a] in 2014

Aftercare measure	Frequency[b]	Per cent[b]
Housing with support, including group homes	*1,540*	*37.2*
General financial support	1,337	32.3
Specific measure to support the youth's development	987	23.8
Foster care (not family or others with an existing relationship)	*788*	*19.0*
Financial support, own housing (e.g. rent or utilities)	*630*	*15.2*
Other specific housing measures	*496*	*12.0*
Mandated counselling and guidance	389	9.4
Leisure activities	332	8.0
Foster care (in family or others with an existing relationship)	*281*	*6.8*
Participation in management/collaboration team	228	5.5
Mentoring	226	5.5
Residential care	*216*	*5.2*
Respite care	197	4.8
Education and employment (follow-up and support to enhance attachment to school or workplace)	172	4.2
Home visit/carer	104	2.5
Other measures	422	10.2

Notes: [a]Aftercare measures as recorded in the child welfare services registry, authors' translation and simplification.
[b]Persons may have received multiple aftercare measures.

It is also interesting to note that Table 1 includes several aftercare housing measures that are identical to in-care measures, such as institutional and foster care. This is not surprising, however, as aftercare is per definition any measure provided after turning 18 years of age, and any in-care measures may be extended as part of aftercare. In other jurisdictions, however, this may be referred to as extended care rather than aftercare.

Martin et al. (2021) outlined the challenges in supporting care leavers transitioning to independence in Australia. This included high turnover of staff and young people continually having to repeat their stories. While it is unlikely that these challenges will disappear with the current phasing-in and trials of extended care in Australia, Martin et al. (2021) proposed strategies to ensure affordable housing for care leavers and provide transitional support. Commencing transitional planning, including contingency plans, was emphasised together with facilitating meaningful participation and post-care support. Earlier research which proposed a set of minimum standards for care leavers, including capping housing costs at 25 per cent of the young persons' income, was also reiterated (Johnson et al., 2010). Chavulak and Mendes (2021) identified three overarching themes to improve housing transitions for care leavers based on a scoping review: extended care, supported planning, and access to government housing.

Implications for policy and practice

Despite well-developed statistical registries in Norway that allow for the linking of personal records and family records across datasets, data on homelessness is poor. While the regular mapping studies aim at capturing the number of homeless persons at a given point in time, this is not linked with the population registry. Therefore, particularly given the housing vulnerabilities of specific sub-groups such as care leavers, it would be useful to capture housing and homelessness in administrative datasets, such as social welfare and health records, when persons access services.

However, it is also important to recognise that housing is more than simply shelter, and having one's own home entails a range of freedoms and responsibilities that go beyond having a place to reside. The importance of having a home, rather than just shelter, has been emphasised for persons with disabilities, who are also at risk of exclusion and institutionalisation. Research has outlined how good homes can create a foundation for further personal, social, and economic participation and growth, even for persons with high support needs (Cocks et al., 2016; Cocks et al., 2014).

Having a home is essential for personal wellbeing and may be a prerequisite for further personal growth and development. Having a home which is homely, which 'feels like a home', can foster a sense of security. CWS should therefore support care leavers in obtaining housing and also creating good homes. While we have not accounted for what constitutes good homes in this article, it is commonly understood that there is a wide range of individual or personal preferences. However, it also entails a range of both freedoms and responsibilities. CWS should therefore also support care leavers in maintaining their responsibilities by facilitating independent living skills development, but also enjoying their freedoms (within reason).

The recent scoping reviews (Chavulak & Mendes, 2021; Turnbull et al., 2021) differentiated between structural challenges or facilitators (e.g. housing market), support structures (e.g. transitional support, aftercare, and other service providers), and characteristics related to the individual care leaver (e.g. transitional planning and independent living skills). We believe a similar approach, or three-part strategy, would be useful to enhance outcomes and reduce housing vulnerabilities for Norwegian care leavers. However, it will be important to integrate and work across these domains, addressing a totality rather than individual or fragmented service responsibilities. This is even more pertinent for persons with more complex needs or vulnerabilities, particularly persons with experiences from residential care.

As Table 1 indicated, about forty per cent of aftercare recipients receive either housing with support, including group homes (37.2%) or residential care (5.2%). However, only a small proportion of CWS recipients access aftercare. While it is unlikely that all CWS recipients will access aftercare, it is important that housing vulnerabilities and aspirations become part of both transition planning and aftercare support. While CWS is not able to change the housing market, it may be possible to provide support to access more affordable and secure housing through public rental schemes or publicly supported home purchasing schemes. Transition planning should map care leavers housing ambitions and provide both skills-development support for independence as well as facilitate access to public housing schemes. It is important that this is a holistic plan that accounts for the intersectionality of housing, education, employment, emotional wellbeing, and independent living skills, to name a few. It would also be beneficial to automatically grant eligibility to care leavers access to the publicly supported home purchase schemes (currently framed around low-income and family households unable to access commercial loans). Policies and practices

that facilitate successful transitions to adulthood for care leavers need to include long-term and sustainable housing considerations in leaving-care plans and aftercare supports.

CWS, leaving-care services, and aftercare services need to incorporate a targeted and systematic approach to housing supports. This may include a dedicated component in leaving-care planning templates and leaving-care plans specifying housing needs, housing supports, and contingency plans. Furthermore, given the pivotal role of housing, verification of suitable housing should be part of the core indicators CWS case workers and other support agencies query throughout the transitional and aftercare support periods when in direct contact with care leavers. Resources and strategies should be developed and shared locally as there are likely to be variations in what are suitable strategies. A strategy utilised in certain areas of Australia is for support services to enter into strategic partnerships with real estate agencies to source housing for care leavers in the private rental market. It is crucial that stakeholders are continuously vigilant with regards to the housing vulnerabilities among care leavers, and disseminate successful strategies to mitigate and improve housing outcomes for this vulnerable group.

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