Healing Trauma and Loss and Increasing Social Connections: Transitions from Care and Early Parenting

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Abstract

International literature suggests that many young people transitioning from government care become parents before age 21, characteristically termed 'early parenting', at least in the English-speaking world. Yet there is only limited knowledge of the factors that lead to this challenging responsibility. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study of service providers' experiences working with young people transitioning from care who had become parents, in the state of Victoria, Australia. Victorian service providers recommended ways that current out-of-home care, transition from care and parenting services could be improved to reduce feelings of loss, including new service approaches that prioritise relationship-based practice, holistic support and practical assistance from a trusted person or service. Preventing feelings of loss and isolation and increasing supportive relationships in care and throughout transitions from care may help to prevent early pregnancy and parenting amongst care leavers who otherwise lack resources for parenting independently. Providing parenting support which addresses feelings of loss and social isolation may reduce the increasing numbers of children being placed in care, and associated ongoing cycles of child protection involvement with disadvantaged families.

International evidence clearly demonstrates a high prevalence of early parenting amongst young people with an out-of-home care or foster care experience (Courtney et al., 2018; Vinnerljung et al., 2007), yet little is known about these young people's motivations to have children early. There are significant indications that many young people are intentionally becoming pregnant to start their own families (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). This paper presents partial results from an exploratory study exploring the key factors influencing transitioning youths (hereon referred to as 'care leavers') early pregnancy and parenting. Boss (2010) ambiguous loss theory is introduced to consider the significance of out-of-home care-related relationship disruptions in care experienced young peoples' transitions to adulthood and any implications for decisions about early parenting. This paper explores service providers' perspectives on what motivates young people in their teens and early 20 s with a

care experience to have children at rates much higher than the rest of the population, and what kinds of services and practice approaches can provide the best support to care leaver parents. The research question is deliberately broad due to the exploratory nature of this research and the multiple and complex explanations in the existing literature for young people's pathways to and experiences of early pregnancy and parenting. This article is part of the broader study answering the research question: What are the key factors influencing early pregnancy and parenting amongst young people transitioning from care? The current article examines what service providers reported about key factors leading to early pregnancy and parenting among care leavers. Victorian service providers' perspectives on young people's experiences of early pregnancy and parenting in transitions from care are examined in a previously published article (Purtell et al., 2021).

The Australian Policy Context

Australia's welfare system is divided between federal and state government responsibilities. Child protection services are the jurisdiction of Australian states and territories. The federal government is responsible for income

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support payments, and so whilst it is not formally responsible for child protection matters, it does incur the significant costs of poor outcomes that may include long-term welfare reliance for young people once they have left care. Similarly, it is the federal government who provides parenting payments where parents are otherwise unable to support their children financially.

Young parents are typically a disadvantaged group having their secondary, further or higher education or employment options limited by parenting duties (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2017). Those that rely on government income support are often portrayed by government and media as a 'drain' on taxpayer funds and have in recent years been required to participate in a mandatory 'pre-employment' program called Parents Next. A federal Senate inquiry into the program has made some damning claims about the program's activities and outcomes:

> The committee considers that placing overly onerous limitations on the rights to social security and an adequate standard of living for parents and their young children is unacceptable. No parent should need to live in fear of being unable to feed their baby because of potential compliance actions against them…
>
> No matter the vulnerable group in question, the clear message received by the committee was that many ParentsNext providers do not have the kind of specialist knowledge and training to provide services which are safe and supportive for these people. Rather than helping parents, untrained providers risk harming parents and further entrenching their disadvantage (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019).

This punitive approach to welfare supports creates significant difficulties for young parents who may lack independent advocacy support to understand the requirements of the program and navigate its compliance frameworks (Australian Council of Social Services, 2021). Consequently, they are at risk of having their payments suspended or cancelled with consequential increased vulnerability to homelessness, hunger and other child safety concerns (Australian Council of Social Services, 2021). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous Australian) parents, payment suspensions and demerit points have been applied disproportionately (Australian Council of Social Services, 2021). Little attention has been paid to how these issues may be compounded for young people transitioning from care as a distinct group of young parents.

Transitions from Care in Australia

Until the recent introduction from 2018 to 2021 of extended care initiatives in a number of Australian states and territories, young people in care were discharged from the accommodation, financial and other supports provided by Child Protection services by the age of 18 years or earlier (Mendes, 2021). In contrast, young Australians in the general community have typically relied on family and social networks for financial, emotional, and housing support, into their early and mid 20 s. Ongoing support allows young people to undertake further or higher education and low paid employment while continuing to live in their familiar communities amongst family, social and community networks they may have developed over a whole lifetime (Courtney et al., 2018; Gwenzi, 2020; Purtell et al., 2019). These starkly contrasted introductions to formal 'adulthood' are widely recognised to contribute to care leaver experiences of a range of negative outcomes (Martin et al., 2021; McDowall, 2020; Muir et al., 2019; Sacker et al., 2021).

Like many countries around the world, Australia has been experiencing a housing affordability crisis for some time. Rates of homelessness for care leavers in their first year after leaving care are consistently reported to be around 30% nationally (McDowall, 2020). A recent survey of rental affordability in Australia found that "just three percent of all properties for rent were affordable and appropriate for households on government income support payments. For households on minimum wage it was 22 percent" (Anglicare Victoria, 2020). The cost of living is a concern for any Australian with educational disadvantages, employment barriers or other issues resulting in a low income. In this regard early parenting amongst care leavers presents a high risk of poverty, housing instability, and child protection involvement.

Nevertheless, significant transition from care reforms are underway in Australia with a number of jurisdictions recently committing to extended care arrangements for the first time beyond 18 years of age. In Victoria, the state in which the current study is based, young people aging out of foster care and permanent care (care by approved community members), kinship care (care provided by relatives and supervised by child protection services) and residential care (group homes with up to four adolescents who typically have no prior relationship and are supervised by paid workers on site 24 h per day) are from January 2021 eligible for extended supports up until their 21st birthdays (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 2020). These care leavers will be supported by a dedicated transition from care service key worker who has access to flexible funding and who can provide an independent living allowance for approved housing if young people choose to live independently (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 2020). However,

the current study was conducted before these policy reforms were introduced.

The Current Study

This study is conceptualised through the researcher's grounding in transitions from care research which demonstrates the isolation and poor outcomes experienced by young people exited from care. This field has grown in prominence over decades following seminal works by UK researcher Mike Stein (2012). Stein's research explored consistent evidence over decades of poor outcomes for care leavers in education, housing stability, income and employment, substance misuse, mental health, criminal justice involvement and early parenting. According to Stein, young people with stable, family-type placements are less likely to be exited from care at 18 or younger, and often have secure attachments and positive relationships with their family of origin (Stein, 2012). These later and more planned exits from care are associated with positive participation in higher education and employment (Stein, 2012). Stein (2012) termed this group of care leavers the 'moving on' group, as they were generally able to leave their care experiences behind them and form solid and ongoing social, family and community networks outside of government services. A second group of care leavers who were more reliant on various government services were termed 'survivors'. This group were less likely to experience placement stability and stable relationships, and more likely to experience challenging transitions, but still able to effectively draw on professional and informal supports to overcome initial setbacks. Stein (2012) identified a third group of care leavers termed 'strugglers' with the worst pre-care and in-care experiences who were often disengaged from support services and education due to complex needs and challenging behaviours. This group was most at risk of the poorest outcomes, including challenging early pregnancies and parenting experiences.

Within the now extensive transitions from care literature there is a dearth of research on the impacts on young people of removal from family and the disrupted relationships that instability in care can produce. Ambiguous loss theory (defined and discussed below in the literature review) offers a way to better understand what these experiences could be like for children and young people. In the current study transitions from care literature is combined with a structured search of key child and youth welfare journals addressing transitions from care and early pregnancy and parenting viewed through the 'lens' of ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2010). A composite, integrated narrative review across general leaving care studies, care leaver early parenting research and ambiguous loss theory (Purtell et al., 2020), revealed the key themes informing the basis for data collection.

The key themes concerned:

- pathways to early pregnancy and parenting;
- 'emotional voids' associated with the care experience;
- the concept of surveillance bias for care experienced people;
- child removal and repeat pregnancies;
- parenting support and turning lives around;
- extended care;
- sex education and pregnancy prevention (Purtell et al., 2020).

This article is one of two exploring the study's results which have been divided into the themes broadly concerning *pathways* to early pregnancy and parenting, and *experiences* of early pregnancy and parenting (Purtell et al., 2021). In this article we report service providers' perspectives on young care leavers' pathways to early pregnancy and parenting in transitions from care.

Literature Review

Pathways to Early Parenting

The literature review identified three previous reviews including a meta-synthesis of qualitative research concerning care leavers and early parenting (Connolly et al., 2012). These studies identified various care-related factors influencing early pregnancy and parenting, including placement instability and disrupted education resulting in young people missing out on sex education, association with negative peer groups resulting in early sexual activity, and difficulties negotiating intimate relationships resulting in coercive sex and pregnancies (Connolly et al., 2012; Fallon & Broadhurst, 2015; Mendes, 2009). Recommendations for preventing pregnancy typically centred around increasing sex education and access to contraception (Fallon & Broadhurst, 2015). Further literature, however, identified a significant number of care leavers actively wanting to start families. Dworsky and Courtney (2010) in a US study found that for 315 of 326 young women care leavers surveyed that answered pregnancy related questions, 35% of those who had been pregnant at 19 years of age had 'probably' or 'definitely' intended to get pregnant. A later study of young people in extended care in California found that 53 per cent of females and 24 per cent of males had children by age 23 with 44 per cent of these females and 34 per cent of these males reporting they either probably or definitely wanted the pregnancy (Courtney et al., 2020). Rates of unexpected pregnancies are high however the rate of 'wanted pregnancies' is also a matter for careful investigation. Swedish researchers Brannstrom et al., (2016) cite Ericsson's (2012) national cohort study of

Sweden that discovered child welfare clients tended to be higher users of contraception than the general population, *until* they turned 18–19 years old when they became less likely than the rest of young people in their age cohort to use contraception. Biehal and Wade (1996) found that the accelerated transition to adulthood that care leavers experience sometimes motivated them to seek a partner and start a family to avoid the anticipated loneliness of leaving care. The current research set out to explore all pathways to early parenting amongst care leavers including 'wanted pregnancies' or clear motivations to start a family at a young age.

Placement instability and poor outcomes are also associated with multiple and sometimes continuous loss. Removal from family and placement in care entails significant loss in itself, however, multiple placement moves cause numerous significant disruptions to family, social relationships and community connections. Recent leaving care research has highlighted the impact of such losses on young people's ability and willingness to trust and engage with new worker relationships (Purtell & Mendes, 2020; Purtell et al., 2019). However, we do not know very much about whether this loss influences young care leavers' decisions to begin a family.

Care Leavers' Ties with Families of Origin

Gwenzi (2020) highlights debates and discussion concerning the sociology of the family and the absence of these debates and analysis from research concerning people who have lived in out-of-home care. Young people who have grown up in out-of-home care may experience disruptions to, or absences of, a sense of family. Young people exited from care will likely experience the very material and tangible impacts of a lack of family support and positive familial relationships. The lack of material supports is well covered in transitions from care research however the impacts of a lack of, or loss of a *sense* of family are relatively unknown.

Only a few transitions from care studies have touched on these subjects. In one small Australian qualitative study comparing a group of 12 care leavers in an intensive, holistic transitions from care program with other young people who had access to standard services, workers in the intensive support service found that young people required lots of support with family relationships, with many wanting to reconcile upon exiting out-of-home care. When these relationships did not work out, young people experienced distress, disappointment, and often housing breakdown if they had moved in with family members (Purtell & Mendes, 2016). Young people who only had access to standard leaving care supports nearly all moved back to family and those young people experienced homelessness when those relationships broke down (Purtell & Mendes, 2016). In a much larger study in the UK, Wade (2008) explored 106 care leavers' transition experiences in England and found that they were

in contact with family members both in care and post care. Biehal (1995) found a relationship between the quality of young people's relationships with family of origin and their ability to build other support networks. Her longitudinal study of 426 young people transitioning from care found that around half had positive relationships with family of origin and approximately 20% relied on family of origin as primary supports. These relationships were associated with ongoing contact whilst in care. Interestingly though, the study found that these young people with positive family relationships were more able to build and maintain friendships, whereas those young people with poor family relationships had few friends (Biehal, 1995).

Many studies recognise young people's tendency to return to their family of origin upon exiting care (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Purtell & Mendes, 2016; Wade, 2008). Stein (2012) notes that having a sense of family is as important to care leavers as it is to anyone else – even when they recognise their family's inability to care for them as a child. Yet, relationships with family of origin are highly complex. It is concerning that out-of-home care systems are notoriously under-resourced and young people often complain of difficulties retaining contact with significant family members such as siblings (McDowall, 2015). Moreover, leaving care support services are often so focussed on preventing homelessness they have little time or funding to assist with sourcing therapeutic interventions necessary for young people to address unresolved family issues (Muir & Hand, 2018). What remains unclear is how care leavers' relationships with family of origin may influence pathways to early parenthood.

Ambiguous Loss Theory

Ambiguous loss theory argues that loss that is not related to a death is not only significant and painful like death-related loss, but can be more difficult to resolve as there is the simultaneous 'presence and absence' of a loved one (Boss, 2010, p. 138–139). For children and young people in care who have been removed from family, they may experience ambiguous loss for each person about whom they care, as well as places and things that they cannot see anymore. Unlike loss resulting from a death, this ambiguous loss is experienced without grief rituals, like funerals, to process the associated grief (Knight & Gitterman, 2019, p. 165). Where abuse and neglect has occurred, workers and carers may be reticent to talk to children and young people about the harm that has occurred, especially at the hands of close family members. There can also be an expectation that someone should lose all love for, or cut all ties with, someone who has harmed them. However, we know that many young people return to family when leaving care so this is clearly not the case (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Purtell et al., 2016; Wade, 2008). It appears that such grief can be "ignored, minimised, or not

acknowledged" (Knight & Gitterman, 2019, p. 167). The 'lens' of ambiguous loss theory allows us to acknowledge the adverse impact that a childhood in which social, family and community connections are lost may have on a young person's outcomes.

Ambiguous loss is likely experienced with both entry to, and exit from, care. Knight and Gitterman (2019, p. 165) argue that such experiences affect a young person's ability to form secure attachments and positive relationships that are essential to healthy development and positive outcomes, and that "what have heretofore been viewed as behavioral [sic] and emotional problems of children in the child welfare system may in fact be indicators of unrecognized and unresolved grief" (Hebert & Kulkin, 2016; Mitchell, 2016). The authors suggest that unrecognised grief can be misinterpreted as mental health conditions including "posttraumatic stress, anxiety and depression" (Knight & Gitterman, 2019, p. 167). Many contend that leaving care itself causes significant distress for young people. The Victorian government has stated that:

> Many young people leaving care report a sense of abandonment, anxiety and fear. They also experience high levels of instability and insecurity; are at risk of unsafe, unstable and poor quality housing; at risk of homelessness; and find it difficult to stay connected to education or employment. (Department of Health and Human Services, 2016, p. 8)

These relational aspects of care leavers' experiences are not often the main focus of research, but with growing interest in the phenomenon of care leaver early parenting and indications that children born to care leavers are at higher risk of being placed in care, a deeper understanding of young people's motivations to have children at a young age, often without many resources, deserve more attention.

Methodology

Recruitment, Data Collection and Data Analysis

Sixteen service provider staff participated in three focus groups and two interviews. Participants worked in a range of services including: Non-metropolitan leaving care services (n = 2), Non-metropolitan and metropolitan intensive parenting support services (n = 10), Non-metropolitan Alcohol and other Drug (AoD) services (n = 1), Non-metropolitan foster care (n = 1) and Non-metropolitan family services (n = 2). Participants were recruited by circulation of a one page invitation flier distributed by email through local practitioner networks and the state peak child welfare body newsletter. Interested practitioners and managers then contacted the student researcher for further information and

were asked to review an explanatory statement. People electing to participate in the research were typically from within the same organisation and focus groups were organised in participants' own offices. Most focus groups had one or more participants become unavailable on the day and on two occasions only one person attended making the focus group into an interview.

All participants had experience working with care leavers who were parents in their current or previous roles. Thirteen of the participants worked mainly with care leavers. Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured in that participants were not directed to address the topics in a predetermined order, rather the researcher ensured that each interview or focus group discussion addressed each of the issues in the interview schedule. Discussion points (as below) were adapted from the themes from the literature review and kept deliberately broad to ensure that no leading questions were asked and any potential researcher bias was minimised. This data collection method was approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Focus group and interview participants were asked to discuss the following topics:

- Factors influencing care leavers' decision/s to have a child/children
- Expectations of and confidence with parenting responsibilities
- Informal support networks – have family or friends been supportive?
- Nature of relationships between parents
- Child protection involvement with own children
- Support services for care leaver parents

If participants claimed they knew little about any of these areas they were asked to comment based on their own opinions or anything they had heard from colleagues. The research was designed to test whether local service providers held similar perspectives on these issues to what was identified in previous research. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Structured thematic analysis was used to code the transcripts using the key concepts from the literature. Where participants raised issues that the literature had not, these were coded as emerging themes and grouped together where similar under new sub-codes. Coding was undertaken using NVivo software which quantified the number of times a particular theme was coded and in how many focus groups or interviews the theme was coded.

Results

Data analysis using NVivo software allowed for clear quantification of the frequency of key themes occurring in service providers' focus group and interview transcripts. Table 1 lists the frequency with which the main themes and subthemes were coded.

The results of this qualitative study are complex and in no way representative. In line with the study's exploratory nature, however, the results are illuminating in their description of both structural and individual circumstances of great importance in understanding the factors contributing to high rates of early parenting amongst care leavers. For ease of understanding, and because of the limited word counts, the results are divided roughly in half across two articles addressing the most frequently discussed (and coded) themes. The themes of 'leaving care and parenting challenges', sub code: 'protective interventions and 'surveillance bias' were the most frequently occurring but are covered in another article (Purtell et al., 2021). This paper analyses the codes and sub-codes in Table 2 below.

Discussions concerning the 'emotional void' that many young care leavers experience occurred in four out of five focus groups and interviews and was coded six times in the transcripts. When counted along with the 'wanted pregnancies' code, which appeared five times, the theme of young people choosing to have children occurred 11 times. Service providers were highly concerned about both the lack of support services available and also their approaches. They also suggested many ways to improve services and design more effective programs. These discussions were coded as a sub code: 'services to assist young people with leaving care and/or parenting' under main code: 'leaving care and parenting challenges' and occurred 10 times across four out of five focus groups and interviews.

Pathways to Early Pregnancy and Parenting for Care Leavers

Residential Care and Disengagement from Schooling

Focus group and interview participants closely associated care leaver early parenting with experience of residential care placements (i.e. residential homes for between one and four unrelated young people with 24 h staffing) and consequent disruptions to school attendance and

Table 1 Most frequently coded themes in whole study findings

Times coded in study	Code	Sub-code	Sub-sub-code	Focus group/ interview
14	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Protective interventions and 'surveillance bias'		4
10	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Services to assist young people with leaving care and/or parenting		4
6	Emerging themes	Risks posed by parents' birth families		4
6	Pathways to early pregnancy and parenting	Filling an 'Emotional void' with children or a family		4
5	Prevention of early pregnancy and parenting	Deliberate and wanted pregnancies		3
5	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Protective interventions and 'surveillance bias'	Loss and grief	2
5	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Transitions from care-specific factors		3
5	Emerging themes	Abortion and adoption		3
5	Emerging themes	Expectations of parenting		4

Table 2 Frequency of themes coded informing current article results and discussion below

Times coded in study	Code	Sub-code	Sub-sub-code	Focus group/ interview
10	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Services to assist young people with leaving care and/or parenting		4
6	Pathways to early pregnancy and parenting	Filling an 'Emotional void' with children or a family		4
5	Prevention of early pregnancy and parenting	Deliberate and wanted pregnancies		3
5	Leaving care and parenting challenges	Transitions from care-specific factors		3
5	Emerging themes	Abortion and adoption		3

engagement. Where young people missed school for long periods of time they missed out on sexual education.

[Participant 1]: And you've got to stop and think, the statistics with kids in resi going to school at all – most of them don't even go to Grade [Year] 8, and that's it, that's the end of school…so I think how much of that information do they miss in not being at school (Metropolitan parenting program staff).

A few participants noted workers' hesitation to address gaps in sex education knowledge. Some felt that the quality of a worker's or carers' relationship with a young person would affect the degree to which a young person would engage with this kind of information.

[Participant 1]: Yeah, I think, oh yeah, it does depend on the worker, because certain workers will try and refer it off to counselling and things like that, which is what we try to do a bit when people are pregnant and unsure. And others will take on those conversations as well, you know, on themselves and it probably depends on the relationship that young people have got with those staff members as well because if you're working with residential care, if your favourite worker says something to you, you're more likely to listen (Non-metropolitan parenting program staff).

[Participant 1]: … this carer in particular is very good and has got a lot of background in working with adolescent females… and lots of conversations about, you know, respecting yourself, respecting your body, it's your choice. Those kinds of things. So she just has those conversations as part and parcel of the care that she provides… So when a young person's thinking at 11 o'çlock at night, they can go and speak to the carer about what was talked about. Or they come home and, you know, their boyfriend has pressured them to do something they don't want to do, they talk to the carer rather than ring us up, because we're not available 24 hours a day either (Non-metropolitan foster care program staff).

Many people would regard sex and relationships as sensitive topics for discussion. It is unsurprising then that young people transitioning from care would respond better to trusted workers and carers when discussing these sorts of issues.

'Emotional Voids'

Participants described a range of out-of-home care-related factors that left young people seeking more love in their lives.

[Participant 1]: And I think there is something about, I don't know, we were talking about this the other day, weren't we, in the car, something about trying to re-create their own upbringing and what they didn't get, yes.

[Participant 2]: Trying to have unconditional love. (Non-metropolitan post care program staff).

[Participant 1]: … I think for her, it seems like from my perspective is that she wants to be able to fit in somewhere, that this child will want her and love her, you know, unconditionally and that's what she's craving. She hasn't had a good relationship with her parents … strained relationship with other significant adults in her life, but wanting to connect. (Non-metropolitan foster care program staff).

[Participant 1]: But even just emotional deprivation of these kids that haven't had a caring parent, they're emotionally so needy, the attention, the time, the intimacy and affection. (Metropolitan parenting program staff)

There was a strong consensus that the 'emotional void' that relationship disruption and care experiences provoked was a strong influence on young people's motivations to have children. Alternatively, continuous or ongoing care was suggested as enabling young people to take pathways leading to delayed parenthood and better outcomes.

[Participant 1]: At the moment foster carers get paid nothing, absolutely nothing, and yet they are the biggest intervention for these kids, because if these kids can find a sense of belonging, they don't need to have a child to find it. They can just be okay themselves.

[Participant 2]: -Yeah, the ones who have, one or two placements who have stability and have that care, have that love … carers who would hang in, to their twenties …

[Participant 1]: They're not the ones having kids. They're the ones having careers and going to university and buying houses. Like, they're the ones who keep us going sometimes. (Non-metropolitan post care program staff).

Wanted Pregnancies

Service providers echoed findings in the literature indicating many pregnancies are intentional amongst care leavers and often this is the case amongst the most disadvantaged groups of care leavers.

[Participant 1]: In that, you know, we see a lot of young men who have been in residential care who are actually wanting to have a family, they're wanting to have a baby as well… Young women… the ones who tend to want to have a baby or fall pregnant at a young age are ones who have had, you know, a lengthy stay in residential care, predominantly. (Non-metropolitan parenting program staff).

[Participant 1]: Often these girls are getting their rods [contraception implants] out for the purpose of getting pregnant.

[Participant 2]: Yes, very intentionally. Yep. (Non-metropolitan post care program staff).

One focus group discussion suggested that fear of losing a partner was another motivation to start a family:

[Participant 1]: …they create these families to kind of keep the partner close and build this family unit. (Metropolitan parenting program staff).

Abortion and Adoption

One experienced post care service staff member felt that continuing with a pregnancy was a given for all the young women she had worked with over the years. Others felt that terminating a pregnancy was very unlikely.

[Participant 1]: …abortion is not an option. It's deemed to be murder even where the option is certainly there… Progressing with the pregnancy is a bit of a given … But, that sense of love and belonging and the thought of family is too great. … I don't think we've ever, in all my years here, I don't think I've ever known of a young girl who grew up in care who'd choose abortion. (Non-metropolitan parenting program staff).

Politics and Values

Although abortion is legally accessible in the State of Victoria on health grounds (Children by Choice, 2021), some professionals were reluctant to discuss abortion, as it was perceived to be controversial.

[Participant 1]: It's not our jobs, but someone has to have it, to let them know of what options are available. (Non-metropolitan post care program staff)

[Participant 1]: And I think some young people are just against terminations as well, like the general population, so yeah, they just continue with it, because they just don't feel that there is another option. (Non-metropolitan parenting program staff)

On the other hand, not having a termination could mean placement breakdown where carers were not going to care for a new baby, as well as a young person.

[Participant 1]: …she was actually in a kinship placement, and then kinship placement did not agree with her not aborting the child … and were encouraging her to do so, and she refused, and they said well … you're not welcome to stay. (Non-metropolitan foster care staff).

Services Available to Support Care Leaver Parents

Service providers raised many concerns about the manner in which child protection and other interventions were carried out with care experienced young people in the current Victorian context. A broader discussion of these issues is covered in a related paper which more closely examines the issue of health and allied health professionals' 'surveillance bias' towards care leavers (Purtell et al., 2021). This is said to occur when services have knowledge of a young person's care experience, and make negative assumptions about their parenting capacity compared to judgements regarding other young parents. For this paper we are considering what service providers have said about services that exist currently, and services that they believe are most effective, in providing supports to young people transitioning from care and then parenting.

Young people transitioning from care are typically referred to a large number of disaggregate government services for assistance with income support, housing, education and employment as they are being exited from out-of-home care. For many young people, especially those in residential care, this referral to a large number of services comes at the same time as young people are facing extreme anxiety about becoming homeless. It is becoming more widely understood that this practice can cause young people to disengage from services altogether leaving them far more vulnerable. Service providers' perspectives on what kinds of services should be provided to young people indicate that preventing disengagement may help to prevent the experience of an emotional void, and/or vulnerability to exploitative relationships and potentially early pregnancy.

For care leaver parents, the number of services and compulsory appointments they need to attend increases for each child they have. In Australia, income support is provided through the Federal Government social security agency 'Centrelink', and over the course of this study, access to parenting payments was tightened. Study participants discussed how these issues affected the young people with whom they worked:

[Participant 1]: Centrelink can be so hard for a young parent without an advocate.

And I think from my experience … it's been made harder recently in terms of the increase, the changes to the funding of childcare… have made an impact to the client's access, and ability to access.

[Participant 2]: It's really making it hard for young parents, double what they presently have, raising their children.

[Participant 3]: A lot of the mums are saying that because they might only study two days a week, then they're only eligible for a 16 hours worth of childcare a week, but I guess we would argue that the benefits for the child is increased if the mum has a third day to do other appointments or just even have a day off so they have respite, but that is beneficial for the child but I guess we don't normally get those kinds of arguments agreed to, in terms of funding. (Metropolitan parenting program staff).

Eligibility Criteria and Service Accessibility—Policy Catch 22 s

Service providers observed that child protection involvement made someone ineligible for local government family services which was regarded as a more community-based and non-statutory response. Policy in Victoria directs service providers that if a young person in care is pregnant, and there is any concern about the unborn child, or the child after birth, then a report to child protection is warranted. If a child is then removed, parents become ineligible for other sorts of services as well. It appears that young people's care experienced status can lock them into a statutory response to their own parenting challenges which could have implications for reunification with their children.

[Participant 1]: There are a lot of services that don't work with parents if the child is no longer in their care. …It's like, there's services to prevent children being removed, but not so many to re-unify. … well, we know that children are better with their parents if their parents are safe, so that's what we should be focussing on. (Non-metropolitan parenting program staff).

Another barrier to reunification is related to the shift to a Permanent care policy in Victoria which sought to provide more stability for children and young people to have a permanent placement either with family or in care. Permanency policies limit the amount of time parents have to access therapeutic interventions to improve their parenting abilities in order to re-unite with their children. These interventions are under-resourced and over-stretched.

[Participant 1]: … the changes around permanency and needing to get action a bit quicker, that is good for young children but because of the time frames, yeah, if they're not getting the right support in that time frame, then what are your chances of making any change? And then decisions are made … if everyone had actually had the opportunity to have really great services during that period, you probably could reduce the numbers of kids going into care. (Non-metropolitan parenting program staff).

The majority of study participants worked in a statewide, intensive, holistic parenting support program that could work with families for up to five years for each child. There was strong agreement that this service was an effective one, however, it wasn't available to all eligible for the service.

[Participant 1]: We always sit over target and don't have the capacity to take all the people who would need the service and it's the same with some of the other parenting programs. So, yeah, not everyone who needs those services can actually access them. (Non-metropolitan parenting program staff).

This service was not able to continue working with a parent where a child had been removed for longer than six months. The program team leader commented that one worker suggested that there was a decrease in repeat pregnancies with mothers whom the program supported but still had a child or children removed. If true, this is important to explore in-depth to prevent intergenerational child protection involvement.

Young People's Resentment of Care Services

For care leaver parents there may be an existing resentment of child protection services from their own time in care. Many service providers talked about young people's desire to leave child protection statutory services. As much as the exit from care could bring anxiety and a drop in supports, for many young people it promised freedom and agency. Young people were said to be angry about child protection services and the care system for making decisions about their lives without their consent or input. For some, being pregnant and/or having a baby was said to be about being in control.

[Participant 1]: It very much seems as though they've had such little control over their lives and who's in them and where they're allowed to be and who they're allowed to be with, has been dictated to them their entire life and this is something that no-one can control but them. (Non-metropolitan post care program staff).

Another interesting aspect of care leaver early parenting is the importance attached to parenting identity or indeed,

parenting status. With a lack of access to more positive identities associated with positive housing, education and employment outcomes, for many care leavers, parenting is a normative and highly respected adult status.

> [Participant 1]: It seems to be that the identity around parenting is the main part of their identity. So if you have someone come in critiquing that sense of who you are then that's obviously very problematic and traumatizing for you. …. if my, my role in life is to be a mother and a wife, and someone's coming in and saying that I'm not performing well in either of those areas, then that sense of shame that is evoked from that is immense, and then to expect people to engage in a group forum, be talking openly with other people about that? Very problematic, yeah. (Non-metropolitan youth services staff).

There may be potential for trauma-informed dimensions of parenting support to include mindfulness of the attachment to parenting status for some young people transitioning from care.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Service providers presented clear links between young people's experiences of residential care, disengagement from services, and early parenting that were consistent with major reviews of literature concerning care leaver early parenting (Connolly et al., 2012; Fallon & Broadhurst, 2015; Mendes, 2009). Biehal and Wade's (1996) findings were echoed with participants making very strong statements about the impact of disrupted relationships and social isolation, suggesting that more attention should be paid to loss and grief that would accompany such profound and repeated disconnection (Boss, 2010; Knight & Gitterman, 2019). The emotional void theme was strong and correlates with Stein's (2012) typologies identifying placement instability and disrupted relationships as being associated with the 'strugglers' and 'survivors' groups who are more at risk of early parenting. Whilst participants identified little or no sex education as a key pathway to pregnancy and parenting, they also said that young people were often very purposefully becoming pregnant (Brannstrom et al., 2016; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Even with accidental pregnancy, service providers reported that young people rarely saw abortion as an option. It also appeared that discussing politically contentious and sensitive issues, such as terminating pregnancies, was outside many service providers' professional comfort zones. However, it is unclear where young people would find out how to access objective health information regarding pregnancy options, if not from carers and workers. Consistent with the literature

concerning early pregnancy and parenting, service providers felt that pregnancy and parenting were more common outcomes for young people exiting residential care. This study has also found that an 'emotional void' left by a lack of supports and family can induce strong motivations to parent. Without clearer understandings of the impacts of removal from family and exits from care and the strengths of young people's connections we may be missing further strategies for preventing pregnancies and parenting amongst young people who are without the necessary resources to look after their children.

There is growing recognition of the disruption to relationships caused by placement in care and placement instability and many attribute early parenting to young people's desire to create family relationships they feel they don't otherwise have. Many service providers thought that a lack of secure attachments or positive relationships associated with placement instability and being in residential care was a precursor to early parenting. This indicates that the authors' consideration of ambiguous loss theory in explaining care leaver early parenting is warranted, with many service providers attributing care leaver early parenting to unresolved trauma, loss and grief, leaving many care leavers feeling isolated and unsupported. Indeed, even care leavers with stable placement histories have until recently been discharged from the accommodation, financial and other supports provided by child protection services at the age of 18 years or earlier. This often leaves young people reliant on siloed community supports typically 'targeted' to one group of issues such as substance abuse, education, employment and training, parenting support, mental health, and so on. A loose collection of services and professionals replicates the child protection system where young people are 'referred out' for each 'problem' that they have. There does not appear to be a holistic service response for care leavers that addresses needs for secure attachments, positive relationships and *family* connections. A service system that fails to meet young people's normative desires for connection and support may contribute to ongoing cycles of child protection involvement.

Service providers' descriptions of the existing service system revealed barriers to accessing basic income support and childcare through social services. These punitive approaches to welfare prevented young people from empowering themselves and improving their circumstances through employment and study (Dominelli et al., 2005). System responses for care leaver parents push towards statutory-based interventions and away from community-based ones as workers are encouraged to make early reports to child protection. This approach deems young people ineligible for many community-based family services supports which young people may be less likely to disengage from. For example, for a young person in Victoria's intensive, holistic support program for

vulnerable parents, continuing involvement with that support after removal of a child or children is time limited and young people lose eligibility if they do not have their children returned in a short time. Without this service young parents would be subject to standard statutory systems of child protection which were regarded as the least trauma-informed and a cause of ambiguous loss, presumably for parents *and* their children. Child protection services form a part of the service system that service providers associated with conditions that contributed to care leavers' development of 'emotional voids' leading to early parenting. Both leaving care literature and care leaver early parenting literature suggest that poor outcomes and disengagement are avoided through continuous care and minimum disruption of relationships. In contrast, care leaver early parenting and intergenerational child protection involvement are perpetuated by the provision of siloed government services and deprivation of felt care and support.

Limitations

This study is based on professionals' opinions about young people's feelings and motivations and not young people's own statements. The study initially sought to include the perspectives of young people with a care experience, both with and without children, but was unfortunately unsuccessful in recruiting care leavers. Recruitment efforts took place at a time of transitions from care system-wide reforms and service instability, alongside major bushfires within the state of Victoria, and a global pandemic. Recruitment of young people would usually require the assistance of service providers and services which understandably have had much higher priorities through these crises. Consequently, less than anticipated numbers of young people responded to the invitation to participate. The service providers participating in this research are not representative of all service providers and had varied involvement with young people transitioning from care who had become parents. Many participants were from non-metropolitan regions where community attitudes to abortion are typically more conservative and it would be useful to more closely investigate young people's attitudes to contraception and abortion and who influences these attitudes. Participants from the parenting support program worked with mothers primarily and perspectives on care leavers becoming young fathers are under-represented in this study. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are over-represented in out-of-home care and a closer examination of their experiences of pathways to, and experiences of early parenting as care leavers would be very valuable. With the sample size for this study a separate exploration of issues for these young people was not possible.

The quantification of qualitative data is used as an indicative measure of how many times a theme may have been discussed, but it does not identify the nature of the discussion, such as whether people agreed or disagreed with statements made in the literature or by research participants. It is, however, a useful method for applying a rigorous process for selecting which themes on which to focus in terms of reliability.

Conclusion

Care leaver early parenting is a complex issue that may require a rethink of the way that services are typically provided to young people transitioning from care and particularly young parents experiencing child protection interventions with their children. Young people's desire to have a normative-style family, to have or keep people close to them, and to have more love in their lives, were strong primary motivators for having children during their transitions from care. Although many young care leavers miss out on sex education through disengagement from schooling, it is not evident that improving sexual education for young people would necessarily reduce the number of wanted pregnancies motivated by feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Service providers participating in this research did indicate that positive relationships and community connections had the potential to prevent early parenting and/or support functional parenting where young people made this choice, and indeed, advance positive outcomes in a range of developmental areas. Punitive welfare responses on the other hand tended to have negative influences on young peoples' behaviours, leading to disengagement. Service providers felt that young people disengaging from services were vulnerable to abusive and exploitative relationships and that many pregnancies and incidences of early parenting resulted from these relationships. This typically led to greater problems, including children's entry into care and possibly ongoing cycles of intergenerational child protection involvement.

Data availability The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

Code availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethical approval Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Monash University.Consent to participateInformed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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