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# The Introduction of Extended Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) Until 21 Years in Australia: A Mapping of Policy, Legislation and Programs in Each Jurisdiction

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## ABSTRACT

It is increasingly recognised by global research that extending out-of-home care (OOHC) until at least 21 years of age is the policy reform most likely to advance improved outcomes for care leavers. In recent years, all eight Australian jurisdictions (States and Territories) have introduced forms of extended care programs. Yet, major variations remain between these jurisdictions in terms of the placement types covered, the levels of support and funding, and the terms and language used to describe their programs. This paper maps the existing policy developments in each jurisdiction and the level of program supports provided to care leavers aged 18–21 years. For each jurisdiction, we establish extended care eligibility and coverage, funding and adequacy, and the key terminology used. Our discussion of the commonalities and differences between the jurisdictions suggests that some sub-groups of care leavers may need additional and specialised forms of support. They include most notably those exiting residential care and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leavers.

## 1 | Introduction

Australia maintains a fragmented out-of-home care (OOHC) system in which transition from care policy and practice differs according to the specific and varied legislation and programs in the eight states and territories. According to the most recent figures from 30 June 2023, there were just over 45,300 children in OOHC nationally; the majority (89% in total) were either in relative/kinship care or foster care (i.e., home-based care), with just 9% living in supervised residential care group homes with paid rostered staff (Productivity Commission/PC 2024). The figures for home-based care are far higher for children aged less than

12 years (almost 96%) compared to just under 79% for those aged 12–17 years (AIHW 2023).

Nearly 20,000 (or 43%) of the overall OOHC cohort are First Nations children (AIHW 2023; PC 2024). The disproportionate number of First Nations children in OOHC seems to reflect a number of historical, structural and systemic factors including the ongoing influence of colonialism, the specific adverse impact of the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children, the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by many First Nations Australians as reflected in poorer life opportunities and outcomes, and the failure of contemporary

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child protection programs and workers to recognise the strengths of First Nations families, communities and culture (SNAICC 2023). The total cost of OOHC services in Australia for 2022–23 was \$5.9 billion. The annual cost of supporting each child in OOHC varied from \$79,000 to \$161,000 across the eight jurisdictions (PC 2024).

In 2021–2022, just over 4000 young people aged 15–17 years nationally transitioned from OOHC to independent living, meaning that they no longer received mandatory financial support from the state or territory government, and they were expected to function as self-reliant young adults. About 1500 or 30% of that care leaver cohort were First Nations young people, which is below their higher proportion of the OOHC population (AIHW 2023). It seems that many First Nations youth ‘self-place’ at 15 years or even younger in an attempt to reconnect with families, communities and country (Mendes et al. 2020), and they may not be included in official care leaver figures.

It appears that young people exiting residential care comprise a larger proportion of older children in and leaving OOHC. In Victoria, for example, it has been estimated that older young people exiting residential care make up between 20% and 25% of the overall care leaver cohort (Victorian Government 2022). To date, neither the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) or the Productivity Commission (PC) reports, which provide annual updates on services supporting children in OOHC, provide any official estimate of the funds spent on support services for young people aged 18–21 years who have exited OOHC.

Care leavers, that is, young people who typically transition from OOHC at 18 years of age (van Breda et al. 2020), are identified as a vulnerable group across the globe. Research in global north countries has identified that many experience long-term social exclusion and intersectional inequalities compared to the majority of young people who do not grow up in OOHC (OECD 2022; Sacker et al. 2021). Until 2017, Australia was regarded internationally as a leaving care laggard (Beauchamp 2016). Most of the state and territory governments cut off financial support to young people transitioning from OOHC at no later than 18 years of age and failed to provide them with the ongoing material and relationship assistance into early adulthood guaranteed to most of their non-care peers (Baidawi 2016). Multiple research studies by government bodies, non-government service providers and academics have revealed challenging pathways and outcomes for care leavers in many areas including housing, education, employment, physical and mental health, early parenting, social relationships, justice system contact, long-term reliance on social security payments, and for First Nations youth, limited connection with culture and community (AIHW 2022; McDowall 2021; Malvaso et al. 2016; Martin et al. 2021; Mendes and McCurdy 2019; Muir et al. 2019). Residential care leavers seem to be particularly at risk of challenging transition experiences and outcomes (Haag et al. 2021; Mendes, Bollinger, and Flynn 2023).

The Commonwealth Government’s response to care leavers, coordinated via the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children, has been limited and lacking in any accountability to either care leavers or their support services. They provide

a one-off grant of \$1500 called the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) to assist care leavers aged 15–25 years that is paid to service providers to purchase goods and services for care leavers, not to the young person directly. That payment is arguably of minimal benefit to recipients and should at least be doubled or made available on more than one occasion (Mendes 2022).

By the end of 2022, the national Home Stretch advocacy campaign (Mendes 2023) succeeded in persuading all Australian jurisdictions to extend OOHC until 21 years of age, reflecting the fact that the OECD has identified extended care as a best practice model for enhancing outcomes for care leavers (OECD 2022). Extended care refers to the provision of ongoing financial support beyond the 18th birthday either to enable young people to remain in their existing placements or to secure other affordable living arrangements (van Breda et al. 2020). One of the key advantages of extended care programs is that they enable the transition from OOHC to be gradual rather than abrupt and include ongoing assistance from a range of supportive social and community relationships and networks. Researchers term this approach transitioning to adulthood via ‘interdependence’ (McDowall 2021: 79), rather than a sudden transition to self-reliant independence that separates care leavers from the experience of most other young people in the community.

However, major variations in legislative, policy and program support for care leavers aged 18–21 years remain across the jurisdictions. The aim of this paper is to map the extended care service provisions in each of the eight state and territories, identify commonalities and differences, and highlight relative strengths and limitations.

## 2 | Study Approach

This policy analysis draws on primary source documents provided by the eight state and territory governments on their websites that detail current OOHC policies with the most recent policy iterations prioritised. Each jurisdiction had one overriding extended care policy or program statement that informed the supports available to care leavers aged 18–21 years. Additionally, most jurisdictions also offered discretionary aftercare supports that usually pre-date the introduction of extended care. The objective of our study was to examine current approaches to supporting care leavers, and in particular, identify details corresponding to the following questions for each jurisdiction:

1. When was extended care introduced, and what was the rationale provided?
2. What was the extent of the eligibility and coverage of the extended care provisions? Which groups of care leavers were supported, and equally which groups were not supported?
3. What level of unit cost funding was allocated to support eligible care leavers, and does this funding seem to be adequate?
4. What language and terms were used to describe the extended care programs?

5. Given the evidence that many care leavers experience housing insecurity or homelessness (KPMG 2023), was there any specific resources allocated to provide housing options?

### 3 | Findings: Extended Care Programs Across the Eight Jurisdictions

#### 3.1 | Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

The ACT had 51 care leavers in 2021–22 (AIHW 2023).

##### 3.1.1 | Chronology

The ACT was an innovator in extended care programs, having introduced legislation in 2012 that funded discretionary financial support for foster and kinship carers until the young person's 21st birthday (Baidawi 2016). In May 2021, the ACT extended the existing post-18 supports for youth leaving foster and kinship care to also include those leaving residential care. And in June 2024, the ACT legislated a mandated 'right to access support' until 21 years (Stephen-Smith 2024).

The ACT's updated model of extended care support was informed by a local research project completed by the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ACU). Conducted in 2022, the project provided a summary of key components of a successful transition-from-care model based on a review of national and international literature, consultation with stakeholders in the ACT and in other Australian jurisdictions, and engagement with young people with lived and living experience of the current system. (Moore et al. 2024; Saballa 2024).

##### 3.1.2 | Eligibility and Coverage

The ACT 'Next Steps for our Kids' document emphasises support for all care leavers until 21 years of age in order to enhance their family and community connections (ACT Government 2022).

##### 3.1.3 | Funding

The ACT funds a fortnightly allowance via the Foster and Kinship Care Subsidy (Carer Subsidy), and a discretionary aftercare support service for youth aged 21–25 years. The current extended care rate in the ACT is \$297.22 per week. The government has also allocated an additional \$10 million to advance the legislated 'right' to extended care support (Stephen-Smith 2024).

##### 3.1.4 | Language and Terms

The ACT government refers to the availability of 'extended care' for young people aged 18–21 years (ACT Government 2022: 18). The new legislation establishes 'a right for young people to access more comprehensive support—giving them the best opportunity to continue their education, gain employment and

establish stable housing and living arrangements'. Care leavers are given an assurance 'that they will continue to be supported during their early adult years, just like other people who continue to receive support from their families through this crucial period' (Stephen-Smith 2024).

##### 3.1.5 | Housing

The ACT Government currently provides funding to a non-government organisation that offers transitional housing to care leavers (known as the CAP program). This model involved both independent living with case management support as well as a lead tenant model whereby young people live with an older co-resident who provides assistance with managing independent living tasks.

The model also supports care leavers to then transition into private or government housing (Saballa 2024).

#### 3.2 | New South Wales

NSW had 1329 care leavers in 2021–22 (AIHW 2023).

##### 3.2.1 | Chronology

NSW was the final jurisdiction to extend care, announcing on 6 November 2022 'Your Choice, Your Future' (NSW Government 2022a). The policy implementation began on 1 February 2023. The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) reports that as of March 2024, 1998 young people aged 18–20 have received an allowance as part of the program since implementation. This figure includes young people who have since turned 21 and been aged out of the program (Anderson 2024).

##### 3.2.2 | Eligibility and Coverage

The policy comprises three forms of support: the Staying on Allowance (SOA); the Independent Living Allowance (ILA); and an expansion of specialist aftercare program supports that include additional caseworkers, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), and additional coverage in regional and metropolitan areas (NSW Government 2023). By September 2024, care leavers in most regions were able to access these new aftercare supports (NSW Government 2024b).

Through data modelling, DCJ estimates that around 2100 care leavers are eligible for the allowances in NSW at any given time. In March 2024, DCJ reported that 992 young people are receiving the ILA and 520 carers are receiving the SOA to support a young person in their care (Wheeler 2024).

##### 3.2.3 | Language and Terms

Policy terminology has shifted in some NSW Government departments. The former Perrottet Government referred to the

'Your Choice, Your Future' program as an extended care program (Liberal NSW 2022), which they emphasised as enabling a better transition to adulthood (NSW Government 2022a, 2023). However, DCJ refers to 'Your Choice, Your Future,' as an aftercare program (rather than extending care program) (Smith, letter to researchers, *personal communication*, dated 10 October 2023).

### 3.2.4 | Funding

The government committed \$100 million over 5 years to improve transitions from OOHC to adulthood (NSW Government 2022a).

The ILA of \$261 per fortnight (NSW Government 2024a, 2024b) is available for all care leavers aged 18–21 who meet the following criteria; they have to have been in care for 12 months prior to turning 18, the package does not include those in SIL (Supported Independent Living) and TSIL (Therapeutic Supported Independent Living), or people currently in justice or have been in justice in the previous 12 months leading up to 18. The allowance is intended to assist with core living costs such as housing and essential living expenses, which are reflective of increased cost of living pressures among young adults (Wheeler 2024). That amount is significantly lower than the fortnightly allowances for care leavers living independently in Victoria, Queensland and WA, despite the higher costs of living in NSW (Dyer and Martin 2024). For example, young people in Victoria receive \$617 per fortnight for the Independent Accommodation Allowance.

The SOA can be paid to foster and kinship carers if a young person continues in their care. The rate is \$568 per fortnight for 18 year olds, but reduces to \$418 per fortnight in Year two, and only \$261 per fortnight in Year three (Wheeler 2024; NSW Government 2024a). To be eligible, the young person must have been in the care of the Minister for more than 12 months when they turn 18 and consent to their carers receiving the payment. This can only be claimed if not already receiving the ILA. Reinstatement of this allowance and multi-entry is not available for leavers who need to return to their carer's home after a period of time living independently, regardless of reason (which is currently available to care leavers in Victoria).

Under the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (NSW), OOHC agencies overseeing a young person's last placement are obligated to provide or arrange support until 25 years. Discretionary assistance may include reviewing leaving care plans, accessing the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA), finding accommodation, education, vocational training, counselling, employment, legal advice, health services and guiding family related matters such as finding family, mediation and accessing personal documentation (NSW Government 2022b).

### 3.2.5 | Housing

The ILA is particularly aimed at assisting with accommodation and other essential living expenses. However, the government has not allocated any specific funding for housing

support, such as support through Homes NSW enhancing the availability of housing stock for care leavers (Parliament of NSW 2024).

## 3.3 | Northern Territory (NT)

The transition from care context for children in the NT differs somewhat to other jurisdictions. In 2020–21, the NT had 73 children aged between 15 and 17 leave care and of these, 82% ( $n = 60$ ) were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (AIHW 2023). In June 2022, 868 children were living in OOHC, with approximately 91% of these children Aboriginal, and 313 living in remote or very remote locations (AIHW 2023). Approximately 38% of Aboriginal children in OOHC in the NT are placed with Aboriginal carers (NT Government 2021).

The care arrangements of children in OOHC in NT that children transition from are distinct, with 41.6% of children in care residing in 'other home-based care', 28% in foster care and 20.9% in relative/kinship care (AIHW 2023). Here, 'other home-based care' refers to 'purchased home-based care', generally not used in other jurisdictions, whereby a commercial contractor is funded to source carers for children Commonwealth of Australia (2017). This type of care has been criticised for its high cost, lack of formal assessments of carers undertaken by the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (DTFHC), its higher payments to purchase home-based carers than to foster or kinship carers, and that its use as a care option de-prioritises the objectives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (NAAJA 2017; Commonwealth of Australia 2017).

### 3.3.1 | Chronology

In 2021, the legislation was updated to expand existing supports for children leaving care, including an entitlement to financial assistance to maintain appropriate living and support arrangements until the age of 22 (NT Government 2021).

### 3.3.2 | Eligibility and Coverage

The legislation outlines a range of entitlements and supports for care leavers. Children in OOHC that are 15 years of age or over, or have left care, are entitled to services that help their transition from care to being 'independent', including, but not limited to, accommodation, education, employment, or legal, health and community services, as well as 'practical and financial assistance' to assist them in transitioning to independence (NT Government 2007). As of December 2023, 50 young people were participating in the extended care program (Home Stretch 2024). The NT government policy states that all care leavers are entitled to assistance with housing, family and community connections, training and education courses, healthcare and employment (NT Government 2022).

Other entitlements for care leavers, set out in legislation, include that at the age of 18, care leavers must be provided with practical and financial assistance to maintain appropriate living and

support arrangements until the age of 22 (NT Government 2022). In addition, a young person in care, who is engaged in education or training when they turn 18, must be provided with assistance to maintain their living arrangements until the education is completed (NT Government 2007).

The legislation gives decision-making power to the CEO of DTFHC to consider and assess requests on the grounds that they are appropriate, reasonable and the young person's ability to be self-sufficient and independent by the age of 22 (Section 85B, 3a (iii)). There is no stated limit on the level of financial assistance that can be provided.

The NT government also contracts one non-government program to provide discretionary housing and independent living support for care leavers aged between 18 and 25 (Mission Australia) and another to offer case management for care leavers aged 16 to 25 years of age (Anglicare NT 2024).

### 3.3.3 | Funding

Relevant legislation and policy do not state a limit to the financial support that eligible care leavers can receive to support their transition to independence. Financial support is available to care leavers until the age of 22, while unplanned financial assistance may be available to care leavers up until the age of 25 if they contact the DTFHC for assistance (NT Government 2022). Anglicare NT's 'Moving On' is an discretionary aftercare support and brokerage case management service for young people aged 16–25 who have left care to support their independence and is available Territory wide with workers based in Darwin and Alice Springs (Anglicare NT 2024).

### 3.3.4 | Language and Terms

The objective of the NTs Transition to Independence policy is to enable care leavers to be self-sufficient, live independently, become independent adults and maintain their independence (NT Government 2022).

### 3.3.5 | Housing

Legislation outlines specific possible supports and entitlements for young people transitioning from care in relation to housing and accommodation (NT Government 2007). This includes assistance to obtain 'accommodation' and an ability to receive financial assistance for 'obtaining and furnishing' (NT Government 2007: 54) a child or young person's accommodation. In addition, the NT Government's Priority Housing Policy gives, from April 2024 onwards, young people transitioning to independence in the care of the CEO of DTFHC priority status for social housing (NT Government 2024).

## 3.4 | Queensland

Queensland had 918 care leavers in 2021–2022 (AIHW 2023).

### 3.4.1 | Chronology

In June 2022, Queensland announced that they would introduce an extended care program to commence in July 2023 (Linard 2022). The Extended Post Care Support (EPCS) program is intended to 'complement and not duplicate' supports provided by the existing suite of transition from care services available in Queensland (Queensland Government 2023c). These other discretionary programs include Next Step Plus (support for young people aged 15–25 years who have been in care at any time after their 12th birthday), and the Transition and Post Care Support Program (support for young people aged 15–21 years with complex disability, mental health, high-risk behaviours and/or youth justice involvement at significant risk of homelessness). Young people with an OOHHC experience may also be eligible for Youth Housing and Reintegration Services (support for young people aged 12–21-years who have exited care and are at risk of homelessness) (Queensland Government 2023b, 2023d).

### 3.4.2 | Eligibility and Coverage

All care leavers turning 18 years old on or after 1 July 2023 are eligible for the EPCS program, including those continuing to live with their foster or kinship carer, and those exiting care to live independently. Care leavers who turned 18 before 1 July 2023 are not eligible for this program but can access discretionary aftercare programs such as Next Step Plus, for money management, housing, training and employment support (Queensland Government 2023a). In the 2023–2024 financial year, 823 people were, as of their 18th birthday, eligible for EPCS. Four hundred and sixty-four were non-Indigenous, 354 were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and five had unknown status (Queensland Government 2024).

### 3.4.3 | Funding

The EPCS program comprises three initiatives: (1) financial support for young people who live independently; (2) extension of the carer allowance if a young person continues to live with their foster or kinship carer post 18 years; and (3) practical support services for young people and the carer household.

The EPCS program provides a support package of \$16,000 per year to care leavers living independently until they turn 21 years to help meet their core living costs such as housing. That payment is not given directly to the young person to prevent the payment being considered as income and thus having implications for tax and the receipt of social security benefits. However, the Queensland Government specifies that the "administration of the financial support will be tailored and led by young adults to empower them... and to strengthen their own financial decision making capacity" (Queensland Government 2023a: 2). If young people remain living with their foster or kinship carer after their 18th birthday, the carer will continue to receive the fortnightly caring allowance of \$716.66 (as at 1 January 2024—these payments are indexed in line with CPI in January each year) until the young person turns 21 years old or moves into an independent living

arrangement. Prior to EPCS, carers could only continue to receive the caring allowance until the young person turned 19 years old (Queensland Government 2023a, 2023b).

Irrespective of whether the young person lives independently or with their foster/kinship carer, they also have access to practical support delivered by EPCS providers to assist in accessing health services, education and training as well as support to connect to family, community, culture and Country. Carers can also access services to develop their capacity to support the young person's transition to adulthood.

#### 3.4.4 | Language and Terms

The government refers to an extended care program that provides 'proactive and practical support' (Queensland Government 2023b: 1) intended to assist care leavers to develop the necessary educational and employment skills and opportunities to succeed in their adult lives. There continues to be a strong emphasis on encouraging care leavers to move promptly towards independence (Linard 2022; Queensland Government 2023b). Documentation about the EPCS also makes reference to 'culturally appropriate' support and assistance with 'connecting or maintaining connections to family, culture, Country and community' (Queensland Government 2023b: 2).

#### 3.4.5 | Housing

The EPCS financial support is aimed at enabling care leavers living independently to access 'safe, stable and secure housing' (Queensland Government 2023a: 2). However, the Queensland government does not seem to provide any specific housing.

### 3.5 | South Australia (SA)

South Australia had 291 care leavers in 2021–22 (AIHW 2023).

#### 3.5.1 | Chronology

The opposition Liberal Party promised during the March 2018 state election to fund foster care placements until age 21 years if they won government (Wright 2019). The SA Liberal Government then introduced a 'Stability in Family Based Care program' in January 2019, which enables young people who are in family based care placements to remain in their kinship or foster care placement until they turn 21.

#### 3.5.2 | Eligibility and Coverage

As of April 2024, there are 164 young people in the Stability in Family Based Care program. The fortnightly funding of carers for \$830.20 applies only to young people continuing to reside in foster or kinship care placements, and it is no longer available if the young person's income reaches or exceeds that

fortnightly amount. SA does not currently provide any guaranteed allowance for those exiting residential care or other care leavers living independently. However, they are piloting a Next Steps Pilot Service from 2022 to 2025. That targeted program assists 20 residential care leavers aged 17.5 years of age and above in the Adelaide metropolitan area with housing, living skills, education, training and employment, and community and cultural connections until they turn 21 years of age (Government of South Australia 2022). Discretionary Post Care Support Services are also available for young people who are 16.5 years and over, and these services include case management, counselling, information and advocacy to support young people who have lived in care for more than 6 months. Eleven young people are currently receiving Stability Post Care Individual Packages, and 85 young people are receiving the Over 18 Education Initiative that aims to enhance education and employment opportunities.

#### 3.5.3 | Funding

This program funds an allowance to foster and kinship carers of \$830.20 per fortnight. Additionally, the Next Steps Pilot Service has been funded for \$2.7 million over 3 years (Centacare Catholic Family Services 2022).

#### 3.5.4 | Language and Terms

The South Australian Government frames ongoing support for those living with foster and kinship carers as enhancing their social connections and their life skills in areas such as finances and budgeting, cooking, education and employment in order to prepare them for adult independence (Government of South Australia 2019, 2021).

#### 3.5.5 | Housing

The Next Steps Pilot Service assists a small group of care leavers who are judged to be at risk of homelessness and aims via a partnership with Housing Choices South Australia to enable them to access and maintain suitable housing (Government of South Australia 2022). However, there is no wider funding of programs to expand the housing options available to care leavers.

### 3.6 | Tasmania

Tasmania had 61 care leavers in 2021–2022 (AIHW 2023).

#### 3.6.1 | Chronology

In February 2018, both the Tasmanian Liberal Party Government and the opposition Labor Party agreed to extend supports for youth living in foster and kinship care till 21 years as part of their policy commitments entering the March 2018 state election (Dolan 2018). On their re-election, the Liberal Government

introduced extended carer payments commencing in June 2019 (Tasmanian Government 2022).

### 3.6.2 | Eligibility and Coverage

The Tasmanian Government funds a Transition to Independence Program for youth exiting foster or kinship care aged 18–20 years ending on their 21st birthday. Currently, 84 young people are in the program. Those leaving residential care are only eligible for a discretionary aftercare support program.

### 3.6.3 | Funding

The Tasmanian Government allocated nearly 3 million dollars (\$2977) for both 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 to fund the Transition to Independence Program. They are currently assessing funding allocation for future years (Tasmanian Government 2022). The payments are provided directly to foster carers and kinship carers. They are paid an allowance at the existing rate for foster carers of 12–17 year olds (the actual amount is not publicly listed) from 18 to 19 years, and then a reduced rate from 19 to 20 years, and a further reduced rate from 20 to 21 years (Tasmanian Government 2023b).

They also allocate minor funding to the discretionary aftercare program that includes support for residential care leavers. Participants in that program can access a one-off payment of \$2500 to assist participation in education or training, employment, family and social relationships, and engagement in sporting and leisure activities (Tasmanian Government 2023a).

### 3.6.4 | Language and Terms

The government refers to an ‘extended support’ program for care leavers and calls the post-18 payments ‘extended carer payments’ (Tasmanian Government 2022). But they also emphasise that the key objective of this funding is to promote the increasing self-reliance of youth to enable a smooth transition from care to independent adulthood based on active engagement in education and training (Tasmanian Government 2022, 2023b).

### 3.6.5 | Housing

One of the stated aims of the aftercare program is to assist care leavers to access accommodation and housing. However, it does not appear that the government provides any specific funding to access housing options. Rather, those young people needing assistance with housing are referred to NGOs such as the CREATE Foundation (Tasmanian Government 2023a); however, this referral may be inappropriate, given CREATE’s mandate is to provide systemic advocacy rather than service support to individual care leavers.

## 3.7 | Victoria

Victoria had 937 care leavers in 2021–2022 (AIHW 2023).

### 3.7.1 | Chronology

Victoria announced a trial extended care program to support 250 young people over 5 years in September 2018 (Anderson 2019). In November 2020, they announced that a universal extended care program would commence in January 2021 (Bhole 2020).

### 3.7.2 | Eligibility and Coverage

The Victorian program includes all youth exiting foster, kinship, residential or permanent care via the Better Futures program. As of December 2023, 1859 young people were participating in that program (Home Stretch campaign 2024).

### 3.7.3 | Funding

The government announced a budget commitment of \$64.7 million over 4 years. That funding allocates per annum approximately \$20,000 to \$27,000 to each care leaver. An Independent Accommodation Allowance is paid either to carers if the young person remains in care beyond 17 years, or alternatively to the young person either if they are leaving residential care or are not able to remain with their carer. That allowance is paid at \$16,065 per year or \$617 per fortnight. There is also flexible funding of up to \$1600 per year to help care leavers acquire housing, education, employment, health and well-being support, and advance community connections. Additionally, a caseworker is funded for up to \$9500 per year (Victorian Government 2022).

### 3.7.4 | Language and Terms

The Victorian government frames the program as empowering care leavers to access a gradual smooth transition from state care to adulthood, stating that “Every young person leaving care deserves to have the best start to their adult life, and it is important we arm them with the tools they need to live on their own two feet” (Victorian Government 2022).

### 3.7.5 | Housing

The Victorian Government prioritised expanding the housing options available to care leavers. The Independent Accommodation Allowance was introduced as “a contribution towards the day-to-day costs of housing, including rent, utilities, telephone and internet, in recognition of the lack of affordable housing options for young people transitioning from care, and their over-representation in the homeless population” (Victorian Government 2019: 1).

Nevertheless, the government recognised that while the Allowance and other supports advanced better housing outcomes, there continued to be limited housing options for residential care leavers. Consequently, a working group was established by the Department of Fairness, Families and Housing and Homes Victoria to identify improved pathways for meeting the housing needs of care leavers. As a result, the 2023 Budget announced funding of \$32.5 million over 4 years for establishment of a targeted ‘Housing First’ program to assist up to 225

residential care leavers to secure stable and affordable housing (Victorian Government 2023). But to date, the program details have not been released.

### 3.8 | Western Australia (WA)

WA had 356 care leavers in 2021–2022 (AIHW 2023).

#### 3.8.1 | Chronology

WA announced an initial extended care trial in October 2018 (Anglicare WA 2021). After the co-designed trial was found to be successful, they announced a universal extended care program in August 2022 (Weber 2022).

#### 3.8.2 | Eligibility and Coverage

The voluntary program, which is termed Home Stretch, funds all care leavers till the age of 21 years, both those remaining with a foster or kinship carer, and those living independently. As of December 2023, 240 young people were participating in the program (Home Stretch campaign 2024).

The WA Homestretch Model includes three core elements:

1. Transition Support—flexible, one-to-one support by a transition coach to enhance their personal skills and capacity.
2. Safety Net—the right to a visible and viable, secure safety net that ensures access to housing, foster care, health, education and life skills.
3. Support Circles—supporting a young person to establish an enduring network of personal, family and community connections.

The program was initially delivered via a partnership between Anglicare and the Aboriginal Yorganop Association foster care agency, and now has been extended to multiple non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Community controlled agencies across the state. That partnership reflects the high number of Aboriginal youth in and leaving the OOHHC system in WA (AIHW 2023) and a strong concern to ensure that the Home Stretch model meets the specific cultural needs of Aboriginal care leavers (WA Government 2023).

#### 3.8.3 | Funding

The WA government allocated \$37 million for the permanent rollout of the extended care program which supports care leavers with housing, education, education, job search and financial skills (Weber 2022). Care leavers living independently can access a \$450 per fortnight Housing Allowance payment. There is also a Staying on subsidy for those remaining with a carer, which is \$450 per fortnight for year one, and then it reduces to \$337 for Year two and \$225 for year three. Additionally, care leavers have access to a brokerage payment called 'Invest in Me' of \$2500 per year to fund key expenses such as education

(WA Government 2023). In April 2024, the WA Government announced additional funding of \$46.3 million over 4 years to expand the program (WA Government 2024).

#### 3.8.4 | Language and Terms

The WA model aims to develop the living skills of care leavers while enhancing their wider 'interdependent' connections with community and culture. The government highlights the rights of care leavers to access guaranteed assistance until 21 years, and to access further support until 25 years as required (WA Government 2023, 2024).

#### 3.8.5 | Housing

A principal purpose of the Housing Allowance is to enable access to 'safe and stable housing' (WA Government 2023). However, there does not seem to be any additional funding allocated to secure specific housing stock or options for care leavers.

## 4 | Discussion

Our mapping of extended care programs in the eight jurisdictions (see summary in Table 1) identified major commonalities and variations.

Most of the programs are quite recent and were only introduced between 2019 and 2023. New South Wales and Queensland were the final two jurisdictions to establish extended care services. The ACT was an exemplar given they introduced ongoing foster and kinship care payments in 2012, however, they only added assistance for residential care leavers in 2021. More recently, they became the first jurisdiction to legislate a 'right' to extended care support.

Six of the eight jurisdictions offer universal extended care programs that support young people exiting from foster, kinship and residential care. However, Tasmania and South Australia have not introduced support services for most young people leaving residential care, and Queensland restrict support to youth who left care and turned 18 years from 1 July 2023.

The funding of payments to care leavers or carers varies significantly from the higher allowances provided by Victoria and Queensland to the lower rates offered by NSW. But a number of jurisdictions do not list the rate paid. To date, there has been no completed independent evaluation of whether or not those rates are adequate to meet core housing and other needs, however, young people have consistently reported financial hardship post-care. The numbers granted support also vary significantly.

Most of the jurisdictions still frame their extended care provisions as seeking to advance a rapid transition from reliance on OOHHC to self-sufficient adult independence. Only Victoria, the ACT and Western Australia seem to recognise a need to plan longer-term support programs that will enable young people to transition to adulthood via a process of 'interdependence'.

**TABLE 1** | The forms of extended care in different jurisdictions.

Name of the jurisdiction and number of care leavers in 2021–2022 (AIHW 2023)	Extended care programs
Australian Capital Territory (ACT); 51	Introduced extended care for foster and kinship care in 2012 and extended to residential care leavers in May 2021 (ACT Government 2022). Legislated right to access extended care supports until 21 years in June 2024 (Stephen-Smith 2024)
New South Wales (NSW); 1329	Extended care program announced in November 2022. Allowance of \$261 per fortnight (New South Wales Government 2023).
Northern Territory (NT); 73	Updated legislation in 2021 provides practical and financial assistance to most care leavers till 22 years old (Northern Territory Government 2022)
Queensland; 918	Universal extended care program commenced in July 2023. Allowance of \$664 per fortnight, but only available to those who turned 18 years from July 2023 (Queensland Government 2023a)
South Australia (SA); 291	Funding for foster and kinship carers introduced in January 2019, but no guaranteed support for residential care leavers (Government of South Australia 2021)
Tasmania; 61	Funding for foster and kinship carers introduced in February 2018, but no guaranteed support for residential care leavers (Tasmanian Government 2023a, 2023b).
Victoria; 937	Universal extended care program commenced in January 2021. Allowance of \$617 per fortnight plus caseworker support (Victorian Government 2022)
Western Australia; 356	Universal extended care program commenced in January 2021 (Western Australian Government 2023)

Except for recent initiatives in Victoria, most of the jurisdictions have not taken any specific steps to expand housing stock and options for care leavers. Those exiting residential care or not able to remain with foster and kinship carers seem to have continuing vulnerabilities in accessing safe and affordable housing.

## 5 | Conclusion: Continuing Challenges and Opportunities

Further policy initiatives are arguably required to address the following challenges:

### 5.1 | Challenge One: Support for Young People Leaving Residential Group Home Care

Providing specific and tailored support for young people leaving residential care is particularly important in light of research, which has consistently demonstrated poorer outcomes among this group of young people compared to the broader care leaver population (Malvaso et al. 2016; Mendes, Bollinger, and Flynn 2023). These children and young people in residential care have often experienced less stable and more complex OOHHC trajectories and are often inadequately supported by formal service systems and thus may require more intensive, coordinated approaches in post-care support services.

There seems to be a case for jurisdictions to trial initiatives similar to the Staying Close scheme successfully introduced in England whereby residential care leavers are assisted to attain housing nearby their former group home and maintain links with their former carers and support networks (Dixon, Cresswell, and Ward 2020).

### 5.2 | Challenge Two: Payment Adequacy

Given the significant variations in extended care allowance rates (and eligibility) across the jurisdictions leaving some care leavers much better off than others, there is arguably a need for an independent authority such as the Productivity Commission to benchmark a uniform (adequately funded) model of extended care to be introduced by all states and territories. That uniform rate should be independently assessed across jurisdictions to ascertain whether it is sufficient to meet the minimal housing needs of those care leavers unable to remain with carers.

### 5.3 | Challenge Three: Housing Stock

Given the lack of accessible housing for many care leavers including particularly those unable to remain with foster and kinship carers, it seems evident that new forms of supportive housing should be established for the exclusive use of this cohort. That housing stock needs to be allocated in both urban and

rural/remote areas, and include culturally responsive housing options for First Nations care leavers.

## 5.4 | Challenge Four: Intersectional Inequalities

Given that many care leavers experience life-long intersectional inequalities in areas such as health, housing, education, justice and employment compared to their non-care peers, they may require ongoing assistance from social and community networks and supports well beyond the age of 21 years (McDowall 2022). Australian policy makers should consider whether the programs currently funded until 21 years need to be extended to at least 25 years to address these inequalities.

## 5.5 | Challenge Five: Intelligent Data Infrastructure

As more children are placed in OOHc and for longer periods of time, young people are transitioning out of care at greater numbers than ever before. Although the focus of this paper and related policy debates concern children leaving care at age 18, the reality is that care leavers are not a homogenous group as they can be placed into care for varying amounts of time and transition in and out of care at different ages. We currently know very little about the number of challenges experienced by young people who leave care at different life stages and have limited understanding of how these complex pathways through the care system impact on outcomes later in life. This is mainly due to a lack of reliable, whole-of-population linked administrative data that can be used by researchers to track experiences of children through the care system and their needs once they leave care. This information is critical to enable targeting of resources to ensure care leavers are supported and to improve outcomes.

## 5.6 | Limitations

Our study mostly relies on accessible policy documents on state and territory government websites. We did not directly consult with any service users or providers as to how effectively the extended care programs have been applied and implemented. It may be that significant ‘implementation gaps’ exist that are reducing the effectiveness of the stated policies (Munro et al. 2024). It is also possible that there is a lag between policies published on government websites and more recent policy and program changes. Additionally, many foster carers and kin carers and care leavers may have failed to claim allowances and other supports for which they were eligible. However, it was not the purpose of this paper to consider program implementation or efficacy, but rather to describe the current state of affairs, identify commonalities and differences, and identify opportunities for strengthening supports for care leavers.

### Author Contributions

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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