

Evaluating the Premier's Youth Initiative: A Yfoundations Research Bite

Key points

Overall, the evaluation found that PYI was successful at preventing homelessness after the age of 18 for a specific cohort: young people with a history of homelessness while in OOHC.

- Among the young people who became homeless after the age of 18, those who had received PYI had fewer repeat contacts with Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS), than those who had not received PYI.
- Not all young people benefitted from PYI. Indigenous young people and young people leaving care from residential care settings were still at greater risk of experiencing homelessness after the age of 18.
- Supporting young people with disabilities to secure and maintain appropriate accommodation was also a challenge for the program.

Introduction

The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) rolled out the Premier's Youth Initiative (PYI) in 2017, to help prevent homelessness among young people leaving statutory out of home care (OOHC). A three-year evaluation of the program, completed by the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI), was publicly released in March 2021. This Research Bite provides an overview of the key findings of the evaluation, which assessed the impact of PYI on young people's wellbeing and housing outcomes.

What is PYI?

Young people leaving care are particularly vulnerable to homelessness (Australia Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020). Estimates suggest that one in three young people leaving OOHC experience homelessness within 12 months of leaving care (McDowall, 2009). This can be due to a lack of support networks, a lack of transition planning, and limited suitable and secure accommodation (Brackertz et al. 2018; Campo & Commerford, 2016).

PYI aims to improve transitions to adulthood for young people leaving OOHC. It offers support to eligible care leavers aged between 16 years and 9 months and 17 years and 6 months, including:

- a **Personal Advisor (PA)** who acts as a central contact and mentor and gives young people advice on how to live independently. The PA supports the young person with their personal and leaving care plan goals.
- an **Education and Employment Mentor** who helps participants to define their employment and educational goals, monitors their progress, and connects them to educational and employment opportunities and support networks.
- a **Transitional Support Worker** who supports some young people in the program to manage and set goals for their accommodation needs. This includes monitoring their plan progress and connecting young people with community housing providers (CHP) and real estate agents.
- **Subsidised head-leasing accommodation** will be provided for some young people. This is when a legal entity, such as a CHP or a government agency, rents a property for a young person. Clients will gain access to single occupant or shared accommodation.
- **Brokerage** funding to purchase essential items or services to help clients transition to independent living.

The eligibility criteria, which is designed to target the most vulnerable young people, includes those:

- leaving residential OOHC
- leaving OOHC with placement instability
- leaving a permanent OOHC placement
- leaving OOHC after being in care for 12 months or longer



Young people cannot be referred, rather they have to be approached by a PYI provider directly.

PYI is currently offered by seven organisations in the following regions:

- Central Coast and Hunter (Samaritans)
- New England (Foundations Care)
- Illawarra Shoalhaven (Southern Youth & Family Services)
- Nepean Blue Mountains (Platform Youth Services)
- Mid North Coast & Northern NSW (Uniting)
- Western NSW (Veritas House)
- South Western Sydney (St Saviours)

PYI is provided by non-government services who applied through a tendering process.

How was PYI evaluated?

To determine the impact of PYI, researchers at the CEI gathered data on the program participants between 2017 and 2020. Their outcomes were compared to a control group made up of young people who met PYI eligibility criteria but lived in areas where the program wasn't available.

The CEI also conducted eight focus groups with a total of 36 PYI participants, as well as focus groups and interviews with PYI providers, CHPs and representatives from DCJ. In addition, they surveyed six PYI provider organisations to gather implementation and expense details and administrative data.

Did PYI reduce homelessness?

The evaluation considered any use of SHS involving the provision of, or request for, accommodation an incidence of homelessness. Its findings strongly suggest that PYI prevented some high-risk young people from becoming homeless after the age of 18.

The impact of PYI was particularly apparent when compared to the control group. The control group were 182% more likely to become homeless after the age of 18, compared to young people who had no interactions with the homelessness system while in OOHC.

But in the PYI group, those who'd accessed SHS during their time in OOHC were no more likely to become homeless after the age of 18, than those who hadn't. These findings suggest that PYI is helping break the cycle of homelessness for high-risk young people leaving OOHC.

However, not all young people receiving PYI support benefitted in the same way. Indigenous young people and young people leaving care from residential care settings were still at greater risk of experiencing homelessness and seeking SHS after age 18.

Young people who had experienced homelessness while in OOHC

Received PYI



Just as likely to become homeless after turning 18, compared to young people who hadn't experienced homelessness while in OOHC

Didn't receive PYI



182% more likely to become homeless after turning 18, compared to young people who hadn't experienced homelessness while in OOHC

Young people leaving residential care were 166% more likely to receive SHS after age 18 than young people leaving other forms of care, regardless of whether they benefitted from PYI. And young Indigenous people were 89% more likely to receive SHS than non-Indigenous young people, regardless of whether they had been PYI clients or not. PYI providers also reported that supporting young people with disability to secure and maintain appropriate accommodation was particularly difficult.

Cost of providing PYI services

\$15,145

The unit cost was \$15,145 across six providers. However, this varied between providers ranging from \$10,606 to \$22,732. This amount was largely due to salaries.

What did young people think of PYI?

Young people's feedback on PYI was overwhelmingly positive. Participants valued the PYI workers' dependability, and the choice and control that the program provided. Many wanted to meet with their mentors more often and wished that they could have accessed PYI from a younger age.

Enablers

The evaluation indicated that a close working relationship between the housing provider and the core PYI team was an important factor for the housing success of young people. CEI also felt that giving clients more choice and control was really important for positive outcomes.

Barriers

The CEI found that a lack of communication and cooperation between PYI and OOHC providers caused significant program and system inefficiencies.

Young people's characterised their experiences with OOHC as 'impersonal, transactional, compliance-driven and sometimes adversarial.' On top of these negative perceptions, young people also felt that the OOHC caseworkers were not delivering the services they were entitled to. This was substantiated by the evaluation, which found that approximately 30% of young people in PYI did not have leaving care plan when they began the PYI program.

Limitations

The CEI acknowledged several limitations with the study and considers its findings to be tentative. It felt that a longer period of follow-up and better measures of homelessness were needed to be certain of the results.

Where to from here?

Based on their findings, the CEI made the following recommendations:

- Maintain the eligibility criteria for PYI to ensure that the program reaches the most vulnerable young people
- Require that leaving care plans be recorded to allow DCJ to measure the plan's implementation and quality
- Incentivise collaboration between OOHC and PYI providers to improve outcomes for young people in PYI
- Ensure that mental health and physical disability assessments are conducted before young people leave OOHC
- Commence PYI earlier
- Provide young people with more options for choice and control over their lives (e.g. choice of housing type)
- Commission a follow up evaluation to analyse long-term effects
- Provide additional clarity to PYI providers about core practices and program guidelines

Endnotes

- Australia Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020 Specialist homelessness services Annual Report (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/homelessness-and-homelessness-services>
- Brackertz, N., Wilkinson, A., & Davison J., (2018). Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change. Melbourne, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.
- Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Melbourne, Child Family Community Australia information exchange, Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- McDowall J., J., (2009). CREATE report card 2009, Transition from Care: Tracking Progress. Sydney, Create Foundation.