

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Upwards of, and possibly more than 500 000 Australians experienced care in an orphanage, Home or other form of out-of-home care during the last century. As many of these people have had a family it is highly likely that every Australian either was, is related to, works with or knows someone who experienced childhood in an institution or out of home care environment.

Children were placed in care for a myriad of reasons including being orphaned; being born to a single mother; family dislocation from domestic violence, divorce or separation; family poverty and parents' inability to cope with their children often as a result of some form of crisis or hardship. Many children were made wards of the state after being charged with being uncontrollable, neglected or in moral danger, not because they had done anything wrong, but because circumstances in which they found themselves resulted in them being status offenders. Others were placed in care through private arrangements usually involving payment to the Home. Irrespective of how children were placed in care, it was not their fault.

Children were placed in a range of institutions including orphanages, Homes, industrial or training schools that were administered variously by the state, religious bodies and other charitable or welfare groups.

The Committee received hundreds of graphic and disturbing accounts about the treatment and care experienced by children in out-of-home care. Many care leavers showed immense courage in putting intensely personal life stories on the public record. Their stories outlined a litany of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and often criminal physical and sexual assault. Their stories also told of neglect, humiliation and deprivation of food, education and healthcare. Such abuse and assault was widespread across institutions, across States and across the government, religious and other care providers.

But the overwhelming response as to treatment in care, even among those that made positive comments was the lack of love, affection and nurturing that was never provided to young children at critical times during their emotional development.

The long term impact of a childhood spent in institutional care is complex and varied. However, a fundamental, ongoing issue is the lack of trust and security and lack of interpersonal and life skills that are acquired through a normal family upbringing, especially social and parenting skills. A lifelong inability to initiate and maintain stable, loving relationships was described by many care leavers who have undergone multiple relationships and failed marriages. Many cannot form trust in relationships and remain loners, never marrying or living an isolated existence.

It is not just the impact that tragic childhood experiences have had for the care leavers. Their children and families have also felt the impact, which can then flow through to future generations.

The legacy of their childhood experiences for far too many has been low self-esteem, lack of confidence, depression, fear and distrust, anger, shame, guilt, obsessiveness, social anxieties, phobias, and recurring nightmares. Many care leavers have tried to block the pain of their past by resorting to substance abuse through life long alcohol and drug addictions. Many turned to illegal practices such as prostitution, or more serious law-breaking offences which have resulted in a large percentage of the prison population being care leavers.

For far too many the emotional problems and depression have resulted in contemplation of or actual suicide. Anecdotal evidence has shown an abnormally large percentage of suicides among care leavers.

Care leavers harbour powerful feelings of anger, guilt and shame; have a range of ongoing physical and mental health problems – often directly associated with beatings or lack of health care as a child; and struggle with employment and housing issues.

A large number of positive stories were heard by the Committee from people who with a great deal of love and support from partners, families and friends are now able to better come to terms with their past and live fuller and more satisfying adult lives.

The Committee considers that there has been wide scale unsafe, improper and unlawful care of children, a failure of duty of care, and serious and repeated breaches of statutory obligations.

The Committee further considers that many comments in recent years by governments, churches and care providers reveal a complete lack of understanding of or acceptance of responsibility for the level of neglect, abuse and assault that occurred in their institutions.

The Committee believes that governments, the Churches and agencies should issue formal statements acknowledging their role in past institutional care policies and practices and the impact this had on the lives of many care leavers. These statements should express sorrow and apologise for the physical, psychological and social harm caused as a result of the care leavers' experiences as children in institutional care. The Committee also considers that these acknowledgments must be accompanied by other positive measures as recommended in the report to ensure that they are not regarded as merely 'empty gestures' by the care leavers and the community generally.

The Committee considered various reparation and redress schemes including access to civil litigation and the legal and other barriers to pursuing claims through the civil system. The Committee examined international and Australian reparation schemes before concluding that a national reparations fund for victims of institutional and out of home care abuse should be established.

The Committee also considered the internal church processes for dealing with allegations of abuse and their commitment to address past grievances. Such processes need to be open, rigorous and accountable; however many of those that do exist are

deficient in these areas and so the Committee has made a number of recommendations to improve transparency and accountability.

Questions of identity both for themselves and of other family members through locating and accessing records has become very important for many care leavers. A range of issues are discussed including locating and accessing records (overcoming FOI hurdles and barriers), the lack of or destruction of personal files, the quality of record keeping at the time and the nature of information and personal comments contained in records, and the need for support when care leavers are viewing their records.

The provision of services to address the needs of care leavers is seriously lacking at many levels. The Committee discusses many issues surrounding what services need to be provided or improved, and how and by whom should they be provided. In particular, support and advocacy services, counselling and the need for specialised counselling services, and programs to tackle health and ageing, housing and homelessness, and adult literacy and numeracy and other education services are addressed.

Recognition of care leavers and their history in Australia in more tangible ways is discussed through the erection of memorials, creation of memorial gardens, construction of heritage centres and in other forms such as reunions. To ensure that the experiences of care leavers are not lost to current and future generations, the Committee recommends that an oral history project be undertaken to collect life stories and that the Museum of Australia should consider the establishment of a permanent exhibition as part of its collection.

Finally the Committee recommends that research needs to be undertaken into a number of areas including the role of institutional care in Australia's social history, the social and economic impact and cost, and interdisciplinary research into the relationship between child protection and welfare dependency. This research needs to be combined with the establishment of courses of study at the tertiary level focusing on these and a range of related subject issues, since the links between how a child is raised and their totality as an adult will continue to influence the creation of policies affecting all Australians.

This report is not just concerned with the past, it is very much about the present and it informs the future of our nation.

