

Out of sight

Systemic inquiry into children and young people who are absent or missing from residential care

Report summary

About us

The Commission for Children and Young People ('the Commission') advocates to improve how the Victorian Government and services keep children and young people safe and protect and respect their rights.

About our inquiry

Our *Out of sight* inquiry looked at how often children and young people are absent or missing from residential care, why they are absent or missing, what happens when they are, and what can be done to better respond to this issue.

The inquiry report was tabled in the Victorian Parliament on 24 June 2021.

Our findings drew on:

- interviews with children and young people who are frequently reported 'absent', in addition to interviews done with 200 children and young people as part of our 2019 [In our own words](#) inquiry
- interviews with a range of workers and other stakeholders (89 people across 55 individual and group sessions)
- review of client files and incident reports relating to children and young people who are absent or missing
- data analysis of incident reports, out-of-home care data and warrants issued for children and young people when they left residential care.

We found that the current model of residential care is not meeting children and young people's fundamental need for human connection or, in many cases, safety. Consequently, many children and young people leave residential care to find connection elsewhere, with family, friends or through sexually or criminally exploitative relationships.

The lack of connection they experience within the current system highlights the need for a stronger relationship-based model of care.

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How often are children and young people absent or missing from residential care?

Children and young people are absent or missing from residential care at an alarming rate, but currently available data is only showing part of the issue.

In the 18 months to 31 March 2020, 388 warrants were granted each month on average authorising police to take children and young people who were absent or missing from residential care into 'safe custody'. This equates to nearly one warrant per child or young person in residential care each month, which is approximately 75 times the rate of missing person reports for children and young people aged 13 to 17 reported in 2016 research across Australia.

We found that current systems for data collection, reporting and oversight do not provide adequate statewide information to effectively understand and address the issue of children and young people who are absent or missing from out-of-home care.

While reliable data is limited, it is clear that the actual rate of children and young people who go absent or missing from residential care is greater than current sources report, and is significantly higher than that of children and young people in the general population.

Why are children and young people absent or missing from residential care?

When I left the resi, it's just about the workers [not] being there for the kids. (Carina, residential care, 17, Aboriginal)

Systemic problems in the residential care system contribute to children and young people being absent or missing from care.

Our inquiry found that a key reason for children and young people going absent or missing was a lack of connection to carers, fellow residents and residential care places. A range of flaws in the model of care prevent children and young people from establishing genuine connections.

We found that a lack of connection in residential care leads children and young people to seek connections in the community with friends or family. For some children and young people, reliance on drugs and alcohol contributes to them going absent or missing from residential care.

Many of these problems reflect the fact that the child protection and out-of-home care systems are under pressure and not designed or funded to provide the level and type of care required to encourage children and young people to stay in their placements.

What happens to children and young people when they are missing or absent?

I was using ice and methamphetamines, so I was going out to use drugs and see people using those drugs to get drugs off them. I was doing sexual favours for money, so I could get money to get the drugs. (Colette, residential care, 17)

Our inquiry found children and young people suffered a range of harms while unaccounted for, including sexual and criminal exploitation, rape and assaults, substance abuse or accidental injuries. These can further traumatise children and young people, making it more difficult for them to heal and thrive.

Often the harm a child or young person suffers is not known to others unless the child or young person discloses what has happened while they have been absent or missing. The same factors that lead to them leaving care, namely a lack of safety in or connection to carers or the home, also prevent disclosures.

The risks children and young people face and the harm they suffer when they are absent or missing from residential care may be underestimated due to a perception that they are 'street-wise' and able to look after themselves. However, this does not adequately recognise the symptoms and impacts of trauma and neglect and, in particular, how trauma can increase the likelihood of high-risk behaviours in young people and their exploitation by others.

Our inquiry showed that among some frontline staff, including police, there was a limited understanding of how the experiences and circumstances of these children and young people can impact their decisions and behaviour.

How does the system respond to a child or young person being absent or missing?

Sometimes [the police pick me up]. They chuck me in the back of the divvy, it's not very nice. I'm not a criminal. (Leila, residential care, 15)



Our inquiry found that children and young people who are absent or missing from residential care are often not treated with the same urgency and care as other children and young people.

Historically, children who left care were seen to be 'absconding' and deserving of punishment. The legacy of these attitudes can be seen today. Other factors that contribute to an inadequate response include service pressures, limited staff and a sense of fatigue and helplessness among frontline staff, including carers and police.

Building connection with children and young people in residential care is key to supporting them to remain in placement. Central to this is the role of care teams and planning, response to child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation and therapeutic interventions. This inquiry found that:

- current care team functioning and planning is inconsistent and in many cases inadequate, departmental planning tools are not used to their potential, and evidence of well-planned and timely support for children and young people moving into and between residential care houses was limited
- strategies to tackle child sexual exploitation have demonstrated positive results but key, multi-agency strategies have not been sustained
- responses to criminal exploitation are limited and not well coordinated
- effective and consistent therapeutic support is not available to most children and young people in residential care.

Safeguarding children and young people while they are absent or missing from care and returning them to their placement are also key parts of an effective service system response. Our inquiry found:

- the absence of a clear risk assessment framework and poor information-sharing limits the ability to develop a complete understanding of the risks to children and young people and the best strategies to locate them and ensure their safe return
- inconsistent use of care-based strategies to encourage children and young people back to care (by calling and showing concern for their safety, looking for them, contacting their friends or family and offering warm meals and comfort on their return)
- the use of police to locate children was not always appropriate or effective and risks stigmatising them and increasing their involvement in the criminal justice system
- services were not consistently having 'return to care' conversations, which are designed to better understand why children and young people leave care and create a safe space for children and young people to disclose any harms they may have experienced while absent or missing.

In some instances, children and young people may be placed in secure welfare services, which are short-term secure facilities used as a last resort for children deemed to be at substantial and immediate risk of harm. The inquiry found insufficient evidence that these secure placements were used to improve support and safety planning for children and young people who were frequently absent or missing.

Children who are absent or missing from care are more likely to have frequent contact with police, either through the process of returning them to their care placement or due to the activities they may be engaged in while outside care. This can increase their involvement in the criminal justice system and have a significant impact on their future.

Our recommendations for reform

I think DHHS need to have a different approach to kids. Work with them, not against them. Not going out and putting a warrant on them. (Meredith, formerly residential care, 17)

Based on the findings of our inquiry, we made 18 recommendations to support children and young people to remain in care, to safeguard them when they are absent or missing, and to support them when they return. These build on recommendations we have made in previous inquiries including our 2019 [In our own words](#) inquiry.

We recommend systemic reforms to redesign Victoria's model of care, including:

- actions to shift historical attitudes and language around 'absconding' towards a care-based culture that better recognises the reasons why children and young people leave care and the risks they face when they do
- a new, relationship-based, trauma-informed residential model of care that:
 - strengthens relationships between carers and children and young people in care and ensures their placements feel safe and welcoming
 - improves safe and supported connections to friends, family and the broader community (particularly for Aboriginal children and young people)
 - is guided by effective planning, information-sharing and risk assessment tools that care teams are trained and supported to apply

- implementing an integrated trauma-informed approach across all agencies, including Victoria Police.

We also recommend urgent reforms to better meet the immediate needs of children and young people, including:

- funding for coordinated statewide approaches to addressing child sexual exploitation and a new approach to tackling criminal exploitation that prevents abuse and holds perpetrators accountable
- reduced reliance on police and other measures that are experienced as punitive or stigmatising by children and young people
- streamlined processes and roles for missing person reports and warrants
- improvement to return to care conversations to encourage continuous improvement in how care is provided and to ensure any disclosures of harm can be acted upon
- increased monitoring and reporting of information relating to children and young people in secure welfare services who are frequently absent or missing from care
- improvements to information management and data collection to allow for more meaningful oversight and accountability.

More information



[Out of sight inquiry report](#) (4.8MB PDF)