Our shame: 50,000 kids adrift

REBECCA PUDDY

Of the children in care, one in 20 are in residential care, having washed around the system after not finding secure places with kin or foster carers. In South Australia and Victoria, separate investigations over the past year have found children in residential care were vulnerable to sexual abuse from predators, including from pedophiles and foster carer Shannon McCoole, who was sentenced to 35 years' jail for the sexual abuse of seven young children.

An Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report shows a record 320,169 notifications in 2014-15, with only half of those reports investigated and just 60 per cent of those substantiated. The dramatic increase in child-protection reports has prompted state governments to launch recruitment campaigns for new foster carers. There are 26,872 registered foster carers in Australia, with demand for carers far outstripping supply.

For Donna Scott, who has fostered 120 children in her northern Adelaide home over 12 years, raising children is like gardening you get a seed and watch it grow. "My kids don't like the word fostering, so we do a lot of gardening in our house," she said. "You don't do it for the money. Carers are volunteers — when they age out of the system at 18 they have nothing, no superannuation.

Over the years, she has noticed an increasing number of children coming into her care who have experienced domestic violence. "They come in quite scared and, as a parent, as soon as you raise your voice you can see it in their eyes" she said. "You then change the way you do things to make sure they feel safe," she said.

The head of South Australia's child-protection body Families SA, Etienne Scheepers, said children were coming into care at a younger age and "we're trying to work out why". "Fundamentally, there is a big challenge for our community in dealing with child protection," Mr Scheepers said.

But he said community-based, early intervention for at-risk families was the key. "We provide programs that support parenting but prevention in child protection is supporting families across the community," he said.

NSW-based foster agency Barnardos Australia strongly advocates for a greater role for foster parents so that they become permanent guardians. "When a court decides they can never go home, you are condemning them to a life of moving," chief executive Deirdre Cheers said. "The order needs permanency and the best form of permanency is open adoption."

System blind to plight of teens after foster care

REBECCA PUDDY

Young adults leaving foster care need to be monitored by state governments because there is little known about their health, employment and social outcomes, Monash University researchers say.

In a 14-month examination of the barriers faced by young people leaving care, to be released today, researchers found Aboriginal people were more likely than their non-Aboriginal counterparts to leave foster care early or abandoned.

Associate professor Philip Mendes said outcomes for both cohorts moving out of foster care were similar, in that they struggled to find housing and jobs, and to make social connections. But young Aboriginal people had the added burden of cultural responsibilities included caring for siblings.

The reports from the service providers and young people were that many of the outcomes were similar in terms of securing a house, progressing education and employment and the like, but what was very evident was a transition really depends on resilience and the structural supports that are in place," Professor Mendes said.

"With indigenous care leavers, the communities and support groups are very important. "The support are not meeting the needs because there is a very high number of indigenous people leaving care and the Aboriginal community-organised organisations are not being funded anywhere near enough to meet their needs."

The federal government committed funding in the budget for a trial to help with the transition of 70 to 80 young people leaving foster care as part of the third action plan of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children.

A 2013 report found those leaving care, 35 per cent were homeless in the first year, 29 per cent worked and 70 per cent were dependent on benefits.

Professor Mendes, who has looked at the transition of foster kids out of care for the past 17 years, said that unlike other Western countries, there was no monitoring of outcomes for young people leaving foster care or mandatory support.

"Given the facts we know they (Aboriginal people) are about 28 per cent of the group in care from 15 to 17 years we need to know whether there are any differences in outcomes for them," he said.