

Important Records

There's a common expectation among Care Leavers that individual files were created containing all their relevant records. However, documented information about a person is most often spread across sets of records, and a person's 'file' comprises extracts brought together from a number of different records.

Case files and admission and discharge registers are key records for Care Leavers, containing vital information about the child, their family, how they came into 'care', and sometimes information about their experiences in 'care'. Photographs are records of great interest and significance to Care Leavers.

However, other types of records can contain significant and relevant information, and possibly contain the answers to the questions Care Leavers want answered. It is often the case that this significant information is to be found in 'administrative' records, which might seem not to be relevant to Care Leavers.

In the first round of Records Access Documentation grants (2012), one organisation used the funds to document minutes of meetings and matrons' reports. In these records, the organisation further identified and indexed information about individual children (including incidents, health issues, court appearances, medical and dental treatment received). The organisation realised that this was the "type of information that is highly sought after by Care Leavers wanting to know more about their childhood". As well, health records can be extremely relevant for later-life issues faced by Care Leavers.

As another example, financial records such as receipts for maintenance payments or reimbursements can be crucial evidence for Care Leavers – sometimes providing the only recorded proof that they were in 'care' at a given date (particularly when other records have been destroyed or lost). Information in seemingly peripheral records can be incredibly valuable!

We encourage organisations to do an archival survey of all records in their custody, and to create basic, high level documentation about the records. The survey will give you a grasp of the extent and nature of all material in your custody, and help identify where targeted project work will have the most benefit.

It's important to know that not all information related to Care Leavers is found in registers and case files, and to take a holistic view of the records in a collection. When organisations learn more about and document all of the records in a collection, Care Leavers seeking access to information important to them can have better outcomes. An understanding of the records, the processes that led to their creation, and the way they have been managed (or not) over time, can help organisations better understand where information about a child may have been recorded.

We give this explanation before providing these broad descriptions of the kinds of records that are likely to be significant to Care Leavers. When thinking about 'significance', it's important to have an open mind about what records Care Leavers are interested in, and where crucial information might be found.

Records of significance include:

- Records of admission and discharge
- Case files
- Photographs – buildings, exterior and interior, and people (staff, children, whether identified by name or not)
- Minutes of meetings of management committees, boards, staff
- Superintendent, matrons, cottage mothers reports, diaries
- Annual reports

- Internal publications – newsletters, circulars
- Policy and procedure manuals
- Staff records
- Medical records
- Holiday host records
- Financial records
- Maintenance payment registers or files
- Death and burial records
- Occurrence books, log books, incident reports, punishment books
- Visitors books, movement books, leave books
- Correspondence files relating to children (with families, the Department etc.), and other administrative records
- Punishment books
- Baptismal, confirmation, sacramental registers
- Returns – weekly, monthly, quarterly returns of children
- School records
- Menu records
- Religious registers
- Records that describe daily life
- Objects/ephemera from the homes, including fundraising material, cots, toys, linen, signs, books, toys

There are other types of records that can provide a wealth of information about the life of the person who was in care. This is particularly important where welfare records are scant or non-existent.

Information may be found in historical sources not necessarily to do with the 'welfare system', eg

- Military records
- School records
- Police records
- Electoral rolls
- Street directories
- Births, deaths and marriages
- Baptisms
- Cemeteries
- Parliamentary debates
- Genealogical sources
- Contemporary newspapers
- Scrapbooks of press clippings

[Trove](#), at the National Library of Australia, can be a good place to start research, along with the public records offices in each state and territory.

Genealogical societies and online genealogical resources can be a good source of information about these types of records.

Many care leavers have written their own histories. These memoirs and autobiographies provide the history of child welfare from the perspective of the people most affected. Inquiries like [Bringing them Home](#), and [Forgotten Australians](#) received hundreds of submissions from people who had been in 'care' as children, and you can read their stories.

Books, articles and websites that provide a historical background about homes, organisations, and child welfare in general are linked from each institution page.

The importance for all of us having a story about our origins helps explain why accessing records is so crucial for those who grew up in institutional care; many become historians of the self.

[\[Murray et al, *After the orphanage: life beyond the children's home* \(2009\)\]](#)

Organisational and administrative records

Valuable insights and information can be found in other types of records held by organisations. Organisational records (such as annual reports, minutes of meetings, and photographs) provide background information about the institution where you lived, help you to contextualise and make sense of the details on your personal file, or provide missing information and memories where those files are lost. This context provided by organisational records can be just as valuable as records on a personal file.

Staff files and minutes of meetings

These type of records give information about staff members who were employed at different periods in time, about the governance of 'care' providers, and background about the key decisions made at the institution while you were there. Although it is not always the case, information about particular children sometimes appears in these types of records.

Superintendent reports

The superintendent of an institution was often responsible for making regular reports with details of occurrences at the institution. The names of children and details of a particular incidents can be found in these reports.

Annual reports

Annual reports can be a rich source of information about an organisation, and the institutions and out-of-home care programs. They often contain photographs of buildings as well as people. Annual reports contain information about the finances and governance of an organisation, and news from the previous year.

The photos and other information in annual reports may inform you about your life, however these reports were created as a positive report into the institution and the content, including photographs, may reflect that. The voices of children are very rarely heard and negative events are often absent or excused. .

The statistics in annual reports are generally accurate, and can provide insights into how children in need of care were treated, and how external circumstances (like war, epidemics, economic circumstances etc) could affect children's welfare. They are also records which are likely to have been kept and preserved by an organisation, or even housed in some public library collections.

Organisational histories

Many of the major 'care' providing organisations have published histories, in many cases 'commissioned' by the organisation itself. Because of this, and similar to annual reports, these histories may put positively represent a history that you remember quite differently. They may emphasise the stories of staff members and benefactors, rather than the lives of the children being cared for. Published histories also contain a lot of information about organisations, their timelines, their changing approaches to child welfare, and can be a digest of precious photographs and documents.

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/child-welfare-records/important-records/>