

Why are so many Victorian kids running away from residential care during COVID-19?

ABC Gippsland / By Kellie Lazzaro

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In April there were 190 out of home missing children reports, an increase of 30 per cent compared to April 2019. (ABC News)

COVID-19 stay at home rules have led to a sharp increase in the number of vulnerable children deciding to run away from their residential care homes.

Victoria Police has received 190 reports of children missing from out-of-home care during April, a 30 per cent increase on the same month last year.

Commissioner for Children and Young People, Liana Buchanan said children in care were running away during the COVID-19 pandemic for a range of reasons.

"Residential care can be a pretty unsafe and unsettling place to live," she said.

"Now if you put on top of that a requirement that you've got to stay in your residential care unit 24/7 — you can't get out to school, you can't get out to see your friends, you can't have the normal contact hours visits with your parents — the reality of residential care has become even harder."

An [inquiry into why hundreds of children go missing](#) from the state's residential care system each year will now be expanded to look specifically at the consequences of COVID-19.

Key points:

- In April there were 190 reports of children who went missing from out-of-home care
- Children are running away from residential care due to the consequences of stay at home rules
- A Victorian inquiry into missing children will be expanded to consider effects of COVID-19

"I was already worried about the number of kids who go missing from residential care," Ms Buchanan said.

"We know that when kids go missing for extended periods they are highly likely to be caught up in some kind of crime, either as a victim most often, or maybe some offending.

"We know that some kids get caught up in sex exploitation so we were already worried about the high levels of kids going missing."

There are between 430 and 450 children living in statutory out-of-home care at any one time in Victoria because they are unable to live safely in their family home.

The children are typically placed in four bedroom residential units staffed by shift workers.

"Now they are faced with all of the kids in that unit being at home all of the time, with all of the behaviours, all of the issues, all of the dynamics in that house that play out," Ms Buchanan said.

"You can only imagine the situation has become worse for those children."

Ms Buchanan said since COVID-19 children have been unable to have face-to-face visits with their families and case managers.

"And I can imagine for some young people, their drive to see a parent or a sibling will be so strong that that might prompt them to leave their unit."

Resi-care kids getting fined

Ms Buchanan said she had heard instances of children from residential care, being fined \$1,652 by Victoria Police for breaching social distancing rules.

Berry Street CEO Michael Perusco said vulnerable children were likely running away from their residential units to see their friends, parents, siblings, and grandparents.

Mr Perusco said Berry Street had experimented with ways to help children maintain their emotional support networks.

"Zoom is playing a really important role in allowing young people to connect with family and also the other services that they rely upon, whether that's case management or psychological support," he said.



Commissioner Liana Buchanan says a review of the sector will now be expanded to include the affects of COVID-19 on children in care. (Supplied: Victorian Law Reform Commission)

"We've also put in place a whole lot of activities to try to help keep things interesting — exercise and drumming sessions, vegetable gardening.

"With the support of our donors we've tried to come up with a range of ways to make what is a challenging time more pleasant and give children more reason to stay."

Commissioner Liana Buchanan said the inquiry into missing children will be tabled in the Victorian Parliament in the second half of the year.

Support services:

[Kids Helpline](#): 1800 551 800

[Lifeline \(24 hour crisis line\)](#): 131 114

Victorian Child Protection Crisis Line: 131 278