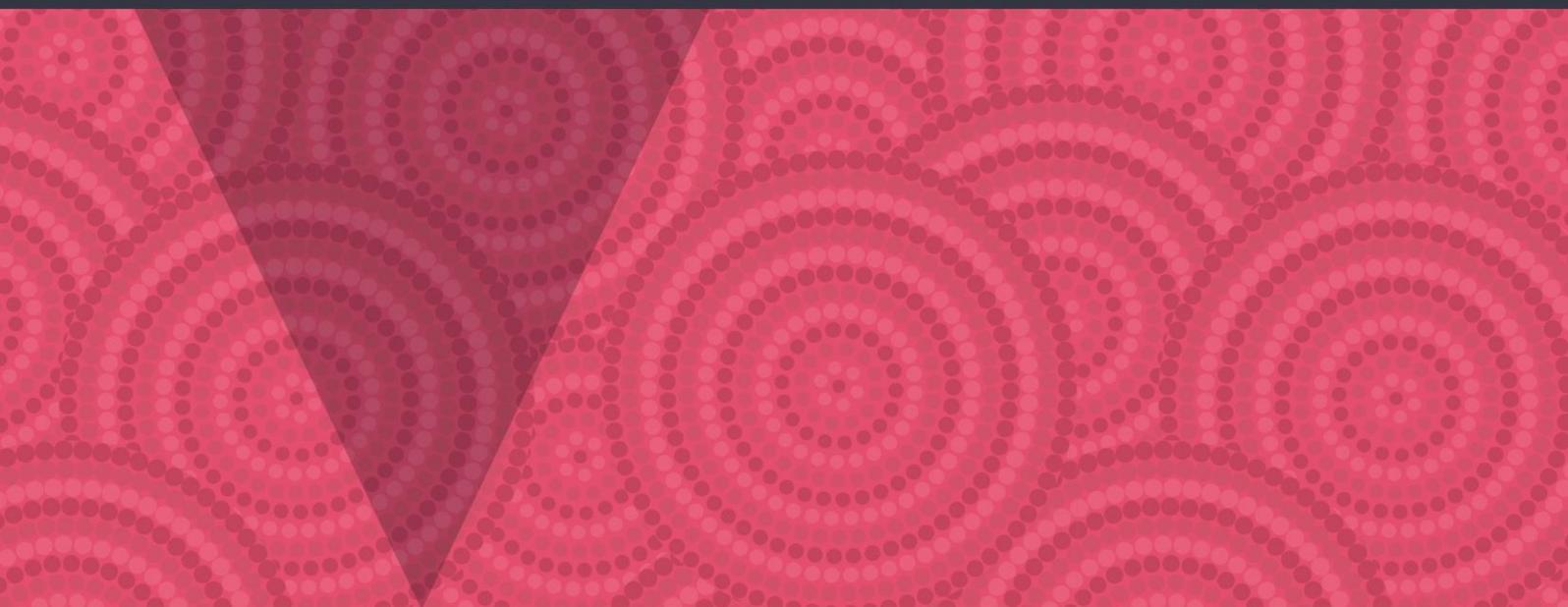


The Voices of Children and Young People in Care

Research Summary



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1. Introduction

1.1 About this research summary

This document is a condensed summary of a literature review conducted by Child Prevention Research Australia at Monash University of existing Australian research about the experiences and perceptions of children and young people in out-of-home care (young people in care). For a detailed overview of the methodology underpinning the literature review upon which this research summary is based, see page 14.

While there is no one unique experience of young people in care, research suggests that this cohort share many common concerns.

This research summary gives an overview of some of these issues including:

- communication
- power and agency
- connections to others
- wellbeing
- safety, risk and crime
- placements and placement stability
- education
- culture
- child protection workers
- bureaucracy.

The Victorian Children and Youth Area Partnerships (Area Partnerships) commissioned this research to develop a deeper understanding of the lived experience of young people in care. The Area Partnerships will use these findings to develop more effective ways to support young people in care as well as the people who support them. The Victorian Government is also using the findings from this research summary to improve services and support for young people in care.

1.2 About the Children and Youth Area Partnerships

Area Partnerships is an initiative which brings together key Victorian Government departments (including the Departments of Health and Human Services; Education and Training; Justice and Regulation and Victoria Police), local community leaders and experts to improve services and supports for vulnerable children, young people and families. Area Partnerships are currently located in eight out of the 17 Department of Health and Human Services areas.

1.3 A note about references to the 'Department' within this document

Throughout this report there are references to the 'Department' and child protection workers. These references are generally not Victoria-specific and may refer to any state or territory government's Department of Human Services.

On 1 January 2015, the Victorian Government established the Department of Health and Human Services, bringing together the former Department of Health, Department of Human Services and Sport and Recreation Victoria). Visit www.dhhs.vic.gov.au for further information about the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services.

2. Communication

When young Australian people enter the care system, a significant number say they are not told basic information such as why they were removed from their homes, or what might happen to them in the future.¹ This often leaves them feeling powerless, frustrated, and afraid.²

Some young people also report they are given little information about the rationale for placement changes or about access visits (for example, who they can and cannot see, and why)³ and that the written information given to them is often difficult to understand.⁴ Young people want workers and other professionals to communicate with them clearly, especially about matters which affect their lives.⁵

In young people's own words: communication

"Communication, communication, communication! I shouldn't have to chase my caseworker up to make sure there is a driver! I have missed out on contact because drivers haven't turned up."⁶

"I was thirteen when I went into care. I was left in a room alone and not told what was happening. I was left alone in the room for five or six hours. I didn't know what was going to happen — it was scary."⁷

"The Department doesn't tell you what is happening. They tell you you're going on holidays or a sleepover when you're actually going into care."⁸

¹ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a); Bessell (2011).

² CREATE Foundation (2014b, p. 10); Moore et al. (2007), p. 37.

³ O'Neill (2004); Fitzgerald and Graham (2011).

⁴ The Youth Movement Initiative (2014).

⁵ CREATE Foundation (2014b).

⁶ CREATE Foundation (2014b), p. 16.

⁷ Bessell (2011), p. 499.

⁸ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 17.

3. Power and Agency

Young Australian people in care often feel they lack genuine and meaningful involvement in important decision-making about placements, education or contact with birth parents, siblings or other family members and friends.⁹ However, they generally understand having a voice in decision-making does not mean always getting what you want.¹⁰

Many young people in care say case planning meetings are not useful.¹¹ Some believe their presence in these meetings is tokenistic, and others feel pressured during these meetings to agree with plans.¹² While many would like to participate, some feel intimidated when they are out-numbered by workers and do not know the names of everyone in the room.¹³ Young people also find it humiliating when their personal history is discussed at meetings in front of strangers.¹⁴

Young people in care want their views and wishes to be valued and taken seriously, and not be pressured into agreeing to decisions.¹⁵ They also recommend workers take the time to help them understand what is happening and support them to voice their views in case planning meetings.¹⁶ Some suggest it would be helpful to have a “neutral person” at meetings to answer their questions and make sure no one is hiding information from them.¹⁷

In young people’s own words: power and agency

“They expect us to put in so much effort, it’s such a drain, but then they don’t do anything with it.”¹⁸

“My CSO [child safety officer] is really good, more like a big sister. She doesn’t tell me what to do; she guides my decision-making. I’ve had her for 2.5 years.”¹⁹

“Everyone else gets a say. Your worker decides where you get put and your foster carer chooses if they want to keep you. They even ask their kids. But what about us? Who cares if we wanna stay or not?”²⁰

“Young people need to be more involved. They have all these meetings about me, but I never got told or invited. I know me better than they know me.”²¹

⁹ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a), p. 28.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald & Graham (2011), p. 496.

¹¹ Alivizatos (2006).

¹² Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a), p. 23; and Bessell (2011).

¹³ The Youth Movement Initiative (2014).

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁵ CREATE Foundation (2013, 2014b); Kiraly and Humphreys (2013); Moore et al. (2007); Mason (2008); and Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Fitzgerald and Graham (2011), p. 495.

¹⁸ Moore et al. (2007), p. 37.

¹⁹ McDowall (2013), p. 20.

²⁰ Moore et al. (2007), p. 36.

²¹ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 24.

4. Connections to others

Young Australian people in care express a strong need for connection so they can feel normal.²² Many value maintaining connections with birth parents, siblings, extended family, friends, places, education, culture, and pets.²³ The majority of young people in care are either satisfied with how often they have contact with their parents or would like to see them more frequently.²⁴ However, a small number describe their contact and relationships with birth parents as being complicated and disappointing.²⁵ Some would prefer not to have access with their birth parents at all.²⁶ Others report contact with birth parents to be emotionally overwhelming²⁷ or avoid contact because of conflict with birth parents' partners.²⁸

Many young people across Australia say they dislike when contact visits with birth parents are held at departmental offices.²⁹ They also report forced contact, whether supervised or not, to be distressing and infuriating³⁰ and will actively avoid it if possible.³¹ Young people in care are more likely to feel positive about contact when it is consensual and occurs in an informal community environment.³²

For many young people, contact with siblings is a source of strong support and friendship.³³ Many feel sad at not being able to live with siblings and would like more contact with them.³⁴ A significant number also say they have no contact at all with extended family³⁵ despite often valuing a connection with them just as much as with birth parents.³⁶

In young people's own words: connections

"I want group contact with my mum and all my siblings. We're family, and we've never been in the same room together."³⁷

"When I don't have friends, I feel like my world, my life is coming to an end."³⁸

"I want to see my nieces. I haven't met them."³⁹

"I wish my mum & stepdad would get on so I can live with them."⁴⁰

"My CSO tried to make me go home and took me there for a visit and then left me there when I didn't want to. No-one told me I was going home. I didn't want to be there so I ran away."⁴¹

"I want contact in open places like parks. Somewhere with space where we can have fun."⁴²

²² Mason (2008).

²³ CREATE Foundation (2014b); O'Neill (2004); and Fernandez (2007, 2010)

²⁴ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 13.

²⁵ Bessell (2011); CREATE Foundation (2014b); and O'Neill (2004).

²⁶ Gardner (2004), p. 179; and O'Neill (2004).

²⁷ CREATE Foundation, (2014b).

²⁸ Kiraly (2011), p. 20.

²⁹ CREATE Foundation (2014b); and Kiraly and Humphreys (2011).

³⁰ Kiraly & Humphreys (2013).

³¹ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 14.

³² CREATE Foundation (2014b); and Kiraly & Humphreys (2011).

³³ Bessell (2011).

³⁴ Kiraly (2011); Kiraly and Humphreys (2011, 2013); Moss (2009a); O'Neill (2004); and Reed & McDowall (2006).

³⁵ Moss (2009a).

³⁶ Kiraly and Humphreys (2013).

³⁷ CREATE Foundation (2014b), p. 7.

³⁸ Mason (2008), p. 365.

³⁹ CREATE Foundation (2014b), p. 7.

⁴⁰ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a), p. 21.

⁴¹ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 14.

⁴² Ibid, p. 8.

5. Wellbeing

Many young Australian people in care have negative feelings about being in care. Many worry most of the time including about their safety and wellbeing, and the safety of family and friends.⁴³ They also often worry about school, placement stability, and the future but tend to worry less when older siblings are present.⁴⁴ Young people in care sometimes also express feelings of loneliness, depression, isolation, low self-esteem, and inferiority.⁴⁵

Young Australian people in care who have had more instability in placements are more likely to experience feelings of rejection and self-blame.⁴⁶ Many young people report that strong, consistent, and caring relationships are a protective factor against emotional instability.⁴⁷

In young people's own words: wellbeing

"Where will I live if Nan gets sick?"⁴⁸

"Will I ever get to be with my Mum and when that will be?"⁴⁹

"It's like we're second hand kids; unless that's how all kids feel who are my age..."⁵⁰

"I don't have any hopes and dreams. I'm a sad person. I just don't want to be here. I don't want to be in [the] f***ing [Department]."⁵¹

⁴³ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2013b); Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a, 2014); and CREATE Foundation (2013).

⁴⁴ Moore et al. (2007).

⁴⁵ Crawford (2013); CREATE Foundation (2013); Fernandez (2007); Kiraly (2011); and The Youth Movement Initiative (Unknown).

⁴⁶ Fernandez (2007), p. 353; and Moss (2009a).

⁴⁷ Skattebol et al. (2013).

⁴⁸ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012b), p. 7.

⁴⁹ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012b), p. 7.

⁵⁰ Fernandez (2007, p. 353).

⁵¹ CREATE Foundation (2009).

6. Placements and placement stability

Most young Australian people in care say they are better off in care where it is easier for them to have their basic physical and emotional needs met, such as getting enough to eat, having clothes to wear or feeling loved and part of a family.⁵² Others believe they are worse off because of: increased exposure to physical and verbal abuse, not feeling wanted or valued by their carers, or having carers who are unable to deal with their emotions or sometimes challenging behaviour.⁵³ Many young people in care strongly believe that the child protection system fails to match young people with compatible placements.⁵⁴ Most young people in residential care do not feel a sense of belonging in their facility.⁵⁵ Some experience difficulties getting along with other residents and feel unsafe.⁵⁶

Young Australian people who have experienced a stable placement are usually more positive about being in care.⁶¹ On the other hand, children who endure multiple placement changes often report a range of negative impacts on: their existing relationships and their ability to form new ones, education, emotional wellbeing and sense of self-worth.⁶² Many young people in care want greater placement stability and want to stay in the same place if they are happy.⁶³ Some report being given insufficient notice about placement changes, not enough time to say goodbye or information about where they are going, and no choice or opportunity to have their say about it.⁶⁴

When asked what could improve their placement experiences, young people say they want foster carers who treat them warmly and with respect.⁶⁵ To ensure placements are free from abuse and neglect, young people recommend continual screening of foster carers coupled with improved scrutiny and training for carers.⁶⁶ They also suggest improving the quality of placements by: imposing a one child per foster family policy, matching young people with compatible carers, giving young people the opportunity to meet and get to know carers before placement occurs and requiring a probationary period before a placement is confirmed.⁶⁷

In young people's own words: placements and placement stability

"I had 3 meals a day, went to school and had access to healthcare – what more could I ask for?"⁵⁷

"Dad can't find us. I'm loved and cared for."⁵⁸

"Mine [foster carer] was mean. She called me fat."⁵⁹

"Foster carer was good, but they couldn't handle me, so I had to move on to lots of other places."⁶⁰

⁵² Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a, 2014); and CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 10.

⁵³ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a, 2014); and McDowall (2013).

⁵⁴ CREATE Foundation (2013).

⁵⁵ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2013a).

⁵⁶ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 11.

⁵⁷ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 10.

⁵⁸ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2014), p. 13.

⁵⁹ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 11

⁶⁰ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 11

⁶¹ McDowall (2013).

⁶² CREATE Foundation, (2013).

⁶³ The Youth Movement Initiative (2014).

⁶⁴ Alivizatos (2006).

⁶⁵ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 13.

⁶⁶ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2015), p. 14676.

⁶⁷ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 13.

7. Safety, risks and crime

Some young Australian people report feeling unsafe in their placements and a significant minority of children report running away as their only option.⁶⁸ Most young people living in residential care feel safe where they live⁶⁹ and attribute this to staff, privacy, space, and being treated well.⁷⁰ However, some express concern about their safety because of drug use, aggression and violence by other residents and neighbours.⁷¹

Young people in residential care feel their living circumstances place them at higher risk of substance abuse.⁷² Some say they started to use substances to be accepted into the residential care peer group, escape from feelings of sadness and loneliness, or sometimes as a protest against the staff or the “system”.⁷³

Some young people in care think that they should receive more education about safety and risk-taking. Some also believed that staff can play a positive role in supporting young people in care not to engage in substance abuse.⁷⁴

In young people's own words: safety, risk and crime

“Too much yelling and swearing.”⁷⁵

“Other client is violent.”⁷⁶

“People or circumstances outside the residential care environment: Area we live in, drug dealers in next street.”⁷⁷

“Boy in neighbourhood says he will bash me.”⁷⁸

“The staff. I can talk to them. They're friendly, used to the bush.”

“The workers protect us.”⁷⁹

⁶⁸ Bessell (2011), p. 498.

⁶⁹ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012c).

⁷⁰ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012c) p. 9.

⁷¹ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012c).

⁷² MacLean (2012).

⁷³ MacLean (2012).

⁷⁴ The Youth Movement Initiative (2014).

⁷⁵ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2013a), pp. 9-10.

⁷⁶ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2013a), pp. 9-10.

⁷⁷ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2013a), pp. 9-10.

⁷⁸ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2013a), pp. 9-10.

⁷⁹ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012c), p. 9.

8. Education

Some young Australian people in care say they enjoy school and are doing well – many view school as an important place to establish and maintain relationships.⁸⁰ A smaller number say they struggle with their studies and bullying, but receive little help to overcome these issues.⁸¹ Some young people, who feel that the mainstream education system is a poor fit for them, want to access alternative education options (for example TAFE and distance education).⁸²

Young people in care also report the stigma of being in care negatively impacts on their education.⁸³ For some, this stigma is compounded when being in care means they miss out on activities like excursions, camps, or being in school photos.⁸⁴ Others, particularly children living in residential care, believe that changing schools has been detrimental to their academic success and relationships with peers and teachers.⁸⁵

Young people report mixed experiences with teachers. Some report disinterest and different treatment from teachers who have lower expectations and do not push them enough.⁸⁶ Others say they appreciate the support of teachers and school counsellors who take the time to listen to them and workshop solutions to their problems.⁸⁷

In young people's own words: education

"I love learning and reading and writing."⁸⁸

"It's hard. The schools I have been to I've only been there for a short time. At first you are more worried about making friends than your education so you didn't really learn."⁸⁹

"I got teased from other students saying your parents didn't want you. My best friend said 'nobody wants you, not even your mother.'"⁹⁰

"It's hard to go to school when you don't have many clothes to wear and all your friends do."⁹¹

"Teachers didn't expect much because of my difficult past. They didn't expect us to make better futures for ourselves."⁹²

"Mainstream education didn't help me. When I went to a flexi school that worked, I got help with the things I was struggling with."⁹³

⁸⁰ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2014); and Skattebol et al. (2013).

⁸¹ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2013b, 2014).

⁸² CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 19.

⁸³ CREATE Foundation (2014a).

⁸⁴ McDowall (2013), p. 20.

⁸⁵ Tilbury et al. (2009).

⁸⁶ CREATE Foundation (2014a); and CREATE Foundation (2014a), p. 8.

⁸⁷ O'Neill (2004), p. 215.

⁸⁸ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2013b), p. 7.

⁸⁹ CREATE Foundation (2009).

⁹⁰ CREATE Foundation (2014a), p. 7.

⁹¹ McDowall (2009), p. 56.

⁹² CREATE Foundation (2014a), p. 8.

⁹³ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 19.

9. Culture

Most Aboriginal young people in care across Australia say culture is very important to them,⁹⁴ as do members of other cultural groups. Young Aboriginal people's understanding of what culture means is broad and includes connection to: community, important adults and elders, family, cultural activities and place.⁹⁵ However, some young people in care feel confused or disconnected from their cultural identity.⁹⁶

Young Aboriginal people in care often stress the importance of staff possessing awareness of and respect for Aboriginality including an appreciation of the importance of connection to community, family, and place. They think support staff should possess the skills and knowledge to understand and communicate with Aboriginal young people and their families.⁹⁷ Many Aboriginal young people in care share a strong view that they should be placed with caregivers of the same cultural background.⁹⁸

In young people's own words: culture

"Culture holds you together, keeps you going."⁹⁹

"It's like your family, where you come from, something you've got in common, it's like everything."¹⁰⁰

"It doesn't mean anything. I don't consider myself Aboriginal. To me Australia is just a country I was born in. I really don't care where I come from."¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ Higgins, Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson (2007).

⁹⁵ Moore et al., (2007).

⁹⁶ Moss (2009a), p. 317.

⁹⁷ Moore et al. (2007).

⁹⁸ Moore et al. (2007), p. 31; CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 21.

⁹⁹ Moore et al. (2007), p. 29.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Moss (2009a), p. 317.

10. Child protection workers

Young Australian people in care often observe it is important to have a trusting, mutually respectful, and supportive relationship with workers.¹⁰² Many say workers help them with a broad range of issues including family contact, behaviour, activities, stable placements, safety, health care, and school resources.¹⁰³

A small but significant number of children in care have negative feelings about their workers, saying they: do not listen or take the time to get to know them, do not provide meaningful assistance, promise to do things but do not follow through promptly or are rude.¹⁰⁴ Young people in care often note their workers' caseloads are too heavy and observe workers only visit rarely, cancel often, and are generally too busy.¹⁰⁵ Many also observe workers change frequently, usually without warning or explanation and would prefer more consistency and continuity.¹⁰⁶

Young people in care say they want workers to be good listeners and to provide practical advice and assistance when needed.¹⁰⁷ When asked what could improve their experiences in care, they say they want additional workers in the system so they will have the time to talk. They recommend employing workers who really want to get to know young people, and will return phone calls.¹⁰⁸

In young people's own words: child protection workers

"She helped me work out how to get along with the other children."¹⁰⁹

"If I'm sad she can make me feel better."¹¹⁰

"One of our workers told me five times she was coming to visit and didn't show up once out of the five times."¹¹¹

"Caseload too busy – employ more workers on a long-term basis."¹¹²

"I don't like her she can't smile."¹¹³

¹⁰² Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, 2012a); and (Bessell, 2011).

¹⁰³ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid..

¹⁰⁵ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ Bessell (2011); Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a); CREATE Foundation (2013); and the Youth Movement Initiative, 2014).

¹⁰⁷ McDowall (2015), p. 40.

¹⁰⁸ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a), p. 28.

¹⁰⁹ Kiraly and Humphreys (2011), p. 12.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 15.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 16.

¹¹³ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a), p. 19.

11. Bureaucracy

Many young Australian people in care struggle with bureaucracy and encounter difficulties accessing their files and documents or obtaining written consent to participate in activities (for example, needing permission to get a haircut).¹¹⁴ They say this makes it harder for them to apply for jobs, education or training positions.¹¹⁵ Some young people in care also feel discriminated against and punished when they are required to seek permission to do everyday things.¹¹⁶

In young people's own words: bureaucracy

"I am sick of the little action plan things on paper... they don't work. Trust me, none of them work. People just still do... what they want to do... I am sick of seeing form after form after form... it is unnecessary. People with parents don't have to have form after form."¹¹⁷

"Sometimes I feel like the Department treats us like we did something wrong, not our parents. I can't go over to friends' houses more than once a month because they need to have a blue card and that is inconvenient."¹¹⁸

"When you wanted to know [your family history] you had to ask, and when you did, it took a while to get the information."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ McDowall (2013), p. 20; Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a), p. 25.

¹¹⁵ McDowall (2009), p. 68; and Crawford (2013).

¹¹⁶ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2012a), p. 28.

¹¹⁷ Tilbury et al. (2009), p. 484.

¹¹⁸ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 16.

¹¹⁹ CREATE Foundation (2013), p. 24.

Methodology

In 2016, the Area Partnerships commissioned Child Prevention Research Australia to conduct a literature review of Australian research on the experiences and perceptions of children and young people in out-of-home care. The Children and Youth Area Partnerships requested that the reviewers focus in particular on children and young people's views on: i) connection to place and community, ii) education, learning, and skills, and iii) the capabilities and capacity of community and services to meet their needs.

Child Prevention Research Australia adopted the following methodology when conducting the literature review:

A keyword literature search was undertaken by the Victorian Government Library Service (VGLS), generating 55 references for consideration. A further literature search was undertaken by the reviewer using the Discovery Search portal identifying an additional 17 references to be considered. Keywords for the searches are given below:

- "out of home care" OR "foster care" OR "foster home*" OR "group home*" OR "in care" OR "residential care" OR fostering
- (su="Surveys") OR (su="Adolescent attitudes") OR (su="Children's attitudes") OR lived experience OR opinion* OR view* OR perspective* OR experience OR feedback OR survey* OR questionnaire* OR consultation* OR participatory research

Child Prevention Research Australia also obtained 24 relevant reports from the following key child/youth welfare agencies and research bodies listed below. A search of the research literature was also conducted using Google Scholar that identified an additional 20 articles for possible inclusion. The identified literature was examined for relevance to the research question and a total of 46 resources retained for the purpose of review.

Each resource was tabulated in the accompanying matrix, giving an overview of the research methodology, sample size, and demography. Eleven theme-specific keywords were identified and applied to each record where relevant. Key findings for each resource were recorded along with any useful direct quotes.

The research question specifically related to the experiences of children in care from their perspectives. As a result, any resources that focused on the views of children and young people as perceived by or communicated through adults (such as carers/case workers/foster parents/birth parents) were removed from the review. The only exception was where the views of children and young people were given and then subsequently compared with those of the adults listed above. Other inclusion criteria included were 1) Australian research, 2) published from 2000 onwards 3) participants were children and young people discussing being in care, rather than leaving care 4) qualitative research. Exclusion criteria were: 1) review articles, but reference lists were checked for articles for possible inclusion.

To identify themes, a review and grounded theory methodology was used. Specifically, no hypotheses or expected keywords were identified prior to the commencement of the review. Instead, themes of importance to the research participants emerged through examination of research findings and embedded quotes.

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