

Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy

A Report

Crossover Kids: Care to Custody

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August, 2003

Draft Paper to be Revised and Submitted for Publication

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Youth who present with challenging behaviours are dealt with by society in two ways: through community services that provide therapeutic intervention or alternatively by means of sanctions through the provision of correctional services. Society has a duty to care for and a responsibility to rehabilitate “troubled or troubling” youth (Nicol et al., 2000; Unger, 2001). Finding the balance between penal and welfare approaches is therefore, critical.

A disproportionate number of youth in the young offender system have been in the care of child welfare authorities in Ontario. Literature suggests there is a trajectory from the children’s service sector to the young offender system (Armstrong, 1998; Hukkanen et al., 1999; McCord et al., 1960; Thompson, 1988; Ulzen and Hamilton, 1998; Unger et al., 2001). The young offender system is often the last step for highly troubled “system kids”. Although these children enter young offender institutions with complex needs, treatment services are rarely available (Snow & Finlay, 1998). Ironically, the youth’s last chance for rehabilitation is often in the very system that is the least equipped to deal with his or her mental health needs. Although there is extensive literature about child welfare and young offender services, there is a dearth of research that reports on the interaction between these two systems in the life of a youth. This qualitative research study asked youth who reside in a secure custody facility, and have a

placement history in the children service sector, to explain from their perspective the events and circumstances which may have influenced the commission of their first offence and their entry into the young offender system.

Child welfare placement itself is not associated with an increase in offences committed by youth (Haapasalo, 2000; Hukkanen et al., 1999; Johnson-Reid, 2002; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Widom, 1991). In fact, recent literature postulates that both child maltreatment and attachment disruptions in the context of the family are the antecedents to the offending behaviour of youth. In some studies, a youth's predisposition to delinquency has been linked to the cumulative trauma in early childhood (Haapasalo, 2000; Hukkanen et al., 1999; Nicol et al., 2000). Such trauma includes neglect, maltreatment, witnessing domestic violence and other adverse life circumstances. It is these situations that bring children into child welfare care.

The impact of childhood history on the emotional/behavioural problems in youth is ameliorated by intervention by children's mental health practitioners (Armstrong, 1998; Hukkanen et al., 1999; Jonson-Reid, 2002; Nicol et al., 2000; Ulzen, 1998). Youth frequently have an entrenched history of disadvantage and trauma prior to receiving their first clinical intervention (Shamsie, 1994; Haapasalo, 2000; Unger et al., 2002). Furthermore, when youth are admitted to protective child welfare services, psychiatric co morbidity is frequently in evidence (references). Lack of early intervention places children further at risk of behavioural difficulties and entry into the young offender system (Jonson-Reid, 2002; Nicol et al., 2000; Thompson, 1998; Ulzen & Hamilton, 1998).

Recent studies indicate that the older the age at the time of the first placement in the child welfare system, the greater the likelihood that youth will commit delinquent offences and be placed in young offender settings. The assumption is that youth enter placements with a pre-existing history or predisposition to behavioural difficulties and delinquency (Jonson-Reid, 2002; Widom, 1991). It was also found that children on entering residential care settings (group homes) had significantly more behavioral problems than those entering foster care (Hukkanen et al., 1999). Moreover, once the child becomes an adolescent, the focus is centred on the youth's behaviour rather than his or her history or life circumstances. Intervention and placement is often directed at behavioural symptomology rather than the underlying problems with parenting and the family environment that brought the youth into child welfare care (Armstrong, 1998; Haapasalo, 2000; Widom, 1991).

Multiple placements and moves within placements are correlated with a greater risk of delinquency (Jonson-Reid and Barth, 2002, Haapasalo, 2000 and Nicol et al., 2000). It is difficult to ascertain whether the movement within the children's service system results in delinquency or whether youth's behavioural problems at the time of entry into the system results in frequent moves (Jonson-Reid, 2002; Snow & Finlay, 1998). In either case, however, youth in care of the state by definition have experienced at least one disruption in their primary care. This places them at risk for difficulties forming attachments. Existing attachment injuries are exacerbated by instability within the care system. Multiple moves in a youth's placement history reinforce his or her poor self-concept and create both

attachment disruptions and an inability to form trusting relationships (Sparrow Lake Alliance, 1996). This attachment instability predisposes youth to disruptive, acting-out behaviors that undermine residential programming, which may result in placement breakdown (Jonson-Reid, 2002; Widom, 1991). Thus, the potential for a successful transition to alternate placements is significantly diminished, ultimately leading to "...a series of graduated residential placements, with the levels of intrusiveness and security increasing as each subsequent placement breaks down." (Snow & Finlay, 1998).

Research suggests that early decisive intervention that addresses the roots of behavioral difficulties exhibited by children prior to placement, and stability in placement, promotes the best outcomes for these children (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Widom, 1991). Youth in the young offender system report multiple contacts in the children's residential care system as well as frequent movement within young offender services (Snow & Finlay, 1998). The literature confirms this perception of youth that numerous out of home placements typically precede a youth's incarceration (Armstrong, 1998; Kennedy, 1995; McCord et al., 1960; Thompson, 1988; Ulzen, 1988).

The normal developmental tasks facing adolescents may manifest behaviorally. During adolescence youth struggle to attain a sense of self-mastery over their environment, a sense of personal authority, a developing self-identity and deeper self-awareness (Stone, 2002). The normal behaviours of youth experiencing these developmental challenges are difficult for others to understand and tolerate and may provoke strong responses from staff. This

combined with an adverse personal history and resultant behavioral difficulties further exacerbate staff/youth relationships. Gaining cooperation from youth in residential settings is critical in their management (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Nicol et al., 2000; Sutherland, 1992). The level of comfort experienced by youth influence their cooperation with staff (Nicol et al., 2000; Snow & Finlay, 1998) and, one can assume, the incidence of acting out behaviours.

Armstrong (1998) reported that youth are more likely to be arrested in group homes as a result of incidents in placements. The group home survey, conducted in Armstrong's study, found that almost half had been arrested as a result of an incident in placement. There appears to be variability among facilities in terms of their response to behavioral difficulties with youth. Some facilities more quickly turned to the police for assistance while others used internal strategies for managing behaviors.

In summary, the literature documents the trajectory of youth from the children's to the young offender residential service sector. A causal relationship between the placement in the children's service sector and the commitment of offenses has not been established. Children suffering from histories of trauma and attachment disruptions are predisposed to behavioral problems. These difficulties are expressed within the context of residential placements. The inability of staff to manage such behavior may precipitate placement breakdown and multiple moves. This movement, in combination with the challenges of normal developmental tasks, exacerbates poor behavior on the part of youth in residential settings. Group homes often lay charges against misbehaving youth.

Intervention by police provokes the youth's entry into the young offender system, which is less focussed on and equipped to deal with the family trauma and mental health problems that bring most children to the children's service sector in the first place.

Method

This study was conducted through the auspices of the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy (Advocacy Office), Province of Ontario, Canada. The objectives of the study were to understand, from the perspective of youth, the types of residential care settings experienced in their placement history, factors which influenced the commission of their first offence, and factors unique to child welfare that influence youthful offending. It was hoped that this study would enlighten care providers about the impact of critical life points in the history of vulnerable youth.

This qualitative study utilized a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1998). The goal of this method in the context of this study is to understand the thoughts and feelings expressed by the youth participants as they relate to their experience as consumers of service in child welfare and custody settings. The youth participants were recognized throughout the data collection and analysis processes as experts. In so doing, the study facilitated the 'voice' of youth through the use of the youth themselves as the key informants.

Design and Procedures

An in-depth, largely unstructured interview was the primary means of collecting the data. Three open-ended questions were available to guide the interviews as follows:

- From your own perspective, describe how you think you ended up in the young offender system at the time of your first charge?
- What do you think influenced the events or circumstances that led to your first charge?
- Looking back, what could have changed things for you?

Although these questions were often used to stimulate discussion, the youth drove the interview process. Significant modifications to these questions occurred to accommodate the direction offered by each of the youth. Key words embedded in each of the three questions became the identified themes that wove throughout the interviews without the need for prescribed questions.

Data Analysis

Each youth interview was transcribed and analyzed as a discrete data set in order to capture the richness of meaning in each interview and to offer participants an independent voice. The youth's own words were used in the development of codes in order to adhere to their intent. Common ideas or themes clustered within and across transcripts. Codes were collapsed into categories that reflected these themes. Comparing and contrasting of passages within categories led to the identification of core categories. This configuration

represented the most salient themes (Glaser, 1995). All stages of analysis described herein were grounded in the youth's own language and understanding. The reporting of the findings is therefore a faithful replaying of the words of youth with their intended meaning.

Participants

The research site was a secure custody, young offender setting in Southern Ontario. Five youth were identified by the social worker at the institution with the criterion for selection being a history in the child welfare system. Correctional officers brought the participants, one by one, from the living units to the interviewer in the chaplaincy area. The youth were not informed of the research study in advance by correctional staff or the social worker to avoid multiple interpretation of the purpose of the study. All youth were male ranging in age from 16 to 19 years with the mean age being 17 years. Three youth were admitted to the institution within three months of the interview. One had been at the institution for ten months. Three youth anticipated release within thirty days and two had release dates within six months of the interview. Four youth had wardship status and one had been discharged from the care of the Children's Aid Society due to his age. The home communities for these youth were in Southern Ontario.

The Interview

In this institutional setting youth did not distinguish the role of the interviewer, for the purposes of this study, from the role of Child Advocate. It influenced the interview process because all youth participants were familiar with the Advocacy Office and had on occasion accessed advocacy services. Thus, they were forthcoming in their interactions due to having trust in the Office. Trust of adults in authority is difficult for these youth to achieve, particularly in an institutional setting. The role of the Child Advocate influenced the ability to collect the data and probably the level of disclosure during the interview.

In young offender institutions the use of audio recordings is deterred for reasons of confidentiality as cited in the Young Offenders Act and for reasons of safety and security. The research was conducted with the use of a Recorder who, with a lap top computer, recorded verbatim the responses of the participants. These recordings served as the transcripts.

The interviews spanned from 55 to 75 minutes which seemed to be the maximum that youth could tolerate due to fatigue and the intensity of the content. The interview process was equally as critical in understanding the emerging themes as the content. All youth participants were thoughtful and focused throughout the interview. This was demonstrated in their demeanor, presentation and body language. At the beginning, youth were asked to describe, chronologically, their progression through residential care placements. This represented their lifeline (Plaisant et al., 1996). Sheets of paper were produced and the interviewer assisted youth by writing each placement on the paper. Youth

were requested to start at the present and, with the support of the interviewer, recalled the series of placements from the most recent to the first placement. All participants had difficulty with their recollection of placements, particularly with those in young offender settings, due to their frequency and brevity. The interviewer recorded the dates and types of placements beside the name of the residential setting. Participants were uniformly awed by the amount of movement in their lives which, as a lifeline for each participant, spanned a number of pages laid out in front of them. Each participant stated that he had not previously had the opportunity to review his history. Youth added more information as they recalled it and reorganized the order as they wished. Without prompting each participant included the time spent with family as part of their placement history. The lifeline became the reference point for the entire interview.

The questions that followed seemed out of context to the process of the lifeline and did not appear to have the same relevance. However, each youth answered the questions in their own way weaving their answers into the telling of their story. As the interview progressed without guidance, the youth had revelations about the connectedness of the different parts of their life. It was quickly apparent to the interviewer that any discussion or allusion to their history of child abuse, or traumatic events in their family, resulted in considerable discomfort. Youth became withdrawn, sunk into their chair, made no eye contact and presented with depressive posture. Poverty of speech was evidenced in two youth as their level of reflection about the content increased. The interviewer modified the interview guide with the use of more neutral questions to minimize

any discomfort. This resulted in youth having a greater sense of control over the interview process. All youth became more animated and comfortable when talking about life on the street, their aggressive acting out, or their complaints about the system. Closure was brought to the interview through the redirection of discussion to the future. Whenever possible the interviews were ended with a sense of hopefulness. Due to the transience of this population and the need to honour confidentiality within the institutional environment youth were not available for a follow up interview or to provide participant feedback at the time of the analysis of the findings.

Results

The Negative Impact of Multiple, Increasingly Restrictive Placements

Youth described the progression of their movements through each system from the least to the most intrusive environments. Multiple moves, frequent changes in workers and the subsequent inconsistencies in care were attested to. Also, the construction of their lifeline had been the first opportunity for them to reflect on their movements. They were earnest in wanting to present the information about their lives fully and honestly.

The number of out-of-home placements identified by the participants ranged from six to eighteen with the mean number of placements at 12.4. Most youth (4) were first admitted to care at or around the age of twelve, though one youth had been in the care of child welfare authorities since the age of two. The majority of out-of-home placements were in young offender settings with the mean number being nine. There was a progression for four youth from less

intrusive care-settings to the most restrictive settings. The placement continuum for these youth was foster home to group care, to open custody, to secure custody settings. The number of different placement settings that they had experienced surprised most participants. Although the progression from care to custody was clearly illustrated in four of the lifelines, there was no comment by youth about this progression. Three youth felt compelled to punctuate their description of their placement history with the times they had lived at home. The reporting of this information was important to the youth's own sense of history. Finally, two youth participants detailed frequent moves in their childhood at those times that they lived with their family.

The impact of this movement on the lives and well-being of these young people was clearly significant as expressed in the findings. Loss was a theme that permeated all interviews: loss of family, loss of worker, loss of peers and loss of a 'home' environment. The constant reintroduction of loss into their lives impacted their sense of self-worth and identity such that they felt powerless to change their life circumstances. As one youth described, "it wouldn't have mattered...I had no family...I would have broken the law...I was just going to have to be in a group home." As suggested by the literature, it seemed that attachment instability predisposed these youth to acting out behaviourally, undermining placements and mistrusting others. (Haapasalo, 2000; Johnson-Reid, 2002; Nicol et al., 2000; Snow & Finlay, 1998). Youth described how these dynamics shaped their identity with the following quotes:

"Got kicked out of everywhere I went...this one didn't want me so they kicked me out...that one kicked me out 'cause I trashed the office..."

“Be careful what you talk about and what you don’t talk about...Decide what you are going to say before you say it...If they ask you questions (workers), decide whether or not to answer it...”

“I really don’t know where I’m going from here...I’ve had so many bad experiences. I don’t really want to talk to someone.”

“It’s me...things can’t change.”

“I found that once I’d been placed that I drifted.”

The Trauma of Leaving Home

Throughout each interview it was evident that the most difficult part was during the discussion of the youth’s family. Nonetheless, it was the topic about which they had the most to say. Abuse was described as a significant feature of the family backgrounds of these youth. Three participants indicated that physical abuse was directed at them by their fathers and that this led to their leaving home:

“Things changed after my father assaulted me.”

“I had all this anger about my father hitting me.”

“I left Dad ‘cause of abuse.”

“Charges were dropped against step dad...glad to get out...had to move.”

“I wouldn’t stay...he’d kill me.”

Due to the chaotic, abusive or neglectful histories, youth demonstrated anger and a sense of hopelessness about their families:

“I have no contact...I don’t care...I hate my whole family...they don’t try.”

“If I had lived with my mom I would have ended up in jail...my whole family is a criminal...brother, uncles...my mom are criminals... (quieter)...it’s in my family.”

The significance of mothers to these male youth was apparent. For the most part, relationships with their mothers were harsh, neglectful and unsupportive.

The lack of connectedness to their mothers was illustrated in the emotion they brought to their statements:

“My mom’s never visited me in jail; ever...I just think she is lazy.”

“I keep in contact with my Dad...I don’t talk to my Mom.”

“My Mom was there but would say that she never wanted me...I am an awful kid...she’s a Wacko.”

“Never seen her again. Don’t hope to.”

The youth participants had rationalized for themselves the reasons they had left the family. As indicated earlier, in some circumstances, it was to escape abuse. In other circumstances it was sadly described as a parental choice:

“Parents didn’t want the responsibility of kids anymore and got rid of us.”

“My parents were selling the family business, so they ended up getting rid of us (too).”

“My Dad didn’t really want kids.”

One youth participant described his ambivalence about his disclosure of the abuse. The consequences to him for doing so continue to affect his life:

“I told someone about it...they called the police...they called the C.A.S...sort of happy...sort of not. I would have never had gone to all these places.”

One youth took full responsibility for his removal from home. ***“I wasn’t that good of a kid when I was little.”*** He felt that ***“if I had stayed with Mom, we could have worked it out.”***

Regardless of the tragic circumstances that led to their removal from home, these youth were convinced that their happiest times were when they lived with their family of origin. The trauma of leaving home was considered by all participants to be a significant factor in influencing who they are today as they felt family defined their identity. A sense of hopelessness was prevalent in their words.

Furthermore, society attaches a stigma to youth who are not wholly participatory in a family.

“I think the main reason is that if you take a kid away from the family and put in a group home that they don’t want you in society...you are not wanted...they don’t want you to feel part of society. What does it teach you? That you are not wanted...that you’ll always be useless...never will contribute to society...will always be in a group home. Makes you feel stupid and useless...”

Relationship with Child Welfare Worker

Each youth participant described that during his care in the Children’s Aid Society they experienced a series of relationships with social workers. Attachment disruptions with workers contributed to a growing ambivalence towards adults. This ambivalence or mistrust was generated in their primary relationships with parents as described earlier and reinforced by the continuation of severed relationships with caregivers.

“I’ve had different ones but these two are the main ones...I don’t get along with my worker.”

“I’ve had seven different workers...this one is the longest...had her for fifteen months...I like her...I don’t trust nobody.”

“I’ve had seven workers...the first was from when I was born until age eight...I still talk to her. Then I had J... then I had Mthen I had C...now I have M.”

“Three workers left me...all they have done with me then a new person comes...it’s useless.”

Four youth participants felt that their workers ***“didn’t listen to them.”*** They stated that the workers were not attentive to their requests or wishes.

“They didn’t care what I wanted...when I asked something they would drift off.”

“I know where these counsellors come from...they have so many kids that they assume all the issues are the same.”

These youth attribute many of their present day difficulties the lack of support from their worker. This speaks to the powerful role ascribed to the social worker by youth in care regardless of ambivalence to that relationship.

“If I got more help...not just things put on you...I might not have done crime.”

“Most likely wouldn’t have got into this (due to worker)...I said, who cares?”

Though youth participants had difficulty articulating the helpful qualities of workers they knew what worked for them and were able to describe this with ease:

“The one worker I have now helps...he actually cares...the one I had before didn’t. This one does all kinds of stuff for me...on the outside calls me up and takes me out for lunch...does stuff with me...”

“I suggest maybe a little more direction to staff...to maybe try and help kids...not how much but the way they help kids.”

Workers are very influential in the lives of youth in care in moulding their relationships with significant others. As indicated by the youth participants, a lack of responsiveness by workers led to provocative behaviour by youth.

Group Homes as Gateways to Custody

Youth did not appear to recognize the interaction between their experiences in child welfare care and their entry into the young offender system. They could describe the progression in the accumulation of charges. Concomitantly, they could describe the escalation of their movement in young offender settings. They also described the connection between their experiences in group homes and the commission of offences in response to those experiences. They did not, however, link group home care with their experience in child welfare as in their own thinking the two were separate. In describing their

first charges, youth participants spoke of participation in minor offences. Included were: a theft in a group home, an assault charge in a classroom setting, mischief, throwing ketchup at a parent, an assault charge related to an altercation with a peer in a foster home, and property damage in a principal's office. Two youth reported entering the young offender settings for the first time due to offences committed in group care settings. Of interest is the number of charges commissioned and accumulated in group home settings. One participant was disturbed by the death of a peer in a group setting and indicated that he stole from that operator in response to that death:

“He (staff) said, if it wasn’t for you (the foster brother) he would still be alive...his house got robbed after that...he called the cops on me...I didn’t care anymore.”

Two youth were emphatic that they had told their child welfare workers they wanted to change placements. When their requests were denied, or appeared to fall on deaf ears, they acted out aggressively or ran away from the group care site and incurred more charges. They explained these actions were taken to get the attention of their caregivers and to force a change in placement.

“I guaranteed there was going to be all that (charges), I kept telling them that I wanted out of this place...he should have listened and got me out...”

“I asked my social worker to let me leave; she wouldn’t so I made her let me leave.”

“They didn’t understand...every time I went to jail (it was because) they didn’t listen.”

Each participant described the influence group care had on them. The relevance of the group care environment became central in the interview with one youth consuming the content of that interview. This youth described the impact of group homes on his life and the lives of young people in that form of care. He stated

that his experiences had been dehumanizing and consistent with what one might expect in a correctional environment:

“Group homes are gateways to jails...that’s what they are...they’re just stupid...they don’t help kids...they just make it worse. You’re young and they try to make it like you are old...like you’re in a prison...it’s stupid...early bedtime...have to make your own meals...lights out and menus...outings you don’t want to go to...staff don’t give a shit...limit family visits...community time...they don’t give you a chance to be normal.”

“Group homes teach kids not to care...I’m already in trouble. I might as well do something else...I know tons of kids from group homes who are right where I am now (jail).”

“My advice would be leave...you are not in jail.”

This youth and one other implied that their preferred out-of-home placement was a foster home and that they aspired to be a foster child. Foster care was viewed as participating in a family. They discussed being on good behaviour to achieve this goal but having their hopes for a change in placement dashed due to their age.

“Where are you going...they make you feel worthless...you’re not going to a foster home...going to get bumped from group home to group home until you are eighteen.”

“They put you in a group home and tell you to behave...and will put in for a foster home. Do you know how long it takes to get a foster home? Then they screw up.”

Critical Life Points

All youth participants spontaneously described points in their life that had a critical impact on their life course. These critical life events were described as turning points or crossroads. Each participant was thoughtful in their description of these points and presented them as lessons learned along their life’s journey. The value of this information cannot be underestimated particularly because it was offered to the researcher by each and every participant with no prompting.

The most poignant event was the trauma of leaving home:

"I left Dad because of abuse...would never have gone to all these places..."

"I would have been all right if I had of stayed with Mom."

"When we came into care...my sister got homesick and I got depressed...I found that once I had been placed that I drifted."

One youth, expelled from school due to an altercation with the principal, attributed that event to the change in his life:

"I was out of school for a year...that's when it all started...I wasn't in school...I had a lot of time on my hands...when you are not allowed in any school, you are screwed...the principal thing changed my life...I didn't give up but I had nothing to do...you know... I'd go out and hang out and get into trouble."

There was a prevalent theme related to the accessibility of "help" or support at critical points as one youth explained:

"If I'd got more help...a little support... I might not have done crime...you don't know how many times I applied (for help)..."

"Cause I couldn't get help in these two places I just lost it."

One youth, as described earlier, felt that the death of his foster brother had a dramatic impact on the sequence of following events. This set the course for his life for many years to follow.

"Foster brother, I knew since back there...he drowned...no one tried to help him...we went...it was too late...he'd already...next day they found his body...after that I had a lot of problems there...I didn't really get along with them after it happened...I didn't care anymore."

One youth recalled the exact point he changed the course of his life. He had become out of control, acting out aggressively in a group care setting, directing his rage at a peer, who he had seriously injured. His capacity to hurt others frightened him:

"I don't do any fighting...since that kid got hurt...I scared myself...I can control my temper now...now I'm taking responsibility...started as soon as I got arrested for those charges...I turned into another person."

The impact of incarceration influenced one youth participant and he described the lessons learned from those around him in jail. He committed to changing his life accordingly:

“Change it, change the behaviour...this guy (in jail) says to me...I was once sitting right where you are...one day you’ll be where I’m at...telling some kid like you the same story.”

Throughout the stories of these five youth, there is a common theme. Had there been intervention by a caregiver at the time of the critical life event, the life paths of these youth may have been redirected and the journey less tragic.

Discussion

This study facilitated youth ‘voice’ through the use of youth themselves as key informants. As they were the consumers of child welfare and young offender services and had ‘lived’ experience, they were considered the experts. The principle of voice, defined as the youth’s right to be heard and taken seriously in matters that concern them (Article 12, U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child), became a theme that predominated a number of the findings.

The lifeline was used to guide the five youth participants through their journey from care to custody. These lifelines illustrated predictable pathways from the least intrusive care environments to the most invasive custodial settings. At the completion of the lifeline, youth were in awe of the amount of movement in their lives and its significance to their well-being. The construction of the lifeline was a process worthy of consideration as a useful therapeutic tool in helping young people in care or custody. Youth gained perspective through the concrete

visualization of their history and it facilitated the identification of critical pathways and turning points.

The debate in the literature persists regarding the association between childhood trauma, the provision of child welfare care and entry into the young offender system (Jonson-Reid and Barth, 2000). Youth participants offered a unique perspective about the ability of child welfare workers and care providers to influence this trajectory. Adverse and abusive life events and circumstances precipitated intervention for the purpose of the protection of the child. The trauma of being removed from the family home was described as a critical life point by all youth. Its impact was perhaps underestimated by the care providers. The entry into care also represented the most significant attachment rupture. Intervention at that moment required intensity, a view to heal the trauma and safeguards against potential disruptions in future relationships. In contrast, youth experienced multiple moves and placement instability with an average of twelve moves in their career in child welfare system. The age of entry to care for the majority of the participants was twelve years. Studies report that youth over twelve had a higher rate of delinquency and it was therefore considered to be risky and not preferable to take older children into less intrusive care settings such as foster homes (Jonson-Reid, 2002 and Widom, 1991). Staff operated group care settings are viewed as more amenable to the care of adolescents. Youth participants described feeling stigmatized and ostracized by society and demoralized by group care environments. One youth questioned his value as a citizen if segregated by society in a group home. Youth longed for and aspired to

placement in foster care environments which from their perspective would more closely replicate family life. Furthermore, workers focus on the symptoms of behavioural acting out instead of on the underlying causal factors for the youth's behavioural problems exacerbated the youth's poor sense of self and reinforced his self-blame.

Youth ascribed tremendous authority, responsibility and centrality to the role of the child welfare worker. Youth were dependent on their workers to make decisions about when and where they would live. A common refrain was that workers were unavailable, changed frequently and they did not listen to the concerns and wishes of the youth. Youth described feeling hopeless and powerless to alter their life circumstances. They were able to justify their rationale for poor behaviour. In an effort to take back power, they behaved in ways that they felt would draw attention to their concerns and fears about their placement and provoke the worker to respond accordingly. Due to these provocative behaviours, youth were relocated to alternate placements or charged and incarcerated. It can be interpreted that youth were managed as 'at risk' subjects of protection rather than young people with the right to have opinions, preferences and wishes (Sutherland, 1992). Empowering youth to have a 'voice' is of limited value if those in a position of influence are not listening. These episodes were described as critical life points in which timely, thoughtful intervention was required to interrupt precipitous entry into the young offender system.

The most compelling finding was the view by youth participants that group homes were a “gateway to jail.” They were seen by youth as a significant contributor to the commission of chargeable offences. It appeared that group home staff had difficulty managing the challenging behaviours of youth and sought the authority and support of the criminal justice system to intervene in these behaviours. Entry into that system ostensibly closes the door to therapeutic resources and services and sets a course in place for the youth in the criminal justice system. The recent introduction of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) in Canada will limit the ability for group home operators to charge youth for aggressive behaviours perpetrated in group home settings except in exceptional circumstances. Community based alternatives to incarceration will be required. The effectiveness of family preservation using Multisystemic Therapy, in reducing the institutionalization of serious young offenders, is supported in the literature (Henggeler et al., 1992). This may offer an alternative to placement in a group home setting once protective concerns are resolved. This approach is predicated on the effective integration of a range of community based services (i.e. school, mental health, recreation, neighbourhood, extended family). The child welfare system by design is focussed on protection and as such, cannot be expected to provide all the necessary services required to support child victims of familial trauma (Jonson-Reid and Barth, 2000). Agency collaboration across service sectors and programs is required to prevent entry of youth into care and custody.

At the point of the first out-of-home placement, a youth centred model that builds on the meaningful relationships in a youth’s life is optimal. The placement

of a youth in care must enhance his life chances (Snow and Finlay, 1998). A single case manager is required to follow the youth from admission to care to discharge. This would assist in the design of a well integrated community plan, ensure continuity in caregivers, provide the necessary advocacy to divert youth from the criminal justice system and provide support to youth through engagement and active listening.

Adequate clinical resources need to be attached to group care settings to assist staff in understanding the complex therapeutic needs of youth in care. This would better prepare staff to anticipate responses and mediate potential counter transference as well as assist youth with the resolution of the underlying causes that led to their admission to care. A coalition of clinical services and youth workers would reinforce a rehabilitative model of care (Finlay, 2003 and Stone, 2002). Group home operators in collaboration with community partners need to ensure that these youth are embraced as contributing members of that community.

A more critical analysis of group care from the perspective of youth is required to understand the trajectory from group homes to the young offender system. Five youth in a secure custody setting were interviewed at a specific point in their life. These youth had lengthy histories in both the child welfare and young offender service sectors. The ability to generalize these findings to all youthful offenders with child welfare experience is not determined. Further research is required to explore the experiences of youth with a range of exposure to each system to more reliably determine the interaction between the two.

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