



Features of Service Delivery that Young People in Out-of-Home Care Who 'Self-place' and Stay in Unapproved Placements Value When Accessing a Specialist Support Service

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Abstract

Young people under child protection orders are a vulnerable group and their vulnerability and risk of exploitation increases if they leave approved out-of-home care placements (residential and foster care) and stay in unapproved arrangements. These arrangements are often temporary, insecure and may expose young people to exploitation and harm. Despite their heightened vulnerability, there are limited specialised services that work alongside this cohort of young people. There is a dearth of evidence regarding their needs and effective service responses. These gaps are compounded by the absence of young people's voices in the literature and policy discussions; with implications for recognising their human rights. This paper reports on the views of thirteen young people who have accessed support via a specialist service in Queensland (Australia), specifically funded by the Queensland Government to provide support to 'self-placing' young people (12–18 years). The service aims to improve young people's resilience, capability, and safety so they can either return to an approved OOHC placement or be supported to make safe and sustainable choices for independent accommodation. This paper reports on interview and survey data about their features of service delivery that young people who self-place value in a specialist support service. The findings highlight the importance of: (1) accessible and responsive support; (2) caring and trusting relationships with workers; (3) supporting young people's choices and their developing agency; and (4) advocacy and support navigating systems.

Keywords Self-placing · Runaway · Child protection · Out-of-home care · Young people · Service delivery

Young people placed in out-of-home care (OOHC) due to child protection concerns are a vulnerable population that often experience poorer outcomes on a variety of domains including mental and physical health, education, housing, and psychosocial wellbeing (Mendes & McCurdy, 2019). Their vulnerability increases when they leave formal approved OOHC placements (foster or residential care) without permission, to stay elsewhere such as family/friend's houses or living on the streets (Attar-Schwartz, 2013). This is because these unapproved arrangements are often temporary, insecure and can expose young people to exploitation (Attar-Schwartz, 2013; Bowden & Lambie, 2015). The term 'self-placing' often used to signify this phenomenon in Queensland (Australia), where this study was conducted.

Although this terminology is contested (CCYP, 2021), it will be used throughout the paper to reflect the study context.

In the literature, other terms such as 'absent' (QFCC, 2016), 'missing' (Colvin et al., 2018), 'runaway' (Crosland et al., 2020), 'awol' (Finkelstein et al., 2004) and 'absconding' (Bowden et al., 2018) are also used when referring to young people in OOHC who leave approved placements to stay elsewhere. These terms have also been critiqued for the way in which they construct the young person (CCYP, 2021). For example, implying that they are deviant or have *decided* to leave rather than feeling *forced* to leave due to institutional failings (CCYP, 2021), such as a lack of safety within the OOHC placement (Moore et al., 2017, 2018). The lack of a standardised definition for this phenomenon contributes to ambiguity and impedes reliable cross-jurisdictional and cross-study comparisons (QFCC, 2016).

In Australia, jurisdictions are not required to report on the number of young people who self-place as a child protection indicator (see AIHW, 2022). This, in concert with variable terminology and definitions, inconsistent policies,

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and documentation all contribute to a lack of reliable data, obscuring the scale and magnitude of the problem (Bowden & Lambie, 2015; Crosland et al., 2018). For example, in 2016, the Queensland child protection authority told an inquiry into the death of a child missing from OOHC (QFCC, 2016) that an average of 5% of children in OOHC were recorded as ‘missing’ or ‘absent’ from their placement each year during July 2010–2015. Whilst a recent Australian survey (n=325) found that 33% of young people self-reported being absent from their OOHC placement for over one week in the previous year (McDowall, 2020). Some international studies suggest the prevalence rates of young people leaving residential care to be over 25% (Bowden & Lambie, 2015).

Characteristics of Young People Who Self-place

Whilst Australian data are particularly lacking on the characteristics of young people in OOHC who self-place, much of the existing international literature has been focused on individual risk factors (Attar-Schwartz, 2013; Chor et al., 2022; Wulczyn, 2020). International evidence suggests those most likely to self-place are older; female; experienced placement instability; placed in non-family-based settings; and have behavioural and emotional difficulties (Courtney et al., 2005; Wulczyn, 2020). Limited Australian evidence suggests that First Nations young people self-place at younger ages than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Mendes et al., 2020).

Until recently, there has been little attention paid to the reasons why young people leave their approved OOHC arrangements to self-place (Taylor et al., 2014). Bowden and Lambie (2015) argued that individual risk factors should be considered in concert with relational and contextual factors. They conceptualised relational factors as family and peer influences and contextual factors as the impact of placement, broader child protection/care system and social contexts. There is growing recognition in the international literature that young people may self-place due to a variety of both push (getting away *from*) and pull (going *to*) factors (Attar-Schwartz, 2013; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). These factors include testing carers to confirm they care; escaping crowded, under-supported and unsafe approved OOHC placements; seeking autonomy; and a desire to live with family, peers or partners (Attar-Schwartz, 2013; Biehal & Wade, 1999, 2000; Finkelstein et al., 2004; Kerr & Finlay, 2006; Taylor et al., 2014).

Consequences of Self-placing

Young people in OOHC who self-place are overrepresented in runaway reports to police in Australia (Colvin et al., 2018; McFarlane, 2021), the UK (Biehal & Wade, 2000) and USA

(Courtney et al., 2005). The literature also indicates young people who self-place are often disconnected from support and tend to be: at increased risk of homelessness during their time in OOHC and post-transition from OOHC; have increased contact with the justice system; experience long-term disengagement from education; face barriers to accessing mental and physical health care; and experience ongoing trauma and crisis including sexual abuse and exploitation (Attar-Schwartz, 2013; Biehal & Wade, 1999; Courtney et al., 2005; Jackson, 2015).

The disconnection of young people from formal support when self-placing, paired with their increased vulnerability at this time, compounds the disadvantage they face. For example, the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (2013) found:

... young people under 18 years are ‘self-selecting’ out of care without adequate support or future plans, leading to their inability to support themselves either financially or emotionally. It is likely that this group of young people are ‘opting out’ of care for such reasons as the perceived ‘failings’ of the state as a ‘corporate parent’ and their general mistrust of the system. This reluctance to engage is compounded by the effects of past abuse and related trauma, which are often not adequately addressed while the young person has been in care (p. 303).

This excerpt highlights the link between a lack of support for young people who self-place whilst in OOHC with poor transitions from OOHC to adulthood. Despite increased policy and research focus on the importance of transition planning and support for young people in OOHC internationally, (Mendes, 2022; Mendes et al., 2014), only a few studies have framed self-placing as a transition or ‘premature’ exit pathway from OOHC (Connell et al., 2006; Courtney & Wong, 1996). This is a significant gap, as self-placing impedes young people’s access to transition-from-care planning and support, as well as ‘after care’ entitlements; factors internationally recognised as essential for enhancing outcomes for care leavers (Mendes et al., 2022).

Responses to Self-placing

There is a dearth of evidence related to programs and practices specifically related to supporting young people in OOHC who self-place (QFCC, 2016). The literature that does exist tends to focus on reactive responses to self-placing such as police involvement to locate the young person and return them to their approved OOHC placement (Colvin et al., 2018; Gerard et al., 2019) or the adoption of punitive responses such as removing possessions and privileges on their return (Finkelstein et al., 2004; Kerr & Finlay, 2006). Such responses have been critiqued for criminalising and

endangering the safety and wellbeing of young people (Colvin et al., 2018; Gerard et al., 2019). There is also a small body of literature that reports on interventions designed to reduce runaway behaviour for young people in OOHC (Slesnick, 2001) and approaches that prioritise safety planning and individualised behaviour support plans for young people who leave but later return to their approved OOHC placement (CCYP, 2021; Crosland et al., 2020).

There does not appear to be any description of, nor evidence regarding, holistic responses to young people who self-place, particularly those that do not intend to return to an approved OOHC placement. As such, we have limited understanding of supports and service delivery approaches that can enhance the safety and connection of young people whilst they are self-placing. The voices of young people and their experiences of engaging with support whilst self-placing is also absent within the literature. This paper seeks to address this gap by answering the question, “*what are the features of a support service specifically designed to support young people in OOHC who self-place that young people value?*”.

Brisbane Emergency Response and Outreach Service

Brisbane Emergency Response and Outreach Service (BEROS) is a specialist service funded by the Queensland State Government (Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services) to support young people aged 12 to 18-years, who are under child protection orders, in OOHC and ‘self-placing’ in non-approved placements. Young people are not eligible for the service if they are subject to temporary or court assessment orders, interstate or overseas child protection orders.

BEROS is a voluntary service and does not have the statutory obligations of the child protection authority. The service does not undertake independent return interviews, which are in-depth conversations with young people upon their return to approved OOHC placements to understand why they left the placement (see Crosland et al., 2020). Instead, BEROS responds to the young person’s self-presenting support needs and goals. It aims to improve the resilience, capability, and safety of young people so they can either return to an approved OOHC placement or be supported to make safe and sustainable choices for independent accommodation.

BEROS has three interrelated components. The first is an *after-hours mobile outreach service* that provides transport, links to other services and emotional support. The second, is highly individualised and flexible *case management* that is focused on increasing the young person’s safety, connection, sense of wellbeing and stability. The work involves supporting young people’s transition-from-care plans, referrals to

other organisations, the provision of practical support such as food, phone credit and support to attend appointments. The third component is *overnight accommodation* that young people can access for up to two consecutive nights and are free to leave at any time.

BEROS’ practice model is future-focused, strengths-based, trauma-informed and aligned with a harm-minimisation approach. Work with young people is guided by the principles: relationship-building is prioritised; engagement is voluntary; practice is transparent; the young person leads change; work with the young person’s reality; and privilege the voice of young people in decision-making (see Venables & Warrell, 2021 for a more detailed overview of these principles).

Method

This paper reports on a subset of data from a larger study exploring the implementation of the BEROS model from the perspective of young people and practitioners. The study was underpinned by a constructivist epistemology and child-rights focus. Constructivism informed the study design by recognising that people actively create and affix subjective meanings to experiences and objects through social interaction (Padgett, 2012). Aligned with the child-rights focus, the study sought to privilege the voice of young people and to maximise their choice of how to participate in the study and share their experiences of service delivery and support (Kennan & Dolan, 2017; Tisdall et al., 2009). Specifically, this paper reports on survey and interview data from young people who accessed the specialist support service, BEROS.

Recruitment

A purposive sample of young people under child protection orders who had accessed support via BEROS were recruited. The target cohort included young people both over and under eighteen years of age. Young people were eligible to participate in the study if they were: (1) currently receiving support from BEROS; or (2) had previously received a service from BEROS within the last 18 months. Prior to recruitment material being distributed to young people, the Queensland child protection authority approved the project and gave consent for eligible young people under its guardianship to participate.

BEROS staff shared recruitment material with young people and where relevant, their guardian. Interested young people were able to contact the research team directly to discuss participation. The research team also placed a locked letterbox at the BEROS office to allow young people to provide their consent for the research team to contact them, or

a nominated support person, directly to arrange a time to discuss the project and their participation.

Participants

Thirteen young people participated in the study. In accordance with the study's ethical clearance, both guardian consent and the young person's assent was required for those under 18-years. Twelve participants provided assent as they were under 18-years. The child protection authority was the guardian for eleven of these young people. A grandparent provided guardian consent for the other participant. One young person was 18-years and provided consent.

The study aimed to maximise choice and opportunities for young people to share their views. They were given the following options for participation: (1) survey; and/or (2) an interview. Two of the young people chose to participate in both the survey and interview, four elected to participate in an interview only and another seven participated in the survey only. Eight of the participants identified as female and five identified as male. Most participants ($n=9$) were neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander. Each participant was given a pseudonym, which is used to refer to them in this paper. These, along with the participant characteristics and mode of participation in the study are outlined below in Table 1.

Data Collection

Data collection with young people occurred between February and October 2019, following ethical clearance from the University of Queensland's Human Research Ethics Committee and approval from Queensland's child protection authority. As discussed, the design included both interviews and surveys to provide young people with as much choice as possible about how they participated in the study. Doing so allowed young people to select a mode (written and anonymous to researcher OR verbal and known to researcher) that suited them best to share their perspectives.

The survey and interview had the shared purpose of understanding young people's experiences of engaging with the service. They both explored participants' perceptions and experiences of the service in relation to (1) how they connect with BEROs (referral, service components, frequency); (2) types of support received and extent to which the service met their needs; (3) the extent to which BEROs practice principles are evident in practice; and 4) their views on the strengths of the service and how it could be improved. Details related to each data collection method are discussed below.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 20 and 45 min were conducted with six young people. Despite young people having the option of having a support person present, all

Table 1 Characteristics of participants and mode of participation

Young person	Age	Gender	Cultural background	Service components accessed	Mode of participation
Dee	16	F	Neither aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	Case management; after-hours outreach; overnight accommodation	Interview and survey
Arya	16	F	Neither aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	Case management; after-hours outreach; overnight accommodation	Interview only
Sara	16	F	Neither aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	Case management; after-hours outreach; overnight accommodation	Interview only
Xavier	17	M	Did not wish to disclose	Case management; after-hours outreach	Interview only
Cian	16	M	Neither aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	Case management; after-hours outreach	Interview only
Fynn	16	M	Neither aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	Case management; after-hours outreach; overnight accommodation	Interview and survey
Court	17	F	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	After-hours outreach	Survey only
Jai	17	M	Neither aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	Case management	Survey only
Zander	16	M	Aboriginal	After-hours outreach	Survey only
Alma	17	F	Neither aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	Case management; after-hours outreach; overnight accommodation	Survey only
Jana	17	F	Aboriginal	Case management	Survey only
Coralie	18	F	Neither aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	Case management; after-hours outreach	Survey only
Tameika	16	F	Neither aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	Case management; after-hours outreach; overnight accommodation	Survey only

interviews were conducted one-on-one by the researcher. Most of the interviews (n = 5) were conducted in person, at a location of the young person's choosing, such as at their homes or in a cafe. One interview was conducted by telephone. With the young person's consent, interviews were audio-recorded.

Survey

The survey was adapted from a tool originally used in an evaluation of aftercare services that support young people who have transitioned from OOHC (Venables et al., 2017) and reviewed by BEROS to determine its suitability for young people supported by the service. The survey was delivered in a paper-based format and included a mixture of nominal checkbox, likert scale and free text questions. The three free text questions in the survey about overall experience were identical to those asked in the semi-structured interview: (a) 'what do you like most about working with BEROS?'; (b) 'how could BEROS be better?'; and (c) 'would you recommend BEROS to a friend? Explain why'. A total of nine young people completed the survey.

Data Analysis

Interviews

All of the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. The transcripts were then de-identified and uploaded to the qualitative data management software program, NVivo. Braun and Clarke's (2006) widely accepted guidelines informed the thematic analysis of the data. The researcher first familiarised themselves with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times, before generating and applying an initial coding frame relevant to the research foci. Throughout the analysis process, the coding frame was refined with new codes added and existing ones reviewed. Once the coding was completed, the researcher then searched for themes across the data, grouping codes together where they reflected an underpinning pattern. Similarities, differences and links between the themes emerging in the data were also explored.

Survey

Due to the small sample size, the quantitative survey data responses (n = 9) were analysed descriptively. The free text comments were uploaded into Nvivo and analysed thematically alongside the interview data, using the process described above.

Findings

This paper reports on young people's experiences of receiving support from BEROS, a specialist non-government service that works with young people in OOHC who self-place away from approved placements. The young people who participated in the study had complex and dynamic support needs, often experiencing challenges in meeting fundamental daily living needs for food and shelter. In response, BEROS reportedly provided them with a wide range of interrelated supports including information/resources, practical and emotional support, transport and advocacy.

This paper specifically focuses on the features of overall service design and delivery that young people valued rather than the responses provided to specific needs. Four interrelated themes were identified across the data: (1) accessible and responsive support; (2) caring and trusting relationships with workers; (3) supporting young people's choices and developing agency; and (4) advocacy and support navigating systems.

Accessible and Responsive Support

All thirteen participants indicated that they would recommend BEROS to a friend who was self-placing because the service was supportive and helpful. For example, in their survey response, Jana wrote, "I pretty much already recommend it to my little sister cause [sic] I know as she gets older she will need that support like they help me" (Jana, survey). Similarly, all of the interviewees reiterated the importance of having a service like BEROS available to young people in OOHC who are self-placing. Dominant across the interview and free text survey responses was a view that BEROS was accessible and responsive. Young people's comments centred on three sub-themes: (1) integrated components; (2) outreach, transport and practical support; and (3) reliable and responsive provision of support.

Integrated Support

BEROS operates as a 24-h service delivered via three interrelated components: (1) case management support; (2) after-hours outreach; and (3) overnight accommodation. As shown in Table 1, six of the 13 participants had accessed all three of the service components, another three had accessed two components and the remaining four had accessed only one component. Case management support and the after-hours outreach service were the most accessed service components.

All the interview participants had accessed two or more components, and they positively discussed the integrated nature of the service components. For example, Sara

appreciated the communication between and shared practice approach of workers across the components, commenting: "...they all talk so it's good. Everyone knows what is going on, and they're always on the same page" (Sara, interview). Whilst Arya reported that the roles of each component were clear and easy to navigate, stating:

It's really easy to work your way around BEROS' system. You know that from nine till five, it's the day team. And if you ever need transport to a meeting... or just to ring up and talk... and if you need transport overnight because you were feeling unsafe... they could easily pick you up and transport you somewhere else". (Arya, interview)

The importance of an integrated model of support that operated 24/7 for keeping young people who are self-placing safe and connected was captured by Dee's experience of engaging with the service. She shared:

When I was with [BEROS], because I wasn't doing anything, and I dropped out of school and I had nowhere to stay. And then [working with BEROS], that kind of got me back on my feet so then I'd have somewhere to stay during the day because I'd be doing my course. Then come back there at night-time (Dee, interview).

This excerpt highlights how the service components worked together to ensure that Sara had a safe place to stay and connect with others at different times of the day whilst self-placing.

Outreach, Transport and Practical Support

All but one of the survey participants (Jai) reported that BEROS had provided them with transport. In the free text section of the survey, Jana identified transport and outreach as the reason why she liked BEROS, commenting: "I like everything beros [sic] they pick me up" (Jana, survey). Whilst Coralie identified "if they need a lift" (Coralie, survey) as a reason for recommending the service to a friend. Similarly, the interviewees all highlighted the importance of transport and the service's outreach model to their engagement with the service.

Young people viewed outreach and transport as critical to their engagement with BEROS, given that most could not easily access the supports and resources that they required when they were self-placing. For example, Sara shared, "... they used to come pick me up every night and take me to get food, have a chat with me, and take me to have a shower, and wash my clothes and stuff like that" (Sara, interview). Like Sara, young people particularly valued that being taken for a meal or to purchase food as part of their interaction with

BEROS workers. For example, when reflecting on what she liked most about BEROS, Jana wrote, "...shout me a feed take me on drives and really helpful help me with shopping" (Jana, survey).

Several of the young people who were interviewed linked the availability of outreach support and transport during the day and at night to their strategies for keeping safe when self-placing. For example, Arya commented:

Well, if I found that I needed to get away from being scared of where I was...[case manager] would always go, "alright give me half an hour. I'll be at your house". And even the night team. It was really good to ring them up and go, "look guys, I'm scared where I am staying. Please come and pick me up." (Arya, interview)

The provision of transport also facilitated young people's engagement with other supports and services including psychologist, drug rehabilitation, doctor and counselling appointments, as well as stakeholder meetings with child safety, education and housing providers. For example, Alma reported that "getting me to appointments" (Alma, survey) was one of the things she liked most about BEROS. One of the interview participants reiterated the provision of transport helped to overcome barriers to attending appointments, when she commented:

... appointments that I needed to go to and had no way to get to. They would always put it in their diary. [Arya] has so and so this day, at this time. And it was really good because they were always on time. They were always there. (Arya, interview)

As well providing transport to appointments, young people frequently commented that BEROS workers helped them to get referrals, make appointments and remember to attend them. For example, during the interview, Xavier reported that the case management team "helped me get into [drug rehabilitation program]" and "[took] me to appointments, arranged appointments" with the program. Xavier attributed this support in navigating the referral process, coordinating appointments, and providing transport allowed to him achieving his goal of completing a rehabilitation program.

Reliable and Responsive Provision of Support

Dominant across the qualitative data was a view that BEROS were "a great support" (Alma, survey) and that "they help you as much as they can" (Court, survey). Across the interview data, reliable and responsive service provision emerged as a key reason why young people felt that BEROS was helpful and supportive. Young people

particularly valued having requests actioned in a timely manner. For example,

BEROS actually listen. They don't sit there and go, "yes we'll get this done" and you wait three or four months and you say, "hey has this been done yet?" [and they say,] "No, still working on it". It's, you call them [BEROS], a week later, [and they say,] "yes no it's already organised..." (Cian, interview)

Responsiveness to requests for support or resources made young people feel heard, prioritised and like the workers "just care more" (Dee, interview).

The importance of reliable and responsive access to emotional support was a dominant thread across the qualitative data. For example, four survey participants identified this in their free text comments, with Tameika identifying "[t]hey are there to talk when needed" (Tameika, survey) as a reason she would recommend the service to another young person. Dee's interview comments provided further explanation for why young people felt that BEROS provided responsive and reliable emotional support when they were self-placing:

The other thing is actually having someone there to talk to. Because if you ring any other support service, you can't really get them to ring you back and have a conversation with you. Because you're really messed up. So, it's really good on the support issue and actually getting a response back. (Dee, interview)

Like Dee, nearly all of the interview participants highlighted that BEROS was reliable in calling them back promptly and that this made them feel supported and cared about. Most of the young people interviewed felt confident that they could make an unplanned call to BEROS at any time they needed emotional support. This is exemplified by Arya's comment, "[a]nd just feeling that if I ever needed to talk to someone, that I could easily ring them." In contrast, some young people valued the proactive offer of emotional support from BEROS workers. Fynn stated:

[case manager] calls me like a day or two before, he's like, "do you want to meet up at this time?" And I just agree and say, "yes". And he calls me on the day and says, "I'll be around this time if you want to hang out." And I'll be like, "okay". It's good. (Fynn, interview).

Fynn reported finding it difficult opening up to people, so he liked that his case manager reached out to him to make plans to catch-up. He also liked that they checked-in with him closer to the time to see if those plans were still suitable. This approach acknowledges the rapidly changing circumstances of young people—particularly when they are self-placing in temporary arrangements.

Caring and Trusting Relationships with Workers

Across the qualitative data, the importance of caring and trusting relationships with workers emerged as a dominant theme. This is exemplified by the comment:

They're professionals, but they're also not really. So, they'll help you with a lot of things, but they're also people you can turn to and talk to, but not as someone professional but someone as a friend. You can trust them as that sort of person. (Sara, interview)

Like Sara, many of the respondents saw the BEROS workers as friends and used words like 'genuine' and 'caring' to describe them. These characteristics of practitioners were frequently identified as a unique feature of BEROS and routinely contrasted with the approach of other services. For example:

I'm just like honestly, it's the best service I've ever worked with, yes, with all the connections through the department, and being in care. Honestly, BEROS and all that, definitely my favourite out of all them... they just care more... It just seems more genuine, the workers. (Dee, interview)

Perceiving the workers to be genuine in their care and offers of support to young people made them feel more comfortable engaging with BEROS.

Another factor that contributed to the development of trusting relationships with BEROS workers, was young people's perception of them as non-judgmental. For example, when explaining the reason why she gave "1000 out of 5" when asked to rate BEROS 'out of five' for how much support they provided her with, Arya commented:

...even though they didn't know you, they had no clue about you. Or they knew just what was on your files. It was really good to have a smiling face that didn't care about where you had come from. Or what you had been through. They were just there to help you. (Arya, interview).

Several of the other interviewees felt that the workers cared about them because they made a concerted effort to get to know them. For example, Dee shared, "...they care more about the kids. They make more of an effort. It's their job but they want to be there at the same time, they want to do it... like actually getting to know you" (Dee, interview). When asked what the implications of being treated like this was, Dee reported that it helped to open up, commenting, "I find it hard to trust people and open up and talk to them. So, they made an effort to get to know me and everything" (Dee, interview). This indicates that the service's focus on building relationships enabled young people to trust workers

and feel comfortable sharing information with them about their situation.

A few young people specifically highlighted the positive impact the service's stance on confidentiality had on their ability to form trusting relationships with workers. Other than confirming they have had contact with a young person, BEROS does not provide information about the young person to the child protection authority without their consent unless there are immediate safety risks. In the survey, Coralie identified this as the best feature of BEROS, writing, "if you told them anything they wouldn't tell anyone" (Coralie, survey). Several of the interview participants explained why they valued the service's stance on confidentiality. Many of them valued having "a support network that wouldn't run back to Child Safety" (Arya, interview), whilst others spoke of how it made them feel safer to share information. For example, Fynn reported that, "[i]t feels good. I've told [case manager] a lot of things and I feel safe" (Fynn, interview).

These examples indicate young people felt BEROS provided them with a unique experience of positive working relationships that allowed them to feel valued, heard and safe to share sensitive information about their situation and needs. Arguably, this would facilitate more thorough assessments and more responsive supports to be implemented.

Supporting Young People's Choices and their Developing Agency

In the interviews, young people consistently reported that when they worked with BEROS they had choices and that their voices were listened to and impacted decisions. Their comments centred around three key areas: (1) choice regarding engagement with the service; (2) leading decisions about goals and support needs; and (3) supporting their developing agency.

Choice Regarding Engagement with the Service

All young people were asked about how much choice they felt they had in engaging with BEROS after being referred. This was done via a three-point scale in the survey (1 = lots of choice; 3 = no choice) and via an open question in the interview. Despite nine of the thirteen young people being referred to BEROS by the child protection authority, all participants reported it was their own choice to engage. All survey participants indicated that they had 'lots of choice'. The interview data provided insights into why young people felt they had lots of choice about their engagement with the service. One young person commented:

I had the option. It was you could work with us [BEROS] and we'll help you out with a lot of the support stuff. Or you could easily just say no and

[BEROS] wouldn't bother you again. And I felt like that was really good because it gave me the choice, if I wanted to work with them or not. (Arya, interview)

In the interviews, young people frequently contrasted their experience of choosing to work with BEROS with their experiences of feeling "like I am forced to do things" (Fynn, interview) with the child protection authority. He went on to comment that not feeling forced to do things by BEROS "makes me feel less anxious" (Fynn, interview). Being able to exercise their right to choose if and how to engage with the service was valued by young people and reportedly fostered their engagement.

A few of the young people also highlighted how their referral to BEROS gave them to choices about how to engage with the child protection authority. For example, Cian remarked:

I ditched Child Safety. Like BEROS is like my Child Safety now. Like I just want nothing to do with them [Child Safety]... I've also said to [child protection officer] like 'you're not a bad [child protection officer] it's just Child Safety itself, it's just not my thing'... And I was like, yes now that I'm independent I want nothing to do with Child Safety. That's how BEROS came into the picture because they just, they do my clothing allowances for me... like, BEROS is my Child Safety. (Cian, interview)

This comment highlights the role specialist support services can play in supporting young people in OOHC who self-place and do not want to engage with the child protection authority. The excerpt also highlights how specialist support services can act as a conduit between the young person and the child protection authority to facilitate access to resources that they are entitled to as a young person in OOHC, like clothing allowances.

Leading Decisions About Goals and Support Needs

Most of the interviewees reported the support provided by BEROS was responsive to their needs over time and that their case manager frequently engaged them in conversations about their needs and goals. This is illustrated by Arya's comment:

[Case manager] was always there telling me to reach my goals. And talk to me on what my goals were... My goals were mainly to get a better life without stealing, so that I could have my own future... [case manager] would sit down and help me with my budget... and help me with the things that I needed to do. Not just what everyone else needed me to do. (Arya, interview)

Workers reportedly used an informal, conversational, and dynamic process of needs assessment with young people. These discussions were often held in the car during outreach visits or transport to appointments. One young person, Dee, shared that she originally found it challenging talking with BEROS about her needs and goals because she was not sure what options were available to her. She shared: "because I didn't know what I could do, they gave me option on more things. So they helped me get, I started doing my [course]" (Dee, interview). For Dee, BEROS played a key role in helping her to identify options and goals for her future, thus supporting her decision-making.

All young people interviewed indicated they felt in control of the support that they received, because of the way BEROS worked with them. This suggests the service's practice principle of 'young people lead change' is realised in practice. Young people valued being given a choice about what they worked on, rather than being forced to do things. A few of the young people identified this as one of the best features of the service. This is illustrated by Fynn's response when asked if he got to decide what he worked on with BEROS: "100%... [because] It's different... at BEROS, they just give me the choice... They're helpful and they're not forceful" (Fynn, interview).

Several of the young people interviewed identified support was offered across a wide variety of domains, with one young person commenting, "it was [about] everything..." (Dee, interview). A few of the interview respondents also highlighted case management support was receptive to 'where they were at', rather than being primarily focused on issues or concerns outlined in their statutory child protection casefiles. Arya's comments illustrate this point:

Well [case manager] wouldn't really go off what my files say. She'd go off on what I was saying. She wouldn't refer it back to anything that's happened in my previous time. She'd actually go, okay, yes, I can understand that... So, it was really, really good for me. (Arya, interview)

This suggests that young people value having their voice and perspective, rather than that of the child protection authority or other adults, driving the support they receive while self-placing. This was found to facilitate engagement and help to build trusting relationships between the young person and the specialist service.

Supporting their Developing Agency

Being supported in their decision-making was important to all of the interviewees. They particularly valued BEROS staff helping them explore options. This is captured in Dee's comment:

Well, they gave me feedback on [my decisions], well they just, because I didn't know what I could do, they gave me options on more things. (Dee, interview)

As well as supporting their decisions, young people appreciated when workers also helped them to think through the consequences of their choices:

They supported my decision making 100%. I would say one thing and even though they wouldn't go, "well, that's a bit of a stupid idea, I don't know what you're on there", but [they would say], "just know the repercussions if you are actually doing this". (Arya, interview)

In these instances, supporting young people to think through their decisions helped to develop their capabilities and reasoning skills. This approach demonstrates safety planning and a harm minimisation approach to supporting young people. Some of the young people reported this helped them to evaluate the safety of their choices (e.g., self-placement locations and attending parties) by weighing up the pros and cons of situations. Young people felt supported because they could call BEROS for transport without fear of judgement if they made a decision that did not work out as intended. This allowed them to get to safety rather than remaining in the potentially dangerous situation.

Advocacy and Support Navigating Systems

All interview participants and two-thirds of the survey respondents (n=6) reported BEROS workers supported their engagement with the child protection authority and played an advocacy role in helping them to access resources. For example, Dee shared:

... I wanted to find out more about what funding the Department could help me with ... [case manager] was really good with that. She was really on to the Department because they weren't really doing much for me at the time. So, she could see that as well. Yes, and then she got on to it. Yes, I started getting more funding for stuff, and they were a lot quicker about it. (Dee, interview)

Similar to Dee, the most commonly identified form of advocacy was requesting the child protection authority provide resources to the young person. These resources included pre-paid transport cards, phones and phone credit, grocery vouchers and clothing allowances, as well as funding for driving lessons or extra-curricular activities. As discussed previously, young people spoke positively of how quickly BEROS responded to these needs, particularly when compared to the child protection authority and other service providers.

Several of the young people interviewed also highlighted the coordination and advocacy role Beros workers played in bringing together the child protection authority with other stakeholders such as education/training providers and government departments to facilitate positive outcomes for the young person. Sara's experience exemplifies this:

[Case manager] actually took me to the Department of Housing for the meeting for this unit. She's the reason I got this unit, because she took me to the appointment, and she pushed for it. She pushed Child Safety, she pushed Department of Housing, and within a day or two of me looking at this unit they turned around to me like, you've been approved for the house. (Sara, interview)

It was also commonly reported Beros workers advocated for young people to receive correct social security payments, to have their payments restored or to be exempt from certain mutual obligation conditions due to their circumstances.

Discussion

The needs of young people transitioning from OOHC (Campo & Commerford, 2016; Dorsey et al., 2012) and the positive impact of relationship-based models of practice for the outcomes of these young people is well established in the literature (Mendes & Purtell, 2020). However, the bulk of this evidence base is drawn from studies focused on young people who remain in, and formally transition from approved OOHC placements, such as residential care, once they cease being under child protection orders (Baldry et al., 2016; Campo & Commerford, 2016). This study has added to existing knowledge by focusing specifically on the perceptions of young people who have self-placed away from approved placements whilst remaining under child protection orders. Whilst acknowledging the importance of efforts to predict and prevent self-placing from occurring (Chor et al., 2022), this study sought to privilege the valuable insights that can be gained from young people about their perspectives on the features of suitable supports and responses that may serve to mitigate the risks that exist when they are self-placing (QFCC, 2016).

The young people in this study experienced unmet basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, hygiene, shelter), as well as needs that were complex and multi-faceted when self-placing. Their disconnection from and often ruptured relationships with other services/supports, most notably the statutory child protection authority, created barriers to their access to resources such as clothing allowances. The findings suggest

the safe and trusting relationships that young people established with the Beros practitioners provided a platform from which they could (re)connect with other formal supports to meet their needs.

The young people in the study valued having a voluntary, non-government service 'on their side', which acted as a conduit between them and the statutory child protection authority and other stakeholders. These findings build on evidence about the importance of relationships in transition from OOHC support (e.g., Muir et al., 2019) and in building safety for young people (e.g., Moore et al., 2017, 2018), by highlighting the particular importance of relationship-based, young person-led, and harm-minimisation principles for creating an environment in which young people feel comfortable to seek support when self-placing. This suggests that practitioners should have, at a minimum, professional knowledge and skill in trauma-informed practice, adolescent development and interpersonal skills, as well as a commitment to the rights of young people (see Munro, 2019).

Similar to findings about other marginalised young people's experiences of service provision (Zuchowski et al., 2022), particularly those with complex needs transitioning to adulthood (Ellem et al., 2020), the young people in this study particularly valued the relationship-based approach of the service. Like findings of other studies, young people felt this approach facilitated their agency and recognised them as worthy and capable individuals (Ellem et al., 2013; Mendes & Purtell, 2020; Muir et al., 2019).

In relationship-based practice, it is the quality of the relationship, rather than a specific method, that is privileged in the intervention (Howe et al., 2018). This relationship-based approach, coupled with the program's emphasis on outreach to the young person and approach to confidentiality, appears to have facilitated the engagement and trust of this cohort of young people. These elements of service design served to remove barriers to accessing services and enhanced young people's willingness to share information about their situation with practitioners. This is particularly important given the increased vulnerability of young people when they self-place away from approved placements.

Having a more holistic understanding of the young person's situation increased their connection and safety when self-placing and allowed for tailored, holistic and responsive services to be provided (see Collins, 2016; Greeson et al., 2015). Future specialist services aimed at supporting this cohort of young people should be strongly committed to outreach and relationship-based practice models, which allows people to "achieve power over their lives, including building relationships, and, through relationships, gain... access to resources, knowledge, and decision-making" (Ellem et al., 2013, p. 166).

Ideally, the introduction of more specialist services would be complemented by training of statutory child protection officers and other key stakeholders to better engage with this cohort of young people. The findings drew attention to the young people's request for advocacy and support when engaging with Government Departments (child protection authority; housing; social security) and other stakeholders (e.g., education/training providers). This support and advocacy related to ensuring needs of the young person were met, but also help in navigating a disjointed system.

Strengths and Limitations

The target cohort for the study can be considered a 'hard to reach' population, and this was reflected in the small sample ($n = 13$). Within the sample, the perspectives of younger service users and those who only engage in outreach or overnight support components are underrepresented. Due to the lack of specialist services like BEROS, it is possible the purposive sample of young people had a vested interest in seeing the program being viewed positively and continuing. This limitation is compounded by reliance on self-report data. However, the study was underpinned by a constructivist epistemology, child-rights focus and sought to explore the perspective of young people in relation to the support they received.

Despite the limitations, the sampling approach allowed for the young people best positioned to discuss the service to be recruited and allowed the research question to be addressed. Whilst the findings are not generalisable, they provide insights into factors that facilitate the engagement of young people in supports when they are self-placing away from approved OOHC placements.

Implications

This study has pointed to the need for investment in non-government services to provide support to young people who self-place away from approved OOHC placements. The funding of such services should recognise and accommodate the significant time resources required for implementing outreach and relationship-based models of practice. The findings also highlight the need for highly skilled practitioners, versed in trauma-informed and harm-minimisation approaches, within both specialist support services and the broader child protection sector.

Future studies need to explore the perspectives and practices of a variety of stakeholders involved in responding to self-placing (e.g., residential care workers, police, education and health workers). Further research exploring the intra and inter-agency practices required for integrated

and effective support of this cohort of young people is also needed to better inform both policy and practice.

As our ethics clearance related only to young people's experiences of service provision, we do not report on the factors that originally led to young people entering OOHC or self-placing. Additional research that investigates the factors that preceded young people self-placing and their pathways when self-placing is also needed. This will further contextualise our understandings of how best to respond to young people who are self-placing, to help enhance the connection, safety and wellbeing of this cohort.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the needs of young people in OOHC who 'self-place' away from approved placements and identified features of service delivery which facilitate their engagement with services. The findings highlight the need for specialist, non-government services that are informed by a relational, trauma-informed and harm-minimisation approach, which acknowledges and supports the young person's emerging agency and have the capacity to engage in advocacy work alongside the young person. This approach shows promise for facilitating trusting relationships between this cohort of young people and practitioners, allowing them to share hopes and worries, enabling more responsive service provision that enhances their safety, connection, and resilience.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This study received approval from the University of Queensland's Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval number: 2018000056. The study complied with ethical standards and the conditions outlined in the approval.

Informed Consent All participants provided informed assent/consent. All young people were provided with a Participant Information Sheet written in Easy English and with pictures to aid understanding. The young people were encouraged to discuss their participation with somebody that they trusted prior to agreeing to participate. The researcher was available to answer any questions that young people had about participation. Young people aged under 18-years provided written assent to participate. It was a requirement of the ethical clearance and the State's statutory child protection authority that their guardian also provide consent. Where the State was the guardian, blanket consent was

given for the participation of young people by the Director General. Where guardianship was with another adult, their written consent was provided.

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