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At-risk youth peer researchers highlight safety and "the bonds you make with staff and peers"

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Abstract

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the juvenile justice system is an ongoing social justice issue. Here we report on our latest research project within an ongoing industry partnership between staff at The Lighthouse and social work researchers from a regional Queensland University. The Lighthouse is a diversionary service provided by the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service (TAIHS) that supports young people who are at risk or high risk of offending. The primary aims of this study were to explore the experiences of young people using The Lighthouse diversionary service; and to recruit young people as peer researchers in discussions about the services provided to them. Key results reveal high priorities for participants were physical, emotional and cultural safety, feeling supported and not judged, and having strong connections at the service so they felt they were among mates, friends and family. We note lessons learned about undertaking peer research with young people, and highlight the distinctive role undertaken by Indigenous workers. Findings can contribute to informed social work practice and to available literature on engaging young people as peer researchers.

Key words: youth offending; peer research; service delivery; cultural safety; juvenile justice

Implications

- Young people at risk of offending want services where they feel safe and not judged

- Participatory peer research with at-risk young people can contribute to informed, evidence-based social work

- Greater recognition is needed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers play a distinctive role in maintaining cultural safety in practice and research

Although approximately 6% of young people aged 10–17 years in Australia are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage, they accounted for 50% of those under youth justice supervision on an average day in 2019-20 (AIHW, 2021). The rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 10-17 years in detention on an average day was 23.2 per 10,000 young people in 2020-21 (Closing the Gap, 2022). These children and young people were more than 16 times as likely as their non-Indigenous counterparts to be under supervision. In the 5 years from 2015–16 to 2019–20, the number of young people under supervision reportedly fell nationally by 4% (from 5,527 to 5,323), yet increased in Queensland, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. For Queensland, this rise has been explained, in part, as "due to new legislation starting on 12 February 2018, which began the transfer of young people aged 17 from the adult justice system to youth justice supervision" (AIHW, 2021, p.34).

Youth offending in Australia has been linked to disadvantage, poverty, precarious home environments, insecure housing, experiences of violence and trauma and disrupted education (CREATE Foundation, 2018; Edwards, 2017; Snow & Powell, 2012). Others have

determined that structural oppression, racism and marginalization in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, contribute significantly to the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in youth and criminal justice systems (Ball & Baidawi, 2021; Cunneen & Tauri, 2019; Russ- Smith & Wheeler, 2021). For example, Ball and Baidawi (2021, p.10) specifically highlighted "…the legacy of colonisation and resultant impact of intergenerational trauma" for children negotiating child protection and youth justice systems. The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection services and the 'drift' into juvenile justice systems have been noted as contributing factors to youth offending (Ball & Baidawi, 2021; Libesman & Briskman, 2018; Sentencing Advisory Council, 2020).

Inherent in working with young people at risk of offending is understanding their experiences and needs, and their perceptions of services provided to them. It is also important to understand the contexts that might shape pathways out of offending. Key priorities repeatedly identified are culture, family, communities and self-determination (Koorie Youth Council, 2018). A recent Victorian report by the Commission for Children and Young People (2021) into the lived experiences of Aboriginal children and young people and their over-representation in the Youth Justice System supported the above-noted priorities, and reiterated a necessary focus on strengths and education. The persistent pursuit of punitive over restorative interventions has been noted as unhelpful (Brookman & Wiener, 2017; Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC), 2021).

The Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Services (TAIHS) seek to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Townsville and the surrounding region. The Lighthouse afterhours diversionary service at TAIHS was launched as part of the Queensland government youth justice reforms to break the cycle of offending

and provide young people with support services, options and opportunities (Atkinson, 2018; Queensland Government, 2019). The Lighthouse service works with over 170 clients per quarter, and over 300 unique clients per year. Many young people using The Lighthouse service are known to both child protection and juvenile justice services.

Social work researchers at James Cook University became involved in a research partnership with The Lighthouse at their invitation in 2018 - to help enhance young people's involvement in shaping services provided to them. Previous work within the partnership has included a systematic literature review of Australian and international literature on inclusion of young people's voices in shaping service delivery, and a photovoice project to explore young people's initial views about their community and services provided to them (Savuro, Gair, Braidwood, d'Emden, O'Reilly, Walsh, & Zuchowski, 2022; Zuchowski, Gair, Braidwood, d'Emden, Savuro, & Zuchowski, 2021).

Youth offending in North Queensland has been prominent in local media over time, prompting a number of policy reviews (Atkinson, 2018; Smith, 2018). A common inference in local media coverage is that all youth offenders are from an Indigenous background. Media sensationalism can lead to racial tensions and calls for tougher measures to reduce youth offending (Edwards, 2017; McCutcheon, 2021). Yet, national and international literature suggests that social justice approaches that seek to divert young people away from entering the justice system, reduce contributing factors, and reengage, resocialise, and reintegrate young people into the community have greater success in reducing youth offending (Edwards, 2017; QFCC, 2021). However, reengagement may be complicated by the reality that some youth can feel alienated from their community (Savuro et al., 2022). Similarly, in their recent Australian study, Skattebol and Redmond (2019, p.77) identified that some communities can act to exclude "troubled kids". International and national research has

reported that social devaluation and exclusion of marginalised groups can be negated through creating cultural safety and bonding through shared identities (Bakouri & Staerkle, 2015; Hepworth et al., 2015; Oates, 2020).

Social work practitioners work with a diverse range of marginalised and oppressed groups. With social justice and human rights at its core, critical social workers seek to work from a strengths perspective in culturally safe ways that uphold minority voices and challenge power relations that maintain discrimination and exclusion (AASW, 2020, 2016; Morley et al., 2019). In doing so, critical social workers and researchers need to respect First Nations sovereignty, acknowledge the intergenerational impacts of colonisation and the white origins of social work, and be aware of the many ways they could further perpetuate injustice (Pease, 2016; Russ- Smith & Wheeler, 2021).

Youth as peer researchers

Hearing the voices of young people through peer research and giving weight to their views has been recognised as important and informative (Dixon, et al., 2019). Young people reportedly are quick learners who are interested in being involved in research, they can challenge dominant narratives told by adults about them, and they can break new ground in contributing to solutions to social issues (Daniels et al. 2014). Nevertheless, as reported by Roholt and Baizerman (2019) young people may resist naming themselves as researchers. In research capturing young people's views of essential characteristics of residential workers, Moore, McAuthur, Death, Tilbury and Roche (2018) found that youth valued staff who provided a positive and safe environment and ensured they had a voice. The Koori Youth Council's Report (2018) identified that the voices of young people in the juvenile justice system can be overlooked when framing problems and solutions.

In discussing the peer researcher role, Bell et al. (2021) cautioned that it is not without its drawbacks because of its multiple responsibilities and complexities. Bell et al. (2021, p.16) further identified that when researching with Aboriginal Australians, respectful insight is needed because over time research has been conducted " 'on' rather than 'with' or 'by' them". Those authors asserted that inviting young people to take some ownership of, and play a central role with other young people in, research activities enhances their own wellbeing and self-determination. Similarly, Seymour et al. (2017) reported that not only does youth-inclusive research improve the research process and contribute to evidence-based practice but it can bring broader benefits to young people and the wider community. The primary aims of this study were to explore the experiences of young people using The Lighthouse diversionary service; and to recruit young people as peer researchers in discussions about the services provided to them. The study resulted from an ongoing partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners at The Lighthouse and James Cook University researchers. Across the project, several social work students on field placement joined the research team.

Methodology

Methods

The project used a participatory peer research approach. Lushey and Munro (2015) identified this method as effective with young people who have spent time in care, while Jones, et al. (2011) argued that participatory action research (PAR) is uniquely suited to working with young people, compensating for their age, experience and social positioning. Similarly, Munns et al. (2017) stated that a PAR method helps redress power imbalances through encouraging self-determination, capacity building and empowerment. Dixon et al. (2019) identified four different strategies to raise the voices of young people in research.

These strategies were participation, consultation, peer-research and co-production. We particularly sought to emphasise the latter two strategies in our methods.

A strengths approach helped to create a safe environment for young people to have their opinions valued, while a decolonising approach meant purposefully privileging Indigenous voices and ways of working (Koori Youth Council, 2018; Russ-Smith & Wheeler, 2021). In keeping with the traditions of participatory peer research, young people received research instruction and they had the opportunity to be involved in decision-making about methods. It was the decision of the partner organisation that the study be integrated into the existing weekly program of activities at The Lighthouse.

Participatory Processes

Cyclical steps in the research process included: Pre-study planning (establishing the research team, developing protocols, building on existing relationships, ethics approval, encouraging young people's participation); Taking action (recruitment and training of peer researchers, recruitment of participants for group sessions, collecting data; Reflection (team reflecting on processes, review of methods); Planning next steps (preliminary thematic analysis, planning additional data collection); Taking further action (an additional session was planned to present interim findings and gather further data (session 7), analysing additional data); and Final steps (team reflections, reporting findings).

The original intentions of the team was that this would be a peer research project, where young people would take some leadership. The young people had demonstrated keen interest and capacity in a previous project, a first step in capturing their views on community and local service delivery. However as is discussed later in this article, the peer researchers became less keen to be seen in a leading role. Consequently, they worked with staff and

members of the research team as "co-researchers" to facilitate their peers' views about service delivery at The Lighthouse (Dixon, et al., 2021).

Ethics

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research Ethics approval in line with the National Health and Medical Research Council (2018) guidelines was granted for this research project by James Cook University Ethics Committee, approval number H8202. Young people in this study received entertainment gift vouchers as recompense for their participation.

Recruitment, training, and session planning

Young people aged 10-17 years old known to The Lighthouse were approached by staff in 2020 about their interest in participating in the project. Potential participants and their carers/guardians were provided with information about the project through conversations (face to face or telephone) and an Information page. Consent forms were signed by young people and their parent/guardian.

A "Let's talk about ethics" document was used to explain verbally to young people what ethics in research means, the study background and aims, who benefits, and who would be involved. Informed consent, data collection, retention and storage of information, and the dissemination of results all were explained. Young people were encouraged to ask questions about withdrawal of consent and data ownership.

The two groups of participating young people were:

- peer researchers who received training for the role

- young people who would attend group yarns (group discussions/interviews) to discuss their perceptions of Lighthouse services and how they could better meet young people's needs

The original program plan included 8 sessions. A general run sheet was developed for each session. The content of the first 6 sessions was to familiarise young people with research, ethics, and data collection methods interspersed with fun activities. The final two sessions were planned as data collection (yarning) sessions. As the program progressed the research team met weekly. Planning for the next sessions included modifications based on the young people's reactions and feedback. Early in the project, the peer researcher group demonstrated some reluctance to being assertive in asking questions of other young people in the proposed group yarning sessions. Additionally, in a departure from the program plan, two sessions were cancelled due to the young people wanting to watch the State of Origin football game and attend an awards night. After discussions about implementing alternative methods and to accommodate session changes, session 6 incorporated arts-based methods consisting of tie-dying and poster-making activities during which discussion about their needs and perceptions of services (yarning) was facilitated and audio-recorded. As such, peer researchers were instrumental in prompting changes to the proposed program and methods that felt right for them.

Twenty one young people participated across the program sessions. Of those participants, 8 attended preparatory research training sessions for peer researchers, 12 attended the project sessions, and 8 attended an additional session (session seven- conducted in June 2021). Overall, the cohort of young people participating in the research was a dynamic group. By the end of the project several younger aged participants in the 10-17 age range had become involved.

Data analysis and final session

During the initial data analysis phase, team members independently read transcripts of recorded sessions, and discussed the themes emerging from transcripts and poster content across multiple meetings. Repeated concepts were coded and team members reflected on meanings between and across codes before key themes were named (Liamputtong, 2013). After further discussions, it was decided that an additional (seventh) session would be undertaken. Several of the authors, additional Lighthouse staff, peer researchers and other young people attended the session.

Session seven began with revisiting the poster content from session six, and presenting the broad, emerging themes visually and verbally to the young people for their further insights. Additionally, these questions were posed: "What do you think? What did we miss? What else can we add? Do we need to add more detail to these ideas? Why is this important to young people? How can we make sure young people feel safe/ supported and connected with family, mates and friends?". Young people rotated in pairs with Indigenous staff through four stations. Three stations explored the key emerging themes, leading to strengthened and extended final themes. One station asked them to reflect on the research process: " What do you think research is?", and "What did you like about being part of the research ?".

Findings

Key themes revealed what was important to young people participating in this study was services that "makes you feel safe" and "supported not judged", and services that provided a space where young people felt included as "mates, friends and family". These themes are presented below. Young people's responses to questions put to them in the final session about the research process also are reported.

Makes you feel safe

The concept of safety was raised by many young people, both verbally and in writing on the posters. Nuanced aspects of their feelings of safety were identified as physical, emotional and cultural safety.

Physical safety

Young people expressed feeling physically safe when they were at The Lighthouse and in contrast, feeling unsafe when they were on the streets. They described The Lighthouse as helping to "keep us safe", and "be safe at home", and that " when we go out, you look after us" and "take us home safely". One participant concisely captured other young people's expressed feelings in this way:

> I feel reassured because we are always in the Centre and feel safer here rather than out in the community

By way of comparison with feeling physically safe at The Lighthouse, young people shared fears and experiences of being harassed and chased when on the streets:

> And sometimes when I walk around I don't feel safe, and when the big jeeps come past I feel they're going to chase me

> When I was walking past… this guy ran at me, but lucky I was faster than him

> [At Lighthouse] no-one can grab us off the streets

> Keep us safe from vigilantes

> They tried to throw me in a car but I ran away

Emotional safety

In addition to physical safety, young people described an emotional safe haven when they were with staff and peers at The Lighthouse:

… there's a place to go when you're sad

Like you would probably understand, because you probably went through it in your childhood

We are loved

Mentally, talk to them about their problems. Ask if they're all right, how was their day

Because the workers are safe

Cultural safety

Feeling culturally safe was very important to young people in this study. A safe space was conceptualised by the young people as the service providing workers who shared their cultural background, as this participant expressed:

Same culture, there's no judging other people where they come from, or what they look like, we're all the same.

Young people identified feeling connected to workers and peers who shared their cultural background:

Indigenous workers here and Torres Strait Islanders, so when you need to talk to somebody, there's somebody in your culture that you can talk to

The bonds that you make with staff and peers

From the same culture as you, that you can talk to, somebody from where you're from

You can also come in and talk to, ah, Indigenous workers

Because we're all family…, we're from the same, like, culture.

In contrast, not feeling culturally safe appeared to be inherent in this statement about accessing services from a non-Indigenous worker:

> I felt like I was disturbing him, it made me feel like I just want to turn around and walk out

Being supported not judged

Young people recognised that The Lighthouse activities and programs were supportive and kept them busy and engaged. They talked about how "staff take us on outings" that they attended "because it's fun". Extending the previous theme of not being culturally judged, young people seemed to identify that not being judged about their behaviours undertaken outside the service contributed to their feelings of acceptance as a worthy young person in workers' eyes:

> Gives you someone to talk to- not judged
>
> Not judged- we are good

Several participants expressed agreement with their peers that the service "makes you feel welcome". Equally, young people recognised how activities at The Lighthouse acted as a distraction from less desirable pastimes:

> Keeps you from … doing bad things

Some young people pointed out that The Lighthouse provided a safe, supportive space for attitudinal and behavioural changes, recognizing "how they support you" to "control my anger" and "Respect and respect others". Another young person expressed receiving emotional support from Lighthouse staff in this way:

> you can't always keep the grief to yourself, you can talk to an adult

Further, several young people talked about how they were supported with safe, overnight accommodation at The Lighthouse if needed, as this participant identified:

> They bring you here and you can camp instead of being in the street.

Mates, friends and family

The young people talked about friends and family encouraging their attendance at The Lighthouse, and also feeling like they were among mates, family and friends.

> My cousin made me come here
>
> Being with friends and family
>
> Fun around cousins

Feeling they were among friends and family who they could depend on to get help for themselves or their peers at the service was an important element of this theme, as these participants expressed:

> If you don't feel well you can talk to staff. But if you feel shy, you can talk to your friend and they will talk to staff
>
> If anything happens I know I can count on them to help me

This participant expressed the sense of feeling like they were among family in this way:

> We go everywhere with TAIHS Lighthouse

Equally, one young person made a different point, highlighting that feeling like you are with "family" at the Lighthouse meant it was:

Not [as] important being with friends because you don't know if they do criminal
stuff.

Young people's perception of research

As noted, in the final session young people were asked to reflect on their perceptions of
research and their involvement in the peer research processes. Some participants shared
general perceptions that research was about finding out information, for example this
comment:

I know, research is where you go on Google and search up stuff.

Referring to participation in this research project, comments included "It was good", "It was
fun" and "I like writing". While young people's responses were less specific about the peer
researcher role than we might have hoped, several responses indicated they understood the
purpose of learning about research and that participation had kept them interested and
occupied:

To develop and improve our knowledge

Not sitting at home being bor[e]d but get up and do research

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that feeling safe and experiencing supportive, non-
judgemental relationships-based services from trusted workers at The Lighthouse was
essential for these young people. The results build on our previous research, and echo
findings reported by Hepworth et al. (2015) that trusted relationships and a shared cultural
background assisted in the provision of culturally safe services. As argued by Bakouri and
Staerkle (2015), feelings of exclusion can be decreased, and personal agency and wellbeing
increased when there are opportunities to bond through shared identities.

It was important to young people in this study that the service was a physically, emotionally and culturally safe space where they could bond with staff and undertake fun activities that distracted them from behaviours that get them into trouble. Equally, their relationships with staff were instrumental in young people engaging in these research activities. Specifically, it was evident that the presence at many sessions of one of the authors of this paper, a long-term employee at Lighthouse, provided strong support to the young people. We recognised that without these relationships between workers and the young people, this project likely would have faltered.

Further, we want to amplify young people's voices for broader benefits. As stated by Edwards (2017, p. 238) "we should not accept a growing youth prison population as a given". We believe these findings identify that culturally safe, culturally responsive services can help break the cycle of youth offending, and provide young people with relationship-based services, options and opportunities (AASW, 2016). A recent Queensland Report reiterated that "if the long-term goal of reducing youth crime is to be achieved, investment should focus firstly on reduction of the factors that may contribute to a young person committing crime" (QFCC, 2021, p.8).

A finding of significant concern was that while young people felt safe with The Lighthouse staff, this was not the case when they were on the streets unaccompanied. Young people revealed feeling fearful and targeted in the wider community, exemplified by this participant's comment "*They tried to throw me in a car but I ran away*". Vigilantes have been reported in national media as being of significant concern to the Indigenous community in this locality (McCutcheon, 2021). It has been speculated that vigilante behaviours are influenced by community perceptions that tougher punishments are needed, in turn provoking "resentment and/or negative sentiment" if such measures are not implemented (Brookman & Wiener, 2017, p.61).

While media coverage about youth offending has focused on the community feeling safe, young people in this study did not feel safe in the community. Increased community measures to help young people feel included can only benefit their resocialization, reengagement and reintegration, in line with recent Change the Sentence Report recommendations (QFCC, 2021). Media and community leaders can help by encouraging increased understanding and investment in reducing factors contributing to young people's offending, and ensuring inclusive dialogue to help minimise community resentment (QFCC, 2021).

Another reflection on these findings is linked to *Mates, friends and family*. One Lighthouse team member and author emphasised the point in several meetings that many Lighthouse workers are members of the Indigenous community and may be family members of the service users. As noted, findings identified this sense of being with family was a comfort factor for many service users. However, the worker was making a different point, which was that Indigenous workers often live with the same trauma and life circumstances that service users experience, at the same time needing to provide support, and uphold cultural obligations to families and the community. These impacts and obligations are not the same for non-Indigenous workers. Increased recognition and respect is needed for the distinctive role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers play in upholding cultural safety in practice and research (Oates, 2020).

Regarding the methods used, as noted we initially envisioned the study as a *peer-led* project. However, subsequently the young people appeared to be reluctant to step up beyond the level of their peers into the peer-researcher role. This hesitancy mirrored observations from Roholt and Baizerman (2019) that while young people can "easily learn and take on the role of researcher, they often resist naming themselves as researchers" (p.96). Reflecting on

a key finding that peer and family relationships were very important to these young people, members of the team speculated that the peer researchers may have perceived that stepping up beyond their peer group or their cultural/family positioning might impact negatively on those relationships. Equally, as noted earlier, the inexperience of peer researchers brings additional layers of complexity (Bell et al, 2021; Lushey & Munro, 2015). We observed that when young people expressed discomfort at being required to initiate peer group discussions, art-based activities were a culturally safe and effective replacement method. Dixon et al. (2021) similarly identified the use of innovative techniques in research with young people.

Broader reflections from the team included that our assumptions that young people would take on a greater leadership role had been overly simplistic. The Lighthouse staff identified that a more "step by step" approach, with increased role modelling and mentoring for potential peer researchers by trusted staff could have helped increase young people's confidence and allowed for their transition into the peer researcher role over time. Both young people and staff may have benefited from more tailored research training, regular recapping about the peer researcher role, and ongoing discussion about how research projects can help young people raise their voices and claim their right to be heard.

These findings have implications for critical social work practice and research including maintaining critical awareness in order to undertake meaningful research that can help facilitate culturally safe and responsive service delivery, and help highlight systemic barriers in the broader community (Morley et al., 2019; Pease, 2016). It is evident that if this study had not been a partnership, academic researchers might have missed the deep insight that young people and Lighthouse staff brought to this project. As a partnership we documented important experiences, reflections and needs through centering the voices of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their peers (Russ- Smith & Wheeler, 2021).

Specific recommendations and implications for social work practice and research arising from this study include recognition that at risk young people wanted to feel welcome, safe and supported through non-judgemental relationships-based services. Peer researchers can play a valuable role in gathering evidence to inform such service delivery. However, maximizing research outcomes through peer research may mean providing a more tailored approach to recruitment and training, and maintaining flexibility to accommodate emerging circumstances (Daniels et al. 2014; Dixon, 2019). Finally, greater recognition and respect is needed that Indigenous workers play a unique role in maintaining culturally safe spaces in service delivery and research (Oates, 2020).

Limitations

Participants in this study were service users of The Lighthouse. They were known to staff and the research project was integrated into an existing weekly program of activities. Therefore participants may have felt reluctant to share any negative thoughts and perceptions. Due to young people being hesitant about taking a peer leadership role in the project, a change to the methods was required. The sample was small and dynamic, and working with the same group of young people across the entire project was not possible.

Conclusion

The findings reported here reveal that what was important to young people was feeling physically, emotionally and culturally safe, experiencing non-judgemental, supportive services, and being with people they considered to be mates, friends and family. These

findings can contribute to evidence-based social work practice with young people at risk of offending at the partner service and other similar juvenile justice services. Further, the findings can contribute to available literature on engaging young people as peer researchers. While some adjustments to training are recommended, a peer research approach enabled young people in this study, supported by Indigenous workers, to demonstrate they were keen and capable of raising their voices and conveying their perceptions about services delivered to them.

Acknowledgements

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