Article

The Lived Experiences of Youth-Workers: Understanding Service-Delivery Practices Within Queensland Non-Government Residential Youth Care Organisations

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Abstract

Young people under the care of child protection agencies are at increased risk of entering the criminal justice system. Residential youth organisations support young people who are unable to reside with their families or in foster care. Youth workers in these environments ensure the safety and wellbeing of young people in their care, consequently supporting the wellbeing of the overall community. This research explored the views and experiences of Queensland residential youth workers via a focus group interview. The data captured a thick description of service delivery practices. Constructivist Grounded Theory was used to conceptualise a theoretical framework based on the various empirical realities of participants. The findings highlight occasions where complex power dynamics had damaging consequences for youth workers and young people. Participants explored systemic constraints and structural inequalities, thus detailing the implications of top-down organisational structures on their service delivery, safety, and outcomes for young people. Participants were concerned about the implications of interrupted attachment and young people's progression into crime. Practice recommendations centre around improving the disconnection between front-line realities and systemic hierarchies. Residential out-of-home care service delivery should focus on building community connection and belonging; mental, emotional and physical safety; collaborative care; and support.

Keywords: early intervention; proactive; non-coercive; community building and engagement; residential care; youth workers; youth crime; child protection; systemic power dynamics; attachment

1. Introduction

Young people exposed to significant childhood adversities and traumas enter out-of-home care because their primary guardians "are unable or unwilling to protect them" from "abuse, neglect and harm in their homes" (DFSDSCS 2024). During 2022–2023, the Australian Government held legal guardianship of 13,152 young people by way of Child Protection orders nationwide (AIHW 2024). Of these young people, 9832 were placed in OOHC (AIHW 2024). In Queensland, out-of-home placements typically consist of one of six placement types: foster and kinship care, intensive foster care, supported independent living, Indigenous safe houses, residential care, and therapeutic residential care (DFSDSCS 2024). With placement types that support family connection being highly preferential, residential care is generally considered a last resort for children and young people (Whittaker et al. 2022).

Where young people are allocated into residential care, a third-party Queensland Non-Government Residential Youth Care Organisation (QNGRYCO) manages the structure of their environments and provides 24-h care. Individual placements across Queensland Residential Out-Of-Home Care (QROOHC) can support up to six young people in carefully constructed, small to medium-sized, home-like environments (CCYPCG 2009). QNGRYCOs employ residential youth workers to assist these vulnerable young people in navigating daily life and managing their social, physical, cultural, emotional, and mental wellbeing (CCYPCG 2009; Vamvakos and Berger 2024, p. 2).

When compared to foster or kinship placements, Residential Out-Of-Home Care (ROOHC) increases a young person's risk of developing "emotional, behavioural, health, social and educational concerns" (Green et al. 2023, pp. 379–80). Subsequently, research suggests that ROOHC significantly reduces young people's protective factors against justice involvement (Ball et al. 2024). The Family Matters Report identifies how the number of Indigenous young people residing in out-of-home care "has seen the most dramatic increase over the past decade" (National Family Matters Leadership Group et al. 2024, p. 16). An over-reliance on out-of-home care is particularly problematic for First Nations children, who risk receiving culturally inappropriate support. Given the overrepresentation of First Nations young people across ROOHC, some researchers argue that contemporary child-protection practices are enabling a second stolen generation to occur, thus labelling it "an epidemic" (Oates 2020, p. 171; Krakouer et al. 2018; Lima et al. 2024). Authors suggest this over-representation is not coincidental, but rather a legacy of the "complex structural interrelationship between historical and contemporary macro, messo, micro, and systemic factors" (Gatwiri et al. 2021, p. 836).

Queensland disproportionately relies on out-of-home care services (QFCC 2025). For example, as of 2023, "Queensland had 40 per cent of Australia's residential care placements despite only having 21 per cent of the nation's children in care" (QFCC 2025, p. 1). Further, the number of children entering out-of-home care in Queensland has grown by 85% over the past 5 years—a growth rate that is higher than all other Australian states and territories (QFCC 2025). To accommodate this increasing demand, youth workers must be skilled enough to create home-like environments that help young people gain life skills, "identify emotions, develop new coping skills, experience success, and trust relationships with adults" (Sellers et al. 2020, p. 152). Many young people entering QROOHC exhibit complex and high-level needs, including violent, dangerous, or risky behaviours (Osei et al. 2016; Vamvakos and Berger 2024, p. 2). Young people's complex needs and behaviours are often linked to exposure to significant traumas and adversities across childhood (Steinkopf et al. 2022; Vamvakos and Berger 2024; DFSDSCS 2024). Awareness of trauma-informed knowledge, culturally safe practices, and evidence-based behaviour-management strategies, therefore, is critical.

Children who have been subjected to neglect and abuse are at heightened risk of developing attachment concerns (Moran et al. 2024). Perhaps unsurprisingly, attachment disorders are not uncommon amongst young people in residential care (Moran et al. 2024). Attachment theory emphasises how consistent, attuned, responsive, and nurturing caregiving across childhood is foundational for young people to create secure attachments and develop emotional intelligence (Grady and Yoder 2024). Without such, attachment theory suggests young people may understand the world as being unsafe and untrustworthy (Grady and Yoder 2024). As such, residential youth workers play a central role in shaping young people's worldviews and responses to the world around them (Morais et al. 2024). Strengthening young people's emotional security through responsive, consistent, holistic caregiving enables youth workers to support healing from childhood adversities and traumas (Morais et al. 2024).

Conversely, however, residential care can further compromise the development of trusting and secure relationships due to high child-to-worker ratios and high turnover of staff (Morais et al. 2024). In this sense, poor quality of care can have detrimental impacts on young people's adaptation and development, undermining the wellbeing of children in care (Morais et al. 2024). For young people's complex behaviours to improve, Psychodynamic Attachment Theory suggests they first need to "experience a secure and safe relationship with the caregiver" (Payne 2020, p. 46). Therefore, promoting and nurturing young people's secure attachments may address criminogenic risk factors, as a correlation exists between attachment disorders and youth offending (Moran et al. 2024).

In Queensland, there is an established link between child protection and justice systems, referred to as the "crossover cohort" (QFCC 2024a, p. 1). In 2023, 3.4% of Queensland young people over 10 years old were engaged with both Child Protection and Youth Justice departments (QFCC 2024a). The Children's Court of Queensland (2024) reports 72.9% of young people under a Youth Justice Supervision Order have previously engaged with Queensland Child Protection services. Research by Moran et al. (2024) discerns that a significant portion of juvenile offenders who access child psychological services experience attachment difficulties. The authors (Moran et al. 2024) suggest that addressing unmet attachment needs through evidence-based treatment approaches is likely to reduce recidivist offending and the associated societal costs of youth crime. Youth workers can further address dynamic risk factors through interventions that target the criminogenic needs of young people within their care (Kanestrøm et al. 2025). Such risk factors include antisocial behaviours, criminal associates, pro-criminal attitudes, substance misuse, lack of educational engagement, disrupted family connections, and limited participation in recreational activities (Kanestrøm et al. 2025).

A complex interplay exists between young people's attachments and adversities across childhood and engagement with the Youth Justice system across ROOHC. The literature suggests that young people across ROOHC experience regular contact with police for minor incidents, sometimes described as typical "teenage rebellion" or behaviours usually managed by parents in the family home (Staines 2017, p. 103; Malvaso and Delfabbro 2015). Malvaso and Delfabbro (2015) identify that young people commonly engage with the Youth Justice system from property damage across their ROOHC placements. This over-criminalisation of vulnerable young people across ROOHC has the potential to "entrap young people into a cycle of offending that they are less able to escape" (Malvaso and Delfabbro 2015, p. 3568). Further predictors for offending behaviours include "hyperactivity, impulsivity, antisocial parents, poor attachment history, poor academic performance and antisocial friends" (Bollinger et al. 2017, p. 109). Consequently, both ROOHC placement instability and Youth Justice engagement can often signify the beginning of a life trajectory involving entrenched societal disadvantage and ongoing costs to governments and communities due to criminality and complex needs (Malvaso and Delfabbro 2015).

Residential care organisations that thoroughly evaluate and address individual young people's criminogenic needs have the potential to lower their risk of offending (Kanestrøm et al. 2025; Osei et al. 2016). As such, well-resourced youth homes may have preventative impacts on young people's criminal and delinquent acts (Kanestrøm et al. 2025; Osei et al. 2016). Despite the potential for residential youth homes to mitigate risk factors, a body of Australian literature indicates that Australian residential care environments are often less than ideal. The Australian Youth Justice and Child Protection literature describes ways in which young people can experience further victimisation and emotional abuse from the "systems designed to provide care and protection for them" (RCIRCSA 2017, p. 27; Ball et al. 2024; Matthews et al. 2022). Consequently, young people frequently describe their experiences of ROOHC as difficult (CCYPCG 2009). Throughout recent reports

capturing the perspectives of QNGRYCO service delivery, young people identified the following concerns regarding residential care: instability of child-protection placements, negative consequences of residing across multiple inconsistent placements, lack of cultural understanding, and the difficulties involved in navigating relationships with multiple youth workers per week (CCYPCG 2009).

Unsurprisingly, ROOHC across Australia is regularly labelled a "systemic failure" (Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry 2013, p. 1). Concerns regarding incompetent staff, poor recruitment processes, and an organisational "culture of control" have been raised (RCIRCSA 2017, p. 49). The Queensland Carmody inquiry into Child Protection systems and structures identified that significant improvements were required across early intervention, workforce conditions, cultural sensitivity, and prevention (Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry 2013). Additionally, the need for improving training, supervision practices, recruitment, staff–client connections, shared decision making, interagency collaboration, consistency, and consumer feedback across ROOHC has continued to be highlighted (Isobel et al. 2020; QFCC 2023a).

Staff burnout and low employee retention across ROOHC are underscored by youth workers experiencing regular incidents of "physical and sexual violence" (Smith et al. 2021, p. 1983), thus causing trauma and re-traumatisation for both young people and youth workers (Isobel et al. 2020; Sellers et al. 2020). The literature suggests that Australian ROOHC youth workers are undertrained and lack awareness of "the costs of psychological trauma" for young people (Steinkopf et al. 2022, p. 625). Researchers further describe how youth workers can experience occupational stressors when a situation exceeds "the training, expertise and/or internal or external resources of the employee" (Hallam et al. 2021, p. 848). Poor staff retention is suggested to be linked to the regular exposure to client violence, navigation of complex employment environments, and low "level of support provided to the team" (Vamvakos and Berger 2024). Consequently, staff burnout and high turnover rates among youth workers make "the 'family' façade hard to maintain" across Australian ROOHC (RCIRCSA 2017, p. 49)

Poor staff retention reinforces the repetitive disruption of young people's secure attachments, which is "the very patterns that lead some youth into residential care" (Smith et al. 2021, p. 2002). Therefore, the consistent interruption of young people's relationships across Australian ROOHC is alarming, particularly as poor wellbeing outcomes are reinforced through experiences of trauma, childhood adversity, placement instability, and staffing inconsistencies (Smith et al. 2021). In QROOHC environments, young people report seeing between 14 to 42 youth workers weekly (CCYPCG 2009). Young people can exhibit complex behaviours in response to navigating multiple relationships among differing youth worker personalities, Child Safety representatives, case managers, QNGRYCO office employees, and other stakeholders (QFCC 2018, 2022, 2023a, 2024b).

Despite their central role in supporting and rehabilitating vulnerable young people, Australian research capturing the subjectivities of youth workers employed across complex ROOHC environments is limited. Specifically, there is a lack of Australian experiential youth worker data regarding the following: contextualisation of knowledge into practice, consequences of client violence, power hierarchies, and enquiry into a youth worker's real-world needs (Hallam et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2021; Vamvakos and Berger 2024).

This study investigated the views and experiences of front-line residential youth workers. Insights generated from this study may provide valuable knowledge that supports the development of more effective practices across ROOHC, thus improving the direct care of young people. The findings may also be used to develop preventive support and early intervention strategies across Australia's child protection and youth justice systems.

2. Materials and Methods

The overall objective of this qualitative research was to explore the experiences and views of front-line youth workers regarding QNGRYCO service delivery practices. Data collection involved a focus group interview with five experienced residential youth workers, thus exploring their experiences and perspectives. A critical aim of this research was to utilise the findings to make recommendations that strengthen and optimise service delivery practice evidence across Queensland.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the [removed for peer review] Human Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent for participation was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Data was collected through a single two-and-a-half-hour focus group interview. During the focus group interview, the researcher was guided by a semi-structured interview schedule that included questions targeting participant experiences relating to rostering practices, supervision, supporting complex-needs young people, and training. Utilising a combination of open, closed, explorative, probing, and trigger questions during the focus group interview generated rich experiential data (Fern 2001). Examples of questions included asking participants to reflect on the types of training they had received and the corresponding influences on their service delivery while working in residential care. They were also invited to share their thoughts and feelings about staff rostering practices, describe specific experiences of supporting young people with complex needs, and outline common supervision practices they had encountered within non-government residential youth care organisations (NGRYCOs) in Queensland. The focus group interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All data was de-identified, with participants opting to choose their own pseudonyms.

Participants were recruited via information flyers distributed on social media. The flyer defined participation criteria, research aims, and objectives. Initially, eight residential youth workers expressed interest in taking part in the study; however, five youth workers participated in the focus group interview. Inclusion criteria necessitated that participants were youth workers with at least one year of employment within a QNGRYCO in the last 10 years.

This research was informed by an interpretivist research paradigm, which harnessed constructivist grounded theory to explore the subjective experiences of participants (Alston and Bowles 2018; Payne 2020; Sheppard 2006). These epistemological perspectives suggest that understanding a social reality requires researchers to explore the intersections and complexities across the multidimensional subjectivities of individuals (McDermott 2002; Payne 2020). Operationalising constructivist grounded theory during data analysis involved undertaking three phases of coding: initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz 2014; Urquhart 2023). During the method of constant comparison, the relationships emerging across the data were allocated codes and further analysed to develop a theoretical framework of understanding (Urquhart 2023). All data collected during the study were analysed by Author One.

Research limitations include a small sample size and locality. Specifically, all participants resided within Townsville at the time of the interview. As such, research findings are not generalisable. Another limitation of this study is the inclusion criteria, which required participants to have at least one year of experience working within a Queensland non-government residential youth care organisation within the past ten years. Residential youth work is a sector that is highly dynamic and subject to frequent policy and practice changes. As a result, some participant reflections may not accurately represent contemporary youth work practices in Queensland residential care settings. Additionally, detailed information distinguishing between undergraduate and master's level qualifications of the staff referenced in the article was not collected, which may affect the interpretation of

their professional expertise and roles. A further limitation is the focus group methodology. While focus group interviews enable researchers to capture data "within a tight time-frame" and provide access to participants holding rich experiential knowledge, the direction of the discussion will be influenced by participants hearing other participants' contributions (McDermott 2002, p. 21; Fern 2001).

3. Results and Discussion

In line with constructivist grounded theory, a combined results and discussion chapter is presented. Participants were aged between 20 and 60 at the time of the interview. All participants were female and possessed between three to sixteen years of employment across QNGRYCOs between 2014 and 2024. At the time of the interview, none of the participants were employed as youth workers.

Participants either held or had almost finished obtaining an undergraduate and/or master's degree. Professional qualifications included social work, psychology, paramedicine, and art therapy. Study findings highlight youth workers' insights, subjective constructions, interpretations, and experiences pertaining to the child protection system.

An overarching theoretical category of 'Power in Protection' emerged through data analysis. Interconnected relationships between codes regarding the use of power in child-protection responses were apparent. Through exploring the challenges identified by front-line youth workers, insights emerged regarding structural disconnection and systemic inconsistency. Systemic constraints and structural inequalities were described, revealing complexities across relationships between youth workers, young people, and child-protection systems. Discussions highlight the implications of overt and covert uses of power for both young people and youth workers (see Figure 1).
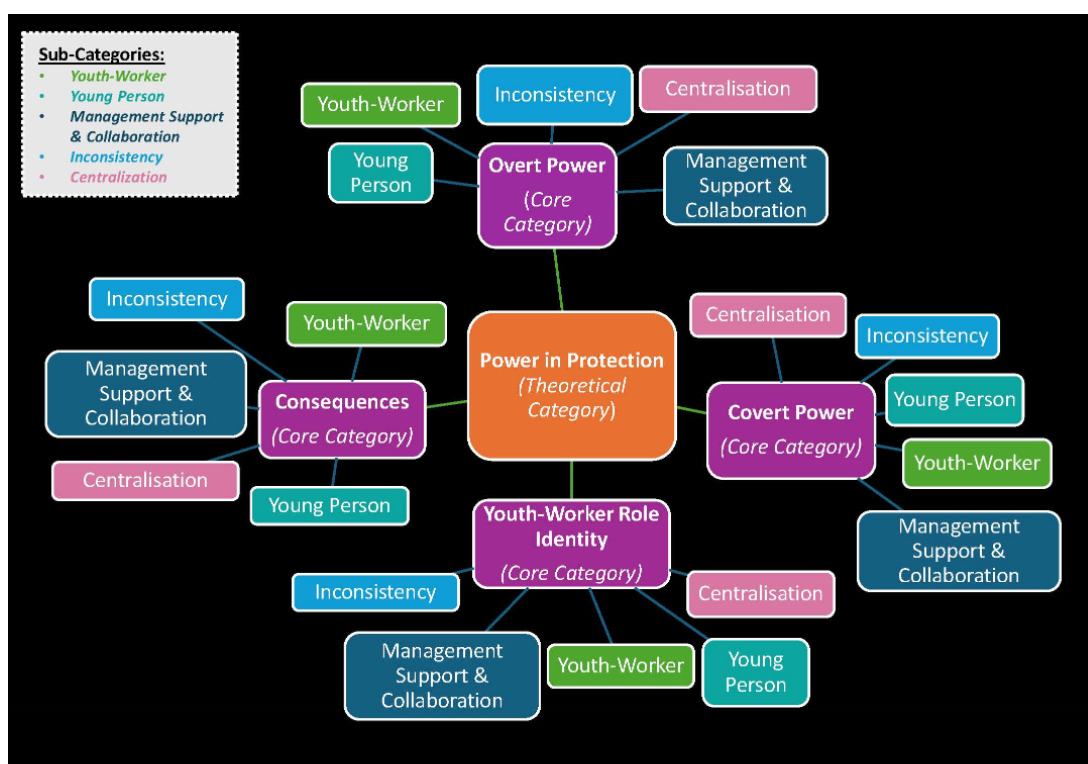

Figure 1. Theoretical category: Power in Protection. Note: Representation of how core categories and sub-categories relate to the overarching theoretical category. Own work.

The key findings relating to 'Power in Protection' highlight the following range of insights about participants experiences in QNGRYCOs: suffering systemic abuse from a

social system expected to protect vulnerable populations; Attachment Theory and other Westernised practice evidence dominating service delivery approaches; political influences controlling systemic structures; young people residing across multiple loveless 'home-like' environments; poor organisational cultures; strict rules and policies enhancing one's power over another; poor staff retention, recruitment, supervision, and training practices; and internal organisational procedures monitoring, investigating, and responding to complaints and safety reports.

3.1. Power in Protection

The overarching theoretical category of 'Power in Protection' pertains not only to Queensland child-protection power hierarchies but to young people's realities of how childhood adversities and traumatic experiences are reinforced by systemic structures. 'Power in Protection' revealed the areas that management hierarchies in child-protection departments regularly overlook. Namely, the nurturing of young people's healthy attachments across institutionalised social systems; providing youth workers access to appropriate training, debriefing, and supervision; the significant implications of consistently completing excessive work hours across complex high-stress environments; service delivery implications of employing non-collaborative decision-making practices; and youth workers' and young people's emotional, physical, and mental safety, and wellbeing. Moreover, findings indicate that Eurocentrism dominates Queensland child-protection practice evidence, consequently resulting in participants recognising that Indigenous young people's ways of 'knowing, being, and doing' are consistently ignored across QNGRYCO and child-protection departments (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003).

Existing systemic inconsistencies, injustices, and oppressions across QROOHC are seen by participants as being the result of the following concepts: poor organisational cultures; inconsistent service delivery and practice approaches; disregarding youth workers and young people's mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing; insufficient supervision, debriefing, training, and rostering practices; lack of collaboration between management structures and front-line personnel; de-valuing of young people's attachment and cultural worldviews; and centralised decision-making processes. Moreover, the decision-making process used by centralised organisational structures limits employees' and service users' autonomy (Robbins et al. 2010). Consequently, the sub-category 'centralisation' contains codes about organisational cultures within child-protection departments in Townsville. For example, participants identified child-protection departments as having a "blatant lack of care and consideration for the trickle-down effect" on young people and youth workers. Sonny described centralised decision-making as entailing "a lot of . . . decision making with a flow-on effect with very little input or consideration for the on-the-ground impacts". Participants further defined centralised decision-making as "very limited input seeking in my experience and it's like well this is what we're doing and sorry for ya".

In line with previous discussions, participants consistently described QROOHC environments as inconsistent, unpredictable, unstructured, and non-collaborative. As such, the following service delivery implications emerged during data analysis: reduced quality of care, low staff retention, poor service and life outcomes for young people, and heightened risks associated with the overall safety and wellbeing of youth workers and young people. Participants subsequently highlighted several consequences that pertained to inconsistent variations of service delivery. Queensland Child Safety departments and QNGRYCOs were seen by youth workers as malfunctioning in ways that compounded challenges. This perspective was evidenced by Sonny, who proclaimed, "there never was an issue with the kid. It was always around the support or lack thereof that I received".

3.2. Overt Power

Lukes (2005, p. 37) defines the misuse of power as relating to subordination, thus arguing "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests". Accordingly, 'overt power', as conceptualised in this paper, relates to the observable expression of control over youth workers and young people. Figure 2 illustrates how decision-making powers are distributed yet centralised within child-protection departments. Child Safety holds legislative child-protection powers; QNGRYCO directs the daily oversight of young people's care; and youth workers hold authority over young people's daily supervision through providing behaviour management. Ultimately, Child Safety holds final decision-making powers. While it is said young people can invoke their right to have their voice heard by organisational hierarchies, the lived experiences of participants tell a more complex and less flattering narrative. What is consistently labelled as "participatory decision-making processes throughout all stages of their involvement with Child Safety" (DFSDSCS 2023), Bubbles illustrates as:

Figure 2. Decision-making power. Note: Conceptualisation of decision-making power across Queensland child-protection departments based on participants focus-group interview discussions. Own work.

> *"got to his 18th birthday and we were told oh yep, he's got somewhere to go, . . . I got*
>
> *together a glory box for him just so he's got something in the new place, and just as*
>
> *we're about to go child safety ring and there like oh no that accommodation*
>
> *fallen over, I kinda went like oh okay so where where do we go, and . . . they go oh we*
>
> *don't care where you take him but he can't stay"*

Figure 2 further outlines how young people and youth workers are subordinate to child-protection power hierarchies in Queensland. It is suggested that power differentiation allows young people's voices to be manipulated by the interpretations of systemic power hierarchies, which exacerbates their feelings of powerlessness and isolation (QFCC 2024b). Consistent with existing research, our findings reveal that QNGRYCO child-protection placements are not reflective of Indigenous ways of 'knowing, being, and doing' (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003). LJ critiqued QROOHC environments as dominated by Westernised cultural, political, and social constructs, expressing:

> *"then you have a child from straight out of community, right, and brought straight into*
> *a resi, you've gotta remember A) now there the different one in the community not you*

> *because everybody's now white not black, in the first month, any of the community kids*
> *live together in the lounge room on one mattress, you know, because how can you work*
> *that rule when they have never ever been like that*"

Such findings indicate that, despite young Indigenous Australians often experiencing a significant cultural shock, QNGRYCOs do not necessarily restructure environments according to their individual cultural needs. Participants further identified Child Safety as overtly dominating the autonomy of First Nations young people by banning their return "back to community". Such findings pose profound implications for ethnic minorities like First Nations young people residing in QROOHC. If colonisation has taught Australians anything, it is that disconnecting Indigenous young people's cultural connection to country, kinship, and spirituality fractures family roles, responsibilities, clan structures, and overall mental and physical wellbeing. Despite this knowledge, Queensland child protection departments continue to reinforce disrupted attachments, poor self-identity, and intensify risk-taking, thus increasing the possibilities of future engagement with Queensland Child Protection and criminal justice systems (QFCC 2023b).

Participants reflected on how management hierarchies overtly use their power to undermine the safety of Queensland youth workers, evidently reinforcing the systems that create environments where youth workers experience a greater risk of physical and emotional harm. Focus-group interview participants described this overt use of power as demanding that youth workers remain on shift without medical treatment and/or shift replacements. For example, one participant detailed their experience of a young colleague being left to complete an overnight shift after being sexually assaulted by a young person in their care. Although the agency supported pressing formal charges, no policies or procedures were altered across this young person's house. The participant further shared how, following the incident, newly employed female youth workers were not informed about the sexual assault risks associated with overnight shifts. Victoria similarly recounted how, following a serious head injury inflicted by a young person, the QNGRYCO explicitly restricted her access to medical care by responding:

> "*Oh, no, that's not good, just make sure you do your incident report and then go to*
> *sleep. I'm like yeah cool no worries I'm just chillin' here with a concussion*".

The supervisor's directive to "go to sleep" despite Victoria's potential concussion is indicative of how overt power can be exercised to downplay harm and discourage medical accountability across QROOHC.

There was additionally a sense that youth workers were punished through rostering. For instance, one participant felt coerced to complete their shift following a hospital visit after receiving a broken nose from a young person. Covert use of power was described as punishing youth workers who cannot complete their shifts due to burnout. Rostering punishments included reducing hours, shaming youth workers, and removing impending promotions. Victoria details:

> "*I get a phone call from a manager saying hey we're just gonna not follow through with*
> *this part-time anymore just because you know on the weekend you called in sick because*
> *you were anxious*"

This marginalising response reflects a broader pattern where institutional power is used to override individual safety and dismiss the legitimate concerns of both youth workers and young people. However, despite managing the effects of her injury, Victoria understood the incident as a consequence of Child Safety failing to equip youth workers with up-to-date behaviour support and accurate routine information. This lack of transparency represents how institutional power is overtly exercised through the control of information that is critical for the safety of youth workers and the young people in their

care. Several participants further indicated that Child Safety regularly provides youth workers with limited information about the young person's medical history, childhood trauma, cultural needs, and behavioural supports. By limiting access to essential background information, Child Safety effectively disempowers those responsible for young people's daily care. Participants perceived this as a systemic strategy that prioritises liability protection over the wellbeing of both staff and young people, thus creating conditions for unsafe and ineffective care.

3.3. Covert Power

The core category of 'covert power' encapsulates hidden, subtle, and indirect control of young people and youth workers. The most prominent implication of 'covert power' was the discussion of rapid, unforeseen, and abrupt Child Safety decisions that continuously force young people through an ever-revolving door of child-protection placements. Such observations are reflected through Bubbles and LJ's reflections: *"It's repeated again and again"*. Youth workers further detailed how this revolving door of child-protection placements exacerbates young people's feelings of abandonment and isolation. LJ shared the subtle but significant effects of Child Safety's rapid decision-making:

> *"We had him join, he had won a sports award the year before, so we had him ready to go into footy, the whole bit, the morning he was getting out . . . of [juvenile detention centre] he rings me in distress, 'child safety have, they've changed their mind' and sent him back to Mount Isa. Three weeks in Mount Isa, stolen cars, back in back out of the big house"*.

LJ's insight underscores the direct consequences for young people engaged across the Child Protection, Family Law, and Youth Justice systems in Queensland. These "deficiencies in systems integration" are linked to consequences including the "criminalisation of dual system youth" (Ball et al. 2024, p. 447). Labelling this as the triple-system power loop, these three Queensland Government systems have significant decision-making power over young people residing in QROOHC (Walsh et al. 2023; Ball et al. 2024).

The above account further details how instability undermines opportunities for rehabilitation, social connection, and community reintegration for young people engaged in the triple-system power loop. Evidently, both young people and youth workers are often left powerless when advocating for continuity in care, as decisions are frequently made without consultation or concern for the young person's circumstances. The covert nature of Child Safety's decisions illustrates the unseen consequences produced by top-down uses of institutional power. As a result, these systems that are designed for efficiency often override young people's needs, thus deepening existing inequalities and exposing them to ongoing cycles of criminal justice intervention.

LJ's insight also illustrates how a revolving door of placements can continuously disrupt young people's lives. Research suggests that recreational activities such as sports can cater to young people's criminogenic needs, in turn lowering their risk of criminality by increasing protective factors (Kanestrøm et al. 2025). In this sense, residential youth worker accounts underscore ways in which covert practices can work against their ability to address dynamic risk factors, which may otherwise reduce offending and promote community safety. When young people's recreational opportunities are denied through abrupt systemic decisions, they are often left without meaningful outlets for emotional development and social connection. Participants' accounts demonstrate how denying young people a stable and nurturing environment can influence reoffending and reinforce cycles of criminal justice involvement.

Participants described how Child Safety can covertly use their power to prioritise the reduction in placement costs, instead of nurturing the attachment and rapport between young people and youth workers. This is captured in LJ's comments:

> *"Well, you believe in Attachment Theory. I'm certain we've all seen certain things happen in the residential with children that decisions made above who don't know the child . . . yet they've formed attachments in placements and are starting to improve behaviours and . . . suddenly, we're moving them because it's cheaper over there and bugger the theory that our whole department is pro vised on".*

The DFSDSCS (2022) practice manual recognises the severe implications of ongoing environmental instability and relationship breakdowns. However, according to participants, ongoing disruptions caused by those in power consistently undermine young people's environmental stability and attachments; thus, increasing their risk of criminal justice system engagement. This was evidenced by participants who indicated that Queensland child-protection organisations preach Attachment Theory ideas but fail to contextualise information across real-world environments. LJ described this as:

> *"The departments do, and unfortunately, the organisations are, sprout for the benefit of the child and Attachment Theory, yet none of them lives it or uses it".*

As noted, Attachment Theory emphasises how safe, nurturing, and stable relationships with caregivers are critical for supporting young people who exhibit challenging behaviours in child-protection placements (Payne 2020). However, the revolving door of child-protection placements challenges this idea by signifying discrepancies between practice evidence and real-world approaches. This discrepancy pertains to 'covert power', which functions via organisational hierarchies covertly devaluing the positive rapport and attachment between young people and their youth workers. Neglecting young people's attachments directly minimises the therapeutic importance of stable, nurturing, and trusted relationships, thus identified as a covert consequence of power in protection. Subsequently, youth workers are often required to manage young people's emotional distress and behavioural complexities rooted in ongoing attachment disruptions. Participants' experiences detail the implications of abruptly severing the relationships between young people and youth workers across QROOHC. Sonny recounts her experience of the way a QNGRYCO managed a young person's attachment-related emotions following her resignation:

> *"I was leaving the organisation . . . no one was going to tell him because the worry was that he was going to react negatively so following instruction, which was not comfortable for me, but also what I had to do . . . well, he found out eventually . . . the week before I was due to not come back . . . he overheard it and then I was called in that night because he attempted to hang himself from the tree out the back. . . . he was just so upset and felt betrayed and very hurt. . . I was called in on shift that night because this was happening and they were like you need to he's really only going to respond to you"*

This covert use of power had clear emotional, physical, and mental impacts on both the young person and Sonny. Despite Sonny wanting to prepare the young person for her departure, and it being her day off, management pressured her to come in and fix a problem she had previously approached management about addressing. Therefore, insufficient coordination and collaboration between power hierarchies and front-line staff can amplify young people's behavioural and emotional challenges in QROOHC (Malvaso and Delfabbro 2015).

Youth workers frequently voiced their frustration at having little influence over major decisions, despite bearing the emotional consequences of the young person experiencing emotional distress (McDowall 2018). Fittingly, systemic power hierarchies can covertly override youth workers' insights by dismissing crucial knowledge from those holding positive and consistent relationships with young people (McDowall 2018). Consequently,

continuous environmental instability and relationship interruptions lead young people to lose confidence and trust in the systems designed to protect them from harm (McDowall 2018). This disconnection and instability can contribute to increasing a young person's vulnerability to criminality through their emotional dysregulation and complex behaviours as young people respond to relational instability with externalising actions (Malvaso and Delfabbro 2015; McDowall 2018). When systemic power hierarchies exclude crucial insights and relationships of trusted youth workers, young people often experience feelings associated with disconnection and emotional isolation (McDowall 2018).

The DFSDSCS (2022) practice manual acknowledges their awareness of the severe implications of continuous environmental instability, relationship breakdowns, and non-participatory decision-making processes. In theory, DFSDSCS (2025) harnesses knowledge from Attachment Theory to inform permanency planning decisions that recognise the developmental impact of emotionally available and consistent caregiving. This understanding is said to underpin the construction of long-term, reliable child protection placements (DFSDSCS 2022, 2025). The framework is further said to prompt Child Safety departments to prioritise stable attachments and recognise how critical they are for a young person's overall wellbeing and development (DFSDSCS 2025), thus ensuring young people experience the psychological safety of knowing their relationships are dependable and nurturing (DFSDSCS 2025). However, despite DFSDSCS (2022) claiming "Attachment theory underpins permanency planning", the experiences of participants shared contrasting accounts. Participants described covert impacts where decision makers regularly disrupted young people's environments and attachments, ultimately leading to the potential for engagement with criminal justice systems and future social disadvantage. Despite both aiming to protect children, Queensland Child Protection and Family Law departments interpret 'the best interests of the child' differently (Walsh et al. 2023). Walsh et al. (2023, p. 162) indicate that Queensland Child Protection employees can use "the best interests of the child to justify outcomes that made sense to, or were convenient for them". Consequently, Westernised Queensland Child Protection departments require parents to "earn back" their right to reunification or "to have a relationship with their child" (Walsh et al. 2023, p. 162). Contrastingly, Queensland Family Law departments prioritise supporting young people in sustaining meaningful connections with their primary caregivers (Walsh et al. 2023).

This systemic disconnect leads to fractured structures and approaches, often leaving youth workers and young people shouldering the emotional consequences and experiencing limited influence across decision-making (McDowall 2018; Staines 2017). Such instability and structural disconnection have been linked to young people engaging in risky behaviours and experiencing feelings of personal failure and unworthiness (Malvaso and Delfabbro 2015). Without a coherent, relationship-focused framework that prioritises relational continuity, young people remain vulnerable to repeated harm through the consequences of covert systemic practices. Ultimately, these systemic inconsistencies and structural disconnections reinforce relationship disconnection and reduce protective factors, which are two critical drivers of youth justice system contact and poorer life outcomes.

Furthermore, a covert disregard for the attachment of young people in residential youth care is problematic in terms of youth development and community safety (Moran et al. 2024). As noted, many children in residential youth care struggle with attachment-related issues (Moran et al. 2024). There are established links between attachment disorders and youth offending, with addressing attachment having the potential to address problem behaviours, including recidivist offending (Moran et al. 2024). Participants stated that continuously reallocating young people into different child-protection placements reinforces their feelings of abandonment, isolation, and powerlessness. As expressed by K, who grew up under Child Safety's guardianship:

> *"abandonment is the, is the worst thing in the world, you know, and when . . . it's like from your parents, like whether it was meant to be or whether it was just like taken, it's something that you are never going to get over".*

This study's findings highlight the hidden consequences of covert power for young people suddenly relocated into alternative child-protection placements. Furthering this point of the impact of sudden relocation linked to covert power, LJ discussed observing an abrupt placement reallocation following a disagreement between those holding positions of power within a QNGRYCO and the Child Safety department. LJ suggests this had significant implications for both young people and youth workers:

> *"bang the kids were dragged out of the house screaming with workers . . . incredibly*
>
> *distressed because we had no idea what was going on".*

Coincidentally, this child accidentally found LJ's home and began sitting outside her bedroom window each morning, visibly crying and asking to live with her:

> *"I would wake up in the morning with him pressed against the bedroom window crying saying please let me in, can I live with you, can I live with you, can I live with you?"*

A lack of emotional and environmental stability has a direct impact on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of already vulnerable young people across residential care (Staines 2017). It is then unsurprising that children under the protection of government departments are "more likely to be subject to criminal proceedings than other children", thus further contributing to poor mental, physical, and emotional outcomes (Staines 2017, p. 103).

Similar to a prioritisation of budget cuts at the expense of nurturing young people's emotional, physical, and mental safety, participants indicated that child-protection systems perceive youth workers as dispensable and replaceable. This point was emphasised by Bubbles, who stated: "the problem is that management in any way sees the youth workers as a disposable resource". This reflects prior research that highlighted those organisational structures perceived youth workers as expendable, amplifying the risks of them consequently developing compassion fatigue (Hallam et al. 2021). Similarly, the findings of this research indicate that a transactional view of youth workers covertly underscores the high staff turnover, ineffective recruitment processes, and lack of highly skilled youth workers. Staffing issues could, in turn, result in disorganised daily care of young people.

LJ reflected this in the following way: "I don't suffer it with kids certainly suffer it with systems above me" and "it's really hard out there to get workers". Smith et al. (2021) assert that high staff turnover and consistent disruption of young people's attachments can intensify adverse childhood experiences, thus increasing recovery challenges and reducing resilience. Consequently, high staff turnover can reinforce insecure attachments, thus increasing young people's challenging behaviours, interpersonal relationships, and mental health difficulties (DFSDSCS 2022).

As participants voiced how QNGRYCOs repeatedly put youth workers in unsafe and reactive environments, links to burnout, emotional fatigue, staff departures, and inadequate support systems were revealed. Covert power is also indicated in QNGRYCO's rostering practices. Participants subsequently highlighted that QNGRYCOs demonstrate a significant lack of boundaries and consistency regarding rostering.

Participants shared how they were expected to work rosters with excessive hours, with K indicating she "was doing like 120 h there every . . . week". LJ further critiqued the demonstration of covert power: "[it is] the organisation knowing what stressful position they've got you in and putting your wellbeing back on yourself". Participants discussed the implications of excessive workloads by detailing their experiences of QNGRYCO's lack of accountability regarding burnout. Youth workers noted "feeling drained," showing signs of physical sickness, being more reactive, and demonstrating a low emotional capacity.

4. Recommendations and Conclusions

This study investigated the qualitative experiences of front-line residential youth workers, with a focus on their experiences of undertaking key service delivery areas. The findings reported in this article pertain specifically to participant experiences in managing the often-complex needs of young people while navigating complex power hierarchies that could impact their wellbeing and the attachment needs of young people within their care. Young people who reside within residential youth facilities often present with histories of trauma, disrupted attachment, and correspondingly, high risks of criminality (Ball et al. 2024; Green et al. 2023). Youth workers can play a critical role in providing consistent, nurturing care, which can promote security and assist in reducing young people's risks of entering the criminal justice system (Kanestrøm et al. 2025; Morais et al. 2024). However, issues such as high staff turnover and disruptions to placement continuity can further undermine the development of secure relationships, negatively impacting children's development, wellbeing, and complex behaviours (Kanestrøm et al. 2025; Morais et al. 2024). The findings of this research reveal a range of instances where intricate power dynamics negatively impacted both youth workers and young people. The stability and attachments of young people are, therefore, of concern in terms of outcomes for young people, as well as community safety. Organisational structures that better support the wellbeing of staff and enhance their abilities to provide consistent care are critical for providing consistent, quality care.

The findings highlight that residential out-of-home care environments sever attachments through abrupt placement re-allocations. Thus, improving community connection and belonging is recommended. This would require restructuring environments to meet the needs of young people and youth workers, including ensuring predictable environments across three key areas: rostering, practice approaches, and placement allocation. Recommendations, therefore, propose prioritising the nurturing of young people's self-identity through healthy attachments, relationships, and community connectedness.

Furthermore, youth workers' and young people's emotional, mental, and physical safety are negatively impacted by issues affecting staff retention. Solutions could involve addressing staff burnout by responding to front-line staff's physical, emotional, and mental health needs. Moreover, management approaches that foster relationships using power-with approaches, as opposed to power-over approaches, are important. Such a strategy would entail significant changes in organisational attitudes and cultures to reduce systemic disconnection. Attention to front-line workers' knowledge would ensure that real-world experiences inform structural changes across Queensland's child-protection system. This should involve direct collaboration with residential youth workers to reduce the complex, multi-layered structural disconnection across Queensland's child-protection power hierarchies.

It is essential to recognise that challenges within residential youth care settings compromise the social and emotional wellbeing of this particularly vulnerable group of children and young people—many of whom have faced considerable trauma and are at risk of ongoing adversity (Ball et al. 2024; Gatwiri et al. 2021). Supporting those who face disadvantage and oppression involves systemic accountability, advocacy, and ethical responsibility (Australian Association of Social Workers 2023). Consequently, this study's findings are relevant to front-line practitioners and academics committed to systemic improvements that promote more positive outcomes for young people in care. By highlighting current constraints among structural practices, this qualitative exploratory research produced valuable interpretations regarding the complex relationship dynamics across Queensland child protection departments. Expanding knowledge about the interrelated complex relationships between Child Safety, QNGRYCO, youth workers, and young people is vital for near-future systemic reforms. Arguably, elevating the voices of youth workers reduces power imbalances in

knowledge production and strengthens youth work practice evidence. When improving service delivery and structural practices within Queensland's child-protection system, policymakers are advised to consider the real-world needs of young people and youth workers by promoting stability and prioritising secure attachments. Future research with a direct focus on the contextualisation of attachment theory across Australian child protection departments and exploring the issues undermining staff retention across ROOHC is recommended.

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