What do young people with an out of home care experience think about Youth Justice and community safety?

Voices from a CREATE Youth Advisory Group Kitchen Table Conversation

On January 25, 2019, the #WorthaSecondChance Youth Justice Campaign and the CREATE Foundation collaborated on a Kitchen Table Conversation to speak with young people with lived experience of the out of home care sector about their thoughts, ideas and suggestions on Youth Justice and community safety.

Background

The CREATE Foundation is the national consumer body representing the voices of children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. CREATE runs programs for children and young people in foster care, kinship care, and residential care. CREATE’s research reports and articles, submissions and policy development allow us to advocate for a better care system.

CREATE believes that to improve the care system, we need to listen to the people who have experienced the system firsthand. This is why youth participation is the foundation of our advocacy.

Jesuit Social Services launched the #WorthaSecondChance Youth Justice Campaign in July 2018. #WorthaSecondChance is dedicated to strengthening the foundations of Victoria’s Youth Justice system with a values based focus.

The campaign has a dedicated focus on shifting the will of the community – to expand their understanding of what works in responding to youth justice issues, and build a groundswell of support for effective policies to prevent crime, divert young people from the youth justice system and help get young people back on track.
Both organisations recognise that too often conversations in the community about Youth Justice and community safety rarely include the voices of children and young people.

The Kitchen Table Conversation involved eight young people involved in CREATE’s Youth Advisory Group (YAG), aged 15-25. Some young people who attended on the night had experience of interacting with police, Youth Justice, or adult prisons. Others had experienced the incarceration of a parent. All young people who attended have been involved in the out-of-home care (OOHC) sector in Victoria.

All quotes featured in this document are from young people who attended on the night and young people involved provided endorsement and approval for the publication of this document.

What leads to young people getting into trouble?
Disengagement from education was discussed by young people as one of the leading factors that can cause young people to get into trouble. There was unanimous agreement from the group that alternative forms of schooling are key to supporting young people at risk of being in trouble.

Young people discussed the importance of creative education environments and community schools as being key ways to support young people to stay in school. Young people advised that they feel like the broader community and mainstream schools want to put young people in a “box” instead of seeing them as individuals who need specialised learning environments.

Young people discussed that they need to be made aware of the variety of further education options available to them, such as trades, instead of just being told to attend TAFE or university. As one young person discussed, young people need support finding options that suit their needs and interests, rather than pressure to “fit into one mould”, and attending university is not the only means to “be someone”.

The group discussed that young people can fall through the cracks when they are not treated as individuals and when people don’t understand their strengths. The group discussed that many young people in OOHC don’t have supportive family members to assist them to pursue mainstream education options, especially when also having to cope with leaving care at 18.

Young people highlighted that detention is not effective in stopping crime. Detention can be traumatizing for young people, and they may not get the help they need to address why they are getting into trouble, such as

**CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN INVOLVED WITH YOUTH JUSTICE**

- 70 per cent were victims of abuse, trauma or neglect
- 65 per cent had previously been suspended or expelled from school
- 58 per cent had a history of alcohol or drug use
- 53 per cent presented with mental health issues
- 37 per cent had involvement with child protection at some time

Youth Parole Board Annual Report 2017-2018

**WHAT IS THE YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP?**

The Youth Advisory Group consists of CREATE Young Consultants, who are young people with a care experience aged 14-25 who have undertaken CREATE’s Speak Up training.

They have a lived experience of being in the care system, so they understand what works and what needs to be improved.

“Young people in care don’t have family support to help them at mainstream school and when we have to leave care when we are 18, it makes school even harder”.
homelessness. Being locked up as young as 10 was also an issue raised by young people in discussions, as this could have major negative effects.

What can help young people stay out of trouble?

The group advised that young people should receive help that is “holistic” and not just focused on one area of their life. They reported that there needs to be recognition that everyone’s life is unique and that many young people in trouble have been to “hell and back”, so they need support that equips them with life skills for the future.

The group advised there is a need for care teams, but these care teams shouldn’t have too many people as this can be overwhelming. Young people reported that they need to be shown different pathways other than just being in trouble. Young people need support to find employment and develop skills for trades.

One young person reported that whilst there are opportunities for support for young people many young people “aren’t aware of them, therefore different strategies of communicating to young people about supports available should be explored.

Another young person discussed the impact of being homeless for some young people when they leave care. The pressures of having nowhere to live can cause some young people to commit crime, like breaking and entering into a building for shelter. Young people spoke about how becoming homeless could start a “domino effect” that ended in crisis and youth justice involvement. One solution is to provide the option to stay in care placements up to at least 21 years of age.

Other young people discussed the needs of young parents. They spoke about how children may enter care if their young parents have not been given the opportunity to learn parenting skills, particularly if they have lacked role models. Potentially the young parents’ own parents may have been in care and so the pattern continues.

Unanimously, the group agreed that young people need support when they first start getting into trouble or are at risk of getting into trouble, such as when they are leaving care or becoming a young parent.

Young people also discussed the need to belong. Some young people may feel like prison is the only place they belong, so it is important that young people feel that there is a place for them in their community where they feel connected and cared about.
THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIA ON YOUNG PEOPLE

“The media gives young people no say and no voice. The media makes me feel like shit”

“The media devalues our self-worth”

“When you are a teenager you are still trying to figure out who you are. When you see the media report like they do, you just think well I don’t know who I am so that must be who they want me to be – I’ll be that then.”

WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

“Youth Centres are good initiatives – hang out areas, group meetings, and the community benefits. We used to have a big problem with youth crime in my area. There used to only be one youth centre, now there are five. It seems to me that crimes is not as big a problem anymore.”

“We need care teams to help us but there shouldn’t be too many people involved – that’s overwhelming”

“We need other options instead of just building prisons”

“Young people that get into trouble have been to hell and back so they need support to learn skills for the future”

The media

Young people discussed the impact of media reporting on young people. Young people reported that they believe the media report the way they do about young people to get more views and likes. A young person noted that this sometimes involved deliberately causing outrage and controversy. It was expressed that media reporting should be transparent, featuring accurate facts.

For example, one young person discussed the media reporting on family violence. She discussed that men’s violence towards women is by no means an “isolated incident” and shouldn’t be reported like this.

Young people discussed that current media reporting gives them “no say and no voice”. Young people feel the media label all young people negatively and misconstrue facts and events. Young people advised that the current media reporting makes young people “devalue our self-worth”.

Two young people from diverse communities discussed racial profiling of young people from CALD background and how this then influences things that even friends and their school say to them. They felt a lot of media reporting is racially fuelled, which is isolating – young people felt there is no acknowledgement of white privilege and the level of inequality faced by people of colour.

Priority asks & actions

Young people made several suggestions for improving how the Youth Justice system responds to young people who get into trouble. Most importantly, they said locking young people up doesn’t work, and the community needs to be committed to looking after young people.

- Assist young people to access alternative education
- Raise the age of criminal responsibility- 10 is too low!
- Support young people to feel like they belong in the community, not in prison such as by changing negative representation in the media and building spaces like youth centres
- Support young people in custody to develop skills and get job ready
- Offer young people diversion programs as alternatives to prison
- Allow all young people to stay in care up to at least 21 years
- Increase the accessibility of social housing
- Recruit more foster carers to offer alternatives to residential care and make sure foster carers receive enough support

More Info

CREATE’s Youth Justice Report at create.org.au/publications/research-reports and visit worthwhileachance.com.au