

The Youth Transitions Study (New Zealand):

Whāia to huanui kia toa

Young People's Experiences with Services

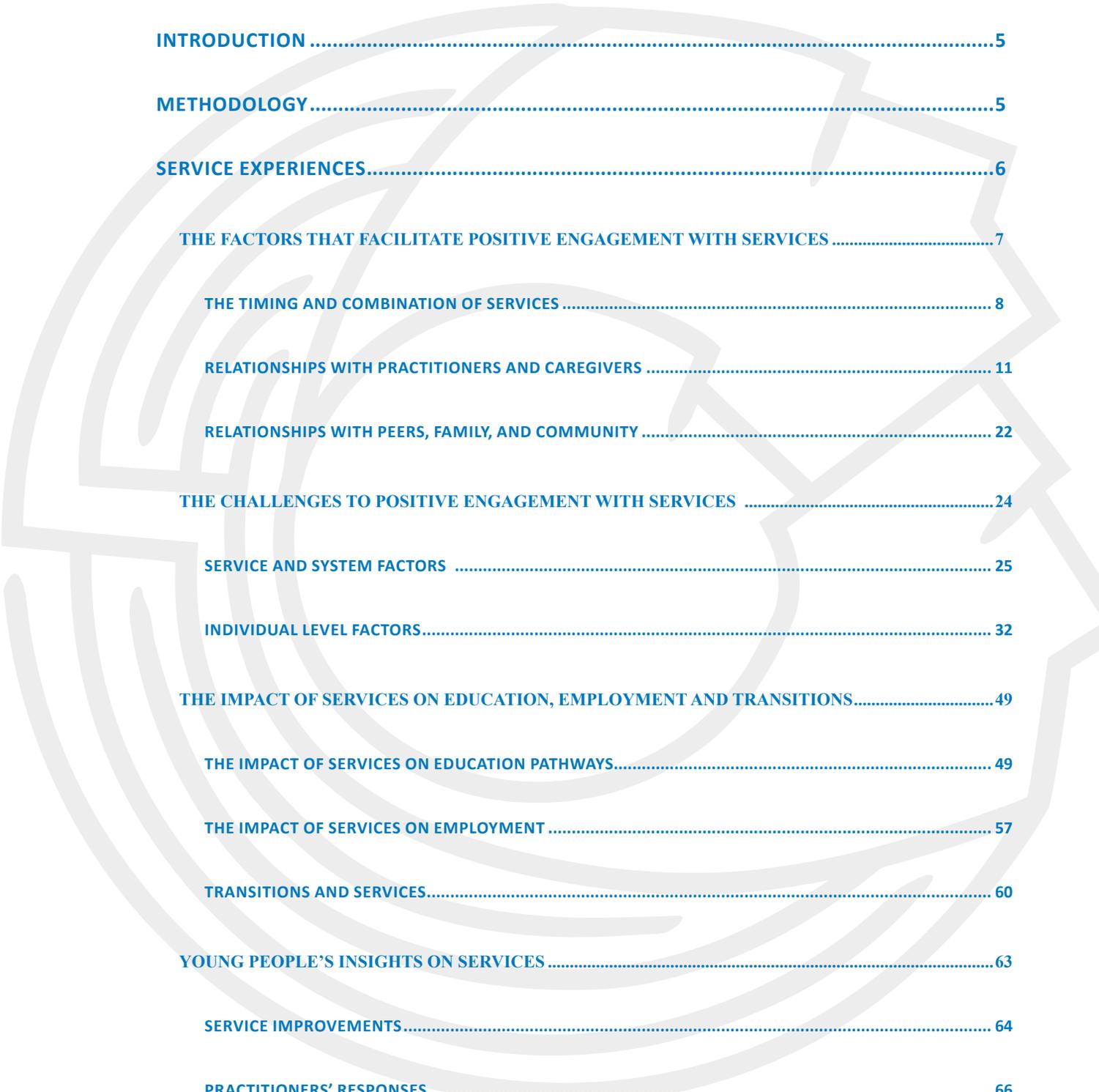
Technical Report 27

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Introduction

The Youth Transitions Study is a longitudinal study of young people's transitions to adulthood. These young people faced high levels of risk during childhood and adolescence. In addition to tracking the transition process across time, the study also investigated the role of services and informal networks in supporting these transitions. This report draws on the qualitative interviews and explores one theme that emerged in the data analysis: young people's experiences with services.

Methodology

The research programme¹ involved:

- A survey administered to young people once a year for three years.
- Qualitative interviews with a sub-set of young people administered once a year for three years after completion of the three surveys.
- Qualitative interviews with an adult nominated by the young people as someone they trusted and whom they considered to know the most about them (Person Most Knowledgeable (PMK)).

In 2009, 593 young people were recruited into the study and took part in the first of three annual surveys. A sub-set of 107 young people were recruited into the qualitative phase and participated in

1 A description of the study population can be found in the report "Starting Points: Patterns of risk, resilience, and service utilisation among a group of vulnerable youth and a community sample (Time 1)" on www.youthsay.co.nz.

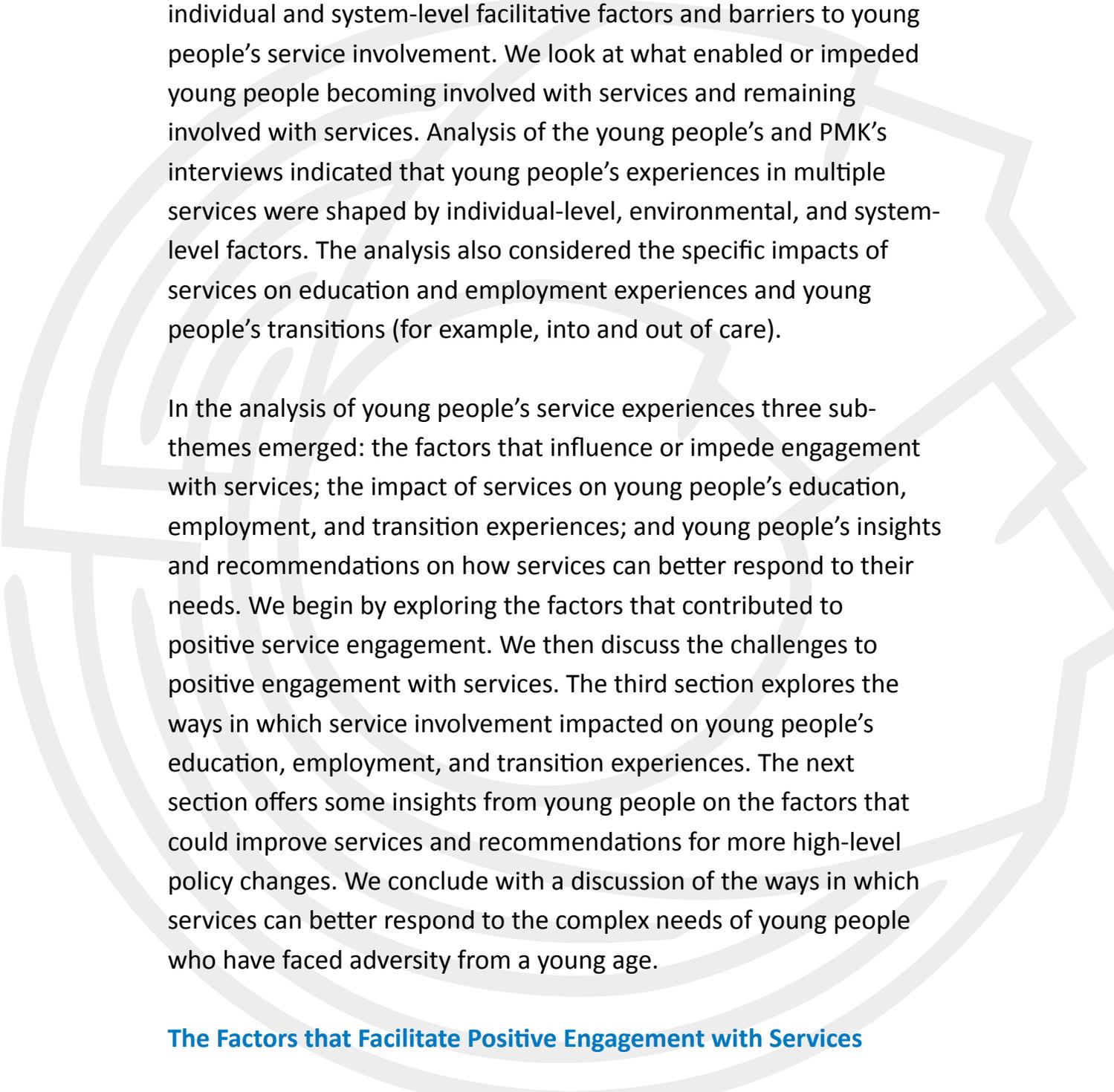
three interviews². The PMK also participated in three rounds of qualitative interviews. The research was approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee. The interviews were administered by trained interviewers. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the qualitative interviews. These interviews included a range of questions covering life experiences, risks and resources, experiences of family, school and service experiences, community networks, relationships, and the young person's insights into what assisted them through their transitions. The young people were interviewed in a location of their choosing.

Interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed verbatim, and coded using NVivo qualitative software. An initial set of thematic nodes was derived from the qualitative interviews and then a secondary analysis generated other themes. This report focuses on one of these themes: young people's experiences of services.

Service Experiences

The young people had experienced significant adversity over their lifetime. These young people had complex needs and used multiple services (child welfare, youth justice, mental health, and education support services, both statutory and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)). Engagement with services can facilitate access to resources and support to mitigate the risks these young people face in their everyday lives. However, service engagement with services was not straightforward. This report explores young people's insights into their experiences with services as well as their recommendations for

² This report focuses primarily on Round One interviews since there was not a significant change over time detected across interviews with regard to young people's experience of services. At the time of the second and third interviews many young people were no longer receiving services.



how to improve service processes and the overall service experience. In particular, it is concerned with explaining the individual and system-level facilitative factors and barriers to young people's service involvement. We look at what enabled or impeded young people becoming involved with services and remaining involved with services. Analysis of the young people's and PMK's interviews indicated that young people's experiences in multiple services were shaped by individual-level, environmental, and system-level factors. The analysis also considered the specific impacts of services on education and employment experiences and young people's transitions (for example, into and out of care).

In the analysis of young people's service experiences three sub-themes emerged: the factors that influence or impede engagement with services; the impact of services on young people's education, employment, and transition experiences; and young people's insights and recommendations on how services can better respond to their needs. We begin by exploring the factors that contributed to positive service engagement. We then discuss the challenges to positive engagement with services. The third section explores the ways in which service involvement impacted on young people's education, employment, and transition experiences. The next section offers some insights from young people on the factors that could improve services and recommendations for more high-level policy changes. We conclude with a discussion of the ways in which services can better respond to the complex needs of young people who have faced adversity from a young age.

The Factors that Facilitate Positive Engagement with Services

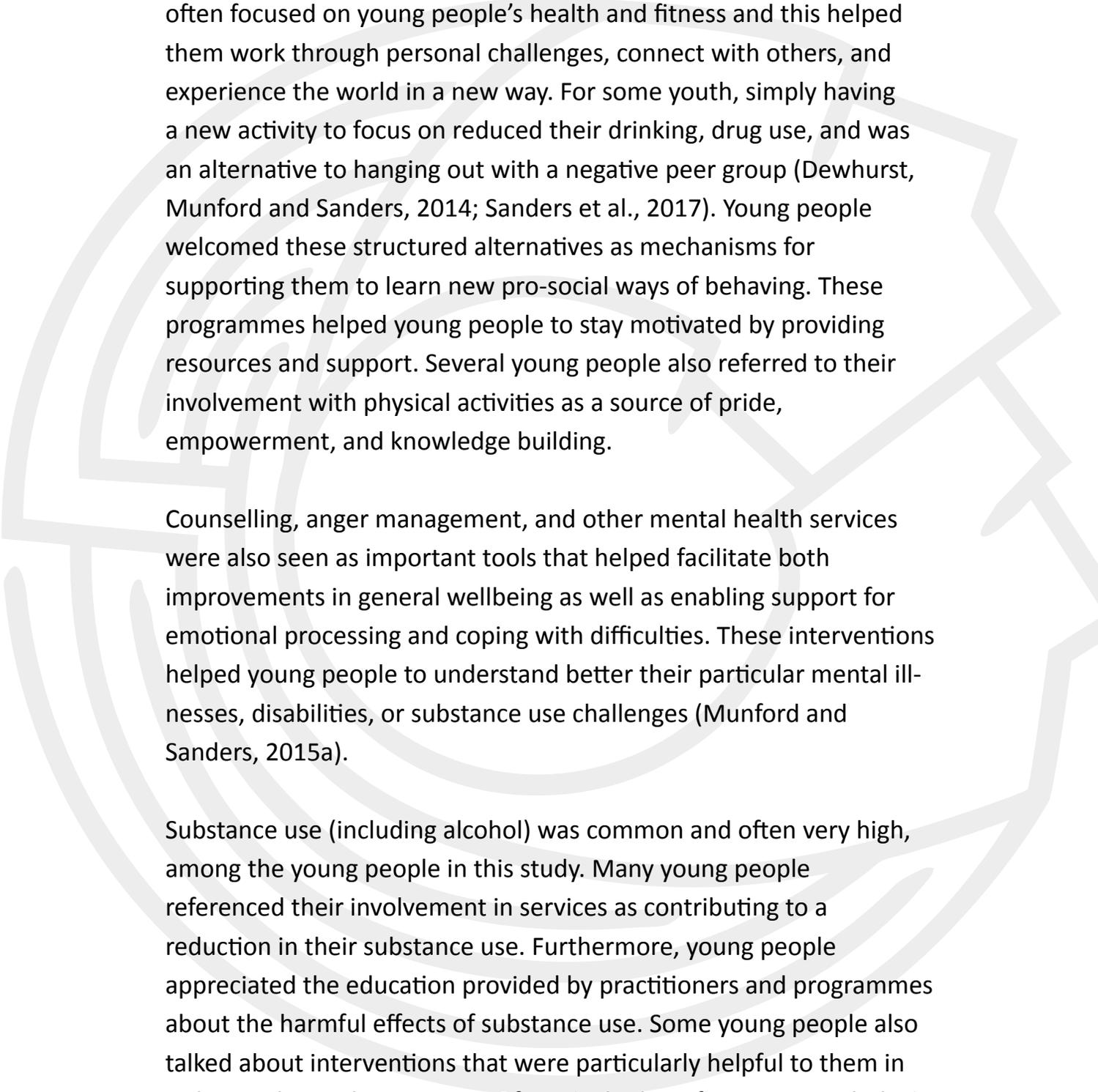
The following section details the factors and experiences that young people described as facilitating positive engagement with services. The timing and combination of services, relationships with

practitioners and caregivers, and relationships with peers, family, and community will be discussed.

The Timing and Combination of Services

Timing was a critical factor in young people's capacity to respond positively to service involvement. While services, family, or peers, may have approached or suggested young people become involved in services, if they were not ready for this it was unlikely that they would engage with a service. However, when services were made available at a point when the young person's circumstances were such that they were able to dedicate focused time to a programme or when they felt that services could help them address their issues, they were more likely to engage and be more receptive to interventions. For example, if they wanted to address their drinking, substance use, and other behaviours that were taking them down "the wrong path." Sometimes successful engagement with services depended on other people; for example, one young person said that going to family counselling a second time was successful because her family was in a better place to work together at that time.

Several young people also reported that being involved with multiple services could contribute to positive service experiences. When young people were involved in more than one service they potentially had a larger support network, more resources at their disposal, and a more comprehensive model of care. Rather than having one service provider focusing on one area of their life being engaged with multiple services meant that there was potential for an overall improvement in wellbeing and progress toward their goals. It is important to note that often it was the timing of the specific combination of services that created positive service experiences for young people.



Young people reported that programmes that adopted holistic approaches contributed to their wellbeing. These programmes often focused on young people's health and fitness and this helped them work through personal challenges, connect with others, and experience the world in a new way. For some youth, simply having a new activity to focus on reduced their drinking, drug use, and was an alternative to hanging out with a negative peer group (Dewhurst, Munford and Sanders, 2014; Sanders et al., 2017). Young people welcomed these structured alternatives as mechanisms for supporting them to learn new pro-social ways of behaving. These programmes helped young people to stay motivated by providing resources and support. Several young people also referred to their involvement with physical activities as a source of pride, empowerment, and knowledge building.

Counselling, anger management, and other mental health services were also seen as important tools that helped facilitate both improvements in general wellbeing as well as enabling support for emotional processing and coping with difficulties. These interventions helped young people to understand better their particular mental illnesses, disabilities, or substance use challenges (Munford and Sanders, 2015a).

Substance use (including alcohol) was common and often very high, among the young people in this study. Many young people referenced their involvement in services as contributing to a reduction in their substance use. Furthermore, young people appreciated the education provided by practitioners and programmes about the harmful effects of substance use. Some young people also talked about interventions that were particularly helpful to them in reducing their substance use. Of particular benefit were more holistic approaches that focused on the wider challenges the young person faced in their lives alongside the problem behaviour. In the account

below, Tasha (pseudonyms are used) shared her experience with a counsellor who focused on substance use, the initial reason for going to counselling, but also contextualised her substance use with other parts of her life:

Tasha ...she was really good, I don't know why she was good, just was easy to talk to, easy to understand. She was really empathetic like she was really good at putting herself in my shoes so that she knew how I felt, so she could give me the appropriate advice I guess, which was good. And I guess also the other thing that sort of that I found quite good was with [counsellor 'B'] we just talk strictly alcohol and so I sort of felt that she was only talking to me coz that was her job, whereas [counsellor 'A'], she talked about everything, like family, school, friends everything....

Interviewer Big picture.

Tasha Yeah so I sort felt that she was genuinely interested in me as well made it easier to talk I guess.

Interviewer [Counsellor 'B'] was just sort of focussing on the problem....

Tasha Yeah then it sort of made, I don't know, I didn't really like it. But it was good coz even if I had slip up like it still come out of that but I don't know I might have drunken more than I negotiated at the weekend but then I passed my Maths test with Merit or something....

Interviewer That's where [counsellor 'A'] would focus on....

Tasha Focus on, she would be like, 'well you know you slipped up everyone does but let's look at how we can fix it for this weekend.' So when I left I was not thinking about how I screwed I was thinking about

that test that I did pass, which is really good.

Tasha appreciated how other aspects of her life, like family and education, were considered in her counsellor's overall view of how she was progressing; that is, progress and good behaviour were not defined solely on reducing or stopping substance use.

Relationships with Practitioners and Caregivers

Positive, supportive relationships with practitioners played a major role in young people's positive engagement with services. Feeling respected, accepted and connected to practitioners were critical characteristics in relationships with service providers and caregivers.

Feeling accepted

Many young people talked about positive experiences with practitioners and caregivers that created a sense of belonging. Young people talked about their positive experiences in foster families; these young people felt accepted by their foster families and were treated as though they were part of the family. Young people mentioned a sense of comfort when they were not treated differently than other children in the family; that is, they were not treated like "the foster kid." As Frankie discusses below, one of her most positive experiences and relationships was with a foster mum who accepted her as a part of the family. She was treated with the same love, respect, and acceptance as all of the children in the family:

My biggest one would be [name of caregiver], my caregiver. [Name of caregiver], she's just been there through everything, she just, she doesn't, the thing I love about her is she does never treat me like a foster child. I am never a special child, I am like her own child and when her daughter comes over, who's 32, she treats us just like her own daughter, like, we are not

different, we're not special, we're not disabled, we're not anything, we're just her daughters and sons, like she just treats us the same, that's what I love about her. And then she knows when to discipline us and then when to sometimes kick back and be our friend, kind of thing, yeah...She's my biggest role model so when I'm older I hope to be a mum like her.

Other young people talked about having a connection with their practitioner and that this created a sense of belonging. These young people referred to the practitioners as being like family because of their ongoing, supportive relationship. When practitioners were involved in the young person's life for a long period, the young people expressed appreciation for how the practitioners stayed with them through many changes in their lives. This ongoing support fostered a sense of family and this was highly valued by the young people.

The qualities of practitioners and caregivers

When young people could relate to a practitioner they were more likely to engage with services. This included working with a practitioner from a similar background (cultural, ethnic, class), who may have faced similar challenges, who shared their own experiences as a young person, and treated the young person with respect and kindness:

Interviewer And so she [practitioner] helped you repair the relationship with your family?

Omoni Yes. Because she was Samoan, she was like one of us people, so she understood where I was coming from, and plus she was going through the same thing I was when she was little, so she kind of put herself into my shoes and she actually understood, and she would tell us the story, she'd tell me the story of what her mum would do to her,

which was helpful enough, because it was like the same thing.

Working with practitioners who had experienced similar hardships also helped young people feel accepted as well as feeling that there was hope for them to turn their lives around and to be able to participate in the workforce in a good job like a social worker. Some young people even referred to their practitioners as their role models. Whereas judgement and disrespect were mentioned as barriers to services, young people seemed to thrive when working with practitioners who accepted them, treated them with respect, and did not focus too much on the young person's problems. When practitioners shared their own challenging upbringing, young people felt seen, accepted, and did not feel like a spectacle, in terms of being held under a microscope for their problems to be examined and fixed. Rebecca described an especially supportive practitioner as someone who offered advice without trying to "scare" the young person into being good:

And [the practitioners at youth health service are] like real chilled out, like they talk to you like they're your friends not a medical professional looking down on you. It's not like always on this, 'you're depressed blah blah blah.' it's 'you can stray off that and have heaps of conversations with people and always comes back to it,' it never just strayed right off it, it's always... Yeah and they want to help you get better, like for certain, find out what's causing it, like if you don't want to talk about it they won't make you, they will just like give you tips on how to deal with issues and things like that. Whereas at the hospital [mental health service] they like make you talk about everything you don't want to talk about, it's awkward.

Echoing what Rebecca said above, Polly described how

non-judgemental and open her counsellor was with her. That Polly was so pleased with her counsellor also points to her disappointment or inability to find other counsellors who were likewise respectful and took her concerns and experience seriously:

[The counsellor at student health] actually talked to me and she said 'okay so when you're a fairy what makes you think that.' And I would tell her and she goes 'okay so have you considered this?' and she would actually talk to me rather than sweep me under the rug, writing it off as a hallucination. She wanted to know why I was feeling that way and why I was doing those things and because she would ask those questions in the next time, she doesn't even poke fun at it but she kind of did like she took it seriously but I didn't feel like she was judging me and that was really, really good coz I really needed that. She definitely heard me....Yeah, yeah she was she was extremely genuine.

Practitioners' responses to young people were crucial; they influenced how well services were received or how facilitative they were to continued service engagement. Young people liked practitioners who listened well, were not judgemental, and did not make assumptions about the young person. Young people appreciated practitioners who genuinely listened and cared for their wellbeing; they gave the young person the sense that they were not alone with their problems. Practitioners were facilitative of positive service experiences when they were reliable and when they were able to sense that something was going on in the young person's life that they needed help with. It was important that young people trusted their practitioners and felt comfortable talking about things they would not talk to anyone else about. Because so many young people identified impersonal, rushed services as a barrier, young people appreciated practitioners who took their time with the young

person and really tried to understand who they were and what was happening in their world. As Horiana details below, her service experience was improved by having a practitioner who looked past her background and was not judgemental of her life circumstances:

Interviewer Has [the employment preparation programme practitioner] been good.

Horiana Shit, I love her she always takes me out for a coffee. She's bad [exceptionally good] I reckon, she is one person that I give it to coz she doesn't judge me like, I know that I have said that before but people don't know, I've been judged all my life, it's dumb, coz I can't be who I want to be and people look at me like who my parents are, I'm not like that.

Many young people mentioned responsiveness as an important element in their experiences with services, especially in times of emergency or danger. Young people appreciated having a practitioner they could call if they needed help and who would come right away. In these situations, advocacy and negotiation on behalf of the young person were identified as positive service factors. Young people particularly valued practitioners who liaised with other services to better meet their needs or to help advocate for what the young person needed, such as practical resources. Practitioners helped young people access other programmes or resources. Transportation, clothing, budgeting advice, and driver's license administrative assistance were greatly appreciated because practical and material needs were significant challenges in the young people's lives.

Young people stated that when they moved between care placements clear communication and transparency were both critical, providing a source of comfort during these transitions. One young person recalled a lawyer who took extra time to help her

understand what was happening during her transition into a youth justice facility. While in this instance the social worker and the police were unhelpful, her lawyer spent time with her before and after court to ensure she understood her rights.

Consistency in support

Young people talked about enduring and consistent contact and support as instrumental to their wellbeing and service engagement. Many young people spoke about maintaining contact with their foster parents or caregivers after transitioning out of care. They appreciated staying in touch and knowing they could rely on their caregivers even after leaving a placement; this contributed to feeling that they were part of a family and provided an important sense of continuity in lives that were marked by disruption.

Areta compared her bible study teacher to others who had usually come in and out of her life, in doing so she highlights that the particular role or mandate a practitioner had was less important than the relational approach:

But yeah, but I have really mad [great] respect for my bible study teacher. She's stuck by me. She's kept her word. You know? She's cool. You come across a lot of people in here that are not loyal, eh? People come and go and 'yeah, I'll write to you, I'll send you some photos, da da da da.' You know, one out of a hundred people in here kept to their word.

As Areta describes, having a consistent presence and support went a long way to building meaningful relationships as well as trust between a practitioner and a young person. In describing her advice for younger youth who might be involved in the system, Hara recalled her experience with a social worker as positive in retrospect, especially their persistence in staying in touch with Hara over time:

I thank her for being there to talk to and just coz she loves me, she always said she loved me. You're not meant to say that, she said 'I love you, you were like my daughter you know.' Coz I thank her for also trying, coz she tried fuckin how many years, she's still trying, you know, she's still trying to get me to go on the course and do this and that. We communicated now she knows that's where my head's at now but she wasn't like she tried and she tried and she tried but she didn't give up.

What Hara points out is her case worker's persistence and how crucial this was for their relationship. She said that she was often evasive and difficult to stay in touch with but was extremely grateful to her case worker for her perseverance in providing support. The experiences of Areta and Hara underscore not only the importance of long-term, consistent support and relationship building but also the critical role of the social worker. They both seem to be pointing out "the social worker who makes a difference." That is, their social workers have had a significant impact on their engagement with services as well as their perception of social services (Kumpulainen et al., 2013; Munford and Sanders, 2015b).

Stability and security

Many young people reported on the ways in which services and caregivers encouraged and promoted safety, security, stability, and structure. Young people shared their experiences of the care system and the importance of being able to stay in one place or a placement for a longer-term period, so that they were not constantly on the move, in transition, or homeless. Remari described these transitions as opportunities for him to reset, get into a healthy/positive routine, and establish a "good solid block" to build his life on.

Several young people said that being in residential youth justice programmes helped create safety and stability. In these settings,

young people were looked after and had regular routines. Below, Rhiannon shares her positive view of youth justice because it helped her to focus, offered her a break from outside influences, and gave her a routine:

Interviewer And you said [youth justice] gave you the wake up call?

Rhiannon Yeah. Yeah it just kinda focused me a bit, and you know, made me sort my...um, brain out? I guess I was going through a transitional period...and I just, yeah, I didn't know kinda, what I was up to. And yeah it was a good break and a good think. And you know, having all the outside bullshit, all the outside influences away from you. You can have a good think about yourself...From just your point of view. And you know, not much dramas, you do the same shit every day pretty much. And you know how it goes, so, no drama. No stress. Just relax. Oh you know, just take it every day as it comes, and it's usually pretty easy, coz you're locked up and you don't do much.

Interviewer Mmmm. And you know the time frame as well. Coz you know how long you're gonna be.

Rhiannon It's all a routine. Yeah. Everyday.

Certain placements were also facilitative for youth when they felt safe and easily able to get help if they needed it. For example, young people spoke of certain foster care placements or times when the statutory agency intervened to change the young person's placement because of the difficulties they were experiencing. These facilitative placements also included relationships with adults or practitioners who were supportive, readily available, and were positive role models. As Taylor expresses below, she was grateful to have a

counsellor so easily accessible, especially during times of danger and emergency:

Oh, I remember I was in tears like, who I was with, um, he like threatened to hurt me, um, I was living with him at the time at his parents' house and he was like yelling at me and going off, and I gave, I think I either text [my drug and alcohol counsellor] or I called her and she ended up like at the house, dropped everything, came and got me, took me out to a café, had a drink and I'm like, I was a mess I looked like a wreck and not coz of like drugs or anything coz ...

Empowerment and self-esteem

Many young people had experienced proud moments because of being involved with services. For example, graduating from a course or programme instilled confidence and self-esteem. For some youth, these accomplishments were identified as some of their first or greatest successes. Programmes and services also helped young people develop social skills or other practical skills like budgeting or developing a CV, which helped build confidence. Learning new skills and developing relationships through services also resulted in young people developing new life goals and having confidence that they could achieve these goals, that they were worthy and capable individuals.

Keeping busy and staying on track

For many young people, simply keeping busy with involvement in a programme helped them avoid boredom and stay out of trouble. These programmes included youth programmes, such as sports courses, the gym, employment, bible study or other religious or spiritual groups, and residential or employment preparation programmes. As John describes below, his engagement with a youth programme was positive because they helped him stay busy with

activities in an alcohol and drug free setting. He appreciated the variety of opportunities he had which opened his eyes to the many ways to have fun and express himself without drugs and alcohol:

Yeah [youth service], I wasn't with [youth service] for long. They take you to church, they take you places they know you know. Like um, dance programmes. To keep your mind off stuff and to know that instead of getting wasted off your face you can go out and you can have a bit of dancing, instead of doing drugs and alcohol. You can go do better stuff than that. Without harming your body, stunting your growth. You can go out and sweat it out a bit have some fun. They took me wicked places too like when we went to [town], heaps of disco places. And to some cool stuff, alcohol free. No alcohol, no drugs, you can have water or whatever. And just hard music, hard, everyone's having fun high on life and like, they taught me how to do stuff without being wasted or drunk or drink driving or you know.

As John reflects above, service involvement can provide a welcome distraction from alcohol and drugs (and other risky behaviours) as well as motivate young people to spend their time engaged in more healthy, productive activities (for a more detailed analysis of the impact of un/employment on young people, particularly as it relates to offending and criminal activity, see the Technical Report:

Precarious Employment Experiences and Uncertain Futures at www.youthsay.co.nz).

Resources and support for transition to independence

One of the major themes to emerge within young people's narratives about services was the important role services had in providing practical resources such as money, food, transport, and housing. Many young people credited their service involvement for helping them get a driver's license. Young people appreciated being

supported to transition into independence; for example, help developing a CV, budgeting, learning to cook, opening a bank account, getting a computer, applying for a birth certificate, learning about hygiene, finding accommodation and setting up a flat.

To this end, young people talked about access to certain material resources as also being facilitative of their wellbeing, including their transitions either into or out of care or services. Some of the resources that were listed as particularly helpful included being given a cell phone, computer, free counselling, recreational services, transportation, clothing, food, technical courses (for job training) and other financial support. Below, Frankie details some of the recreational services she was able to experience while in a residential programme:

Like in [residential programme] we get people come up and do fun days for us, where we get like youth groups come up and throw a massive day, bouncy castles and sports days, and then, we've got the pool and we've got just heaps of stuff that in a normal foster home you just wouldn't get. So I'm just really grateful to being here, and have the support, and the thing about [residential programme] is, you're like, 'oh, I can't go on that coz I don't have enough money,' they're like, 'don't worry about it, we'll do it,' and they always do things you want. Like, unlike (care and protection agency), it's always like, 'oh well, that costs heaps and we're not really budgeted,' [residential programme] just does it, ok, they just want you to be happy, and just have the best home while you can. Because some of them are only here for a little while, have to go back home, so they want you to enjoy what you can now, before you don't get it any more.

Practitioners often assisted young people with applying for and

accessing benefits or loans. They helped young people compile their documentation, as well as advocated for the young people to receive the full benefit amount for which they were entitled. Several young people also received assistance from practitioners in accessing bridging accommodation or housing for independent living.

Relationships with Peers, Family, and Community

Family members, peers, and other community members helped connect young people with services and supported sustained service engagement (for more information about young people's relationships, consult www.youthsay.co.nz for several reports on their relationships with family, siblings, peers, and significant others). Several young people referred to family members who had been involved with services when they were younger. Because of their positive experiences with services, they encouraged young people to use services. Several young people had family members who worked in services and they supported young people to engage with these.

Once involved in care or services, young people recalled the positive influence of having consistent support from family members. This support took the form of emotional support, as well as accompanying young people to appointments or court proceedings. Services also had a role in promoting young people's relationships with family, peers and community.

Services that promote relationships with family, peers and community

Young people referenced many positive experiences where services facilitated or improved connections with their families. Sometimes this meant services involved the whole family, like family counselling, or helped young people reconnect, maintain contact, or establish better relationships with their family. As Nikora describes below, he felt disconnected from his family for much of his youth. Seeking to

mend this, he sought out services and now has a positive relationship with his family:

My upbringing was pretty tough, going from family to family, in and out of boys' homes and hitting [youth justice prison], yeah, I didn't like it but still never changed. I didn't change my ways. And I seen all the hurt on my family late last year, I seen all the hurt that they'd had, what I'd done to them, and, I thought to myself, how could I fix that. And [a social service that uses indigenous practices] was a suggestion and my family really love me now. I am, what they call, the man who keeps everything together.

Similarly, young people recounted examples of friendships and partners who also supported their involvement in services. Friends provided emotional support, encouraged young people to stay out of trouble while involved in services, provided transport to and waited with them at appointments, and offered camaraderie while they were in youth justice facilities. Solomon, found that his alternative education programme created a supportive atmosphere with his fellow peers. This was why that programme worked out so well for him:

Solomon That was after intermediate I went north, yeah.

Interviewer And how was that change?

Solomon It was good coz there was, that was the best school that I went to.

Interviewer How come?

Solomon It was because it fit, it fit my needs, it just felt, everything just went smooth. Like all the kids there were good, really keen for lunchtimes, and everyone brung food and shared. Like we brung food and shared, like some days, like the boys they

would go out and play touch.

Interviewer So it was pretty cool?

Solomon It was, yeah. We all, we all talked about problems, that's one thing that the boys did there. If we got problems we just say it.

Interviewer So it was a safe.....?

Solomon Like we got everyone to sit around, like this a whole meeting, and we just laid the cards on the table.

Interviewer Yeah, yeah.

Solomon And that's how we sort problems out. We didn't fight over nothings. We had to sit down as a thing coz the teacher there was very, you know, very straightforward.

Taken together, these insights into relationships and services point to the importance of a strong connection between practitioners and young people and the key role of practitioners in supporting young people to reconnect with their family, peers and community as these are important resources that can strengthen service engagement. The next section explores the challenges to positive engagement with services.

The Challenges to Positive Engagement with Services

This section explores the factors that undermined positive engagement with services. The discussion highlights the situations where services had a negative impact on young people's experiences and where they interfered with other areas of the young person's life. Two central themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: service and system factors and individual level factors.

Service and System Factors

Service and system level factors often acted as barriers to young people's positive experiences and continued engagement in services. Service level factors related to particular inefficiencies or harm caused by programmes, processes, and practitioners; for example, the timing of services and interventions, service requirements and delays in processing entitlements. Connected to specific service level barriers are broader, system level factors including the inadequate provision of resources for service providers as well as a lack of resources and financial assistance for young people.

The timing of services and interventions

Many young people identified that the timing of services and interventions was problematic. They stated that they wanted service providers to intervene and act sooner and recognise significant turning points in their life where additional services would have been helpful. A long wait time for appointments was a common theme expressed by the young people, such as waiting for appointments with Work and Income, youth health services, and mental health services. Young people also mentioned several instances where violence or abuse was occurring in their homes, yet no service providers intervened. In some instances, the abuse or violence came to the attention of services and practitioners but was not followed up, or was only followed up years later. In other instances, the young people did not necessarily alert services but recalled being so disengaged, from school for example, and showing signs of trauma, that they were surprised that no one stopped to ask what was going on in their lives.

In the account below, Addi describes her experience of being overlooked by multiple systems during a particularly hard time in her

life. She identified several cues that the system could have recognised:

Interviewer So they needed to get in really early, at that point when you were looking after your [family member]. From what you told me people knew that you were looking after your [family member], the school knew.

Addi Yep, the school they were the ones that said something to [the statutory care and protection agency] coz I wasn't going to school all the time. I would've only done four months of a year and the school were worried about me. They weren't being nasty, they were just worried about me, coz I was [still primary school age]. But I looked after [my family member] for years though. So, I'm actually quite surprised that it took four years for them to do anything, I wished someone would have come in and done something at the beginning.

Young people reported that practitioners did not always take seriously their concerns; for example, when they brought up claims of abuse, and this further complicated the process of accessing services. As Peata describes below, young people sometimes mentioned services intervening a long time after the initial concern was expressed, sometimes serving to re-traumatise the young person if they had already moved on from the violence or abuse:

Because [the statutory care and protection agency] had just pushed, after doing all these statements, going through all this stuff that I was going through for all the abuse that was happening in my past, [the statutory care and protection

agency] just pushed it down to the bottom... lost my file after that. Couple of years later they ring me up and I'm like 'oh hello, what do you want,' and they're like 'oh we've just found your file,' and I'm like 'aye, what's that for?' And they go 'for all the abuse that was happening.' And I go 'oh, why now? I did that a couple of years ago.' And they go 'sorry but da da da.' And I was like 'but why now?' I was locked up in YJ at the time, I had just buried it you know. I had moved on from it, and then they bring it up again. And then every time I bury it, like just recently, I had just buried it and then they tell me that I had a trial. I was like 'what the hell?' They bring it up now, and then later, and then later after that. And I'm trying to move on, I'm just trying to move on from everything. But they keep bringing it up, shoving it in my face, and then I have to go through the same situation again and again and again. That's not fair on me.

Unfortunately, the narrative above describes a common theme: that young people are re-traumatised by the services setting out to support them due to improper timing of service delivery, lack of timely follow-up and insensitive approaches to dealing with trauma.

A few young people noted how the delay in services ended up in them assuming independence early or creating more reliance on families who were struggling to provide support. Such situations placed the young person at risk. Some young people took on the care of other family members from a young age. Due to lack of service intervention, young people relied more on themselves (and their families) for support and survival, eventually leading to a resistance and distrust toward service practitioners once they finally became involved in a service. Sidney recalled taking care of a family member from a young age and how that affected her willingness to accept help from service providers:

Coz I grew up too young, when I was [primary school age] I was looking after my [family member] so I grew up too quick. When [services] got involved] I was already like, 'this was my life not yours and you are not going to tell me how to run it.' I was already in that frame of mind so young.

As the above participants explain, it is important for services to be timely, responsive, and trauma-informed. Young people stated that service providers should treat young people with respect and trust rather than suspicion and judgement. Responsiveness to violence was particularly critical since delayed responses (or even none at all) put the young people at risk.

While it is important for service providers to respond to claims of violence and abuse, it is also crucial that services are preventative, as well. When other services, schools for example, notice changes in behaviour—either escalating levels of challenging behaviours or disengagement or not showing up to school—it is important that they bring other services into the school setting to work with these children and young people.

Service requirements and delays in processing entitlements

Several young people mentioned delays in receiving their benefits due to long processing times, overly restrictive requirements or rules, and processing errors.

Participants referred to what they viewed as harsh requirements for receiving or staying on benefits. For example, Work and Income often set requirements for how many jobs young people must apply for each week. One participant did not meet that requirement and was stood-down for a week, leaving him unable to cover his living costs. He became involved in criminal activity in order to meet his financial needs and this exposed him to exploitation. Not only did harsh

requirements stigmatise young people who were unable to meet these, the resulting stand-downs delayed the young person's plans. This also left them without proper support or guidance; many young people reported that they were not well informed about how they could meet the requirements for receiving support and resources. Furthermore, many young people recounted that they had to constantly adjust their plans to accommodate the changes in financial support. For example, young people had to change their living situations or education plans because of changes in their benefits. Some young people resorted to criminal behaviour, such as stealing or shoplifting, in order to provide for themselves due to insufficient financial assistance (these issues are discussed in more detail in the Technical Report: *Precarious Employment Experiences and Uncertain Futures* at www.youthsay.co.nz).

Processing times, processing errors, and confusing application processes were barriers to receiving services. Young people reported a range of issues: that case managers lost their forms, that they received mixed/conflicting information about what they needed to apply for and how much financial support could be provided. Some young people mentioned that long processing times and confusing application processes meant that they chose to abandon the benefit process all together. They said they felt that systems pushed them away and into criminal activity, rather than helped them to resolve the challenges they were facing and move forward in a positive, pro-social way with their lives.

Others, who stayed involved in the process or service, experienced the service as unhelpful because interventions were drawn out. On top of strict requirements for receiving and maintaining benefits, several participants noted instances where a service or government organisation revoked, restricted, or delayed access to material resources. Young people found these experiences distressing and

unhelpful and especially challenging for their wellbeing. Several young people experienced up to eight weeks of delay before they received their first benefit payment.

Moving also complicated receipt of services and support. Several participants mentioned delays in receiving benefits following a move. Others had their benefit cut and had trouble getting it re-established.

Lack of resources and financial assistance

Lack of transportation assistance and other financial resources was a common impediment for young people engaging in services. Often, young people enrolled in or were required to take part in a course that they had great difficulties actually getting to. There were common refrains from young people regarding a lack of assistance for them to take advantage of the services or courses. Furthermore, young people in foster care also referred to instances where they were restricted or denied resources. Although caregivers received stipends for clothes and food, young people reported that they did not always receive these benefits. Below, Hanuere recalls an especially bleak impression of the statutory care and protection agency and their practice of supporting young people:

Well [the statutory care and protection agency] did they put you with criminals and a lot of the caregivers don't use the money for you. You'll get a pay-out for your clothes and you won't see any clothes, you won't get anything, barely get fed sometimes, I just I really, really don't like how [statutory care and protection agency] just you know, they let anybody in for a weekend of training, not even a full week of training and then after a weekend of training you can become a caregiver.

The lack of financial assistance was a major issue for young people who were transitioning out of care. While the transition out of care,

into independence, was challenging in and of itself, young people described the lack of resources and support as accentuating these challenges. Some young people had relationships with caregivers or other peers who advocated on their behalf to get financial and material resources during their transition; however, many did not and were not able to advocate for themselves to get the support they needed. When young people were able to qualify or receive financial assistance, they often spoke of not getting sufficient financial assistance or receiving their full benefit. For example, Horano was living in a supported living accommodation but rarely felt his benefits were sufficient to cover his needs. There were times when he received less than his full benefit amount:

Since I came here they haven't been, oh they did for the first week or so, or first couple of weeks but like, I've been there for ages, just over three months, I reckon. And it's like they had not once since I've been there have we ever got our full amount like ... for a while I couldn't pay my rent cause my benefit hadn't come in yet, but it's like ... for that fund, let's just say ... two months, they have not been giving us our full amount. They give us the amount for three people but not four, cause there's four people living in the house now. We're all paying our full amount of rent but it's like, they are not giving us the full amount, that's why we're getting annoyed and frustrated.

As Horano stated, he was reliant on the benefit to meet his needs and living expenses. When resources were inadequate or withheld, young people were placed in dire situations and this created frustration and resentment toward service providers.

Inadequate resources for service providers

Some young people commented on how some services and organisations were understaffed. They felt they did not get adequate

attention from their practitioners and that practitioners did not have enough time or resources to do their job properly. When describing her care worker, Ellie expressed sympathy for her care worker because she had such a high caseload:

Ah, she's a community support worker but she's mine and [another young person's] case worker. Well, she's sort of everyone's at the moment because she's the only permanent staff full time! Oh, gosh, cause [another worker], I want her back, it's not fair, she's not like those other social workers, she's actually casual but she was working, full time, because now it's only [her worker]. Like they have to like get in people from [another youth agency] and other people that work for [another youth agency] but it's like, they said that they're trying to hire new people, it's like, 'well hurry up and do it,' poor bloody [her worker], you know, it's not good, it's like, wow.

Individual Level Factors

This section explores individual level factors that serve as barriers to service involvement and positive service experiences. Individual level barriers include mental health and alcohol or drug problems, relationships with family and peers, relationships with service providers, supportive or harmful service decisions, poor communication and lack of transparency, young people's aversion to services, cultural and spiritual sensitivity, and loss of agency.

Health, drugs, alcohol, and anger management

Barriers to service involvement often included health issues, alcohol and drug use, and other mental health challenges. One young person was unable to start a programme because he/she was admitted to hospital. In another instance, a young person with an eating disorder went to several services but did not receive adequate care.

One service told her that they were ill equipped to provide services to her, leading to an exacerbation in her condition.

Drug and alcohol use also served as barriers to service involvement. Young people referenced times where they missed appointments, had been stood-down from services, or were not able to take full advantage of services (not feeling present or listening) due to using drugs or alcohol. Many also took part in alcohol or drug counselling, as a requirement for participation in another programme, voluntarily, or due to someone else recommending they take part. Some participants, however, did not find counselling effective at curbing their substance use or drinking. Some reported that counselling or treatment exacerbated their substance abuse because the treatment approach did not meet their specific needs.

With regard to anger management, a few young people mentioned their anger/temper as impediments to service engagement. Some participants found it hard to relate to practitioners and even felt that interventions could trigger their anger or they had difficulties managing this during interventions. Josh was not allowed back to Work and Income due to a violent incident:

Work and Income don't really like to deal with me, coz I lost the plot when I was in [town], had a Work and Income chick there last time. That was actually probably last time I spoke to somebody at Work and Income. She bloody insulted me, so I lost it, bloody flipped the table up in front of her, and was like 'you want to say that again?' Escorted out, I'm never allowed ever allowed back in the [town] Work and Income again.

Family and peer influences as barriers to service engagement

A few young people talked about how their family were resistant to their service involvement. This took the form of family members

disagreeing with what counsellors said to the young people, particularly when the parents/family member's behaviour was called into question. This complicated young people's involvement in services due to them or their family members being sceptical of service motives. Some family members forced young people to take part in counselling services even when the young person was opposed to it or uncomfortable with participating. In one case, Kapariera described feeling forced into counselling and pressured from his dad to portray his situation and their relationship in a particular way. Because his dad felt threatened by social services, this caused tension between him and Kapariera and led to Kapariera's disengagement from services:

Kapariera I was thinking, 'I'm not crazy,' that's what I was saying, 'why am I here if I'm not crazy? Why do I need to talk to these people when I don't have to?' It felt like it was being forced upon me. And my dad was freaking out because he was like, 'answer their questions, hurry up, answer their questions or else they're going to send you to [statutory care and protection agency].' And when he said that, that even pissed me off even more, that just made me just resent them, so I didn't tell them jack - I didn't tell them nothing about me, what I was doing. Oh, except for like stoned, they got that picture when I went there coz I wanted to make a statement - but yeah - just my dad - like apparently they were threatening me, sending me to [the statutory care and protection agency] if I don't talk.

Interviewer Really?

Kapariera Yeah. They were threatening him and that just pissed me off coz that caused tension between me

and my dad and stuff like – he didn't want to be going through this shit and stuff, and they were like forcing it upon us and – yeah, just – fuck – it just pissed me off, it just made me angry.

Other young people spoke of family members being a barrier to young people's engagement with services. In one example, a participant attempted to get help for her and her brother who had been exposed to family violence for some time. Several family group conferences were held, but their mother continued to deny their claims of abuse and obstruct the process. In another case, a young woman tried to get help for her mother, only to have her mother reject any involvement in services.

Several participants mentioned problematic peer influences as barriers to their service involvement. In alternative education programmes, residential services, and prisons, for example, young people referred to the negative social networks within these services and organisations. These peer networks encouraged criminal activity, drinking and drug use, violence, or gang activity. Young people said that peer networks influenced their behaviour and that problematic peers interrupted their service engagement, and were disincentives to positive change. These influences were distractions that prevented them staying on track with interventions and goals. Many young people referenced the normalising and criminogenic effects of being in alternative education, prison, or residential settings; that is, being around other young people with similar backgrounds of criminal activity or drug use, and sharing common experiences served to normalise the behaviour and even enabled further criminal activity:

Interviewer And also I remember you mentioned that there were some students [in alternative education]

there that weren't such a good influence?

Ria Like, all of them! Even at [youth agency] – there was a lot of bad influences, there is everywhere, and I've learnt how to – not really learnt how to move away from them yet –

Interviewer Yeah, getting there?

Ria Yeah coz they relate to me well, people that have been trouble relate to me a lot better than anyone else – so yeah, I do tend to hang around them sometimes. Like the smokers, we all hang out together.

As Ria reflects above, she found that she fitted in with the other youth at her alternative education programme but that they were a bad influence on her. She insightfully pointed out that young people from similar backgrounds, who have used drugs or who have been in trouble, tended to gravitate toward each other because of shared histories and experiences. Her story brings up an important task for services: how to foster connections between young people with challenging pasts in a way that promotes growth rather than creating opportunities for young people to revert back to troubled behaviours.

Relationships with service providers

The positive impact that strong relationships with services and practitioners could have on outcomes was explored in the earlier section on factors that facilitate positive service engagement. However, young people also referenced their relationships with service providers as barriers to service engagement and positive outcomes. When behaviours or relationships were problematic or detrimental, they impeded the young person's engagement with services and their perception of service providers. Problematic relationships took the form of providers being dishonest or hard to trust, being judgemental, and being insensitive or disrespectful.

In several instances, participants referred to service providers as untrustworthy. A lack of trust was typically experienced as service providers breaking confidences or disclosing matters that they had agreed to keep confidential. Young people also referenced lack of trust when service providers did not follow through on their promises or abruptly dropped out of the young person's life. As Kirihitiana describes below:

Kirihitiana I'm supposed to be doing counselling for that stuff I talked to you about. But I've had two counsellors so far and none of them kept their word, so I told them that I don't want to see them again. So I just stopped seeing them.

Interviewer And when you say 'kept to their word,' what do you mean?

Kirihitiana They'll tell me when they will come visit me 'oh yeah, I'll come to you next week or the week after that.' And I'll be like 'ok.' And then next week will come then the week after that will come and then I just go 'nuh, don't wanna see yous, you can't keep your word, can't stick to something so simple like, why would you even say something like that if you're not even gonna turn up?' So I just told them 'nuh, don't come at all, I don't wanna see yous anymore. You just broke my trust, you know.' Coz I've had quite a lot of people break my trust and I just don't want anything to do with them.

Many young people referenced experiences with service providers where they felt that the practitioner did not believe them. This sometimes led to practitioners then making service decisions that went against the young person's best interest, such as sending them back to a placement where the young person did not feel safe.

Maraea remembers feeling ignored and treated with scepticism by authorities when she told the police about the physical abuse she and her foster siblings were experiencing. She insightfully reflected on how the stigma of foster care children influences the response of service providers and the police. Furthermore, the negative connotations associated with the label “foster child” stretched beyond young people’s treatment in services to their broader status and role in the community:

Well yeah, the whole stigma of foster children is that we are liars and manipulators and will do anything for attention, and that’s just how it goes. It’s just what we got over our heads. You ring police and you tell them something and they don’t listen because you’re a foster child. Like, when [foster father] hit us once, I went out to the front house and called the cops and the cops came and then [foster father] came in and he was talking bullshit and they believed him...

Some participants also mentioned feeling blamed for their situations. Rather than approaching the young person with compassion for their situation, young people felt targeted and made to feel like they were the problem. In these instances, practitioners would focus on the young person’s drinking or bad behaviour; for example, as an explanation for the challenges the young person (and their family) were experiencing rather than seeing the behaviour as a way of coping with larger difficulties in their life more generally.

Poor relationships with practitioners also took the form of young people feeling stereotyped or judged. Young people felt that service providers often had preconceived notions about them due to their histories, which led to practitioners being insensitive to their needs or not invested in their treatment. Participants felt judged for their past and that the practitioners had no faith in them; they felt practitioners

assumed they would mess up again or never get on the right path. Many participants also felt discrimination and racism from service providers, making them further sceptical and resentful of services.

Poor communication and lack of transparency

Young people frequently expressed frustration with the way that organisations and practitioners communicated with them. This included practitioners being hard to get in touch with, insufficient follow-up or ongoing support, a lack of transparency with young people regarding their placements or changes in their lives, and an overall lack of respect by practitioners.

Many young people discussed ineffective communication by their service practitioners. It was common for service providers not to follow up after meetings with the young people, often leading to services coming to a halt or being delayed. Alternatively, when young people needed to complete a requirement in order to receive services, providers sometimes did not provide enough detail or communication with the youth about what was required of them. For Heeni, this lack of communication arose while she was trying to complete her community service sentence. As shown below, her practitioner was ambiguous and unhelpful, leaving Heeni to have to sort out the details on her own:

Yeah, that was difficult, yeah, I didn't really like my social worker there, [name of social worker] or something, she wasn't that great, she dropped me off somewhere and I didn't even know what I was doing, I didn't even know where to walk to, to go to talk to somebody, like she will go 'here' and I would go 'so where am I going?' She's going, 'somewhere around there.'

Several young people mentioned changes in placements as a major issue; for example, transitioning out of foster care, and receiving little

or confusing communication from the statutory care and protection agency which meant they were inadequately prepared for these moves. A few young people mentioned never being told why their adoption fell through. When they were moved around placements young people wanted the statutory care and protection agency to be clear about why they were being moved and they wanted to receive more information about their new placement prior to the placement change. Young people described an already intense sense of uncertainty when moving placements, which was often compounded by the statutory care and protection agency giving no or little support and assurances about their new placements or providing support throughout the transition. Tini shared her experiences of switching placements; she said she had little communication about where she was going or why:

They told me, [the statutory care and protection agency] tend to tell you at the last minute ok so, I heard that I was coming here, didn't know anything about the company, neither did they, so they said that's why they couldn't tell me anything about this place until I actually got here, it was pretty hard because one minute you're like excited and everything and then next minute they're just like, 'well we don't know anything about them yet and we haven't met them yet and blah blah blah.'

Moving geographical locations also brought challenges for young people. Moving to a different city was often made more difficult by the interruption or discontinuation of services. While young people might have been referred to an organisation or practitioner in their new town, they often found it difficult to actually get in touch with them or become established with a new service provider. When asked about his transition to a new town, Sam described the challenges in getting in touch and setting up with a new service provider:

Oh my god, that's what we struggled with I was meant to get a social worker in the [nearby] office and they ended up giving me one in the [a different] office who I never got to meet, nothing happened up here they were, the social workers out [the different office] are meant to come in here, and help me get on with my other interviews in the youth benefit or apply for jobs and then they were meant to come out and take me out there to do it. They never came, I rang and I rang and I rang her, I rung and I rung and I rung [social worker's name] and then I rung WINZ and said 'can you get hold of someone in the office and get someone out here?' Coz I had been doing nothing then. So I pretty much got myself sorted and got my own job. Transitioning from areas to another area it's hard because offices don't communicate, oh they are bad, oh I wish I had a stayed down there and done it all down there.

This lack of communication and support with young people can exacerbate challenges and undermine young people's sense of agency, especially during times of transition. When young people are not involved in service decisions and/or are subsequently uninformed about what is happening with their care, services, or benefits, it contributes to an overall sense that they cannot control what happens to them. Young people feel disempowered and dispirited, and feel as if they have no control or input into their service experiences and lives more broadly. This often resulted in the young people taking matters into their own hands by exiting services prematurely and working out for themselves how to solve the problems they confronted.

Unsupportive or harmful service decisions

Young people often referred to experiences with services that went against what the youth wanted or what they thought was best for themselves. Sometimes they felt unsafe or unsupported. Many young

people described their placements as physically endangering them; they either were threatened with violence or were victimised. In some cases, young people described living in such poor conditions that they were not adequately taken care of; for example, not having enough food was a common experience among the youth in this study. In describing his negative experiences, Hakena described the poor, sometimes violent treatment from caregivers:

Interviewer And looking back over the course of your life, how would you rate to [the statutory care and protection agency]?

Hakena Quite useless, to be honest, very useless. Like they're supposed to be putting you in a safe environment and you're getting into an environment with other dangerous kids, who've had worse – who've have had bad lives, putting you with families that they didn't even know, paid them to look after you, the caregivers still beat you and everything, that what goes on behind closed doors is completely like they can be all honest and act all innocent but they're not, they're quite nasty to the kids.

Other young people expressed disagreement with their service/treatment decisions. One young person recounted her time in drug and alcohol counselling as especially problematic. She felt the treatment was over-focused on her alcohol consumption rather than paying attention to other things, positive and negative, that were going on in her life. She appreciated and thrived in a more holistic treatment setting that was not overly prescriptive or punishing.

In the account below, Hariata describes being placed with her father despite his heavy drinking and violent history. While she remembered

that her mum was background checked, the same precautions were not taken with her dad:

But it's like, I ended up overdosing again cause I was like, I was scared, I didn't want to live there anymore. The [statutory care and protection organisation] wouldn't listen, it was like 'I don't want to live there' and then they go, 'you're gonna have to, you can't stay at your mum's,' and it was like 'fine!' and then I got to a point where dad was drunk the whole time and I wasn't feeling safe and I was like, no, 'f this'.

After being taken to the hospital for overdosing, Hariata recalled how the statutory care and protection agency wanted to send her back to live with her dad. A mental health worker ended up intervening, arguing that she should not be sent back to such an unsafe home. If it were not for this advocacy, Hariata may have been sent back to an unsafe, threatening living situation despite her numerous attempts to convey the danger of the situation to her service providers.

Young people's resistance to involvement in services

Many young people did not want to become involved with services because they wanted to do it themselves without support. There was a recurring theme of independence and a strong desire for self-sufficiency noted by the young people. This independence was often why they refused services, ran away, or even resented service involvement. They felt they had, of necessity, learned from a young age how to take care of themselves and often found that interventions disrupted the delicate balance they had achieved in managing the challenges they faced. For many young people it was a risk to become engaged in services as they had experience of services letting them down and not being able to provide consistent support. When services let them down young people had to “start again” and re-establish their own coping mechanisms. In discussing his transition

from foster care back to living with family, Natana denied services, stating he was happy to do it himself. In the account below, Natana describes his desire to take care of himself:

Natana It was, it was a hard change.

Interviewer Why was it hard [Natana]?

Natana It was a bit hard, harsh, but it was alright after that. I just, took it on the chin I guess.

Interviewer Was there anyone supporting you through that change?

Natana Nah, no-one was supporting me on that change. It was just me, I was just, like [the statutory care and protection agency] were going to support me on it, but I just told them I'll be alright, I'll support myself.

Interviewer How come you didn't want their support?

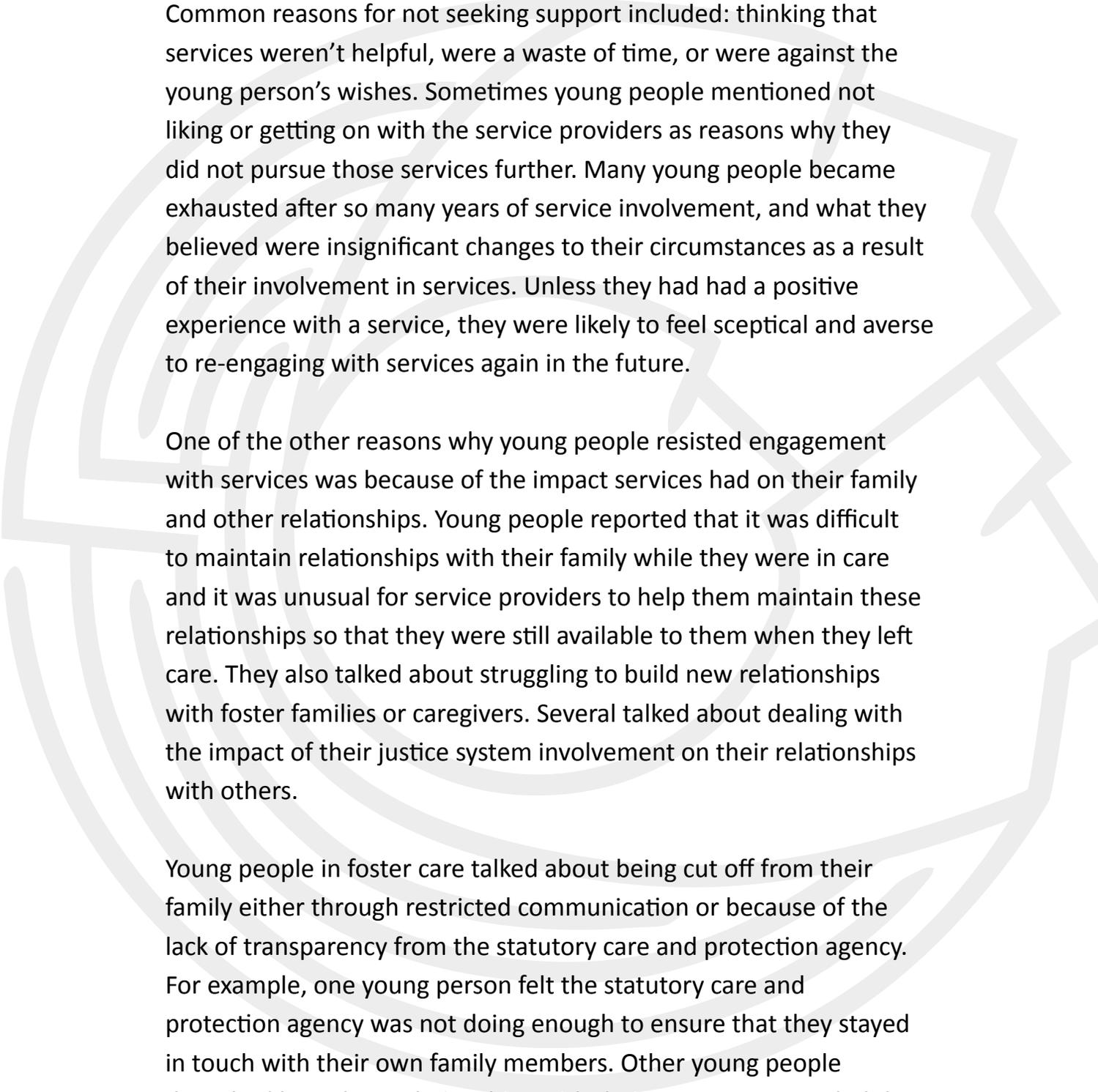
Natana I sort of just wanted to do it by myself.

Interviewer Ok. Do you feel like you would have liked any more support or were you quite happy to do it by yourself?

Natana I was quite happy to do it by myself.

Some young people referred to this desire for independence as a barrier because it led to their being stubborn about receiving services, taking services for granted, and not getting as much out of them as they could. However, equally, this independence was also often a by-product of their experiences of services being unreliable, not listening to them and making decisions without taking into account the young person's views and own coping mechanisms.

The quest for independence and aversion to services came from historic disappointments and frustrations with the systems of care designed to provide young people with support. Young people came



to rely on themselves, their families, and other supports, because past experiences with services were not helpful or beneficial. Common reasons for not seeking support included: thinking that services weren't helpful, were a waste of time, or were against the young person's wishes. Sometimes young people mentioned not liking or getting on with the service providers as reasons why they did not pursue those services further. Many young people became exhausted after so many years of service involvement, and what they believed were insignificant changes to their circumstances as a result of their involvement in services. Unless they had had a positive experience with a service, they were likely to feel sceptical and averse to re-engaging with services again in the future.

One of the other reasons why young people resisted engagement with services was because of the impact services had on their family and other relationships. Young people reported that it was difficult to maintain relationships with their family while they were in care and it was unusual for service providers to help them maintain these relationships so that they were still available to them when they left care. They also talked about struggling to build new relationships with foster families or caregivers. Several talked about dealing with the impact of their justice system involvement on their relationships with others.

Young people in foster care talked about being cut off from their family either through restricted communication or because of the lack of transparency from the statutory care and protection agency. For example, one young person felt the statutory care and protection agency was not doing enough to ensure that they stayed in touch with their own family members. Other young people described how their relationships with their caregivers impeded their relationships with other family members. Bethany describes below how her caregivers often expressed judgement toward her family or

imposed certain values that made it hard for her to appreciate spending time with her biological family:

Bethany [...] it has kinda challenged our relationship when I got put into families that didn't approve of mum, so in a way it made me hate her and see her in a different light and I used to not want to go and visit, I used to just tell [name of young person's sister, who was also in care] to tell them I was sick, coz of what my caregivers were saying.

Interviewer A bit judgemental?

Bethany Very judgemental, um I guess that rubbed off on me because I was so young.

Experiences such as Bethany's, made it difficult for young people to fully engage with foster families and to take full advantage of the resources and support they could provide.

Involvement with the youth justice system also presented challenges in terms of maintaining relationships with others outside the service system. Young people sentenced to a youth justice facility (this was usually in another town) generally had little contact with their family. Many of these young people spoke of the impact of this and how it made it difficult for them to engage in the programmes at the facility because they missed the connection with their family and friends. There were several barriers to maintaining these connections while in prison, including high costs to make phone calls or costs for the family to visit the young person.

What Bethany's story and the testimonies of other young people illustrate is the importance of services preserving contact with biological family members and other supportive individuals, where appropriate, while promoting the development of new, positive

connections with caregivers and practitioners. Young people thrive when there are numerous and varied support systems activated around them including relationships with parents, caregivers, service providers, and other supportive adults or family (Ungar et al. 2015).

Cultural and spiritual sensitivity

A few young people mentioned cultural and spiritual needs as barriers to services. In one case, a young person was allowed to attend only one day of his grandfather's tangi (funeral). Despite being very close with his grandfather and wanting to be there, he was not allowed to attend all three days. In other cases, a few young people mentioned their service providers being judgemental and clashing with their spiritual beliefs or hopes for treatment and services:

I think I went through this one last time...when I first started seeing the counsellor at [youth organization] I was worried about that schizophrenic [issue] coz I was going through a lot of mental issues having hallucinations a whole bunch of problems. So she ended up referring me on to Maori Mental Health system coz she felt that the approach would be better for me coz of my spirituality they would approach it differently. I absolutely hated it, I felt like I was being treated like a druggie because she was pretty much, 'you're just here for drugs,' and I was just like 'can you please read my file again' And she was like 'what do you mean?' 'It says on my referral I don't want drugs, I want help in a holistic way like painting or colour therapy or something else but I want a way to work through this,' and I was treated like a druggie.

As Polly describes above, she sought holistic treatment for mental health issues and drug use but encountered resistance and discrimination from her counsellor.

Loss of agency

Many young people expressed feeling a loss of agency or disempowerment when involved with the justice system or with care and protection services. Loss of agency took the form of young people feeling left out of the decision-making process, feeling pressured into certain services or programmes, not understanding what was going on or what will happen to/for/with them, and feeling mis- or under-informed about changes in their situations. Additionally, young people commonly felt controlled by service providers, expressing a feeling of loss of control once in custody, in justice-related as well as care and protection services. Isiah recalled being moved around to several different placements often without warning or preparation and this made him feel like he had little control over his life:

Interviewer So in terms of some of those decisions like, moving to all these different homes, and then moving from [town] to [town], how were you involved in those decisions? How did they come about?

Isiah Oh, I didn't. I would just come home one day and get told I need to go to the next home, go to the next home, go to the next home, go to the next home and then I just got told, they didn't really have much homes left down there so they just moved me up here and I then just lived here.

In addition to young people feeling as if they had no control of or influence over their service decisions, they also expressed frustration with service providers who thought they knew what was best for the young people. Some participants recalled experiences where they communicated certain needs or wants, which were disregarded and ignored by service providers, and this contributed to a lack of agency and autonomy.

The next section explores the impact of services on young people's education, employment and transition experiences.

The Impact of Services on Education, Employment and Transitions

In addition to the factors that facilitated and challenged positive engagement with services, young people also detailed the specific impacts of services on education pathways, employment, and transitions. This section will extend the discussion on engagement with services and explore the relationships between services, education, employment, and transitions.

The Impact of Services on Education Pathways

Young people discussed how services impacted on their education pathways³. They talked about how services facilitated educational engagement, their experiences of alternative education as providing them with a second chance at education, challenges with alternative education, services as a barrier to education, and recommendations and insights into educational practices.

Services facilitation of educational engagement

Several young people discussed getting involved with a course or education programme because of their involvement with other service providers. For example, family group conferences (FGCs), the involvement of the statutory care and protection agency, and Work and Income were all mentioned as services that helped (or required) a young person to start a course. Even in instances where young

³ (For more detail on young people's educational experiences including their experiences of alternative education, see *Navigating the Education System* (Technical Report 8) from [http://youthsay.co.nz/massey/fms/Resilience/Documents/Navigating the Education System.pdf](http://youthsay.co.nz/massey/fms/Resilience/Documents/Navigating%20the%20Education%20System.pdf))

people were initially reluctant to start a course, many still ended up appreciating these experiences.

Young people also reported that services encouraged or enabled continued engagement with education. A young person who received the Independent Youth Benefit (IYB) said that the continued support from her Work and Income case manager helped her finish high school. For other young people, these crucial supports and motivators were their counsellors and probation officers. Some young people with learning difficulties or disabilities also mentioned positive service experiences in education where they received individualised, targeted assistance. This ranged from adapting teaching styles to better suit the student's needs (visual vs auditory learner), arranging for a reader/writer for exams, or helping the student understand their learning disability and developing strategies for finding work.

A few young people also referenced opportunities to participate in community activities while involved with alternative education. These experiences served to develop participants' leadership skills and build their self-esteem. Specific activities young people described under this theme were: learning how to ride, care for and groom horses, Pacific Islander cultural education, and performing arts programmes. While involvement with youth justice may interrupt services several young people also discussed being connected with educational programmes while in prison, youth justice facilities, or rehabilitation programmes. Participants were able to continue to work toward their NCEA/NZQA school examinations as well as achieve certificates in other trades like scaffolding and catering. Some young people were extremely grateful for the educational opportunities provided while in youth justice care; they felt they would not have had access to such opportunities outside of these programmes.

Alternative education as a second chance

Many young people talked about how their experience in alternative education programmes was a second chance for them to engage in education. Young people who were excluded from mainstream education settings often found new opportunities in alternative education programmes. These young people had disrupted education experiences. Rahiri described his journey into alternative education stating that if his case worker had not advocated on his behalf and found a place for him in an alternative education programme, he feared he would have had to resort back to crime to survive:

Yeah. He was – he was - the man! He's the best, he did so much, I can't thank him enough. Like he started me, like I knew what I wanted to do but I just didn't know how to get there – and when – like he applied for me to go back to school, and no school in Auckland wanted me, not even the schools I didn't really want, and he got me back into [name of high school] and enrolled me for the service academy coz I wasn't old enough and yeah – it was all thanks to him. Like, I lost track, and then I was thinking, in the holidays, Christmas holidays just gone, I was thinking to myself what was I going to do now. And then, the school called me up and asked me if I wanted to be in the service academy – and then I asked them who applied me for it and then they said, 'oh, your youth worker called [name of practitioner]' and I was like, 'oh, thank you so much,' coz honestly that week, I was thinking what was I going to do. Was I going to be a drug dealer or something? Was I going to go steal cars or something like that? But I knew what I really wanted to do was to be in the army, that's what I really wanted to do. I was just lost for a bit.

Young people found new connections and a sense of belonging in these programmes. They expressed feeling accepted by their peers in

alternative education programmes because they came from similar backgrounds and experienced many of the same struggles. Young people felt more comfortable in alternative education settings as well as a sense of camaraderie with the other students because of the small class sizes, more relaxed environment and greater acceptance from teachers. Many young people mentioned that some of the alternative education practitioners came from similar backgrounds as the young people. They felt that this fostered positive experiences because the practitioner was more understanding of their struggles and even shared some of their own journey with the students.

Challenges with alternative education

Despite the many successes and positive elements of alternative education shared by participants, there were also concerns and challenges. Although many young people felt connected to and accepted by their peers in alternative education, they also provided insights into the normalisation of bad behaviour that was present in this educational environment. Participants talked about being in class with other students who drank, used drugs, and engaged in criminal behaviour. They talked about how these young people encouraged other young people to take part in this behaviour. One participant expressed particular concern about alternative education “elevating” bad behaviour, meaning they saw other students engaging in increasingly more criminal, dangerous, or destructive behaviours because of the negative peer influence.

Young people talked about how they and other people perceived alternative education. Participants expressed grappling with shame and embarrassment for going to alternative education, particularly with regard to how they thought it might influence upon others’ perception of their intelligence or ability to succeed. There were also comparisons of alternative education with mainstream

education where some young people stated that the alternative education experience was inferior to mainstream education. One participant went so far as to say that alternative education was not “real school”. As Eruini reflects below, although young people did well in alternative education, they often questioned their success and intelligence because they thought the school was too easy. In fact, they had come to expect that they would not do well in a mainstream school setting:

Interviewer And you wished there was more study?

Eruini No, not more study – more things that help us get back into school, because they said if I completed that year’s course I would be able to get back into school, but the work they were doing, it didn’t look like it was going to get me back into intermediate school...Hell – like I never gave like a test, never in my life I’ve had a whole 100% and in that thing I got all of them 100%. Like man! I’ve never had more than 50.

Connected to this young person’s feelings about not being challenged enough in education is their concern with how this could impact upon their transition back into mainstream education. Since they had historically done poorly in school, they felt sceptical that their good grades in alternative education meant they were ready or could succeed in mainstream settings. They advocated for more focused planning for transitioning back into mainstream school settings.

Services as a barrier to education

Although many young people spoke of service involvement as facilitative of educational engagement, there were also accounts from participants where their service involvement did not lead to meaningful educational engagement. Young people spoke of not

finishing a course that they were enrolled in or encouraged to attend by the service. Reasons for not finishing included not liking the course and not continuing the course after the required period (that is, participating in courses as part of Work and Income or other services). One young person expressed particular frustration with their counsellor for enrolling him in a course without consulting him first; he subsequently failed the course.

In addition, participants mentioned services actually impeding their participation in certain educational programmes. Transitioning into and out of placements, such as foster homes, youth justice facilities or other residential homes, meant young people's educational plans were often interrupted and were sometimes discontinued. For instance, when one young person transitioned into a youth justice facility, he could not continue a course he enjoyed. Another young person reflected on her instability of placements, talking about how she knew moving around so much was bad for her schooling. She described feeling emotionally upset throughout these transitions, which was compounded by changes in school settings. She was grateful for her service experience with a residential programme since they respected her wish to remain with her caregiver and not have to switch schools again. In the excerpt below, Thomas details the long-term consequences of instability in placements on educational pathways, he was not able to attend school on a consistent basis and consequently fell behind:

Thomas Um, so yeah [the statutory care and protection agency] kept moving me around to different caregivers. So I take a month off course/school every time I change caregiver. And, quite often I ended up having three months off course because it would be school holidays or something like that. So I mean over the last four years I've probably only

been to school three quarters of the year. I mean, yeah that's about it really.

Interviewer So while [the statutory care and protection agency] were moving you, you had time off school –

Thomas Yeah, coz they were all like you're still unsettled we don't want you going into school causing trouble.

While instability in placements posed a risk to educational engagement, so too did inadequate financial resources from services. Some young people felt insufficiently supported by services while trying to attend school. Young people said that issues with their student allowances or independent youth benefits (IYBs) and unstable financial situations meant that they did not have enough to live on and this compromised their engagement in education programmes.

Studylink (a service provided by Work and Income that provided financial support for tertiary study) was also commonly referenced when young people discussed the barriers to educational engagement. Themes included: inadequate financial support, ineffective communication, student debt, and problems with the way Studylink was organised leading to confusion about when applications had been approved, amounts approved and where the young person's application was up to in the Studylink process. Several participants felt that their stipend did not cover their living costs in a way that allowed them to meaningfully engage in education. As students, they still struggled with transportation to class as well as with being able to afford food and accommodation. The stress of being financially strained was often listed as a reason for why students became disengaged with school and other education programmes.

Recommendations and insights into educational practices

Throughout their reflections on how service involvement impacted upon their educational pathways, young people also shared recommendations and insights into what made their educational experiences (typically alternative education) more fulfilling and productive or challenging and detrimental to their wellbeing.

Several young people mentioned smaller class sizes and more one-on-one help as particularly advantageous in alternative education. Participants appreciated smaller class sizes as it allowed for more attention and contact with the teachers and a more targeted curriculum that met the specific needs of students. The smaller class size also created more camaraderie and closeness among students since teachers could more easily facilitate group activities and relationship building. As Thora reflected, her class size was one of the most facilitative factors of educational engagement while in alternative education:

It's definitely just the smaller class, you know, and there's two teachers there to help you and it's just, there's only like 10 of you, and you just chuck up your hand and they're there, it's more easy than in a class of 23, you know, and there's everybody sticking their hand up before you and you're too embarrassed to say something, coz everybody else in that class was not so on to it at schooling, as you were, and it was more comfortable and, I think just especially [name of tutors] just could teach in a different way, eh? They – like they're real open minded and a bit more hands on and they explain things easier and – yeah – I just wish I'd gotten to them earlier or something, and got my Level 1.

Connected to the smaller class sizes was one-on-one teaching support. Several young people expressed gratitude for receiving such targeted, individualised support while in alternative education. It

allowed for more hands-on instruction as well as an opportunity to tailor the assignments or subjects to better suit the student's learning style or interests. One alternative education programme even set aside a day for each student where they worked one-on-one with a tutor. However, even so, there were still participants who wished they could have had more one-on-one teaching time.

Young people identified other factors that facilitated young people's learning and engagement in alternative education programmes. These factors related broadly to the way young people were treated. Young people discussed positive experiences with education that were associated with practitioners' understanding of their cultural backgrounds and the challenges they were facing. Educational service delivery was beneficial when teachers were less punitive, more adaptable, and incorporated a variety of life and leadership skills into the curriculum. Connected to this were the accounts of some young people who really enjoyed the inclusion of recreational activities and field trips. Participants appreciated these opportunities to get out of the classroom setting as well as to take part in activities they might not have been able to do otherwise; for example, going to the beach, theme parks, or playing sports.

The Impact of Services on Employment

The following section explores the impact of services on employment. Specifically, we look at how services helped or hindered young people to find employment, as well as who offered advice or resources to help the young person find a sense of direction regarding work and career pathways (for a more detailed analysis of young people's experiences with employment, see the Technical Report: *Precarious Employment Experiences and Uncertain Futures* at www.youthsay.co.nz).

Services facilitation of employment and work experience

Young people frequently spoke of the role of services and practitioners in helping them find employment, volunteer work, or work experience. Included in these comments were references to services that facilitated participants' career plans, job seeking, or work ethic, helping them with their CV and other employment related support. The services and practitioners that helped facilitate engagement with employment were: alternative education programmes, caregivers, residential programmes, youth agencies, community agencies, and Work and Income.

Participants shared experiences of working with service practitioners who were helpful in assisting them to not only find work but to find work that they were interested in and contributed to their career goals. Services spent time with young people teaching them how to make (or improve) a CV, how to look for jobs, and find clothing for job interviews and work. A few young people even considered their service practitioners as career role models, inspiring them to consider becoming counsellors, social workers, or to work with young people. Many young people who spent time in prison, youth justice, or residential programmes, also referenced positive experiences with vocational training and education. Specific training opportunities included hospitality work in the kitchen of the facility, painting, horticulture and maintaining the grounds of the prison, catering courses, and welding courses.

Barriers to employment

While many young people found services to be facilitative of their engagement with employment, there were also several accounts of services being a barrier to employment. Young people referenced experiences with services not adequately supporting them to find employment as well as experiences where service involvement interfered or conflicted with the young person's job or career goals.

Barriers included service level issues as well as individual level factors that interrupted opportunities for employment.

Service level barriers included: practitioners not being helpful in finding a job, taking too long to provide support, lack of follow-up, and strict or counterproductive programme requirements. For example, one young person contacted a service organisation hoping for advice on job searching and training. He felt pressured to go on the benefit in order to receive advice and training. However, because he did not meet the criteria for job seeking, he was subsequently stood-down and transitioned onto a course. In the account below, Waka describes the lack of follow-through from services offering or committing to providing support for job seeking:

Yeah, well all of us [referring to all those present at the FGC]. . . I told them and they go, 'yeah we can work on it . . .' coz its whatever I want to work on. And they just agree with it. And they agreed with it, but it never got worked on. Yeah. They said, 'we will hook you up with Burger King' and then it just got dropped after that. The conversation - we didn't talk about it again.

Individual level barriers to employment included: mental health issues, having a criminal record, and more generally struggling to balance employment with other things going on in a young person's life. Some young people with mental health issues expressed particular challenges in job seeking due to the need to maintain positive mental health alongside the demands of employment. One young person felt that her anxiety and bipolar disorder were a barrier to employment and did not find the techniques her counsellor provided effective in managing her anxiety while looking for work. Another young person said that Work and Income did not understand that he needed to get help for his depression before he

was available to seek work.

Transitions and Services

Throughout their lives, young people in the study had numerous experiences of transitioning into and out of services. The following section details these transitions and how services impacted upon the transition experience. Examples of transitions include: into and out of foster homes, moving schools, moving between mental health services, moving in and out of youth justice facilities, and moving between services.

The impact of services and interventions on transitions

Young people gave many examples of how services had both impeded and supported their transitions.

Frequent themes within the narratives on transitions where services were non-facilitative included: delayed or disrupted transitions into or out of care, abrupt transitions out of care, frequent transitions, placements that were bad or 'wrong,' and inadequate support during transitions. Young people shared experiences with services where support was inconsistent and inadequate, often forcing the young person to have to deal with the situation on their own. In terms of aging out of care, several young people mentioned feeling pushed out of care once they reached a certain age. They felt unprepared for the transition, and the sudden withdrawal of support and financial resources were experienced as a significant shock even when they knew this was coming. Frankie reflected that it was quite difficult to adjust to independent living after having her supports suddenly removed and life circumstances altered:

Yeah, well that's kinda annoying coz you get all this time to have all this stuff and then as soon as you turn 18, they're like, 'find a

job, do this' and you're like, 'what, but I can't' and it's just like, it's just, it's really hard, as soon as you turn 18 and you're in [care] it just goes downhill, coz all this time you had your support and now it's like, 'find a job, get out there, do it yourself'.

Coupled with the strain of an abrupt transition was a lack of preparation for the change. Some young people felt they had no training or adequate preparation for living life on their own. They did not know how to look for a job, find accommodation, set up benefits or fill out forms. A few young people expressed resentment towards service providers because they did not provide enough preparation for transition nor support throughout it, leaving young people to sort it out on their own, some being able to do so more successfully than others.

Some young people also shared accounts of services putting them in placements that they considered dangerous, harmful, or not in the young person's best interest. Recall how Hariata, mentioned in the "Unsupportive or Harmful Service Decisions" section, was placed into the care of her alcoholic father, which she considered unsafe and stressful. Another participant was subject to neglect and physical abuse by caregivers. There were also experiences of being placed into a residence when young people felt it would have been better for them to be placed with their parents or family.

Frequent transitions in care were also discussed as negative impacts of service involvement and intervention. Young people described transitioning into and out of homes or care as a particularly unstable, challenging process. As Bethany recalls, even when young people were told by services that they would be in a placement long-term, they would often still be moved after a short period:

Challenging bits [about being in care] would be the fact that you

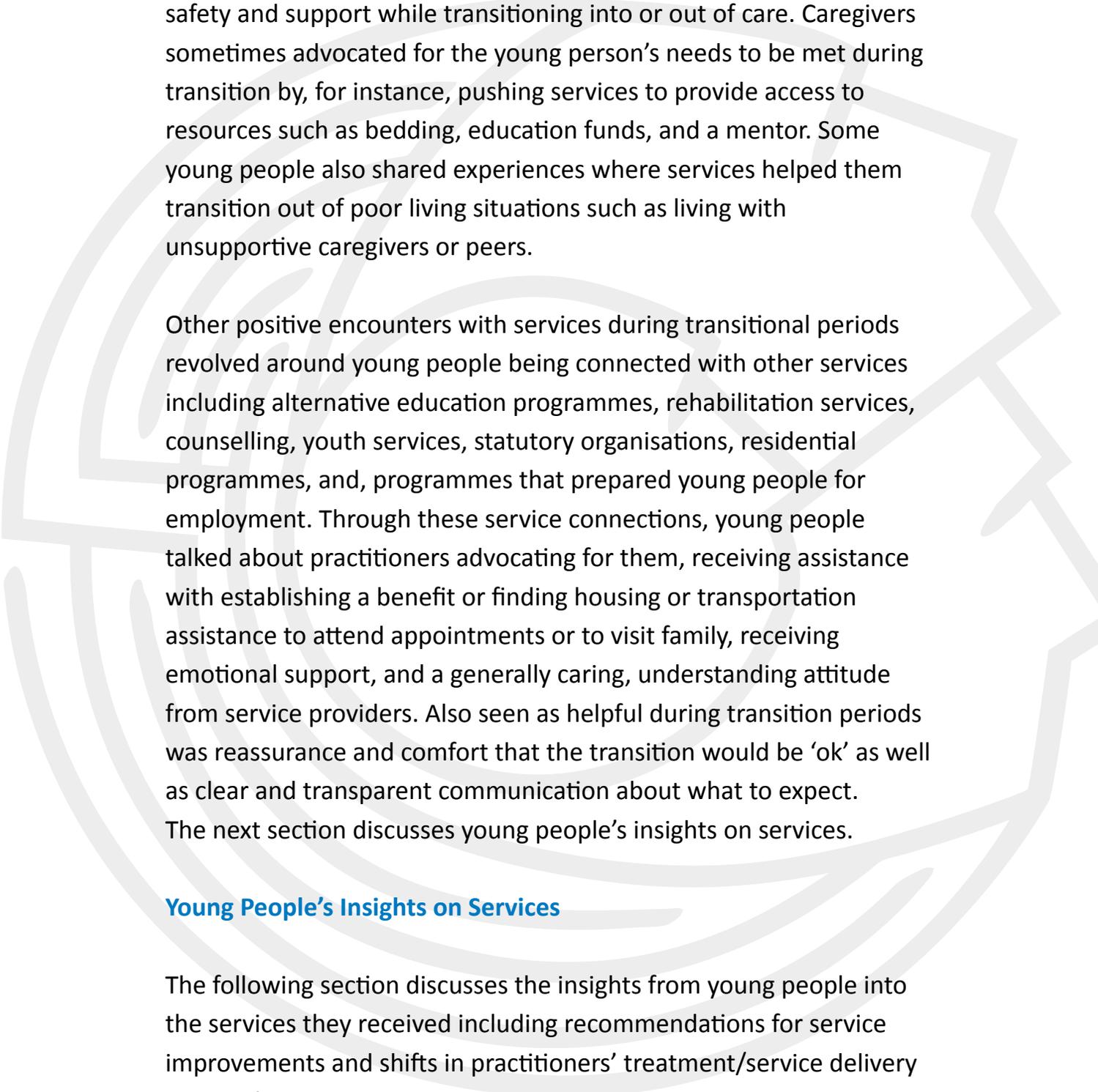
get passed on to so many different people and that you have to just, like they say you are gonna be there for ages but then it would be like two months later and it would just not be going well and then it is the fact that you are not with your own parents.

These frequent transitions often resulted in young people not trusting services, feeling there was a lack of communication regarding their care. In addition, it made it hard for young people to maintain contact with their families and develop new relationships.

Many young people identified having a criminal record, as a barrier during transitions. Barriers typically related to employment prospects—being turned down because of a criminal history—but also included restrictions to job seeking relating to conditions of bail, being on home detention or probation.

In contrast to the experiences shared above where young people found services unhelpful or non-facilitative during their transitions, there were also accounts of services being supportive and having a positive influence on the participants. Transitions into youth justice, for example, were considered to be a positive change by some young people. More specifically, some young people talked about these transitions as facilitative of a new beginning or a new stage in their life where they could get back on track, be removed from negative influences or peer pressure, and take courses or engage in job training. Other positive transition experiences, involving transitioning out of the justice system or into supported living, were also said to provide a sense of freedom since the young person either was cleared of their criminal record or was assisted to live on their own.

Young people frequently spoke of relationships being facilitative of



transitions. Specifically, they referenced caregivers with whom they felt close and connected. These relationships created a sense of safety and support while transitioning into or out of care. Caregivers sometimes advocated for the young person's needs to be met during transition by, for instance, pushing services to provide access to resources such as bedding, education funds, and a mentor. Some young people also shared experiences where services helped them transition out of poor living situations such as living with unsupportive caregivers or peers.

Other positive encounters with services during transitional periods revolved around young people being connected with other services including alternative education programmes, rehabilitation services, counselling, youth services, statutory organisations, residential programmes, and, programmes that prepared young people for employment. Through these service connections, young people talked about practitioners advocating for them, receiving assistance with establishing a benefit or finding housing or transportation assistance to attend appointments or to visit family, receiving emotional support, and a generally caring, understanding attitude from service providers. Also seen as helpful during transition periods was reassurance and comfort that the transition would be 'ok' as well as clear and transparent communication about what to expect. The next section discusses young people's insights on services.

Young People's Insights on Services

The following section discusses the insights from young people into the services they received including recommendations for service improvements and shifts in practitioners' treatment/service delivery approaches.

Service Improvements

Young people identified several areas for improvement in service delivery, including more high-level policy and system change recommendations to better support young people in services.

Many young people stated that the timing of service interventions and support could have been better and many wanted services to spend more time with them or be more sensitive to their needs. The need for early intervention was a common theme within young people's recommendations for improvement to services. Several young people detailed challenging times where they felt services could have intervened sooner or where they had overlooked signs that the young person needed help. Inconsistent or non-attendance at school as well as initial signs of offending (for example, shoplifting or stealing) were listed as indicators that the young person was going through a hard time and needed service support. Several young people also noted times when they explicitly told professionals that they were exposed to abuse only to have services do nothing. Clearly, in these instances of trauma, young people recommended that services be more responsive and supportive. As Ria reflects below, her claims of abuse were not taken seriously and, in fact, were said to be normal by police and practitioners. She recalls being blamed for 'taking a hiding'—for her attitude and behaviour problems:

I was just getting angrier and angrier at them and reacting the worst way I could have ever reacted, but just nobody was there for me. I felt like- a lot of kids don't say anything because – because nobody really does want to listen, they listen and – yeah, they understand where they're coming from, they feel sorry for them, they say, 'are you all right, are you sure?' But really they've got their whole lives to deal with, and everybody has problems and other issues in their life to deal with, other

than little things. You might see it as a little thing, like getting a growling, but then again it does go to verbal abuse and physical abuse and mental abuse. Mental abuse is one of the worst that I've noticed and – so many New Zealand families – so many, it's horrible.

Young people commented that the service range of some programmes could be extended. For example, this included having more service centres, such as educational or outreach organisations where courses were also offered. Some young people found it difficult to get to the existing service centres (such as Work and Income) as they were located out of their area. Participants also expressed a need for more transportation assistance, both to and from service appointments and more generally in their day-to-day lives. One young person explained that it would be easier to keep up with service appointments if transportation were arranged for them. Some young people also found it difficult to get an emergency appointment at a time of crisis. With regard to mental health services, some young people identified the need for more financial support to continue with counselling, as well as improved mental health facilities. Since trauma and emotional development were experienced over time, young people felt it would be beneficial to have more long-term access to counselling services in order to continue to process their life experiences. Frankie's experience below highlights this need for consistent, extended counselling services:

Interviewer Do you feel like you need a bit more support around that, like emotional support, counselling, do you feel like that's something you need at the moment?

Frankie Yeah, well, going through all this stuff I've gone through, like you need it [counselling] but then, you can't afford it, you can't say much coz you've only

got limited time, so you want to make sure you get the most out of everything, which is really annoying coz you want to know that you can just go to counselling when [you need it], but I feel like I can't because I've only got this much funding so I've just got to just deal with that now [by myself] and wait for a bigger problem, that kind of thing. Which you shouldn't have to feel like you have to do that.

Young people also recommended that services could offer more opportunities for recreational activities, employment, and emotional support.

Practitioners' Responses

In sharing their insights into services, many young people expressed a desire for practitioners to have kept in touch with them longer, even after they were no longer involved with particular services. For example, after transitioning out of care, aging out of alternative education, and transitioning into or out of a youth justice facility, young people would have liked practitioners to check in on them periodically to see how they were doing. As Pohia describes below, it would be beneficial for young people if their case workers provided long-term support and check-ins since they were familiar with their history and experiences:

For families, they should pretty much stick with them for a while. Because sticking with a child, it takes time for them to get over things, to forget things that they've seen, you can't just come and go. Why? Because it's just back to the same when you're gone.

In addition to regular follow-up and checking in throughout service delivery or following transitions, young people also mentioned practitioners being more accessible and easy to contact. Some practitioners did not return phone calls or were only contactable during business hours. As one young person noted: “problems might not happen between 9 and 5”.

Several participants provided recommendations for how practitioners could have changed their approach to working with young people to make services more helpful or enjoyable. Several young people felt that practitioners were not well trained in communicating with and relating to young people, nor did they seem to understand what the young people were going through. It was beneficial when practitioners were able to express understanding and sympathy for the young person’s life circumstances, even sharing their own childhood experiences with hardship. Trust, honesty, reliability, respect, and compassion were also identified as crucial traits of practitioners. Young people’s service experiences will be compromised when they do not trust practitioners or do not feel valued:

I understand where other kids and stuff need to go to foster homes and stuff, but when you’re a criminal and you’re involved with [statutory youth justice services] it’s no help unless you’ve got a decent social worker. My social worker was just - they didn’t have no hope in me, were always just thinking I’m going to reoffend and mess up again. And it didn’t work on my mentality. My social worker, the person who was meant to be big support person, he thinks like that of me? Yeah, didn’t work, I didn’t like him.

As Shane points to above, participants were more likely to thrive when they felt their practitioners believed in them and wished the

best for them, but when this was not the case achieving sustainable change became unlikely. Furthermore, having a practitioner who was accessible and reliable was extremely advantageous for participants.

Several young people expressed frustration with service providers for not acknowledging the way they were trying to make changes and progress toward their goals. Young people found it motivating and supportive to be recognised and praised for their work, for their compliance with programmes, and for the positive changes they had made. Furthermore, young people suggested that programmes and practitioners take into account their progress and cooperation when setting requirements. Rhiannon recalled being treated quite harshly during her interactions with youth justice services. Despite her being cooperative and showing good behaviour while on bail (over a year), she was still given a strict supervision order, which even the judge considered severe:

You know like, I didn't get off easy mate. Even the judge said 'oh that's a bit harsh isn't it?' to the social worker for my supervision order, like all the stuff I had to do when I got out, it was bullshit. Especially because I'd been so cooperative when I was on bail. I didn't breach once. You know which, it was all like, I did everything they wanted me to do.

As Rhiannon states above, services and young people would be better served if their accomplishments were acknowledged and programmatic restrictions tailored accordingly. When young people feel that their service providers have confidence in them, this greatly improves the young person's sense of self and self-esteem and increases the likelihood that they will continue to make progress. Young people also mentioned the need for services to be more individually responsive. Participants spoke of being held to expectations that seemed overly standardised and not appropriately

suited to their needs, capabilities, or social settings. This included service eligibility requirements (for example, bail conditions, courses to attend, job-seeking criteria) that were appropriate for the young person's needs as well as achievable within their present living conditions:

James *Coz you've just done your time inside, then you've got to do half your time outside too with all those meetings. Your mum or Nan's got to run you around, gas, they get pissed off if you argue with them, they kick you out, stuff like that. There's this big thing then.*

Interviewer *So for those conditions that you had to meet, you were having to rely on your family members and other people.*

James *And some families are really poor, there's a lot of poor people, you know, and their parents are going, 'oh you little shit I have to take you there now, you know, that's ten bucks gas.' Some families can't even buy bread, shit like that. And little do the big people know who sign you off; 'we're going to refer you to here,' they're just thinking, 'oh it's going to help him' – but family issues are so big, like, their mum could be stressed; 'I'm not taking you mate,' he could stress and smash something and run off down the street and get in trouble again, just like that.*

As James explained above, there is a heavy burden placed on families when young people are required to take part in services. Many families did not have the resources to support young people to engage with services, and their situation often became strained as they tried to comply with service requirements. Moreover, in order to

individually-tailor plans and services, young people must be a part of the decision-making process. This provides an opportunity for young people to comment on how services might impact on their lives more broadly and whether their current living situations are conducive to service involvement and vice versa.

This need for practitioners to involve young people in their service decisions and treatment was reflected in a few participants' experiences with mental health services and, particularly, their experiences in taking medication. One participant expressed frustration with being medicated so heavily to the point of feeling nothing. He did not think the medication helped him move forward with his life and he ended up selling the medication rather than taking it. As he put it, mental health practitioners were always resorting to their "Plan B" which was to medicate young people rather than find other ways to treat them. This sentiment was echoed by Mariana below, where she suggests that adequate treatment could replace the need for medication, in some cases:

Mariana [The statutory care and protection agency] drug up a lot of the kids.

Interviewer Really?

Mariana Yeah a lot of the kids, like not on illegal drugs, on medical drugs but I just don't think that they're needed. If we get the care that we need we don't need anti-psychotic medication.

As Mariana points out, medication should not be pushed onto young people as a solution, especially if they are expressing not wanting to take it or not feeling better when taking it. While medication can be a useful tool for some, young people must be consulted and respected when making these decisions.

Several participants also referenced consistency in case worker/s as advantageous. Working with the same practitioner over time not only created a long-term relationship for a young person but, it also meant that they didn't have to continually explain their life circumstances to someone new. Life for participants in this study was often chaotic and ever changing, thus the consistent presence of a case worker was both facilitative of successful transitions but also critical for building supportive relationships. As Sam stated:

I think [community organisation] didn't work as well for me, I thought we were going to get a little bit more out of them, a little bit more help from them. We ended up losing one of the counsellors so it meant it sort of made it a lot harder. We had the same problem with the [community organisation] we were just changing family counsellors all the time, we had one, we still got the one that we had from the beginning and she's pretty much been there so she knows pretty much everything, but we went through three other ones so that made it a little harder to explain the situations.

A common frustration expressed by participants was the conflicting information and lack of transparency with service providers. Young people often did not understand what was going on with their services and interventions, including decisions around care and placements. They found it difficult to get straightforward information from service providers. There was often conflicting or wrong information provided to young people regarding their benefits or services, leading to confusion, delays, or even young people giving up on services.

Many young people mentioned insufficient guidance and support from programmes and practitioners throughout their transitions to independence. When reflecting on how programmes could have been

more supportive, young people listed help with budgeting, employment, and independent living as potentially useful for their transition. With regard to employment, young people would have liked to be connected with more opportunities for training, career advice, and one-on-one assistance. One participant thought it would have been helpful to sit down with a practitioner and go through what jobs the young person was qualified for and could apply for. Similar to the one-on-one assistance with employment young people desired, some young people also expressed a need for one-on-one assistance with accommodation. Practical skills such as budgeting, setting up a flat, and filling out paperwork were also identified as potentially helpful resources for young people transitioning out of care.

Misinformation was also compounded by the instability of young people's lives and high turnover among service providers. Some young people felt that having a good relationship with a case manager was often facilitative of more transparent communication. As Blake reflects below, a lack of transparency during transitions can be especially challenging and scary. They recommended being upfront with young people about what was going on as a way to comfort and support young people. This also built rapport:

Yeah, get more clear with that sort of stuff, coz some people, they are just like shoved in [care] and they got no say in the matter, and that's how they get all shitty at them, thinking that they're not doing the right thing. Coz they've got no say in the matter, they just go, 'nah, this is for your own safety,' [And the young people] don't really understand what's happening at the time. [They need to say] 'this is why,' or 'you're going to be staying away from your parents for whatever [reason]'. They could just say, 'oh, it's getting too much of a mess around your house or whatever – we'd like you to move into this property,

whatever, with this new family or whatever' not 'you have to go into this'.

In contrast to Blake's account above, Adam shared a positive experience of planning for a transition between residential programmes. He described how he visited his new residence several times before moving in as well as developed strong relationships with the practitioners throughout the transition process. They were open with him about the transition and offered comfort and support.

Many young people talked about the instability of placements while in care. These frequent transitions compounded challenges for young people adding to the stress of moving and having to adjust to a new environment, as well as disrupting their participation in services such as alternative education. Instability in care fostered a sense of distrust by young people with service providers and caregivers since the young people could never be sure how long they would be in one place. Many said that this uncertainty made them reluctant to develop relationships with caregivers. Furthermore, some young people mentioned feelings of distrust with service providers when they were not upfront about how long a young person would be in a specific placement or why they were being moved. These feelings are often reflected in accounts from young people in youth justice services. One young person recalls being sent to a number of different prisons and how it would have been less stressful if he had transitioned straight from the youth justice residence into one prison and stayed there.

Safety in care was also a big issue for these young people. Although many young people found it disruptive to frequently change placements, several young people expressed frustration that they did not have their safety concerns taken seriously and remained in unsafe living situations. Some young people took matters into their

own hands and left these unsafe placements.

Young people frequently referred to their case workers and service practitioners being overworked, to the point of not being able to provide sufficient support. Due to high caseloads and demanding work, case workers often did not have enough time to understand fully what was going on in the young person's life, to check-in regularly, to be responsive, or even maintain meaningful relationships. Yet these were precisely the types of interventions the young people needed in order to make good progress.

The next section extends the discussion on young people's insights and explores the ways in which services can better respond to the complex needs of young people who have faced adversity from a young age. It presents recommendations for how to improve policy guidelines, service processes and the overall service experience.

Discussion and Implications

The presentation of young people's service experiences has shown that the young people in the Youth Transitions Study faced an accumulation of life disadvantages (Elder, 1998) and a chronic lack of needs being met in many areas of their lives. Participants were less likely to live with one or both biological parents; they experienced a relative absence of enduring, positive caregiver presence in their lives; reported high levels of emotional and physical disengagement from mainstream schools; and, higher health and wellbeing risks (Sanders et al., 2013). They experienced violence, abuse, substance use and alcohol problems, unstable relationships, and disengagement from school. Due to the life circumstances described above, it follows that much of these challenges would bring young people into contact with the four service systems (education, mental health, child welfare, youth justice). However, as we have discussed throughout

the report, service engagement was not always positive or consistently supportive.

Young people spoke about challenges to positive engagement with services including overly strict rules to qualify for benefits or services, delays or interruptions/breaks in service delivery, as well as programme expectations that did not seem to appropriately consider and reflect the tumultuous lives of young people. This, in conjunction with poor communication and lack of transparency from service providers, often left young people feeling set up to fail and feeling that the system was not set up to help them. Over time, many young people became disenchanted and apathetic toward services as they felt unsupported or disconnected from services or providers.

In contrast to these experiences shared by young people, we also learned about factors that facilitated positive engagement with services. Young people responded well to and thrived in service environments where they felt empowered, included, and understood. When young people were involved in decision-making and their needs and life circumstances were prioritised, they tended to express more positive engagement with services. Moreover, consistency and reliability helped young people feel cared for and trusting of service providers. We saw commonalities between factors that facilitated positive engagement with services and the principles of trauma-informed care. Services that aimed to do no harm and protect young people from re-traumatisation, sought to minimise the number of providers intervening in a young person's life to prevent them from having to repeat their story (and trauma) to practitioners who might then leave or disappear, and prioritised safety, trustworthiness, youth choice and control (Hummer et al., 2010).

Participants spoke about the lack of communication between services, siloed services, and services acting as barriers to

involvement in other services in that they received conflicting or contradictory support or their participation in one service hindered their ability to participate in another (for example, education as a barrier to employment; justice involvement as a barrier to education). We found that young people felt more engaged and pleased with their service experience when there was collaboration among providers and a more comprehensive, holistic approach to service provision.

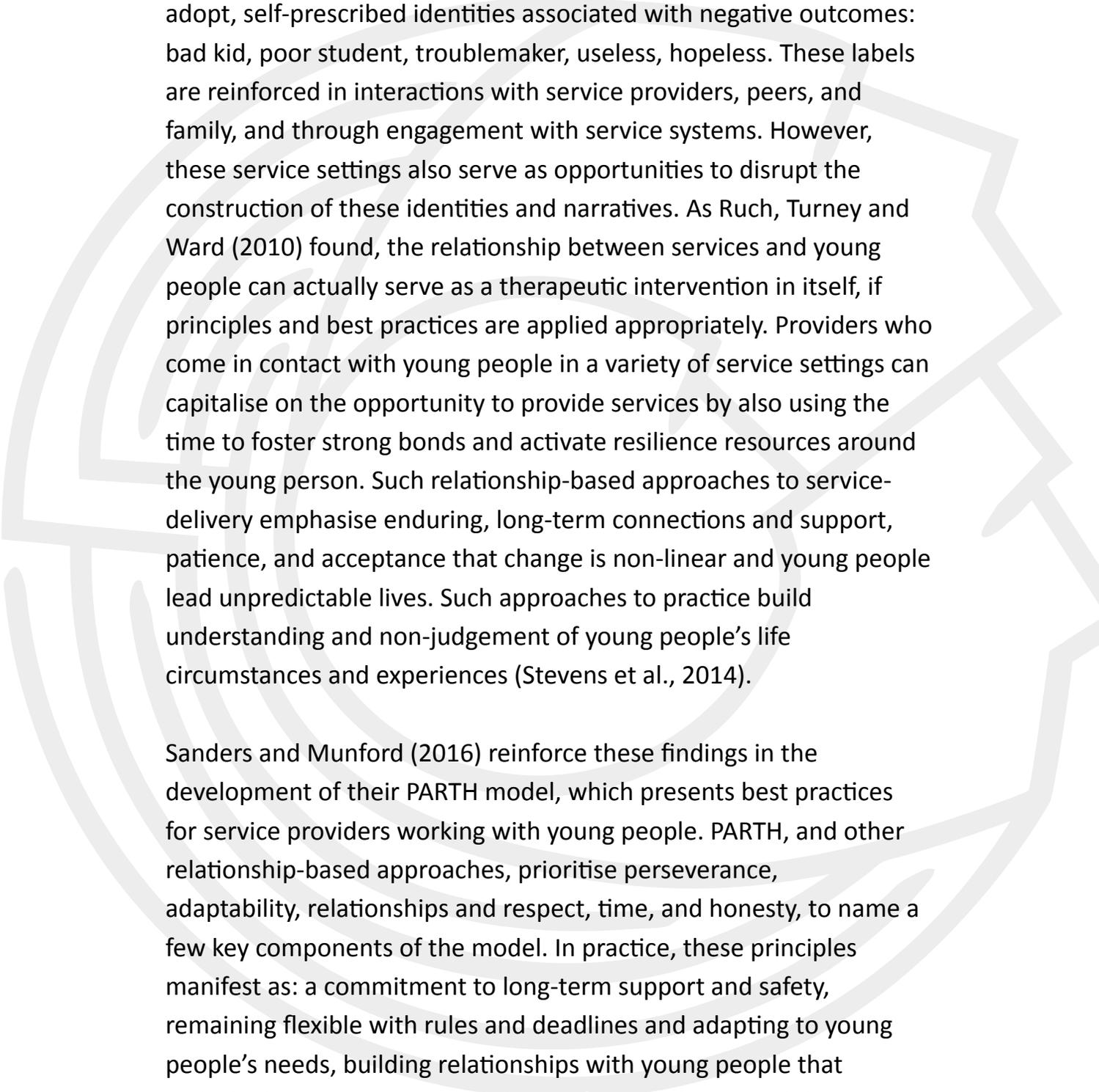
Transitions were a particularly difficult time for young people in the study. Moving residences, going into or out of a youth justice facility, changing care placements, switching schools or service providers are all examples of transitional periods that were accompanied by other individual and systemic stressors. We found that the quality of care young people experienced impacted upon their transitions into/within/from care or services and their livelihoods thereafter. When service providers engage in long-term transition planning, are transparent about what the transition will be like and what type of support they (or another organisation) can offer, help young people develop reliable support networks, and keep in touch with young people during and beyond the transitions, young people are better equipped to move on from care (Stein, 2008).

Some participants expressed changing views and experiences over time, and these were generally associated with whether the young person had a positive or negative experience with services in between interviews. Thus, shifting experiences with services were juxtaposed to changing circumstances which brought young people into contact with services. Young people going through transitions—into or out of a new placement, school or youth justice facility, moving, or aging out of care—counted on services to assist during these tumultuous times. The insights from the young people highlight the importance of transition planning, long-term care/service

delivery and consistency. When young people are engaged with individually tailored and appropriate services, are adequately prepared and knowledgeable about what to expect during transitions, and are supported reliably over time (including check-ins and follow-up after their programme or service might have ended), they are more likely to have a positive engagement with services.

Relationships were central components of the service experience. Peers and family stood to greatly enhance or interrupt participation in services. Young people dealt with interpersonal issues stemming from their involvement with services, usually around disagreement with service delivery or the way a relationship or behaviour was characterised. While service providers worked to mitigate the negative influences of relationships on young people and their service engagement, they also prioritised preserving and developing positive, supporting relationships. The “peer paradox” complicates relationships as young people might find it hard to cope as they distance themselves from negative influences (Sanders et al., 2017). Without supplementary supports either from adults in family or support systems or newly developed, pro-social relationships with peers, young people might still feel isolated despite well-meaning attempts to reduce risk through social withdrawal. These findings highlight the need for young people to have multiple and varied supports activated around them as these broaden and strengthen the social networks and resources available to them. Service providers have a key role in building bridges between young people and their natural support systems (Ungar et al., 2015).

Practitioners are well placed to influence not only young people’s engagement with services but also their sense of identity and overall wellbeing (Munford and Sanders, 2015c). Woven throughout participant interviews were the common threads of stigma, negative labels, lack of self-esteem, and a conflicted sense of self.



Because young people in the study have experienced complexity, adversity, and trauma, throughout their lives, they are often given, or adopt, self-prescribed identities associated with negative outcomes: bad kid, poor student, troublemaker, useless, hopeless. These labels are reinforced in interactions with service providers, peers, and family, and through engagement with service systems. However, these service settings also serve as opportunities to disrupt the construction of these identities and narratives. As Ruch, Turney and Ward (2010) found, the relationship between services and young people can actually serve as a therapeutic intervention in itself, if principles and best practices are applied appropriately. Providers who come in contact with young people in a variety of service settings can capitalise on the opportunity to provide services by also using the time to foster strong bonds and activate resilience resources around the young person. Such relationship-based approaches to service-delivery emphasise enduring, long-term connections and support, patience, and acceptance that change is non-linear and young people lead unpredictable lives. Such approaches to practice build understanding and non-judgement of young people's life circumstances and experiences (Stevens et al., 2014).

Sanders and Munford (2016) reinforce these findings in the development of their PARTH model, which presents best practices for service providers working with young people. PARTH, and other relationship-based approaches, prioritise perseverance, adaptability, relationships and respect, time, and honesty, to name a few key components of the model. In practice, these principles manifest as: a commitment to long-term support and safety, remaining flexible with rules and deadlines and adapting to young people's needs, building relationships with young people that actively discourage the internalising of negative labels while promoting a self-story that embraces resilience (Giddens, 1991), investing time in young people outside of and beyond the typical

scope of service providers (for example, a teacher maintaining a relationship with young person beyond the semester or school year), and transparency about what support professionals can provide including demonstrating reliability and follow-through. PARTH practices and other relational approaches and spaces can be harnessed to facilitate positive engagement with services, build resilience as well as contribute to a re-authoring of the young people's narratives (Sanders and Munford, 2017).

Conclusion

This report explored the service experiences of young people in the Youth Transitions Study. Four key themes were discussed: factors that facilitate positive engagement with services, challenges to positive engagement with services, specific impacts of services on education, employment, and transitions, and insights on and recommendations for services. Often, the quality of care received had long-lasting impacts on young people, extending well beyond the service contact or programme. Relationships with practitioners and caregivers had a major impact on the overall service experience: when young people were adequately and reliably supported, understood, and empowered, they were more likely to remain engaged in services and hold a positive view of their experience over time. Relationships and relational approaches to service delivery were most effective in tandem with trauma-informed, appropriate, holistic, and youth-driven approaches. It is also important that multiple-service using young people are able to access varied and comprehensive services that complement rather than constrain their engagement with other service systems in order to stimulate their development of resilience resources and pro-social support networks. Although service and system level barriers to service engagement exist, and arguably might be harder to correct or moderate because of their ties to funding and bureaucracy, strong

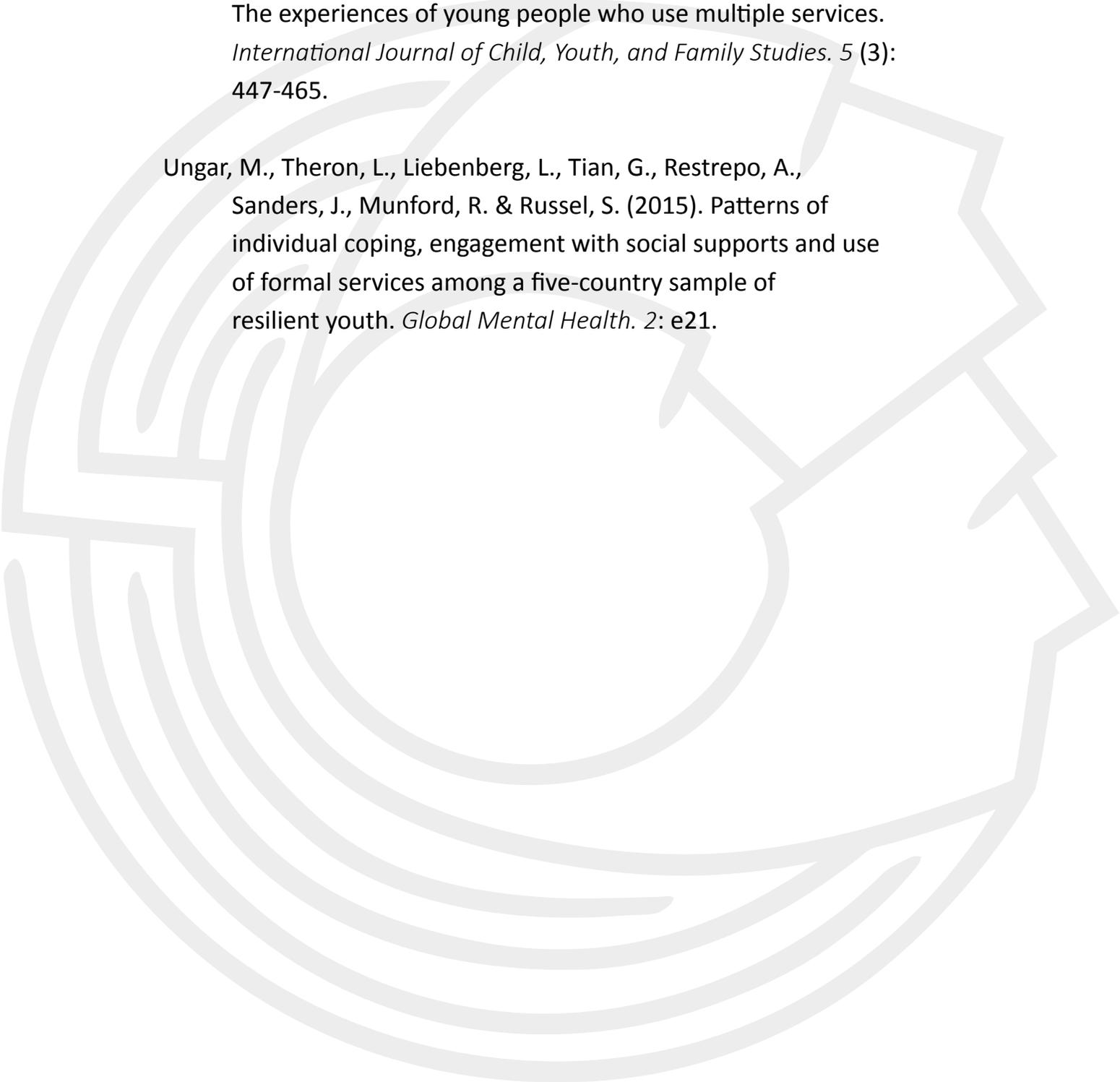
relationships with service providers, caregivers, family and peers, can indeed mitigate these challenges. It is imperative that transition planning and interventions become foundational to youth service work since transitions are especially consequential for a young person's resilience. Service interactions must be viewed as therapeutic interventions and embraced as opportunities to connect with young people, promote resilience, and empower them to move toward more positive futures.



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