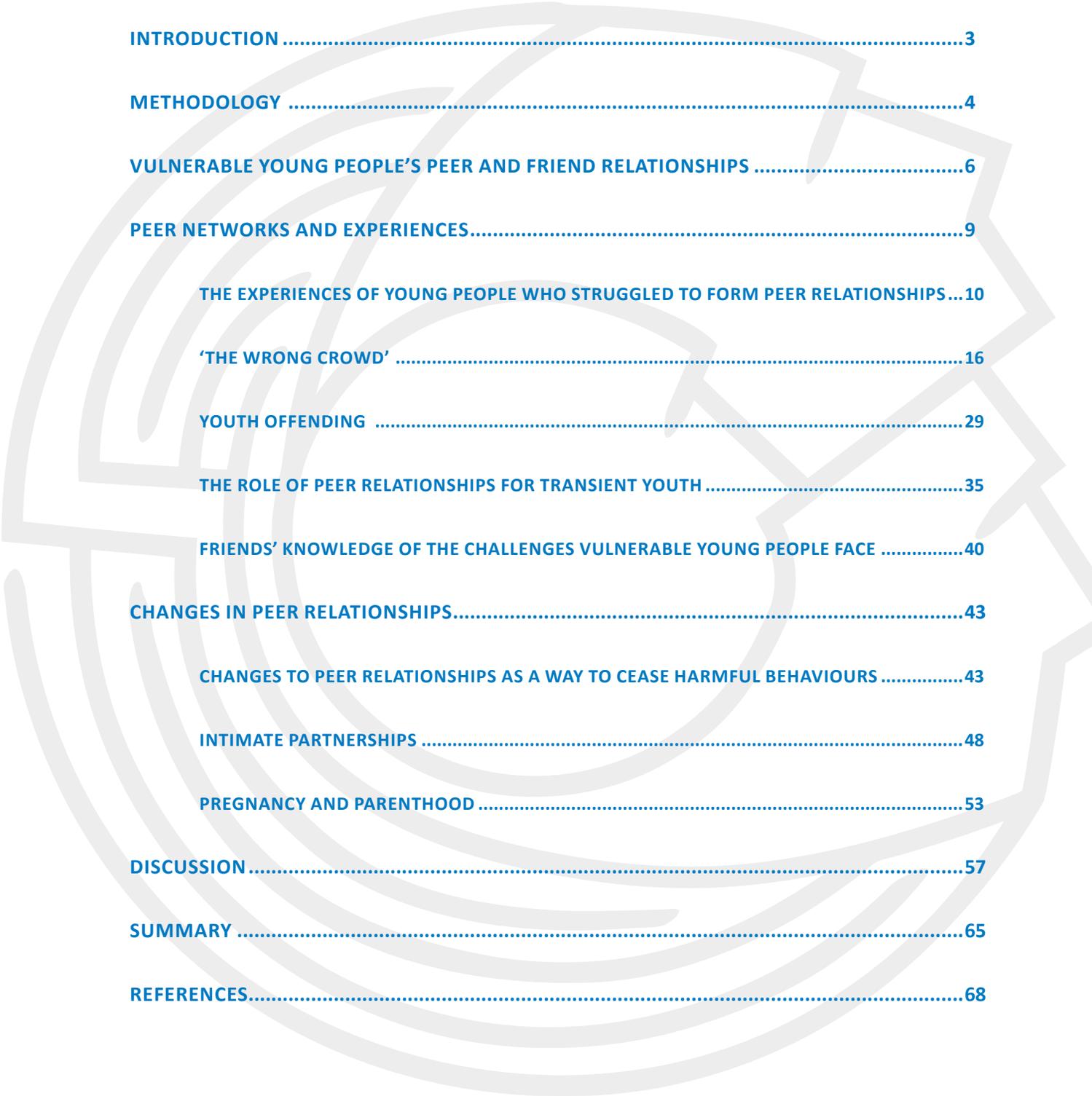# Young people's peer relationships

**Technical Report 21**

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## INTRODUCTION

The data presented in this report was collected as part of a larger study, the Pathways to Resilience Research Program, a five-country (Canada, China, Colombia, South Africa, and New Zealand), mixed methods study of youth resilience and risk. Data for the study was gathered between 2009 and 2013. Linked to its parent study based at the Resilience Research Centre in Halifax Canada, these were the first studies anywhere in the world that investigated the ways in which experiences across service systems influenced outcomes for youth with complex needs. Taking an ecological and youth-centred perspective, the research not only considers multiple service experiences, it also takes account of patterns within the social and material environment as well as interpersonal relationships within the lives of youth who are clients of multiple services. In this way it focuses on explaining the ways in which youth "negotiate" for, and "navigate" (Ungar et al., 2013) towards the social determinants of wellbeing with their families/whānau and the service systems that provide them with support, treatment and care. The purpose of the study was to identify the factors that were related to the achievement of positive outcomes for youth who were users of multiple services. These were vulnerable young people who faced a complex mix of challenges in navigating safe pathways through adolescence and into adulthood (Allard, 2007; Berzin, 2010; Rogers, 2011; Stein, et al., 2011). The study had a particular interest in explaining the ways in which the risks confronted by these youth, their resilience and wider social ecologies, combined with supportive and remedial services to create different patterns in outcomes. While data was collected from a number of sources, the research placed a particular priority upon providing spaces for youth themselves to explain their own experiences and to reflect upon the factors that made a positive difference in their lives (Bolzan & Gale, 2012; Bottrell, 2009; Fleming, 2011; McLaren, 2002; Sanders & Munford, 2005).

# METHODOLOGY[1]

The research programme has several distinct components:

- A survey of Multiple Service Using (MSU) and Comparison Group (CG) youth aged between 12 and 17 years;
- A survey of adults nominated by MSU youth as knowing the most about them (PMK - person most knowledgeable);
- Qualitative interviews with a subsample of MSU youth and their PMK;
- Reviews of case files held by a range of organisations that worked with the subsample of MSU youth

Taken together, these four components constituted the New Zealand Pathways to Resilience Study. The study built upon the Canadian Pathways to Resilience study (http://resilienceproject.org/). In total 1477 youth participated in the research. All of these youth completed a questionnaire at the beginning of the study. This figure of 1477 was composed of 872 youth who formed a comparison group, and 605 (40%) youth who were the primary focus of the investigation. The 605 youth were purposefully selected because they were concurrent clients of two or more service systems; they were multiple-service using youth. The service systems included: mental health, youth justice, child welfare and educational services additional to mainstream classroom programmes. These services were provided by both statutory and non-governmental (NGO) providers. Youth were recruited into the qualitative sample, which is the focus of this report, from the 605 multiple-service using youth on the basis of their risk and resilience scores in the survey phase. Youth who scored above the mean on a composite risk measure and who also either scored above the mean on a resilience measure or below the mean on this

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1   A description of the methodology is provided in The Pathways to Resilience Study (New Zealand):Whāia to huanui kia toa: Methodological Overview: Technical Report 2.
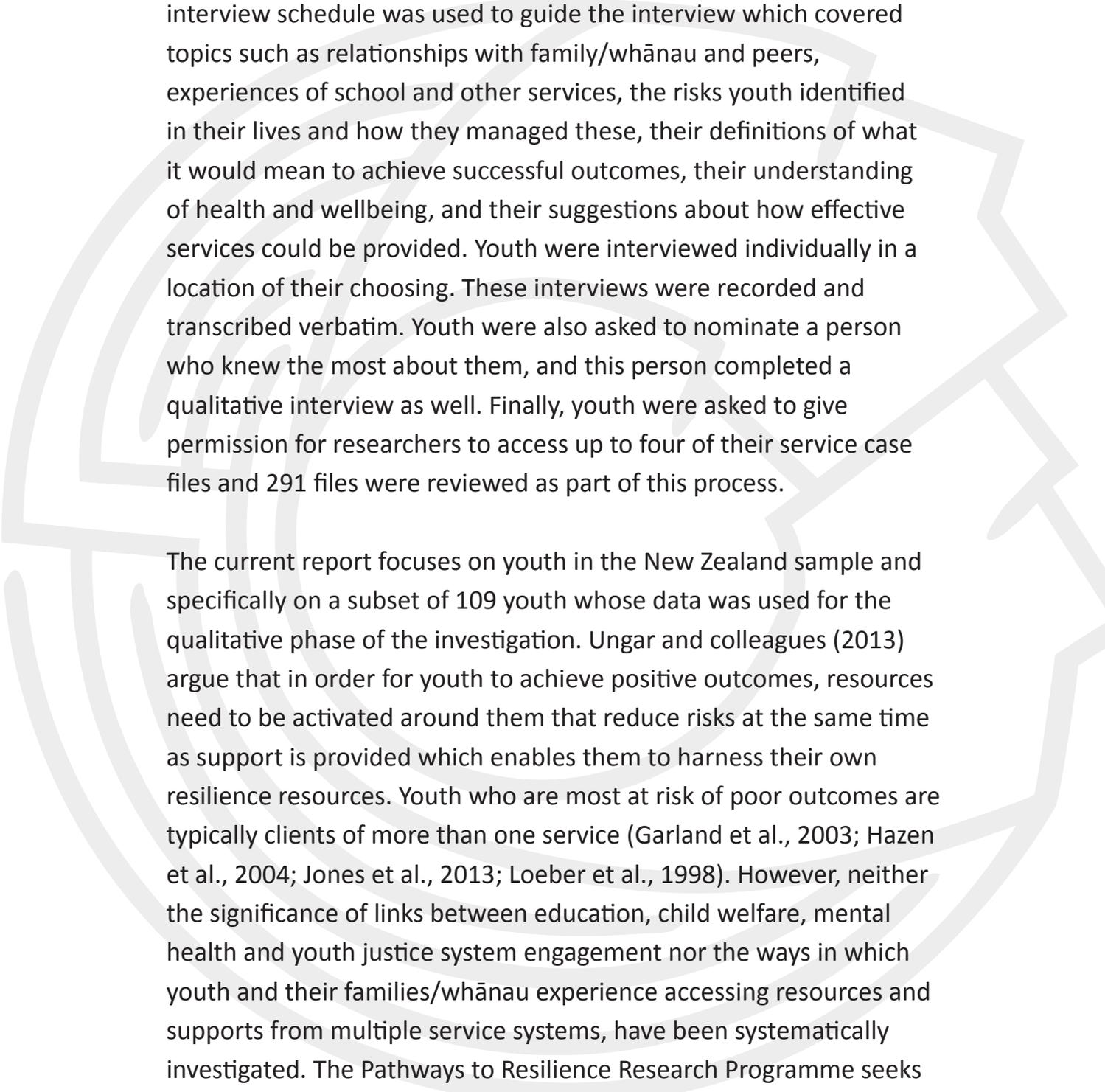
measure were interviewed for the qualitative phase (*n* = 109). Youth were interviewed by trained interviewers, and a semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the interview which covered topics such as relationships with family/whānau and peers, experiences of school and other services, the risks youth identified in their lives and how they managed these, their definitions of what it would mean to achieve successful outcomes, their understanding of health and wellbeing, and their suggestions about how effective services could be provided. Youth were interviewed individually in a location of their choosing. These interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Youth were also asked to nominate a person who knew the most about them, and this person completed a qualitative interview as well. Finally, youth were asked to give permission for researchers to access up to four of their service case files and 291 files were reviewed as part of this process.

The current report focuses on youth in the New Zealand sample and specifically on a subset of 109 youth whose data was used for the qualitative phase of the investigation. Ungar and colleagues (2013) argue that in order for youth to achieve positive outcomes, resources need to be activated around them that reduce risks at the same time as support is provided which enables them to harness their own resilience resources. Youth who are most at risk of poor outcomes are typically clients of more than one service (Garland et al., 2003; Hazen et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2013; Loeber et al., 1998). However, neither the significance of links between education, child welfare, mental health and youth justice system engagement nor the ways in which youth and their families/whānau experience accessing resources and supports from multiple service systems, have been systematically investigated. The Pathways to Resilience Research Programme seeks to address this gap in knowledge and the current report focuses on one part of this larger research endeavour.

## VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE'S PEER AND FRIEND RELATIONSHIPS

This report examines the risks, as well as the protective role of vulnerable young people's peer relationships and close friendships. Young people's peer relationships are defined as similar age or at times slightly older, networks that revolve around shared activities and pursuits as a group. Close friends are defined as young people's 'best friend(s)/mates' or 'like family/whānau '.

To examine the risks and protective role of these relationships, we explore the factors that influence young people's peer relationships; from their struggles to form friendships, to their association with 'the wrong crowd' and involvement in risky behaviours, such as disengaging with school, and offending. The report also considers the support and resources vulnerable young people access in their peer and friend relationships, and how these relationships are shaped by their particular circumstances, for example, disrupted family/whānau relationships, impoverished material conditions and transience. We also explore how the support vulnerable youth experience from peers and close friends can also be paradoxical, reflecting that these 'supportive relationships' often carry another set of risks (e.g. staying in houses where there is drug use and abuse). We look at the strategies young people utilised to exit harmful peer/friend networks and how changes in these relationships (intimate partnerships, pregnancy) influenced cessation in risky behaviours.

Adults and practitioners who come into regular contact with young people recognise the value and importance that peer relationships and close friendships play in young people's lives. These relationships can represent a meaningful aspect of young people's social support systems and have the potential to nurture healthy development and achievement. Young people's close friendships can serve as the

primary means by which they share and validate each other's struggles, develop new identities and affirm new roles. These relationships also have the potential to influence young people's harmful behaviours, influencing a range of risks in their lives; for example, drug and alcohol abuse and educational disengagement.

In this study, involvement with peers often brought increased risks in areas such as offending, disengaging (truanting) from school (which often resulted in school exclusion) and drug and alcohol use. Young people often referred to this as becoming involved with 'the wrong crowd' (Dewhurst et al., 2014b; Sanders et al., 2014b; Urry et al., 2014). For young people who have experienced a sense of powerlessness in many areas of their lives, from caregiver instability, personal behavioural problems that elicited negative responses from adults, and multiple forms of disadvantage, 'the wrong crowd' can be a place where they feel understood (Sanders et al., 2013; Wilkinson, 2004). From having experienced significant adult relationships as conflictual and difficult, 'the wrong crowd' affords young people with the potential for meeting some of their unmet needs such as a sense of belonging (Atwool, 2006).

Many of the young people who connected with 'the wrong crowd' faced multiple risks (such as unmet educational needs) and were already on the social margins at school and in the community, due to the range of challenges they faced (Dewhurst et al., 2014c). The difficulties they experienced led to a sense that they did not 'belong' that intensified as they moved through adolescence. These young people navigated towards peers whom they felt would understand their experiences and provide support. These peers were also on the social margins and were engaged in a range of harmful behaviours. Several young people described gang involvement and offending as part of these relationships. In order to fit in with these peers, the young people felt that they needed to participate in the activities that

these youth were engaging with. Doing this gave the young person status within the group, as they proved to others that they could be 'bad' and defy the wishes of the adults involved with their lives (Dewhurst et al., 2014a). 'Fitting in' for vulnerable young people comes from the same desire to belong to their peer group as young people who face less adversity. However this is often manifested in involvement with risky group behaviours, creating more challenges in their lives.

Many of the young people in the study faced additional risks when they wanted to leave harmful peer relationships. They resorted to strategies, such as social withdrawal, to manage this. For young people who do not face adversity, social withdrawal often indicates potential risk, however for vulnerable youth, social withdrawal can initially be protective (Sanders et al., 2014b). To address their immediate challenges, vulnerable youth may have to choose between associating with 'the wrong crowd' or having few/no friends at all (Sanders et al., 2014b).

For some young people, intimate partnerships and pregnancy can provide an opportunity to reduce their involvement in risky peer relationships (Urry et al., 2014). However, intimate relationships can also be harmful. Abusive and controlling relationships are isolating and the risk in being physically, sexually and psychologically harmed by one's intimate partner is high (11% women; 3% men) (Campbell et al., 2003; Martin et al., 1998). Some young people in the study, who described entering an intimate partnership as a way to distance themselves from their harmful peer networks, found themselves in controlling, abusive and isolating relationships. Other youth binged on drugs and alcohol with peers to try and alleviate their distress when intimate relationships ended. Some young people found that parenthood created changes in their peer relationships; and for some, pregnancy and the responsibility for another life, provided a

socially acceptable reason to disengage from their peer's harmful activities.

The first section of the report explores the influence of young people's peer networks on their behaviours: experiencing a lack of peer support; connecting with 'the wrong crowd' and becoming involved with gangs and offending. The role that peer networks play for transient youth and the knowledge that young people's close friends have of their challenges is also discussed. The next section looks at how changes in young people's peer relationships can influence their behaviour: stopping involvement with offending and drug and alcohol using peers; entering into intimate partnerships that alter peer networks and behaviours; and a discussion on how pregnancy and parenthood can sometimes 'fast track' changes in peer relationships and subsequently, the young person's behaviours. The discussion then explores the implications that peer relationships and close friendships have for young people's involvement in challenging behaviours, that is, being protective and yet paradoxically risky. The final section summarises this discussion and explores implications for practice and for those who provide support to young people.

## PEER NETWORKS AND EXPERIENCES

In this section the impact of being primarily connected with peer networks engaged in harmful behaviours is explored. Young people in the study, who lacked connection with supportive, prosocial peers, had often experienced upheaval in their family/whānau and also school disruption. Exposure to a lot of disruption and upheaval increased the chances that youth would become connected with 'the wrong crowd', disengage early from their education and become involved with offending peers and gangs. These young people often went on to display a range of acting out behaviours that

elicited largely negative responses from others. Due to ongoing adversity in their caregiver circumstances, some young people became transient (Dewhurst et al., 2014a; 2014c). Close friends became key confidantes, and were often very knowledgeable about the issues the young person was facing and at times were in a powerful position to encourage young people to seek help.

### *The experiences of young people who struggled to form peer relationships*

Young people in the study who struggled to form peer relationships had often experienced challenges in their family/whānau (Sanders et al., 2014b). For example, family/whānau challenges (such as abuse, mental health struggles and family violence, transience), often resulted in inconsistent school attendance and disruptions in the young person's social development (Stevens at al., 2014b). Young people from these circumstances may develop behavioural struggles (for example, physical aggression) due to witnessing and experiencing family violence (Litrownik et al., 2003; Rivera et al., 1990; Salzinger et al., 1993). The advent of these behavioural problems often contributes to their struggle to form peer relationships. When the young person lacks access to prosocial peers and supportive networks that can buffer difficult experiences and transitions, they may respond to these issues in ways that create additional challenges; for example, hostility, acting out at school, truanting, which can lead to educational disruption and further social isolation.

Eric,[2] who was bullied and lacked connections to supportive prosocial peer networks, described the challenges he experienced at school and home and how this impacted on his learning and exacerbated his acting out behaviours:

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2 To maintain confidentiality all identifying information has been changed or removed and pseudonyms are used.

*Eric: I got bullied a lot at intermediate school. It's when the bullying actually started. That's actually kind of when I started the self-harm and that. I didn't really have any friends.*

*Interviewer: So who helped you deal with your self-harm and that feeling of being depressed?*

*Eric: I just tried to deal with it myself... I did not tell my dad 'cause the first time I told him he kicked the shit out of me. I got really angry about it and I decided that I am going to get out now while I can. So I threatened my dad with a knife. That's how I got kicked out. Then I went back to my mum and then my stepdad came in about a year ago. Then I got bullied extremely hard-core at [the college] to the point where I was actually being beaten up, yeah...but I got expelled after year 9 anyway 'cause on the last day I messed with the teachers' cars. My stepdad showed me how to kill the engine ...he understands me.*

Eric's story reveals that he had a range of issues in his life that influenced his capacity to form prosocial peer relationships. Eric's relationships with his caregivers were troubled and he had developed harmful behaviours as a way of coping (self-harming and aggression). His challenging experiences compounded when he was bullied at school by peers. Being alienated had put Eric on the offensive; he expected his peers would reject him and respond to him with hostility, so he became hostile in response to this expectation. This created a challenging situation for Eric; potential non-bullying peers limited their contact with him due to his aggressive behaviours, which compounded Eric's social isolation, increasing his troubled feelings.

The next narrative further highlights how multiple adversities impact on young people's capacity to form peer relationships, such as

challenges in the family/whānau and behavioural difficulties. Rowan and his immediate family/whānau had been involved with services since he was a child, due to family violence, neglect and abuse. By the time Rowan was eight, he was engaging in a range of acting out behaviours, angry outbursts and he had fallen behind academically. Rowan describes this period in his life as challenging and lonely:

> *I was happy at school, but there were probably a number of times where I was a bit disruptive or annoying or disturbing the class, and I'm being sent to... there was a sick room. I used to end up sitting on the floor, and just sitting there for an hour, so I eventually started to get a bit of a reputation. The excuse for putting me in that room was to get a break. Sometimes I'd talk to people at lunch times and morning teas, and used to go come on bro, come on bro, someone to talk to, someone to talk to... Or sometimes I'd sit in the hallway. I didn't really want to be in the sick bay, but at school I don't know why I misbehaved. I just wasn't happy with my progress and lots of stuff at home, and everything, especially with family like Dad. Over my lifetime, I've had lots of issues with lots of other kids, not just primary school.*

Much like Eric, the childhood adversity Rowan had experienced influenced a range of acting out and coping mechanisms that worked to isolate him from his peers, and put additional barriers in place regarding his education. Rowan described not wanting to be 'in the sick bay' but being sent there 'to get a break' by teaching staff. This gave him a bad reputation which influenced how the other children responded to him. From his challenging experiences in primary school, Rowan went on to experience lifelong struggles in forming positive peer relationships. Rowan learned that if he acted out, people noticed him. Due to this, Rowan was vulnerable to participating in a range of risky behaviours (aggression, smoking and drinking at school) as a way to seek acceptance from his peers. He

was excluded from school at age fourteen and placed in residential care, as his caregiver could no longer cope with his difficult behaviours, isolating him still further.

Becks, who had been abused by her parents as a child, struggled to form positive relationships with peers until she went to a youth justice residential programme and had counselling to help her address her offending. In the following excerpt she shows insight into the cause of her difficult peer relationships and bullying behaviours:

> *School, honestly, I was so naughty aye, when I look at it now...*
> *I used to hate it when people used to say, you're an attention*
> *seeker and all that. Of course I was an attention seeker back*
> *then 'cause I never used to get the attention that I wanted at*
> *home you know. I tried to find it at school by bullying, and being*
> *the loudest and all that stuff. I never used to like show my*
> *feelings. I used to show them in a rough way. I just always*
> *wanted to fight. And when I look at it now I think I was pretty*
> *stupid but then again understandable the way that I was doing*
> *it. But then, kids who are like bullies, honestly they have*
> *problems, they just don't want to talk about it, if they don't trust*
> *that person. Like coming from me, and I speak from experience,*
> *you know I never used to like opening my feelings to anyone aye.*
> *I found it hard to trust anyone 'cause of what happened.*

Beck's narrative provides insights into the causes of the bullying behaviours of young people and how this impacts on their ability to form prosocial peer relationships (Coggan et al., 2003). Young people who are acting this way towards their peers may have experienced significant people in their lives as unsafe and untrustworthy and their 'tough' behaviour reflects their, albeit harmful, way of managing this. In lives marked by experiences of powerlessness, controlling and hurting their peers through their bullying behaviours, mirrors their

own experiences and is an attempt to feel powerful.

Becks, when encouraged to reflect on her behaviours in a youth justice residence, connected with new peer networks, and was 'adopted' into another family/whānau due to these new social connections. Eric's narrative indicated that he never felt as though anyone in his life had tried to understand his issues, until his stepfather came into his life. For Eric, the timing and combination of abuse in his family/whānau, the absence of supportive peer networks, and his unaddressed challenges, contributed to his ongoing vulnerability.

Some young people in the study had to take responsibility for caring for members of their family/whānau at a young age (Dewhurst et al., 2014a; Urry et al., 2014) and this resulted in them disconnecting from school and subsequently losing their peer networks. Many went on to experience future struggles in being able to connect with same-age peers. Parentification is associated with the onset of a new responsibility in a family/whānau system, which while it may foster competency in children and young people, in the long term, can compromise and interfere with their own developmental processes; such as their capacity to form close, prosocial peer relationships (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Burnett et al., 2006).

In the next narrative Trent describes these types of experiences when his father went to prison for abuse, influencing a deterioration in his mother's mental health. Trent became her primary caregiver. He describes the impact this had on his education and peer relationships:

> *Trent: I did not really have a social life. I had things I had to do and sort out. I had to take care of the household.  Had to sort everything pretty much. Might have used to try to have friends*

*but yeah…. Mum had quite bad depression and anxiety. She was quite unwell. So I was pretty much looking after her and me since a young age…I had quite a lot of time off school- which is pretty much why I'm at [alternative education]. Because when you have that much time off at school by the time you go back to school it's like an alien concept, so I didn't really fit in, started acting out a bit, so…I had no one to talk to. I don't really have mates, I just sort of like have people that if they walk past then I'll say: hey, how's it going? Quite a lot of people know me but I wouldn't say I have mates. I don't like people my age. They annoy me. Too immature. I get on better with older people.*

As Trent's narrative indicates, parentification, and the subsequent social isolation he experienced, was not conducive to fostering peer relationships and this impacted on his mental health (Barnett et al., 1998; Burnett et al., 2006; Dewhurst et al., 2014a). Trent developed depression when he entered high school, and his continued absences hindered his capacity to connect with the school environment and his peers. His caregiving role restricted his opportunities for developing positive relationships with his peers. While being able to form prosocial relationships with adults is known to be protective for vulnerable youth (Kroll, 2010; Ungar, 2004; 2013), for Trent, not being able to connect with his same age peers at school, created additional risks. He continued to be absent from school because being there contributed to his feelings of social isolation. In addition to missing out on the friend and peer relationship opportunities school provides, Trent also fell behind in his education.

Eric, Rowan, Becks, and Trent's narratives show that stressors in the family/whānau can have an impact on young people's social development, resulting in difficult, acting out behaviours, which inhibits their ability to form positive peer relationships. Struggling to form relationships with same age peers can compromise young

people's mental health and their acting out behaviours compound their social isolation, limiting potential access and opportunities to form peer relationships.

## *'The wrong crowd'*

The transition to high school involves navigating new relationships, negotiating the shifting contexts of peers and adjusting to new school cultures, and responding to the expectation that young people will effectively utilise resources in the educational environment. Successful management of these complex processes by young people typically brings with it meaningful peer connections and involvement in mainstream educational culture (Fredricks et al., 2004; Phelan et al., 1991). For many of the young people in this study, entering high school brought with it connections to 'the wrong crowd'; often older peers engaged in risky behaviours who drew young people away from school. Many young people said that their educational disengagement and challenging behaviours were in part due their involvement with 'the wrong crowd'. At times, these peers were involved with or on the periphery of gangs. While not all young people progressed from associating with 'the wrong crowd' to joining a gang, they all had similar vulnerabilities. Young people were more vulnerable to the influence of harmful peer networks if they had experienced troubled relationships at home. When family/whānau relationships are a source of difficulty, young people often seek to compensate for these relational deficits in  peer relationships; young people's unmet needs for family/whānau acceptance and belonging can make them vulnerable to connecting with peers who have also experienced challenges, and who the young people feel understand them.

Young people in the study who gravitated towards 'the wrong crowd' had often felt powerless in many areas of their lives, and had

developed behavioural issues, such as aggression, often connected with being exposed to bullying peers and violence in their caregiver environments (Finkelhor, 2008). These experiences reduced their capacity to manage complex peer relationships (Benner & Graham, 2009; Phelan et al., 1991). Furthermore, many youth in the study became involved with 'the wrong crowd' to occupy their time when they had disengaged from their education.

In the following narrative, Sally expresses regret about connecting with 'the wrong crowd' when she started high school. Sally had a difficult background, and struggled to separate herself from peers who had experienced similar challenges and were engaged in challenging behaviours:

> *'Cause all the people in that bad kid group that I was with in College, they are all not in school now. Looking at it now it's like, and then I saw all the [not 'bad kid'] group, they have left school now they have finished their year, 7th form. So I am like if I had of stayed in that group I would have passed, they would have helped me too, they had already helped me in 3rd form, like the first, second day. So I sort of looked at that, and thought shit, if I had stayed with them, if I had of stayed with them through College, I would have been at Uni. I would have actually wanted to stay in school. But then I chose the wrong group, so that's what I am now, and my sister is 3rd form now and so I am trying to push her into the 'good kid' group.*

Sally identified that when she started at high school she had been vulnerable to becoming involved with 'the wrong crowd' and recognised that her life may have been different if she had chosen a different group and stayed at school. Sally regretted her involvement with 'the wrong crowd' recognising that her educational disengagement had created limitations for her vocationally; as Sally

highlights: 'If I had stayed with them (the 'not bad kids') I would have been at Uni and I would have actually wanted to stay in school'.

Joel also discussed the influence of 'the wrong crowd' during his transition into high school. Joel's mother had died when he was a baby and this impacted on him and his older siblings; they moved multiple times between family/whānau members and were in and out of, often emergency, foster care. Joel and his siblings all went on to experience a range of challenging behaviours. Joel noted that he had struggled with his behaviour, having a 'short fuse' in response to conflict. When he entered high school, he was vulnerable to the influence of his peers:

> *Oh I started wagging from the first week of college. I suppose 'cause I didn't like the school and my mate showed me that I could do it and get away with it and then I kind of just got addicted to it. And I just never went. You know from the first day that I wagged it was constantly and I used to smoke pot when I first started that ...I think half the time why I wagged is 'cause I got into a rut-hole wagging, you know. And it was very hard to get back into school. Like at primary I never missed a day. Even though I did get teased sometimes I still never missed a day, I just didn't think about wagging, I didn't think there was such a thing as wagging, you know.*

In the next narrative, Hine, who described being 'a good kid' at primary and intermediate school, found the transition to high school difficult. Due to her desire to 'fit-in' she was vulnerable to involvement with 'the wrong crowd':

> *I was a good kid at primary and intermediate but starting high school wasn't easy. I kind of went to the wrong path when I first started 'cause I was in a new form class where I didn't know*

*anyone...So I kind of started following the girls in my class. I got into alcohol, like drugs, wagging, fights and stuff. I was getting into those types of sort of things.*

For Sally, Joel and Hine, the desire to fit in influenced their connection with 'the wrong crowd'; here the norms of the group often involved under-valuing academic success and encouraging involvement in harmful behaviours. Joel's narrative reveals the powerful influence of 'the wrong crowd' on school disengagement; he had never thought about, or knew how to truant until he met this friend. He indicated that the influence of his peers resulted in a tenuous situation for him and his extended absences from school made it difficult for him to reconnect with his education.

In the following narratives, Steph and James discuss the ongoing consequences of their involvement with 'the wrong crowd':

> *Steph: Other kids outside of school started to hear about what I was doing at school [drugs, fighting and shoplifting] and they were picking on me because of it.*

James had attended several high schools due to his challenging behaviours and discussed the issues that associating with 'the wrong crowd' created for him:

> *James: I changed high school three times. I had to meet different people all the time and that was real hard because you have to get to know people and it is always the bad people you get to know first, they are hanging out looking for new people. Yeah...I think I stuffed up school 'cause of the wrong crowd. If I had good mates then it wouldn't have happened, but it is just if you have got bad mates then it is over. You get known, and the good kids avoid you, they think, 'he is a bad kid'. They won't*

*hang out with you.*

Steph's and James' narratives show that young people's connection with 'the wrong crowd' has consequences. Steph and James highlighted that by becoming associated with 'the wrong crowd', other young people did not form relationships with them due to the perception that they were 'bad kids'. They felt constrained by their 'bad kid' status. As Steph highlights, she was teased by young people from outside of her school for her harmful behaviours which contributed to her feeling 'trapped' by her 'bad kid' status. James was aware of the harmful influence of his association with 'the wrong crowd', and that they were likely to target him when he changed schools. James was vulnerable to connecting with 'the wrong crowd'; as this was a peer group he was familiar with, and each time he changed schools, he faced potential social exclusion, so having the immediate attention and acceptance from 'the wrong crowd' was a way to alleviate this. However, this became a challenging cycle for him, he experienced difficulties in separating himself from these friends and making new social connections because as he said: 'the good kids avoid you'.

For some young people involvement with the 'the wrong crowd', where they sought belonging and acceptance, led to gang membership. While many youth expressed regret about their connection with 'the wrong crowd' and went on to leave these peer groups, some youth described their challenging behaviours with their peers as 'necessary' for attracting the attention of gangs. For these youth, belonging to a gang was meaningful and a forum in which their harmful activities (i.e. offending and fighting) were recognised and valued. However, some of these youth described wanting to end their involvement with the gang so that they could stop offending and using drugs, but faced social isolation as a consequence of this. In the next narrative, Warwick, who had life-long exposure to abuse

within his family/whānau, and described multiple occasions when 'I got the bash so bad that I thought I was gonna die'. He had chosen to live on the streets, because this was safer than living at home. He disengaged from school when he was twelve and started offending as a way to survive. His offending brought him to the attention of older, gang-related peers. He discusses that the group of young people he was involved with, explicitly sought the attention of gangs:

> Warwick: But when I was 12, when I was 12, I started smoking dope and drinking, started smoking dope and drinking 'cause I wanted to be like the other boys on the street, walking around all cool and gangsta and stuff.
>
> Interviewer: Were you in a gang or just in a group of kids?
>
> Warwick: I was in a group; that is what you needed to be in to get into a gang. And then I started drinking, drinking, cabbaging like you do your first time. Thinking you are real cool 'cause you are drunk and stoned, doing all that and then get arrested for doing that. Just drunk in public or drunk and disorderly, get arrested, taken home and I kept doing that and then I started getting used to drinking and smoking dope and then I stole my first car. I stole; 'cause I used to, at the same time I used to break into cars and take their stereos, their speakers, their money. I used to take everything; I was 12 and I stole my first car.... to get into [a gang] you have to show them what you are capable of and, by the time I was fifteen [the gang] already heard of my rap; robbing people, taking cars and all of that so I was | recruited.

Warwick's narrative shows that when vulnerable youth have experienced challenges in their family/whānau, gangs can 'tap into' their need for belonging, attention, acceptance and resources (Joe et

al., 1995). For youth who have few positive and meaningful relationships with peers and adults, who have disengaged with their education and are looking for somewhere and someone to belong to, the attention from gangs meets their need for a sense of achievement (i.e. as a skilled offender) and belonging. Furthermore, Warwick saw gang membership as meaningful 'cause I wanted to be like the other boys on the street, walking around all cool and gangsta and stuff'. The criminal behaviours that Warwick engaged in were meaningful in a gang, and he continued with criminal behaviour in order to maintain his membership in the gang.

Saul grew up with family/whānau violence; his mother and stepfather struggled with drug addiction and there were times in his childhood when he had to take care of himself. Saul experienced difficulties in his education, disengaging in year nine. He came to the attention of youth justice services for aggravated robbery with his peers when he was fourteen.  He discusses how the gang appealed to his need for love, attention and belonging:

> *Interviewer: You now you were 11 years old, and the gang members were attractive to you because like you said they showed you respect and love.*
>
> *Saul: Yeah.*
>
> *Interviewer: How did they show you?*
>
> *Saul: By like buying me clothes, buying me food, buying me [electronic goods; drugs] what I want so that I can feel good.*

For young people, like Saul, who have experienced negative attention or inattention from their caregivers (Hill et al., 1999) the attention of gangs can make them feel 'special'. Part of this was receiving material

items that elevated his status in his community, as these goods were often expensive and coveted. This conveyed a powerful message and provided him with some of the attention that he longed for; that is, that he was special and important to them and that if he continued to participate in the group and do what they wanted, he too could have status.

In the following narrative Tama, who was removed from his family/ whānau at age seven due to care and protection concerns, describes his childhood, family/whānau and peer relationships as being interconnected with and on the periphery of gangs. At the time of his interview he was in a youth justice residence:

> Tama: I remember when I was close to joining [a gang] I was about three months away from getting into [a gang]. To join [the gang] this is what everybody does, they go to meetings- sometimes it is every night. I helped one of my best mates join-he has been in there for a few years now. See like he might be in the gang but he is still trying to uphold the family/ whānau thing. He has a family. So when the gang comes over, he'll tell them no drugs.

Although Tama did not become involved with the gang his narrative shows that young people negotiate peer networks that on the one hand, may encourage harmful behaviours, but also offer meaningful group membership. Tama also indicates that while he may have found the idea of being part of a gang meaningful earlier in his adolescence, this changed. His narrative also shows that he is sensitive about the reputation that gangs can have; discussing how his gang-involved friend is different, and tries to counter the influence of some of the gang's harmful behaviour, by not allowing drug use in his house. Young people like Tama, whose peer relationships can involve some form of connection with a gang, may have few options

to choose from and consequently find it difficult to resist gang membership. Tama described an inevitability that he will be connected with a gang through his close friendships, indicating how embedded youth can be in challenging peer networks.

In this narrative, Warwick, who wanted to draw the attention of gangs through his offending behaviours with a group of peers, discusses the conflictual process he went through when he was 'recruited' into a gang:

> We knew [the gang] so that was all good until we caught up with the bigger boys... the boys that had bigger reputations than us and they go to me and my mate: "Shall we rob the [shop] eh?" And then I was like: "Ah I don't know, I don't know I'm a bit busy tomorrow". And then they were like: "No let's do it now, let's do it now, straight, hard and fast, come on bro". And I was like: "I don't know". Fuck and then um they were like: "All good bro we will see you two years later". See if you say no or something they think you are dropping the [gang] or something and then I mean people just to hear: "Ah he is a pussy" you know and yeah so I said: "Let's go then" and we ran in and then they stand outside the shop covering their face up and I was like: "Whose going in to do the shopkeeper over?" And they were like: "Nah I'm not, I'm not" and I was like: "Eh whose going to do it, I ain't". And they were like: "Just go do it" and I was like: "Nah fuck off I already came along bro I ain't doing it". And they're like: "Hurry up just go do it bro, think of what we can get out of it". And then I went in the shop and I just did what I had to do.

Warwick's narrative reveals that he was on a knife edge concerning where his offending behaviours were going to take him; this was his first serious offence. Warwick said that he was initially very reluctant to get involved, but was afraid of losing his street credibility if he did

not participate. When presented with the very real prospect of committing a violent armed robbery to join the gang, Warwick hesitated. This indicates that young people do not necessarily understand the consequences of gang involvement, they are drawn into wanting a 'gang identity' because they want to belong and be 'powerful' but this desire for power and a meaningful identity involves participating in harmful, life-changing activities. Warwick was placed in a high security youth facility following the robbery, and further on in his narrative he discussed that he was 'probably' going to get back with the gang when he got out. Warwick envisioned going to adult prison one day 'I already have mates in prison eh...you go and do your time for the gang'.

Some of the young people who could not access support and meaningful and safe peer relationships resorted to drastic measures to move away from 'the wrong crowd' and gangs. In the next narratives, Kiri and then Vanessa discuss the strategies they used to remove themselves and alleviate harmful peer situations:

> *Interviewer: What precipitated moving you from the school? What did you do at the school or what did someone else do...*
>
> *Kiri: Well I was being bullied and I'd sort of just start wagging and then when I told [the school] why I wagged they just didn't do nothing. So my parents just pulled me out..when I was still thirteen...Then I went to [another high school] where I ended up getting excluded 'cause I mixed in with the wrong crowd.*

And Vanessa:

> *Vanessa: Oh, I hated primary school 'cause I used to get teased all the time so I'd stay home every day.The teachers did not help 'cause they didn't know how to I guess 'cause it's gunna happen,*

*every kid is going to get bullied in their life time. Back then that made me angry and like I think that's where I became suicidal. High school was kind of the same and by then everyone had learnt how to fight and so when I went to college they were like 'oh yeah remember that time where we used to pick on you' but I got smart and threw it right back. I had two fights and then I got, I can't remember if I got kicked out or if I just stopped going. But if a teacher or someone at school had tried to help me I would have stayed.*

Kiri and Vanessa did not have access to appropriate support when they were being bullied and truanting from school. They both initially disengaged from school as a way to manage difficult peer experiences. Kiri went on to connect with 'the wrong crowd' at her new school. She connected with peers who also truanted, potentially because she understood these behaviours and by participating with the group, she could experience a sense of belonging. Kiri's prior experience of being bullied influenced why she went along with the difficult behaviours of her new peer group; she would rather be included than experience social isolation (Gifford-Smith et al., 2003).

Vanessa said that if someone had tried to address her challenges at school then she would have stayed. She did not transition successfully into high school, her isolation from school-connected peers continued, and she associated with older peers who were disengaged from school and she started using drugs and alcohol. Her caregiver, who Vanessa described as "letting her do whatever she wanted", died when she was twelve. Vanessa then spent a large part of her adolescence in care and protection and mental health residential facilities. She had no connection with supportive and prosocial peer relationships and extended adult networks. Furthermore, due to growing up without rules and boundaries and her prolonged absence from school, she struggled to adapt to

environments where there were rules and boundaries. To regain a sense of control over her life, Vanessa regularly ran away from foster carers and residential homes. While 'on the run' her central means of forming peer relationships involved engaging in harmful behaviours.

Keishia who had become involved with 'the wrong crowd' at school, was then excluded for drug dealing and became connected with gang-involved peers. She discusses the strategies she used to remove herself from the gang:

> I dropped out of school and then mum kicked me out and so I started living with these people who got me into P. We like were always high and then we got involved with [a gang] there would be stand overs about owing drug money and stuff and at some stage these older gang guys would come over and give me P. I was so high all the time that I did not care about myself so yeah.... I hit rock bottom and called mum. I was crying so bad 'mum I have really messed up' and I felt so bad because of what I had done and put her through... so I went home and locked myself away pretty much now I don't go out anymore except with my mum and my aunt even then I am scared I will bump into them and they would be like 'let's hang out' but you know, I think it would be ok if I did but I dunno.

For Keishia, the only option that she had to leave the gang was to isolate herself from this peer network, but this offered no guarantee that she could successfully stay away from these peers and not be drawn back into their harmful behaviours.

In the next narrative, Leanne discusses being 'born into a gang family' and how this influenced her relationship with her peers, insofar as they saw her through the same lens as her family/whānau and the expectation that she participate with this peer group. While

Leanne was involved with youth justice and attending an education programme, she tired of the gang's expectation that she continue to participate in harmful activities:

> Leanne: The fact that I'm known as a gang member's daughter it's got a lot of pressure on me and everyone's got high expectations and heaps of girls that don't know what it's really like, they think it's cool and they wanna be like me. And I was like 'nah you don't want to' the things that you see and experience through all those years is something that you just don't want to go through. I'm not in the [gang] right now just kind of still involved because my other ex-partner he's in [gang] as well. Yeah he just got his patch and he's only 17. His dad's in [gang] and his dad raised him so hard, it's like he's got no hope.

> Interviewer: Were you still with the gangs when you were with [youth programme]?

> Leanne: Yep, It made it harder 'cause I'd get texts to say 'oh I've got a hit you gotta do'. It was like an order if I didn't do it I'd get a hiding. Like gang members would text me, and I have to leave the class because if I don't answer it they'll get really mad so I'd just have to excuse myself and leave the room, go outside and answer it. I'd go 'but I don't want to' and he goes 'well you've got no bloody choice girl'. I got pretty sick of it eh.

Leanne's narratives shows the presence that gangs can have in young people's lives, in their family/whānau and broader community. Leanne described the challenges and conflict she experienced through her connection with gangs. While Leanne said that she was not involved in gangs at the time of her interview, and resisted becoming involved in their risky activities, the expectation that she still participate is clear in her narrative. Leanne's family/whānau and

wider community were involved with, and on the periphery of gangs and she risked social exclusion if she did not accept 'gang life' (McGloin, 2007; Portes, 2000).

Many young people in the study risked social isolation and the threat of harm if they left harmful peer networks. Vulnerable young people often have to make very difficult decisions to end harmful peer relationships, such as isolating themselves from their peers, but this strategy is not usually sustainable (Sanders et al., 2014b). Youth who socially isolated themselves from their peers as a way to reduce their involvement in harmful behaviours, experienced risk reduction in the short term, however prolonged social isolation created a new range of risks, such as poor mental health and without support to build new social networks, the strategy of social withdrawal was not successful in the longer term because withdrawal on its own does not produce the alternative positive relationships that young people need in order to thrive (Sanders et al., 2014b).

## *Youth Offending*

Offending was a common experience for the young people in this study, often precipitated by connecting with 'the wrong crowd', gangs and disengaging from school; as discussed in the previous section. Many young people have contact with the police or justice system at some point during their teenage years. The Ministry of Social Development notes that "while about 30 per cent of young people are apprehended by the Police at least once, only 1 per cent of all young people become chronic offenders" (Ministry of Youth Development, 2008, p. 6). Similarly, the Ministry of Justice reports that the majority of offending by young people is minor and short term; nearly half of all known offences committed by young people are considered to be of minimum seriousness and, in recent statistical reports, the number of young people being charged in the

youth court is noted as declining (Ministry of Justice, 2013; 2014; Stevens et al., 2013).

According to Sampson and Laub's (1993; 2005) life-course theory of crime and delinquency, people are more likely to become involved in offending when their bond to society is impaired. For vulnerable young people, their connection and sense of place with society may be marred due to several factors.  Many have experienced multiple challenges and/or disruptions in their family/whānau, caregiving relationships and education and as a result display challenging behaviours that make it hard for them to form prosocial peer relationships (Dewhurst et al., 2014a; Sanders et al., 2013; Stevens et al., 2014b; Urry et al., 2014). Furthermore many youth who offend have experienced structural disadvantages that compound these challenges. They may have grown up in communities impacted by poverty, experienced racial discrimination, internalised negative stereotypes about their cultural group and lack a meaningful connection with their culture (Denny et al., 2004; Joe et al., 1995). These difficult experiences can contribute to their feelings of alienation and being an outsider.

Young people who did not have access to protective relationships, either within their own family/whānau and/or through their peer networks, who were disengaged from school and  connected with 'the wrong crowd' and gangs, were more likely to become involved in offending behaviour, often coming to the repeat attention of youth justice services (Urry et al., 2014). Through offending, they had access to resources (material/relational) and having a 'bad' identity made them feel powerful. This identity affirmed their place in their peer network.  These peer networks could be volatile, and unsafe; the young person and their peers would often cause each other harm by encouraging dangerous and risky behaviour (Berzin, 2010; Müller et al., 2013).

Kui described how she drifted into offending when she was excluded from school for drug possession, had nothing to do during the day and started associating with older peers:

> I was excluded from school and doing correspondence. But I wasn't really doing much, like my days got so boring. That all I could think of was just trouble. Like be drinking, and stuff like that, and stealing, going up town and stealing stuff. I had nothing to do with my days and having nothing to do with my days made me meet a whole different crowd of people a lot older than me.

While Kui's offending led to youth justice involvement she continued to engage in offending with her peers. Kui went into a youth justice residence to address her offending, where she started working on the wider issues in which her offending was embedded, such as her peer relationships and disconnection with school (Dewhurst et al., 2014a). When Kui finished the programme, she identified that she would like to return to an educational environment so that she could get space from 'the wrong crowd' and get back on track with her education. With the help of her social service provider, Kui was connected with an alternative education centre, where she achieved her educational goals.

Leilani had disengaged from school and started hanging out with peers involved in offending. She discussed her views on offending:

> Leilani:  I sort of kept on doing the youth justice thing at the time, but kept on getting into trouble, because I was like, I didn't really care at the time.  But now it's like, don't want to do that

*anymore 'cause once I get older I won't be doing a FGC[3] it will be court and then jail. My older brother, went through worser things than what I been through [gang involvement and jail] and I don't want to go through that stuff.*

*Interviewer: What influenced you to sort of go down that path to get in trouble or?*

*Leilani: I hung out with the wrong people. I thought it was cool, it's alright now 'cause I know it aint.*

Leilani's narrative shows how vulnerable young people are at risk from being targeted and recruited into harmful behaviours by peers. At certain times in young people's lives, for example when they do not successfully transition into high school, they are more vulnerable to the influence of peers involved in risky behaviours. As Leilani's narrative highlights, as young people grow up, they often start to see the consequences of associating with friends who encourage challenging behaviours. In Leilani's situation this meant not wanting to end up like her brother who continued to offend and went to adult prison when he was eighteen.

Sean had been exposed to years of parental drug and alcohol abuse, criminality (drug dealing, burglary and family violence), physical abuse and neglect in his primary and extended family/whānau. He discussed his entry into offending:

*Sean: Me and [friend] were stealing heaps of shit from school*

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3  The Family Group Conference (FGC) is at the heart of the New Zealand youth justice procedures. An FGC is a restorative justice process, bringing together the young person, victim(s), family/whānau and practitioners to foster accountability and resolution around the young person's offending. FGC's are both a pre-charge mechanism to determine whether prosecution can be avoided and also as a post-charge mechanism to determine how to deal with cases admitted or proved in the Youth Court (The Ministry of Justice, 2014).

*like on a daily basis. Ah we'd wag every assembly pick the locks
to each classroom and go through people's bags. I'd give it to
[another friend] to put on [online trading site] and so we're
selling stolen goods for quite a bit stealing people's wallets, like
it was really stupid and sad. Me and [friend] one day we got
done for burglary. Like he was my little theft buddy and we were
just going around stealing all sorts of shit. And um like the cops
snapped me so I blamed it on him 'cause I knew he had a prior
burglary conviction. So I was like: "Yeah sweet I'll get away with
it. I don't need a criminal charge preventing me getting a job,
he's already got one so whatever, stuff like that".*

Sean's friendship revolved around offending. Like many peer
relationships, their mutual behaviours and activities provided them
with an identity; in this case, as skilled, prolific offenders. Along with
their offending, there appears to be no prosocial aspects to their
relationship; as Sean highlighted: 'I'll blame it on him... and I'll get
away with it' rather than take responsibility for his part in the
offending.  The antisocial dynamics of offending behaviours pervade
this peer relationship; the harm they cause through their offending
extends to the harm that they cause each other.

Most young people in the study did try to leave the peer relationships
that were associated with offending and they frequently recognised
that these peers did not care about them (Urry et al., 2014). Sean was
sentenced to a youth justice residential programme and this helped
him learn how to stop his offending. It also enabled him to re-engage
with his education. When Sean exited the programme he relocated
to another city, identifying to his social worker that he needed to stay
away from the harmful influence of his peers, so that he could 'keep
on track' with the changes that he had made.

In the next narratives, Ben and Johnny discuss addressing their drug

and alcohol use and offending while involved with youth justice. However, on discharge they found it difficult to remove themselves from peers who continued with these harmful behaviours:

> *Interviewer: So how is the alcohol and drugs going?*
>
> *Ben: Not very good. I am trying, but it is really hard eh when the bro's around me do it. I mean they are like 'oh come on bro, just have one bro, just have one sesh' so nah not good. And I go 'it is on my plan' and they go 'oh what a girl, you have changed' and I am like 'nah I haven't bro'.*

Johnny, who had attended a rangitahi residential programme to address his offending and drug issues, describes the influence his peers had on his risky behaviours:

> *I was doing probably the best I have ever done at the course. I was feeling good, fit as, healthy as and then I dunno I caught back up with somebody from yeah back in the day and got back on the drugs and started smoking crack again. They were a bad influence but I wouldn't blame it all on them, it was my doing as well.*

Tamati, who had also attended a rangitahi youth justice residential programme, discusses the influence of his peers on his behaviours:

> *Tamati: The boys used to come over even though they're on the other side of town. They always used to come over and kick back for a little bit and then take off back to their house. And just feel like doing something so went out, go smash people, rob people's houses. Now I know that it's not right but at the time I was just in for the adrenaline rush, I was only young just tryna have fun with the other boys too.*

*Interviewer: Is there anything you worry might stop you from getting to where you want to be?*

*Tamati: Something that would stop me from getting ahead – probably going back to [hometown] all the boys are there. I'll go see them again and just get drunk, go do something stupid and end up back in here [youth justice residence] again. Yeah. Oh I want to go to [a town] first get into that routine of actually work and coming back, and work and then they can come down visit.*

Young people who have experienced Rangitahi Court and rangitahi programmes have reported improved attitudes and behaviour and shown responsibility for their offending and its impact on others (The Youth Court Aotearoa/New Zealand, 2014). The findings from the current study support this; Ben, Johnny and Tamati report that they made positive changes to their behaviour when they were involved with youth justice services, however, they identified that their peers would not be supportive of these changes when they left these programmes. Tamati identified that going back to his community at the end of the programme would make it difficult for him to keep on track with the positive changes he made. He decided that moving in with family/whānau in another town and being in a regular routine through work would potentially keep him on track, and then he could manage seeing his peers. However, when Tamati's peers came and visited him, within a few days he had offended with them again.

### *The role of peer relationships for transient youth*

Young people often become transient and homeless when they leave difficult home environments. Their experience is that adults are unsafe and untrustworthy and they come to rely on the support of other peers, some of whom may be negotiating similar circumstances (Auerswald et al., 2002; Kidd, 2003; Rice et al., 2008). For young

people who have chosen to live rough due to fragile and difficult family/whānau circumstances, their peer connections and close friendships move beyond the sharing of experiences, such as school and socialising, to finding resources for basic survival (Johnson et al., 2005).

Shane had experienced significant adversity in his family/whānau and had chosen to live rough when he was fifteen rather than cope with the stressors at home, such as family violence, neglect and abuse. His peers and close friends helped him and gave him somewhere to sleep and also connected him with services:

> *Some of the people I met on the streets and some mates I was staying with helped... my mate yeah I stayed with him and his family for a bit he knew about [a social service for homeless people]. Oh I just told him that I didn't want to live with my family anymore and then he was like, sweet as, just come and live with us. So I stayed there for a bit. And that's when I went to [a social service] ...but that was the last place I stayed at... I mean I've slept at schools and bus stops and bushes and I've slept at one other, two other mates' houses in [various suburbs].*

Shane's peers and friends helped him find the resources he needed to re-engage with his education and find stability. Shane spoke highly of the support provided by his friends and their family/whānau. He also talked positively about several youth-focused social services that he was connected with for several years; they helped him to reconnect with his education and complete NCEA Level One and Two.

Shane noted that he had always been independent but that he was supported by his friends. His difficult childhood meant that he had 'grown up fast' hurtling him into independence at a young age and his close friends understood this and responded to his needs

(Cunningham et al., 2013; Kearns, 2013). For many transient youth, their friends (and peer networks) provide them with basic resources to help them survive and while this support does not guarantee that the transient young person will then make changes, providing basic resources is often a good place to start, and at times the only place to start.

Charlene also talked about the support she received through her peer networks when she had nowhere to live. Charlene had run away from home, where she had a difficult and at times abusive relationship with her mother and her mother's new partner. Charlene was reported as a missing young person by her caregiver, and services tried to locate her. Due to her drug and alcohol issues, Charlene was connected with peers who also evaded the attention of the authorities. At one point, Charlene had moved in with her boyfriend, which turned out to be another challenging environment so she subsequently left and started living on the streets. As a result of living rough, Charlene had developed a bronchial infection, a common ailment for people who live rough (Bender et al., 2007). Charlene describes being taken in by a peer of her ex-partner after she fell ill:

> *But anyway my [ex-boyfriend] had a mate, who had two kids and she asked him where his girlfriend was one day and he said: oh she's sleeping in the bush. And she was like: oh well bring her here…. and like she took me to the doctors and that day I got better and she just let me live there.*

The peer who took in Charlene, although helpful, turned out to have a range of her own challenges. Charlene lived at this friend's house for several months, but then went on to recognise that this situation was also harmful:

> *Charlene: I was enjoying it at first eh, like I was just like*

*constantly wasted and looking after her kids, but like I didn't find anything wrong with it 'cause I was still only fifteen...after a while I saw it wasn't good... 'cause of the people coming and going all the time, the drugs eh it was pretty messed up.*

*Interviewer: So this was not a cool place for these kids - at all?*

*Charlene: Yeah, but like, 'cause the kids were used to it so I was just like: oh yeah. But I wouldn't do drugs in front of kids now, but 'cause her kids were used to it I was just doing it anyway... But yeah, she got them taken off her anyway. She's not fit to be a mum eh yeah there's something wrong with her eh. But at the start yeah I appreciated it heaps that she'd taken me in.*

Charlene and Shane's narratives highlight the vulnerable worlds of transient and homeless young people and the role played by peers and close friendships in assisting them to access resources. Transient young people's survival on the streets is improved if they are connected with other transient youth (who can teach them survival skills) and other informal peer networks that support them, for example houses where they can 'couch surf' (Auerswald et al., 2002; Bender et al., 2007; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). The support Charlene's peer provided was on the one hand positive (taking Charlene to the doctor) but it also had its own set of risks. Charlene evaded the police, used drugs regularly, and her peer was also involved in harmful behaviours.

As Charlene's narrative shows, transient young people may not have protective peer and adult relationships, so they are more vulnerable to connecting with peers, particularly older peers, who offer some form of, albeit misguided, support and role modelling (Auerswald et al., 2002; Capaldi et al., 1996; Crockett et al., 1996; French & Dishion 2003; Müller & Minger 2013; Patterson et al., 1992; Wilkinson 2004).

Vanessa and Shannon talk of bereavement, upheaval and rejection in their family/whānau that precipitates their transience:

> Vanessa: When I was 13 I ran away to [a city] for a little while and I used to prostitute…just like 'cause when you get hooked on drugs that's all you wanna do is drugs….I just started meeting this online [peer group]…, to be honest it's all young men on there you know and all they want is sex. And that's how I made money….and then I found one guy that, didn't ask for anything you know I fell in love with him, he's now my baby's father [laugh] and I stayed with him for about eight, seven and a half months. So I also had somewhere to stay.

Shannon discussed a sexual relationship that began when she was thirteen. Shannon had a transient childhood, her family/whānau moved regularly and when Shannon started high school, she started hanging out with 'the wrong crowd'. This involved acting out, truanting, using drugs and running away. Shannon was exposed to harm through her involvement in a relationship with another young person connected to one of her friends:

> I think I was about fourteen when I stopped going home. I stayed at friends and then I started going out with this guy [name] he was actually my friend's older brother and he, pretty much all he wanted was sex from me. I pretty much moved in with him and his family. Then his dad offered me money to sleep with him. …I was in a really bad place, like I felt as though I no longer cared about myself.

Vanessa and Shannon's experiences reveal the vulnerabilities of transient young people; they may enter intimate partnerships for survival, and may be more likely to find themselves in unsafe circumstances. Shannon describes this partner as expecting sex from

her all the time, a potential transaction insofar as this 'kept the relationship together' and provided her with somewhere to live. Like many transient youth, they were vulnerable to sexual assault and exploitation (Walker, 2002). The young men who paid Vanessa for sex and Shannon's partner and his father were breaking the law (sexual acts with a minor) (*The Crimes Act,* s134, 1961).

Many young people in the study were transient because family/whānau care arrangements had not worked and the move between caregivers and schools was disruptive. The resolution was to take charge themselves by running away. As the narratives highlight, the common option young people chose to gain some control over their difficult circumstances, was to run away.  However, for many transient young people, their survival decisions often involved engaging with peers who were also involved in risky behaviours.

### *Friends' knowledge of the challenges vulnerable young people face*

The following section explores young people's narratives and the extent to which they confided in their close friends. This reflects the knowledge and insight that close friends often have of young people's risks and challenges and points to the potentially valuable information they hold for professionals who work with vulnerable youth.  In the following narratives, Jenny and Linda describe confiding in friends:

> *I started drinking and stuff when I was eleven, and I stopped when I was fifteen.  And I told my friend about the drinking. 'Cause she was my best friend at the time.... I felt like she should know. It just sort of came out one day 'cause I was just sort of sick of no one knowing. No one in my family knew. Not at the time.  I mean my sister knows now but it's not something I want my family knowing about.*

And Linda:

> *Interviewer: And if something happened if you were to ah get involved in something now, who would you turn to for support.*
>
> *Linda: Well my friend.*
>
> *Interviewer: Do you feel comfortable talking to your family?*
>
> *Linda: Oh, not really just like my sister and one of my good friends.*

Jenny and Linda highlight how young people's close friends are often their key confidantes, potentially more knowledgeable concerning vulnerable young people's challenges than their family/whānau and other key adults. In the study we found that friends, who young people chose to be interviewed as their 'person most knowledgeable' (PMK) scored youth in similar ways to youth themselves on most of the individual risk scales (i.e. delinquency, depression) indicating that those closest in age and social status to youth may have a better understanding of youth lives than other groups around them (Sanders et al., 2014a).

In the next narrative, Grace, who had been assaulted as a child and had disengaged from school as a way to cope with ongoing emotional and psychological distress, was encouraged by her close friends to talk to her mother about what had happened and how this influenced her challenging behaviours:

> *Grace: Um I was raped when I was a child and I only just confessed to my mum that's what happened to me. That's why I had heaps of stuff bottled up which also didn't help me. It just made me not wanna go to school and just be home all the time.*

*Interviewer: So you told your mum at the beginning of this year, so people have been able to help you now?*

*Grace: Yeah that's right. I got counselling and I'm just getting on with my mum a lot better. I just feel way better that I actually let it out...a lot of things helped me tell my mum; people, close friends and stuff like that told me that I need to tell my mum and I would feel way better.*

*Interviewer: They gave you the confidence to do that?*

*Grace: Yeah 'cause before that, I only told [friend] and she promised that she wouldn't tell my mum until I was ready to tell her.*

Grace's close friends supported her; they listened to her and they encouraged her to talk to her mum about what had happened and to seek help. Jenny, Linda and Grace's narratives support what is known about young people's support seeking, they often choose friends as their key confidantes (Hallett et al., 2000; O'Donnell et al., 2004). The reasons for this are varied, and touch on normative developmental and socialisation processes of adolescence, which may become maladaptive if the young person has experienced challenges in trusting and connecting with key adults. Young people may have disclosed their issues and harmful behaviours to adults in the past and this may have caused conflict and distress, but no resolution of their difficulties (Gilchrist et al., 2006; Kroll, 2010). Furthermore, young people who have experienced abuse in the family/whānau are more likely to tell their close friends and similar age siblings out of fear of not being believed by their caregivers, shame and being blamed for 'breaking up the family/whānau' (Allnock et al., 2005; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003). Disclosing challenges to friends is a safer option as friendship does not necessarily pose the threat that

they may 'get into trouble' with their family/whānau for revealing abuse, and face family/whānau upheaval through a series of affirmative actions, such as formal investigations (Butler et al., 1994; Gilchrist et al., 2006; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003).

## Changes in peer relationships

Changes in young people's harmful peer networks and friendships, such as choosing to leave these relationships, the onset of a new intimate relationship, and pregnancy and parenthood, can influence changes in their behaviour (Urry et al., 2014). For young people who had access to prosocial peer networks, leaving harmful peer networks and friendships were often handled well, and they made positive changes to their behaviour as a result of ending these relationships. Other young people made positive changes in their behaviours when they entered intimate partnerships. This partnership reinforced the positive changes young people were already making on their own, while for others intimate partnerships resulted in further vulnerability, such as abuse, social isolation, and mutual encouragement of harmful activities (for example, offending and binging on drugs and alcohol). Several young people made changes in their behaviour due to the advent of parenthood. For these youth, pregnancy and parenthood altered the landscape of their peer relationships, as well as their connection to family/whānau and the adult world by providing them with access to a new identity as a parent.

### *Changes to peer relationships as a way to cease harmful behaviours*

In an attempt to reduce their harmful behaviours several of the young people in the study left peer relationships and friendships. The successful navigation into new peer groups, involved the young person's personal, and external resources. For example, access to

and the ability to create prosocial peer relationships and friendships. Young people described the strategies they utilised to leave 'the wrong crowd' and harmful friendships, revealing the importance of having access to other peer networks.

In the following narratives, young people discuss their decisions to leave harmful peer groups and friendships and how this influenced their behaviour. Jenny, who had several prosocial friendships from her past involvement in a sports club and youth group, discussed why she left a group of risky peers, highlighting the resources she was able to utlise to do so:

> Jenny: It was like maybe the start of last year. I would have been nearly sixteen.  And I had just sort of gotten into a really, really bad patch of just drinking a lot and smoking a lot of pot. But I think a lot of it had to do with just some of the people I knew and I was quite easily influenced. ...then I started talking with  a friend I'd had when I was younger that I was best friends with and we had kind of drifted apart a bit- she didn't like the friends I had that were doing all the bad stuff...
>
> Inteviewer: How do you stay away from it if they are in your neighbourhood?
>
> Jenny:  I've just decided really I can't be bothered with them.  I don't really want to hang out with them anymore 'cause you know the dramas that goes with it. I just couldn't be bothered with the drama and like I feel really bad saying it and I don't mean it in a horrible way  but they just really weren't going anywhere.

Jenny explained how she had carefully navigated her way out of these relationships:

*Interviewer: How do they handle the fact that you're withdrawing a little bit from them?*

*Jenny: Oh I get called a "snob" quite a bit. Oh it's sort of like: oh you're too good for us now. I just try and make out that it is not that 'I don't want to hang out with you anymore', I just go: 'no, I'm busy, I'm busy'. Now it's just gotten to the point where I don't really hear from them that much now.*

The start and ending of peer relationships often signals that young people want to change their behaviours and explore different identities. As Jenny's narrative shows, having access to prosocial peers provides valuable support as young people move away from challenging peer relationships. In the following narrative, Liz, who described herself as a bully and a tough kid at intermediate, decided that she wanted to change these behaviours in high school and changing peer groups and choosing her "real friends" was a way to support her decision:

*Liz: I came more nicer towards the end of high school. I think it is 'cause I realised that life's too short to be a little rat bag. I had to start choosing my real friends. Different friends than the ones that got into trouble.*

*Interviewer: How did you do that 'cause the other friends would have got really annoyed with you?*

*Liz : Well they didn't really like it that I was hanging out with the other friends that were not getting into trouble but they got over it in the end, they found more people to get into trouble with.*

*Interviewer: And that came at a time that you were ready to*

*make some changes?*

*Liz: Yep.*

Liz and Jenny were both resourceful at navigating their way out of these difficult peer relationships. They made the decision to change their behaviours and connect with new peers and the conviction to make these changes came from the realisation that their peers and behaviours were harmful. Jenny and Liz identified that these peers were not "their real friends", recognising that a "real friend" would not want you to get into trouble. They were also fortunate in that they had other peer relationships and friendships they could draw on to help them with this process of disengagement.

Johnny had struggled with drug use and attended a youth programme to address this. This programme also helped him remove himself from the negative influences of his peers:

*Johnny: Yeah, it was sort of hard, oh it wasn't as hard as what I thought it would be to get out of that hole, sort of you know I fell in a little hole, but there was a ladder on the side to get out.*

*Interviewer: What helped you out of that?*

*Johnny: Looking in the mirror and seeing that I was losing weight. And starting to get all skinny and that 'cause of the drugs... I was like 'this shit again'. So I was like nah. I changed my number and I never ever text those friends ever again. Got out of that drug circle, stopped playing that game and just went back to course... And stayed off the drugs ever since. I just kept trying to get further and further through courses. After this one I am thinking about doing one at [a university]... I have also got back into my sports... as soon as I started boxing again, I don't*

*know, I just took off from there, just never looked back never really got back into the scene. Like I still see people around all the time that are like in that circle... I just don't get into the stuff that they get into anymore.*

Johnny's decision to leave his peer group and stop using drugs was prompted by fear for his health and wellbeing. While Johnny did not say that he connected with another peer group to help him make changes to his behaviour, his connection to the training course was potentially a link to a peer group environment that supported safe behaviours. Re-connecting with his education provided him with the physical space he needed to remove himself from his peers and stop his harmful behaviours. His days were taken up with his training, not drug use, and he was no longer available to his old peer group. This connection was valuable for Johnny, who had limited access to extended, protective family/whānau and peer networks in his immediate environment.

In the next narrative, Maria discusses a cognitive change that accompanied her decision to leave friends that 'do dumb stuff':

*I don't really like my friends anymore. They are not mature enough. They are like back in the old days, like they haven't stopped doing the dumb stuff. Robbing cars and stuff. I have no time for them anymore...My new friends, I have got time for them. They are down to earth; they know what's wrong and what's not. They are not stupid....I have grown apart from my old friends. It is hard, when you see them and they want you to be the person you used to be- that you are not anymore. It is hard to tell them how I am now because they are like 'oh you are not the person that I knew'. I find it quite amusing too that they are still like that. Like they freaked out and laughed when they saw my learners licence. Like 'why do you need that [laugh] to*

*drive the car?'...I said 'if you were smart you would have got one too'.*

As Maria's narrative highlights, when young people make positive changes to their behaviour and want to stop participating in harmful behaviours with their friends, they often face the threat of social exclusion (Sanders et al., 2014b). Maria explained that it was hard to tell her old friends about the positive changes she had made. Rather than be supportive, they made fun of her achievements and invalidated the positive changes she had made by saying "you are not the person that I knew". What is supportive for these young people is having access to peers and activities that reinforce personal achievement, as well as the ability to recognise that the friendships they are exiting are no longer beneficial for them. As Liz highlights: "I had to start choosing my real friends" and Maria: "they are not mature enough..they are still doing dumb stuff". These narratives are self defining; by saying that they are no longer like their old friends, they effectively position themselves in a new light, mature and capable of having prosocial, "real" friendships.

### *Intimate partnerships*

In the study we found that young people's intimate partnerships often played a key role in fostering prosocial behaviours as well as encouraging antisocial behaviours and at times creating additional vulnerabilities in the young people's lives (Urry et al., 2014). Young people's intimate partnerships could also be about survival, as transient and vulnerable youth often entered intimate partnerships to have somewhere to live, and to connect with, albeit often risky adults, to substitute for family/whānau involvement in their lives.

Vulnerable young people have been found to place more emphasis on their intimate partners, entering sexual relationships

from an early age and facing a greater risk of early entry into parenthood than young people who do not confront high levels of risk (Capaldi et al., 1996; Crockett et al., 1996; Ellis et al., 1999; French et al., 2003; Müller et al., 2013; Patterson et al., 1992; Wilkinson, 2004). This is thought to be due to vulnerable young people having unmet emotional needs within their caregiver relationships, low parental monitoring and experiences of abuse and neglect in their family/whānau (Capaldi et al., 1996; Ellis et al., 1999; Williams et al., 2008). Due to these factors, young people may seek comfort from intimate partnerships at a younger age than young people from less adverse circumstances.

In this study, intimate partnerships could influence young people's desistance from harmful behaviours, fostering positive behavioural change and providing a forum for the young person to 'get space' from and leave harmful peer groups and friendships (Urry et al., 2014). However, changes in intimate partnerships were also stressful and could trigger a range of challenging behaviours, such as drug and alcohol abuse.

Vai's partner had a positive influence on his behaviour; she helped him keep on track with the changes he made while he was involved with youth justice services:

> *Interviewer: So is there anything about your life that has been particularly helpful for you, with trying to get going with your life?*
>
> *Vai: Yeah, my missus. She just like keeps me out of trouble. I probably would have been in way more trouble without her. If I hadn't of met her, I was on that road. Like when I was at the youth justice course, I had just met her at the end of that. And I was starting to get into hard shit again with the bros and then*

*when I met her I just turned up to course with her. Instead of going out and getting into trouble... All of the bros need misuses and she is like my best friend.*

The importance of maintaining this relationship was a key factor that influenced changes in Vai's behaviour, helping him end his involvement in harmful behaviours with his peers and get back on track with his youth justice programme. The influence that intimate partners have in fostering important change is significant, and while it may be ideal that young people choose to cease harmful behaviours due to their own internal processes, it is also important to recognise that young people may be able to access and utilise these internal resources because of the positive support from others in their immediate network.

In the following narrative, Coral describes how an intimate partnership was initially positive and gave her space from friends who were a bad influence on her. However, her partner became abusive and isolated her from her friends:

> *I moved to [a town] to be with [partner]. It was good at first 'cause I needed to get space from my best friend who was a bad influence but then [partner] said I wasn't allowed any friends at all 'cause apparently I might cheat all the time which is just rubbish... Now that I look back, I know it was wrong 'cause it was pretty abusive. He used to beat me up and then someone called the police in...then my friend came and got me and took me back home.*

Coral moved towns to be in this relationship as she wanted to have space from her close friend and change her harmful behaviours. However, Coral's partner was abusive and after the police became involved she contacted her friend, who she initially wanted space

from. Coral's 'best friend', who at one time had been a source of harm, encouraging her to run away from home and truant from school, then acted protectively by helping her leave the abusive relationship. This supports what we know about young people's challenging close friendships; while the risks of being involved with them can be high they are also important, bringing protection and emotional support. Depending on the social networks, strategies and resources the young person has access to, losing friendships can at times, cause as much harm as maintaining them (Sanders et al., 2014b).

Renee was transient for a large part of her childhood, sleeping under bridges and struggling with mental health issues. She was brought up by her father, who she described as someone who was always "huffing solvents". As a child, Renee moved between multiple family/whānau and unrelated adult households. When Renee entered adolescence she re-connected with her mother who had children with another partner. Renee did not feel that she belonged in her mother's 'new' family/whānau.

Renee connected with gang-involved and drug-using peers when she was 13, and subsequently struggled with her addiction throughout her adolescence.  Renee reported that even though a new partner influenced her decision to stop using drugs and to leave the gang, as soon as that relationship ended she started engaging in harmful behaviours again and reconnected with her old peer group:

> Then I met my boyfriend, my ex-boyfriend, and he was also a big part of me changing and stuff "cause he was like "you can have your drugs and your gang life or you can have me".  And I was like "okay, I'll have you".  So when I turned 17 and like the last couple of months were sweet but then we broke up like two months later and my family kicked me out of their house just

*two months ago and I didn't know what I was going to do. So I stayed with this chick and her Mum and they were both junkies so you can gather what happened. I got back on the drugs. I was still working and stuff, started smoking P again, hanging out with gang members. But then I had enough of that because that's when I started taking days off work and stuff because of coming down. So I was like, I needed to stop, I can't do this any more.*

When relationships end, young people draw on the social and personal coping resources resources available to them and also the coping strategies they have used in the past. For example, Renee had experienced hurt and multiple challenges in her family/whānau relationships over her lifetime; she initially used drugs and alcohol to self-medicate and remove herself from her painful experiences and feelings. When her relationship ended, she turned back to drugs and peers involved in these activities as a way to manage.

Intimate partnerships provided opportunities for some young people to change their harmful behaviours; the partnership involved leaving challenging peer networks and this helped them focus on their education.  For some it meant maintaining the positive changes they had made while they were involved with youth justice services. For others, leaving difficult friendships and entering a new intimate relationship posed a new set of risks, such as becoming involved in a potentially controlling and abusive relationship. The fluctuations of intimate partnerships also reveal the fragility of the changes made by these young people as when the relationships ended, they reverted back to, or connected with peers and friends who engaged in harmful behaviours.

## *Pregnancy and parenthood*

Some young people in the study discussed changes in their friendships as a result of pregnancy, their own as well as their friends. The ensuing responsibility for another life often led to the decision to change their behaviour. A few young people, who were not pregnant but had close friends who were, participated in their friends' new behaviours, such as, staying at home and immersing themselves in running the household with their family/whānau and no longer associating with friends' who were involved in drug, alcohol use and offending.

Sally had been excluded from school for violent behaviour and drug dealing and recognised that her close friends had influenced her difficult behaviours. Two of her close friend altered their behaviours when they became pregnant; they no longer 'partied' and their new activities focused on the onset of motherhood that is, attending teen parenting courses and occupying a new space, the home, in preparation for the birth of their babies. Sally discusses participating in these new behaviours:

> Interviewer: What about your friends, what are your friends like? What do you do with them?

> Sally: I have sorted of changed my group of friends since [youth justice programme], like I sort of hung out with Isabelle but now she is real naughty and stuff. We have gone our separate ways 'cause there used to be like four of us all the time. 'Isabelle' is sort of still doing what she was doing, partying sort of thing and 'cause she has always known that I have been the home person. I don't drink every day like she does. I spend more time with Liz and Carla. …Isabelle has sort of drifted and separated from all of us. And both Liz and Carla are pregnant and so now I am

*looking at the future, what I want to do, 'cause they already got their future in their tummies.*

Although Sally was not pregnant, maintaining membership with this group of friends was meaningful to her. Sally's friend who "has sort of drifted and separated from all of us" was involved in behaviours that Sally no longer wanted to participate in. As Sally highlights, she has always been a "home person" and the pregnancies of her friends, gave her justification for retreating from her friendship with Isabelle, and no longer "partying". Sally's friends now have "got their future in their tummies" and Sally's narrative reveals a longing for her to have a future too.

Sue had been neglected by her caregivers as a child and had been involved regularly with services since she was five. She became involved in drug and alcohol use and offending with her peers from the age of twelve, before finding out that she was pregnant when she was sixteen. Sue ceased her harmful behaviours with these peers in response to her pregnancy:

> *As soon as I got pregnant I just stopped smoking, stopped drinking and hanging out with my mates...yeah that's the only thing in my life that's helped. Well I have a baby inside me. A very good thing. If I didn't get pregnant I'd still be out drinking in the streets with the others, getting arrested...I was getting arrested 3 or 4 times a week.*

Many youth cease their involvement with peers when they become pregnant, and while this is protective in the short term, the young person may re-connect with peers involved in harmful behaviours after the birth of the child. Early parenthood is often associated with multiple stressors and poor outcomes for both parents and children. This is often due to the young age of the parents; their own difficult

attachment experiences with their caregivers; and limited financial and material resources. Unmet emotional needs can become problematic and exacerbated by the expectations and demands of parenthood (Corcoran et al., 2000).

In the next narrative, Vanessa, describes the experience of having her first child when she was fourteen. Vanessa had a difficult history, her mother had died shortly after she was born, and she was abandoned by her birth father and brought up by her grandfather. Vanessa disengaged from school due to challenging peer relationships, and connected with older peers, and started abusing drugs and alcohol. After her central caregiver died when she was twelve, Vanessa began a pattern of running away from family/whānau and foster caregivers, living rough and staying at older peers' houses. These peers taught Vanessa survival strategies that involved criminal activity. At age thirteen, Vanessa ran away to a new area of the country and met the father of her child through these peer networks. They both engaged in harmful behaviours:

> *I got pregnant when I was fourteen, I'm seventeen this year. I came out of hospital and went to my aunts but she expected me to look after her kids too. I was stuck in the house all alone with the kids and had no one helping me. I got real depressed and soon after [baby] got taken off me...then I started drinking and doing drugs again 'cause I didn't think about the six months ahead (Vanessa could have unsupervised access to her child, as part of her FGC plan if she had shown an improvement) and then I went and committed a crime. I was just off my face. I was off my face with my partner at the time and just thought 'hey, fuck it my life's over' when really I, if I had have known then what I know now I would have been more than happy to wait 6 months 'cause now I have to wait forever. Oh 'cause now I'm not allowed him back. Maybe if I'm stable in the next five years*

*maybe I will get him back. If I'm not well then it will be up to him. It will be up to him if he says: 'I'm going to live with mum' then he'll come. Even then I might not be stable.*

Vanessa had few touchstones regarding positive, enduring and prosocial peer and adult relationships. Her narrative shows that having challenging family/whānau relationships, no prosocial peer supports and being connected with a partner involved in harmful behaviours, contributed to her inability to care for her baby.

In the next narrative, Bella discusses how her friend's pregnancy changed their relationship. Her friend made changes to her lifestyle, ceased partying, and due to her young age, was connected to a social service for other young mothers. Bella and her friend's lives diverged at this point and subsequently they drifted apart:

*Interviewer: Oh I was just wondering about [friend's name], you say you are not talking at the moment, is that because she is busy with the baby, or something else?*

*Bella: We probably don't see each other, because she goes to [teen parent school] and I go to [high school] and now she has kind of got her own friends from [teen parent school] so it is kind of like, I have kind of like lost her in a way but then she must have been thinking that when she had a baby and she was at home, sitting at home and I am off with my friends and with my life, like it is her losing friends too, but I am making new friends as well.*

Pregnancy and parenthood often altered young people's close friendships. The responsibility of having a child influenced short-term changes in the young people's social behaviours, they stopped going out, drinking with friends and started preparing for parenthood

which took up their time. Once the child was born they then became immersed in the day to day routine and responsibility of being a parent. For other youth, the birth of their child brought about new challenges such as having a partner who engaged in harmful behaviours with them and no close friendships. This type of situation exacerbated, as well created new vulnerabilities. As these young people highlighted, pregnancy and parenthood altered their peer networks and friendships; they lost touch with friends, developed new peer networks where they could share and engage with social activities with other parents. Pregnancy resulted in turning away from drugs and alcohol, offending, and while pregnancy in itself did not guarantee the long term resolution of adversity; it did give young people quick access to a new identity, often a new peer group and access to social services (Corcoran et al., 2000; Stevens-Simon et al., 1996).

## DISCUSSION

The difficult and conflicting relationships many of the young people in this study experienced with key adults meant that they became more reliant on their peers and close friends for support. These friends helped them to build a sense of belonging and in many cases these friends provided basic resources such as food and shelter. Young people often found that their peers and friends 'understood' them better than the adults charged with responsibility for them. The range of unmet needs and difficult, often conflictual connections with their caregivers left the young people dependent upon peers and friends for emotional and practical support. These relationships frequently revolved around harmful and risky behaviours including truanting, offending and drug and alcohol use. These behaviours created additional challenges for the young people, such as educational disengagement and involvement with the justice system.
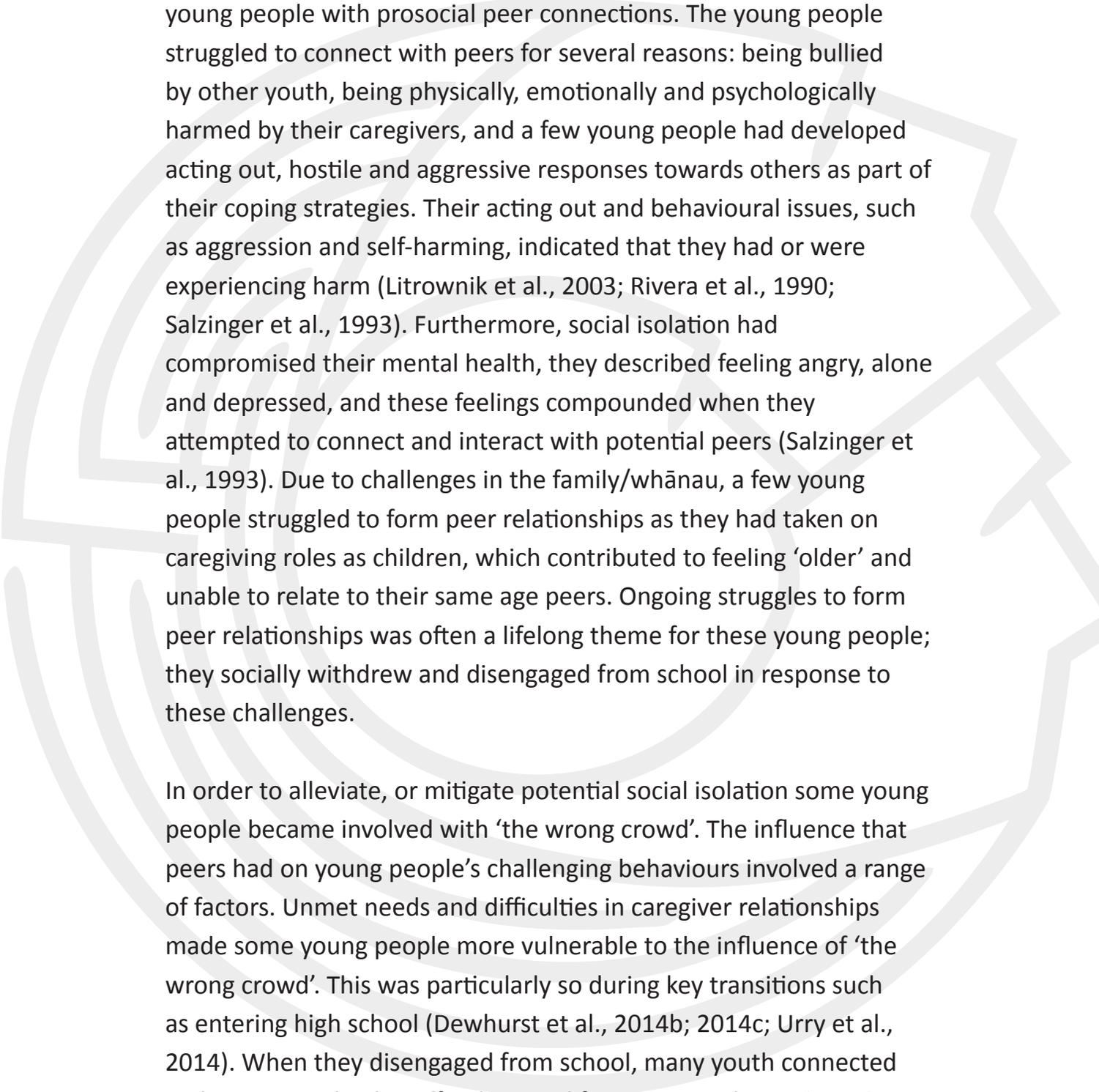
In the study, young people who experienced social isolation and found it difficult to form peer relationships, faced greater risks than young people with prosocial peer connections. The young people struggled to connect with peers for several reasons: being bullied by other youth, being physically, emotionally and psychologically harmed by their caregivers, and a few young people had developed acting out, hostile and aggressive responses towards others as part of their coping strategies. Their acting out and behavioural issues, such as aggression and self-harming, indicated that they had or were experiencing harm (Litrownik et al., 2003; Rivera et al., 1990; Salzinger et al., 1993). Furthermore, social isolation had compromised their mental health, they described feeling angry, alone and depressed, and these feelings compounded when they attempted to connect and interact with potential peers (Salzinger et al., 1993). Due to challenges in the family/whānau, a few young people struggled to form peer relationships as they had taken on caregiving roles as children, which contributed to feeling 'older' and unable to relate to their same age peers. Ongoing struggles to form peer relationships was often a lifelong theme for these young people; they socially withdrew and disengaged from school in response to these challenges.

In order to alleviate, or mitigate potential social isolation some young people became involved with 'the wrong crowd'. The influence that peers had on young people's challenging behaviours involved a range of factors. Unmet needs and difficulties in caregiver relationships made some young people more vulnerable to the influence of 'the wrong crowd'. This was particularly so during key transitions such as entering high school (Dewhurst et al., 2014b; 2014c; Urry et al., 2014). When they disengaged from school, many youth connected with peers involved in offending, and for some youth, participating in these activities was motivated by the potential of gaining gang membership. For these youth, 'the wrong crowd' and gangs became a

forum where they sought acceptance; participating in these behaviours was a way to 'belong' (Smith et al., 1995; Thornberry et al., 2005).

Young people in the study who connected with 'the wrong crowd' had very little control over how they were being treated and perceived, and when they wanted to leave 'the wrong crowd' they struggled to form relationships with prosocial peers because these peers perceived them as 'bad'. Their association with 'the wrong crowd' and being a 'bad kid' created barriers to their educational engagement and other peer networks. The young people's experiences with 'the wrong crowd' highlight that the transition into high school is often a crucial time insofar as the formation of peer relationships has long term consequences concerning their educational engagement. Furthermore, the young people discussed the lack of support for helping them to navigate the relational as well as academic challenges of high school.

Association with gangs met the young people's unmet needs for family/whānau acceptance and belonging. Young people who gravitated towards gangs, had often felt powerless in many areas of their lives and had developed behavioural issues, such as aggression, often connected with being exposed to bullying peers and violence in their home environments (Finkelhor, 2008). These difficult behaviours had attracted negative attention from adults throughout their lives, but took on a new meaning in the gang where they became acceptable. When young people talked of being embedded in gang peer networks, there appeared to be few opportunities and alternative peer networks that could support them and draw them away from the gang. Despite this, many young people expressed a desire to remove themselves  from gang life. This usually occurred when they were involved with youth justice, or reached a critical point with their drug and alcohol abuse or where they

recognised the potential consequences (i.e. prison) of their continued involvement with gangs.

Typically, involvement with 'the wrong crowd' and gangs involved criminal activities, and when they came to the attention of the youth justice system their peer relationships came under scrutiny. For many young people in the study, the consequences of participating in these harmful peer behaviours became undesirable and they expressed regret about their involvement with 'the wrong crowd' and gangs, often saying that they were young and impressionable at the time.

Young people in the study often engaged in interventions, changed their behaviour, and recognised the underlying reasons for their harmful behaviour when they were no longer associating with 'the wrong crowd' and gangs (Haigh, 2009; Sanders et al., 2014b; Urry et al., 2014). Young people in the study who were connected to youth justice services, Rangitahi Court and rangitahi targeted programmes all made positive changes to their behaviour, and expressed that the skills they learned, the personal development, and the peer connections they made while connected to these programmes were life changing.  The findings from the report on young people's experiences of Rangitahi Court and rangitahi programmes (The Youth Court Aotearoa/New Zealand, 2014) has relevance for the findings from the current study; young people who have been connected to these kinds of programmes report improved attitudes and behaviour and show responsibility for their offending and its impact on others (The Youth Court of Aotearoa/New Zealand, 2014). However, sustaining changes made in these programmes can be a substantial challenge and if they are not well supported, then young people face the risk of returning to old relationships and behaviours.

Many gang connected and youth offenders in the study expressed concern that they were not able to sustain the changes they had

made when they were discharged from youth justice programmes. The young people who had made positive changes when they were separated from their peers, did not appear to have plans in place as to how they would manage their peer relationships post-discharge and seek support to assist them to deal with these challenges. Young people reported that they need assistance and support when they leave these programmes.

In the study, youth became transient as a way to remove themselves from conflicted caregiver relationships; many had experienced prolonged difficulties in their caregiver relationships and their extended family/whānau networks had not been able to support them appropriately. The support transient young people experienced from their peer networks and friends, while providing important basic resources, like shelter and food, could also be harmful. Transient youth often struggled with drug and alcohol abuse, and were involved with peers' criminal activities, such as underage prostitution, offending and drug use. The combination of these factors meant that transient youth were reluctant to seek help, as their peers and their own activities were often illegal.

A few transient youth in the study were able to return to their family/whānau. For other transient youth, returning to family/whānau was not an option. The transient youth in the study who were connected with services in some capacity, were able to access support for some of their needs (i.e. education, food) however, they still relied on their friends for shelter. Furthermore, when the youth were evading services and authorities they were likely to turn to harmful peer networks, and engage in risky behaviours to survive. Transient youth have often 'taken charge' of their challenging situations by running away, and friends often emphasise mutuality and understanding of their need for independence and interdependence (Bernath et al., 1995). Practitioners who provide effective support to these youth

respond in ways that that do not threaten their independence, working towards building an interdependent relationship that can take care of their basic need for safety, shelter and food and help them address other challenges in their lives.

Young people's close friends often knew more about their issues than caregivers and practitioners and the reasons that young people chose to tell their friends rather than these adults provides important insights for practitioners to consider. In the young people's narratives, friends often kept the 'power to tell' in the young people's hands, offering to be their support person when they were ready to tell key adults their issues. Close friends also encouraged young people to seek help and connected them with services and practitioners who they had personally experienced as helpful (drug and alcohol counsellor; school guidance counsellor and alternative education provider). While it is not ideal and may be difficult for friends to carry knowledge of young people's challenging experiences, it is also not ideal that young people are reluctant to seek support from adults, especially when their harmful behaviours are reactive and/or are coping mechanisms in response to their issues.

Young people's close friends know that something is going on, often understanding and being sympathetic about the young people's difficult behaviours. However, adults asking young people's close friends about the young person's issues, without the young person's permission, could compromise the trust in the friendship, potentially setting in motion a breakdown and crisis in the relationship, creating new issues and vulnerabilities (i.e. social withdrawal and isolation) for the young person (Cotterell, 2007). Close friends were interviewed in this research when the young person nominated them as a Person Most Knowledgeable and in these cases close friends often identified the same level of individual risk that the youth self-identified (Sanders et al., 2014a). Close friends also encouraged youth to seek

help (Urry et al., 2014). There is potential for practitioners to work with the young person and their close friends, to better understand vulnerable youth's challenges and provide appropriate support.

As we have highlighted, while having good friends is protective and provides a safe place for many young people to share their issues, the reliance vulnerable youth place on their peers can be a risk. Over-reliance on these relationships can make youth more vulnerable when these relationships 'go bad', change and end (Cotterell, 2007). Furthermore, if friends are key confidantes they are also in a position to use young people's private information to harm them, by telling others who may then tease and socially isolate them. Peer relationships that were at one point a protective factor (close confidante) can then become equally harmful when the relationship changes.

Frequently, young people's friendships altered and ended when the young person recognised the harmful influence of peers on their behaviours and either exited the relationship or utilised strategies that made themselves 'unavailable', such as being 'busy' when contacted. Exiting these peer relationships was frequently described by the young people in the study as important and positive, but for many, the process involved a range of difficulties and risks, such as social withdrawal (Sanders et al., 2014b). For youth facing significant adversity, social withdrawal was an adaptive response to a difficult situation.  When young people in the study recognised the harm in their behaviours and wanted to change they often had to choose between continuing to associate with 'the wrong crowd' or having few/no friends at all. Young people's decisions to withdraw socially was a positive attempt at risk reduction, and a few young people were able to utilise compensatory strategies to fill the relational void, such as immersing themselves in a new intimate partnership, focusing on their studies or becoming parents. However, these

attempts were often not sustainable and presented new challenges of their own. In addition, the young people still had to cope with the impact of  losing important relationships with peers.

For some young people, intimate partnerships and entry into parenthood became a way to change their peer networks and find new identities, as a partner and parent. Being able to access a new identity and engage in the activities that come with a new role, can help young people exit difficult peer relationships and friendships and cease harmful behaviours (Kearns, 2013). For several youth, intimate partnerships and pregnancies resulted in a shift in the dynamics of their peer relationships and friendships; these changes provided them with opportunities and support to turn away from drug and alcohol abuse and offending.

Pregnancy can provide a significant motivation to stop using drugs and alcohol and in turn, stop associating with peers and friends involved in these activities. Intimate partnerships can also carry the expectation that the young person prioritises their partner over their peers and friends, and while this can be socially isolating, for some youth, it can also provide them with an opportunity to cease their involvement with harmful peer relationships. These youth left their harmful peer relationships to refrain from drug and alcohol use and became involved in activities (such as parenting classes) to prepare themselves for the birth of the baby.

Many young people in the study described their partners as a positive influence on changing their behaviours and as supporting them to disengage from risky peer networks and friendships; in these cases intimate relationships played a protective role. However, for some youth maintaining relationships with these risky peers was also paradoxically protective giving them an alternative source of support when the relationship became controlling and abusive. Although this

often meant the young person returned to harmful behaviours (drug and alcohol abuse) again their old peer group did often provide short-term options for them to move to a place of safety.

Although intimate partnerships and pregnancy did provide opportunities for young people to initiate positive changes these are not long term solutions for managing difficult peer relationships and friendships (Edin et al., 2011). The young people's narratives show that the short term strategies they utilised to change their behaviours and exit harmful peer networks, were initially protective, but had the potential to create a new range of difficulties for them (Sanders et al., 2014b).

## SUMMARY

Young people's peer relationships played a paradoxical role in their lives; peers influenced a range of harmful behaviours, such as offending and gang involvement, but losses in these peer networks could put young people at risk of social isolation and compromised mental health. Socially isolated youth reported depression, hostility and ongoing difficulties in connecting with peers. Transient young people's peers provided them with basic resources, such as shelter, but these environments often contained other risks, such as exposure to sexual exploitation and drug abuse. Close friends were often knowledgeable about the challenges the young people faced and were available when the young people needed support.

Young people often developed intense peer relationships in response to the challenges they had faced in their caregiver relationships, with over reliance on peers creating risk for the young people. Their esteem and sense of belonging came from being with friends who were involved in offending and risky behaviours. Young people were particularly vulnerable to joining 'the wrong crowd' at key transition

points such as entering high school. As they grew up they often saw the behaviours of 'the wrong crowd' in a new light. Most young people became involved in offending with their peers, and then went on to recognise that they no longer wanted to participate, and that these peers were 'not real friends'. This was a common response once they realised the consequences of educational disengagement and recognised the potential negative consequences of their offending.

Another group of young people who offended said that they were connected to a gang. They usually had experienced multiple challenges and issues in their family/whānau and some were homeless when they came to the attention of gangs because their 'street' lifestyle involved survival offending. Recognition of their capacity to survive on the streets was an important identity marker for them; they were street smart and knew how to survive and gang life appealed to their need for validation and belonging. Much like 'the wrong crowd' some young people decided that they no longer wanted to participate in gang life. Having access to meaningful and prosocial peer connections and supportive family/whānau and practitioners, made leaving the gang easier for these young people. Other young people discussed the complex role gangs had in their communities, and that 'rebelling' against the wishes of the gang, was like rebelling against the norms of a family/whānau and could, furthermore, bring serious risks to their safety.

The characteristics of young people's peer's networks and the young people's primary means of social support reveal the young person's strengths and vulnerabilities. Young people who experience challenges with their caregiver relationships are more vulnerable to connecting with 'the wrong crowd' when they enter high school. Offending youth have often disengaged from their education and are connected with 'the wrong crowd' and gangs. Transient youth seek
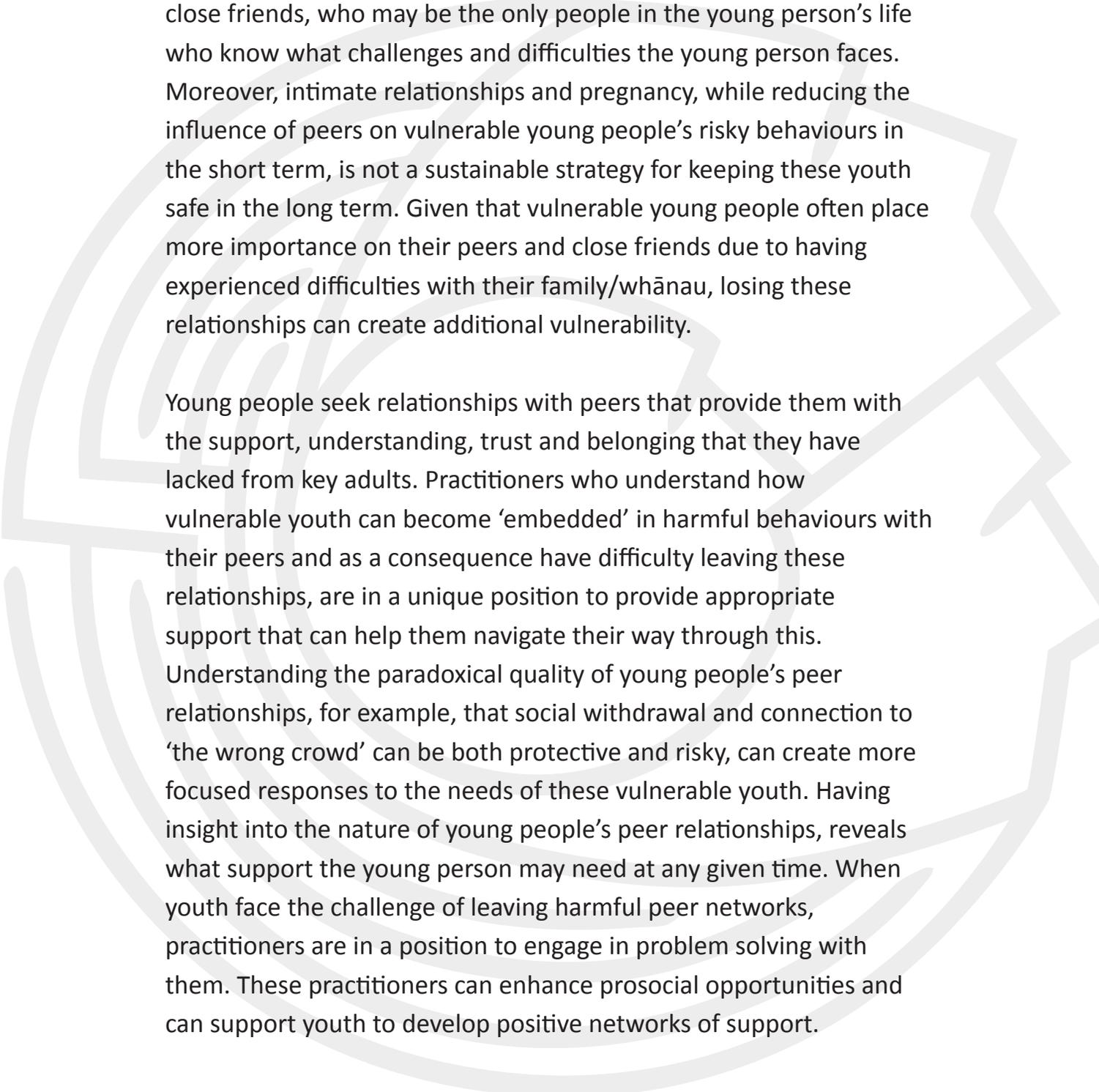
basic resources, such as shelter and food from their peer networks and close friends. Young people often confide their issues to their close friends, who may be the only people in the young person's life who know what challenges and difficulties the young person faces. Moreover, intimate relationships and pregnancy, while reducing the influence of peers on vulnerable young people's risky behaviours in the short term, is not a sustainable strategy for keeping these youth safe in the long term. Given that vulnerable young people often place more importance on their peers and close friends due to having experienced difficulties with their family/whānau, losing these relationships can create additional vulnerability.

Young people seek relationships with peers that provide them with the support, understanding, trust and belonging that they have lacked from key adults. Practitioners who understand how vulnerable youth can become 'embedded' in harmful behaviours with their peers and as a consequence have difficulty leaving these relationships, are in a unique position to provide appropriate support that can help them navigate their way through this. Understanding the paradoxical quality of young people's peer relationships, for example, that social withdrawal and connection to 'the wrong crowd' can be both protective and risky, can create more focused responses to the needs of these vulnerable youth. Having insight into the nature of young people's peer relationships, reveals what support the young person may need at any given time. When youth face the challenge of leaving harmful peer networks, practitioners are in a position to engage in problem solving with them. These practitioners can enhance prosocial opportunities and can support youth to develop positive networks of support.

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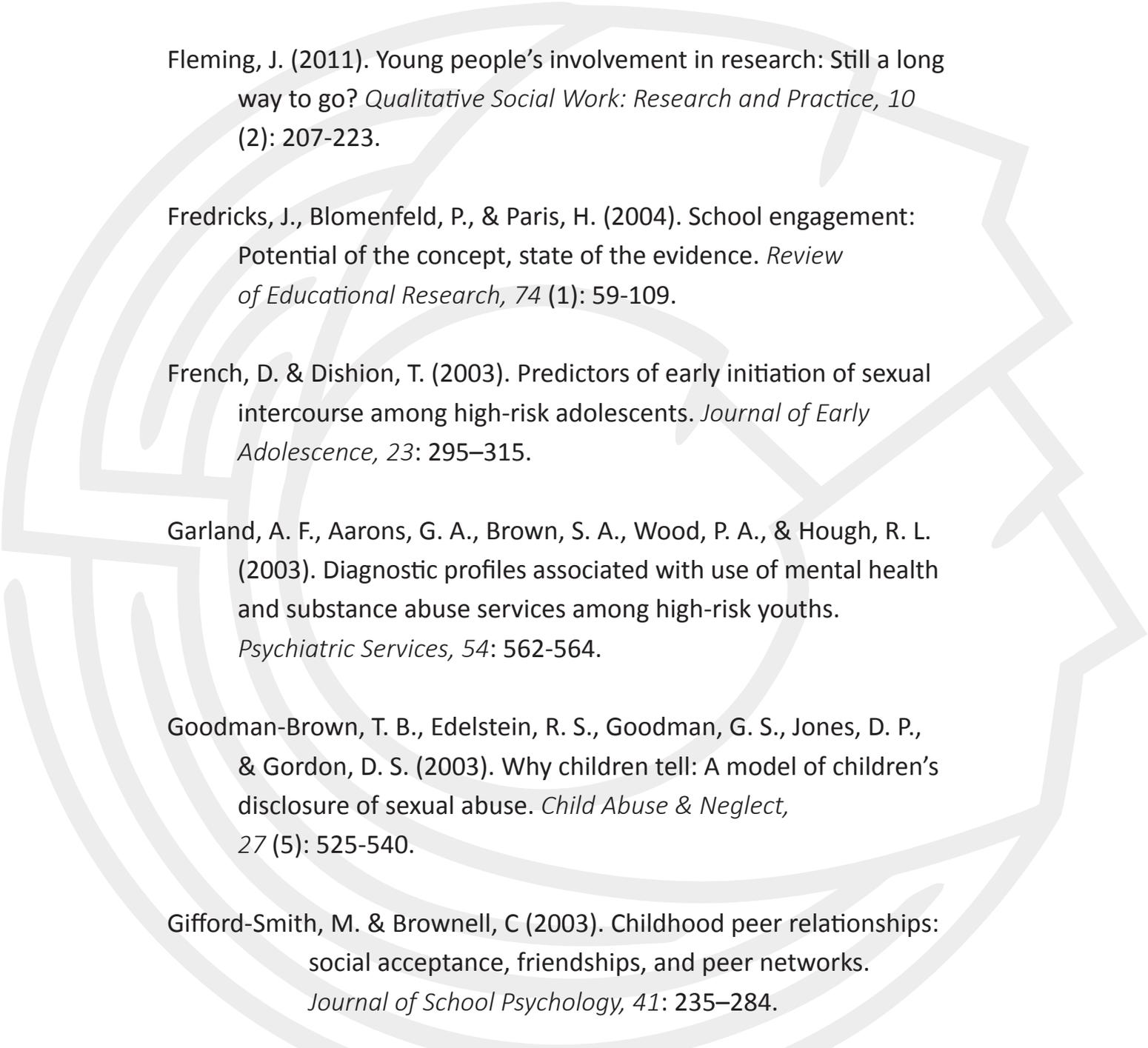
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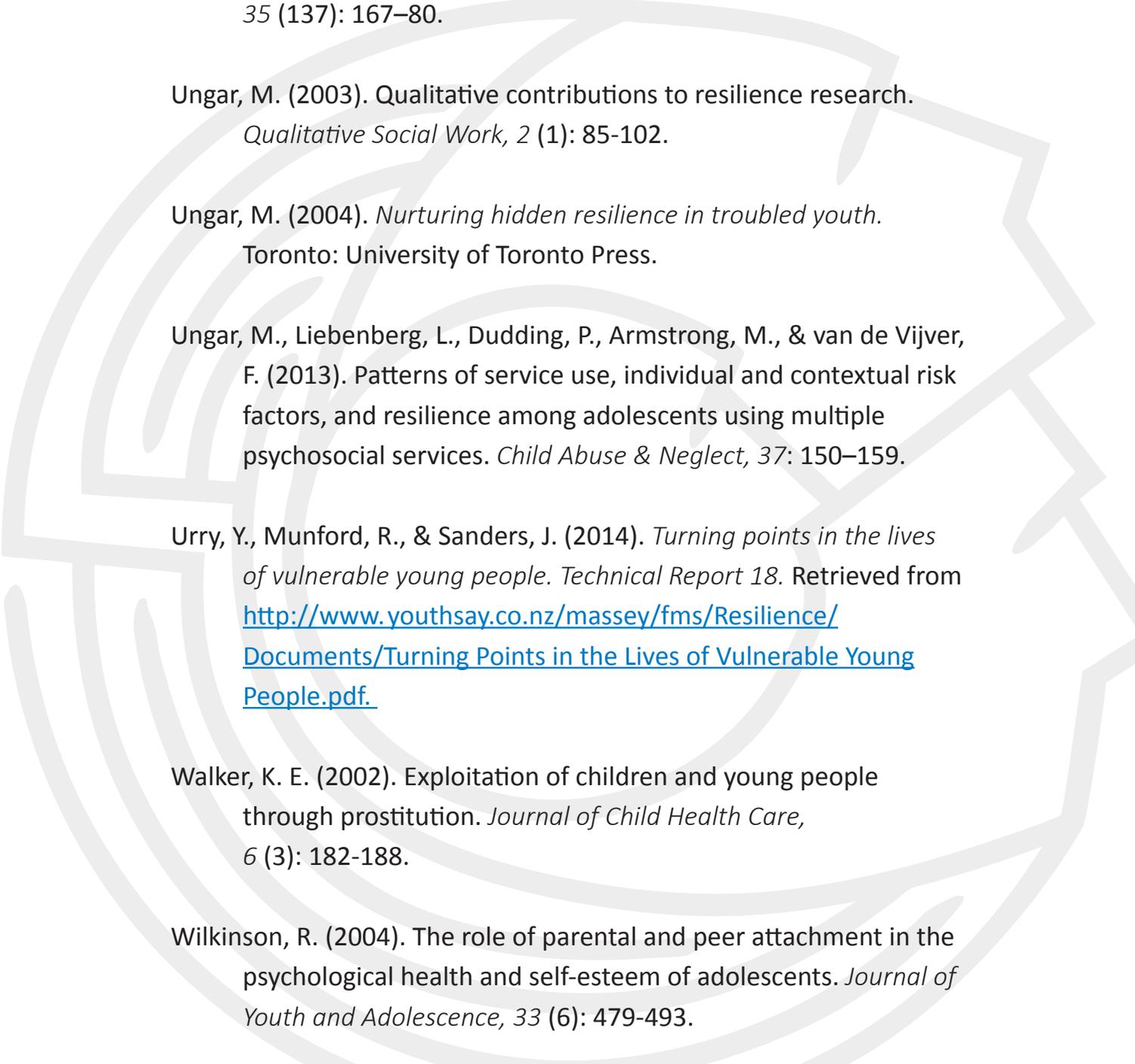
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