

The Pathways to Resilience Research Project (New Zealand):
Whāia to huanui kia toa

**Review and Analysis
of Case File Summaries:**

Report on Changes of Circumstances

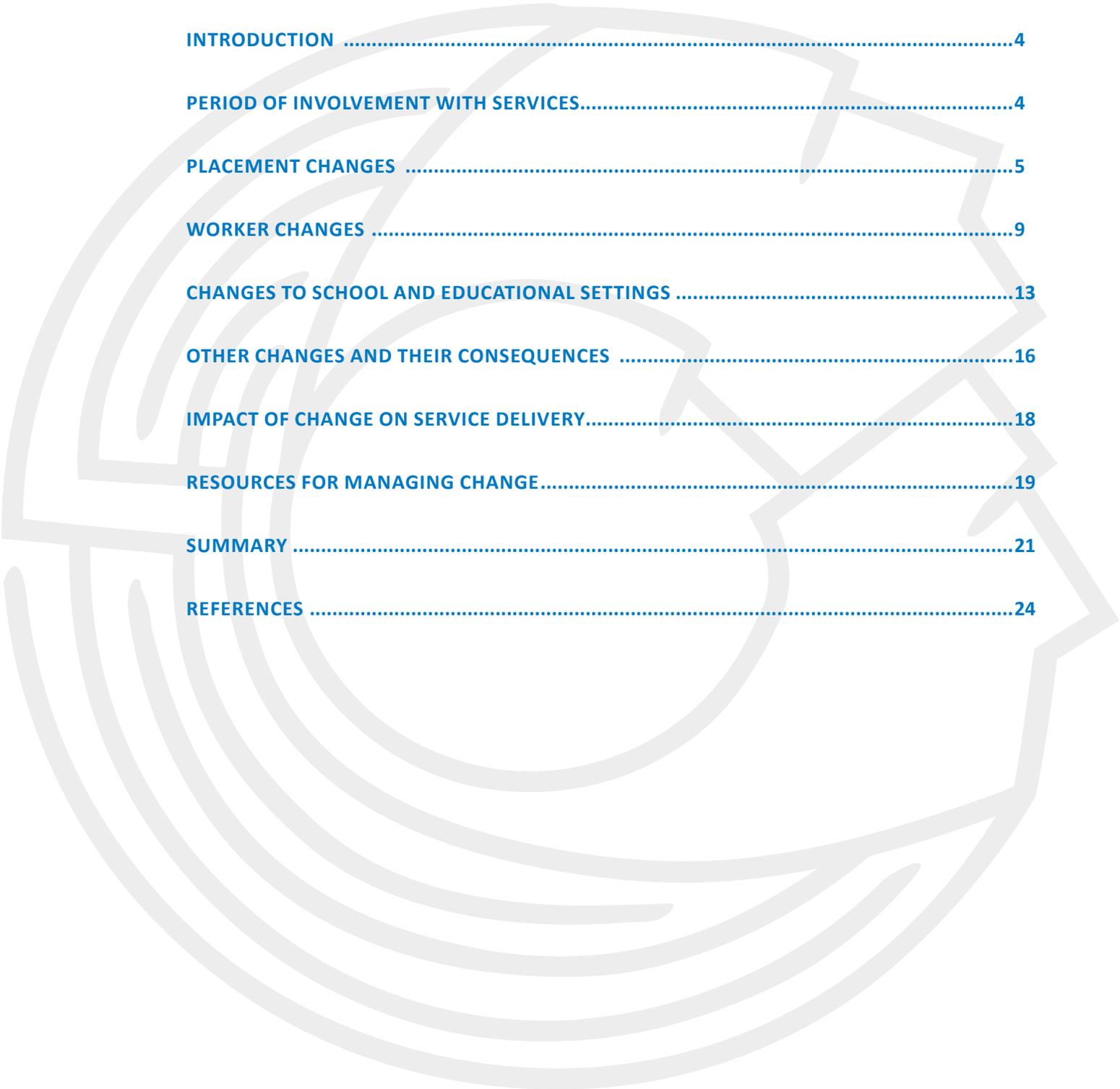
Technical Report 12

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Introduction

This report discusses findings from the analysis of the case file summary information contained within the changes of circumstances node¹. This node captured information on significant changes experienced by young people in the sample, in particular changes to their living arrangements, schooling, and workers² during the period they were involved with a specific service. This report discusses the following key themes that emerged from the analysis of this node:

- Period of involvement with services
- Placement changes
- Worker changes
- Changes to school and educational settings
- Other changes and their consequences
- Impact of change on service delivery
- Resources for managing change

Very few young people in the sample had no information coded to this node.

Period of involvement with services

In analysing the range and frequency of changes young people experienced during their involvement with a service, it is important to consider how long they had been involved with that service. The table below describes the length of time the 79 young people in the

1 Data collection and analysis methods are outlined in [The pathways to resilience research: Review and analysis of case file summaries: Overview](#) (Stevens et al., 2014c), which also provides details on the qualitative descriptors used in this report.

2 In this report the term 'worker' is used to refer to any professional a young person may have contact with, including social workers, mental health professionals, teachers, caregivers or mentors.

file review sample were known to the service³.

Table 1. Period of involvement with services

Period of Involvement	Number of young people in sample (n=79)
0 days – 1 week	3
More than 1 week – less than 6 months	4
6 to 12 months	4
1 to 5 years	22
6 to 10 years	20
11 to 17 years	20
More than 17 years	6
Total	79

Placement changes

Analysis of the file summaries revealed that 61 out of the 79 young people in the sample had periods of living away from their birth parent(s) recorded on their files, while 18 of the young people were not recorded as living outside of their parents' care. 'Placements' included those formally organised by services involved with young people, and informal arrangements made by family/whānau members or by young people themselves, for example, when young people were sent to live with an aunt or grandparent, or young people ran away to another family/whānau member. In a few cases, services were not aware of informal placements at the time they occurred (and so did not necessarily condone them) and file summaries reported on these retrospectively. Young people who

³ The period of time young people were known to services was calculated from the date they first became involved until the last date of involvement, inclusive. Cases may have been closed for periods within these timeframes.

lived away from their parents commonly experienced a mix of both kin and non-kin care (kin in this context refers to any member of the extended kin network), as summarised in Table two.

Table 2. Young people’s experiences of kin and non-kin care

Care Type	Number of young people
Kin care only	14
Kin and non-kin care	34
Care Protection	12
Specialist care	3
Foster care	19
Non-kin care only	13
Care Protection	5
Specialist care	2
Foster care	6
Total	61

Nine young people were placed in non-kin care as a result of criminal offending⁴; seven of those young people had not previously experienced non-kin care.

File summaries recorded instances where young people moved only once, and at the other end of the scale where young people moved 30 or more times. Reports that young people had absconded from a living arrangement were common, some ‘chose’ their new placement by making this the destination they ran to (see also Urry et al., 2014). In a few cases, young people moved from placements following concerns of mistreatment by caregivers or where historical

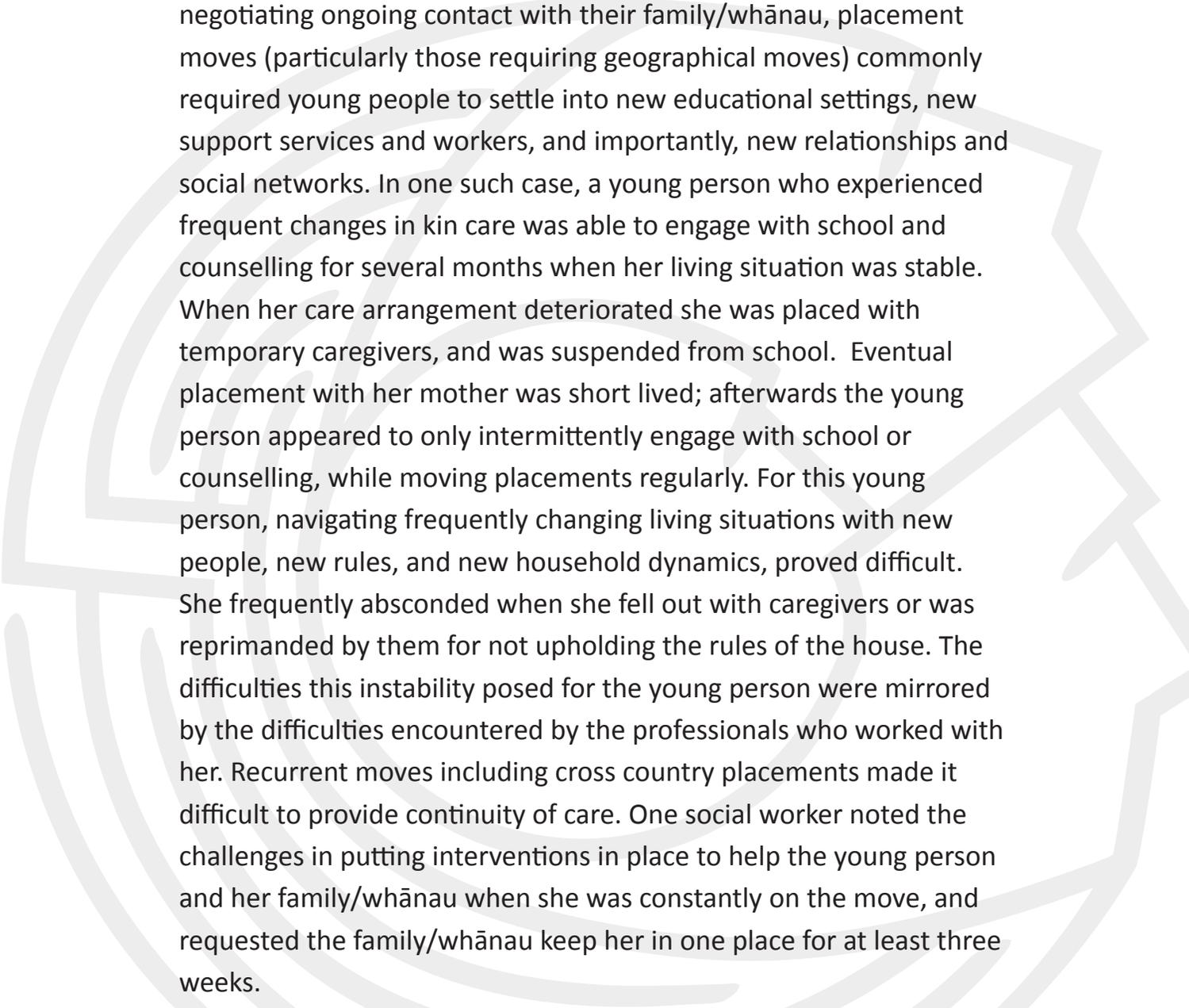
⁴ More than seven young people had youth justice placements, but also had other placements during their involvement with services.

concerns about the caregivers' suitability emerged. The young people who lived outside of their parents' care had, on average, nine moves recorded on their files (ranging from 3 to 24).

A small group of young people moved more than twenty times. These young people tended to have long term involvement with services (more than six years) and complex backgrounds including experiences of abuse, drug and alcohol misuse, behavioural challenges and mental health issues. One case file summary documented the experiences of a young person who moved approximately 30 times during her involvement with social services, between kin caregivers, friends, and formal placements. Over this period she spent a great deal of time outside of education. The young person's living arrangements repeatedly broke down during adolescence as a consequence of her difficult behaviours, with analysis suggesting these stemmed from a history of abuse and neglect (Dewhurst et al., 2014b; Urry et al., 2014). She was reported as stating she felt unwanted, and eventually found stability in a placement she arranged for herself. Although she maintained a relationship with this caregiver and asked to return there on numerous occasions, she eventually identified that it was an abusive situation. She had few safe networks as she moved into independent living.

Several young people in the sample lived in out-of-home care (kin, non-kin or a combination of both) on a long term basis (six or more years) or permanently. Thirty-one of the young people could be considered care-leavers; that is, they were still in formal placements or had moved from formal care into independence at the time their files were reviewed.

More so than other types of change (for example, school or social worker), changes in living arrangements had significant flow on effects for young people, requiring them to negotiate new settings



and make multiple adjustments to their lives. As well as having to become acquainted with new caregivers and their families and negotiating ongoing contact with their family/whānau, placement moves (particularly those requiring geographical moves) commonly required young people to settle into new educational settings, new support services and workers, and importantly, new relationships and social networks. In one such case, a young person who experienced frequent changes in kin care was able to engage with school and counselling for several months when her living situation was stable. When her care arrangement deteriorated she was placed with temporary caregivers, and was suspended from school. Eventual placement with her mother was short lived; afterwards the young person appeared to only intermittently engage with school or counselling, while moving placements regularly. For this young person, navigating frequently changing living situations with new people, new rules, and new household dynamics, proved difficult. She frequently absconded when she fell out with caregivers or was reprimanded by them for not upholding the rules of the house. The difficulties this instability posed for the young person were mirrored by the difficulties encountered by the professionals who worked with her. Recurrent moves including cross country placements made it difficult to provide continuity of care. One social worker noted the challenges in putting interventions in place to help the young person and her family/whānau when she was constantly on the move, and requested the family/whānau keep her in one place for at least three weeks.

Young people exhibited a range of responses to the changes in their living arrangements. Some were reported to have more settled behaviours and improved school attendance. In other cases, particularly where young people were resistant to new placements, caregivers reported challenges in managing young people's behaviours, young people themselves made complaints or requested

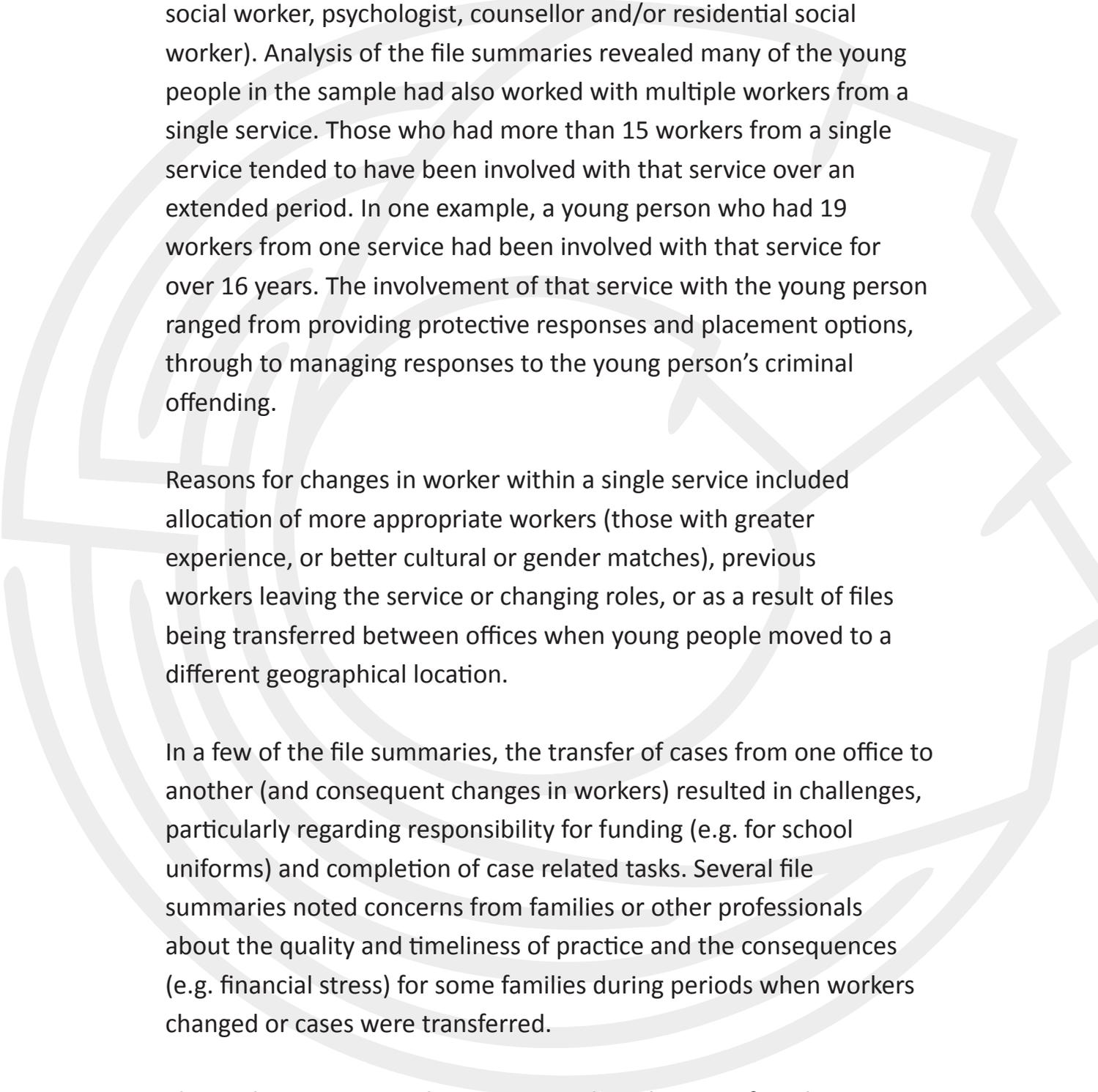
moves, and many absconded. File summaries suggested that in a few cases young people deliberately sabotaged placements in an effort to return home, to demonstrate some control over their situation, or rejecting relationships with new carers before they had a chance to be rejected themselves (Solomon, 2010; Ungar, 2005).

A few file summaries reported that young people felt sad about placement changes where they had built positive relationships with carers or peers. In these cases changes were the result of young people completing time-limited placements (e.g. a wilderness course) or carers requesting young people be removed. A few examples of young people later requesting or making contact with previous caregivers were noted. One young person was reported as saying he would return to his residential placement if he could and wanted to stay in contact with programme staff. He had felt secure in the placement and believed it had changed his life and outlook. He described having built relationships with and enjoyed the company of the elders who were involved in the placement.

Analysis of the file summaries revealed placement changes were often unplanned and frequently a response to crises (such as when young people absconded). Managing placement changes and their consequences (e.g. school moves) and responding to placement disruptions dominated much of recorded practice with young people (Stevens et al., 2014d). It was clear that considerable time and energy was expended on trying to secure consistent living arrangements for these youth. Changes in living arrangements appeared to have more far reaching effects for young people than changes in workers and schools which are discussed in the following sections.

Worker changes

All of the young people in the sample had been involved with more



than one service and consequently usually had more than one professional involved over the course of their lives (for example, a social worker, psychologist, counsellor and/or residential social worker). Analysis of the file summaries revealed many of the young people in the sample had also worked with multiple workers from a single service. Those who had more than 15 workers from a single service tended to have been involved with that service over an extended period. In one example, a young person who had 19 workers from one service had been involved with that service for over 16 years. The involvement of that service with the young person ranged from providing protective responses and placement options, through to managing responses to the young person's criminal offending.

Reasons for changes in worker within a single service included allocation of more appropriate workers (those with greater experience, or better cultural or gender matches), previous workers leaving the service or changing roles, or as a result of files being transferred between offices when young people moved to a different geographical location.

In a few of the file summaries, the transfer of cases from one office to another (and consequent changes in workers) resulted in challenges, particularly regarding responsibility for funding (e.g. for school uniforms) and completion of case related tasks. Several file summaries noted concerns from families or other professionals about the quality and timeliness of practice and the consequences (e.g. financial stress) for some families during periods when workers changed or cases were transferred.

The evidence suggests decisions regarding changes of worker were thoughtfully considered, with several file summaries noting the importance of maintaining relationships between a particular worker

and young person, or documenting conscious efforts by services to retain the involvement of a particular worker. In one example, the case file note described the need for continuity as the reason a particular worker was allocated to a case, and outlined contingency plans with another known worker given the young person's high level of vulnerability at that time. Concerns about relationship continuity may create tensions within services or for individual professionals where worker changes are required by policies, processes, or as a result of staff turnover.

File summaries contained little information on young people's responses to changes of worker. The literature does suggest however, that multiple worker changes are strongly correlated with placement instability (Rock et al., 2013) which in turn is correlated with poorer outcomes for young people (Stein, 2006). These changes, including discharge from a service, are likely to be experienced as a loss and where clients perceive that their needs have not been met, such endings can "reactivate feelings of being abandoned" and increase vulnerability (Solomon, 2010, p. 178).

Several file summaries documented examples of worker persistence and commitment to a young person, often providing continuity which was lacking elsewhere in their lives (Munford et al., 2014). Case file summaries suggested that in these instances good relationships existed between the worker and the young person, characterised by regular communication. In a number of these cases, the worker was from the education sector and had daily or weekly contact with the young person. In one example, a young person's school and in particular her teacher, provided extensive support and a sense of stability during a period of change. The teacher was familiar with the young person's family/whānau circumstances, took note of forthcoming family/whānau contact which could upset the young person, and was involved in ensuring the young person had appropriate counselling

and mental health services in place. The teacher was the young person's advocate for an extended period, attending the young person's court appearance even after the young person had moved away from the school. The school supported the teacher in playing this role for the young person.

Persistence and commitment may also enhance service engagement with young people, as demonstrated in another case file summary where the professional made weekly home visits over a six month period prior to the young person turning 17. The young person was initially reluctant to engage with this professional or to consider making behavioural changes, but over time responded well and demonstrated improved behaviours. While the file summary did not explicitly state that the professional had a good relationship with the young person, in a later interview⁵ the young person reported favourably on their relationship, describing the professional as "helpful" and focussed particularly on the professional's willingness to listen non-judgementally to the young person.

The literature on young people's experience with services and with their key workers, reports that commitment and persistence by professionals supports the development of meaningful relationships which model a "reliable, engaged and constructive relationship" (Ruch et al., 2010, p. 15). Such relationships enhance young people's ability to regulate their own lives. In attachment terms such a relationship contributes to a 'secure base' from which, over time, the young person will be able to develop their own internal working model and provide stability for themselves (Munford & Sanders, 2014; Ruch et al., 2010; Schofield & Beek, 2002). This was the experience of one young person, who, despite being discharged into somewhat unsettled living circumstances, was described in a case file

5 This information emerged from an interview with this young person as part of the qualitative component of the Pathways to Resilience study (Sanders et al., 2013).

summary as being focussed on attaining independence by getting a job, finding a flat, and avoiding getting involved in his parents' marital disharmony. It was noted that he felt he knew he could call on the service he had been involved with for support to achieve these goals.

To this end, while many young people experienced multiple changes of worker, young people appeared to be better engaged with services when workers demonstrated commitment and persistence.

Changes to school and educational settings

Young people commonly experienced changes of school and other educational settings (e.g. alternative education). Several attended multiple mainstream schools either because of placement moves or because they were asked to leave schools due to concerns about their behaviours. One young person was first expelled during primary school and went on to attend several more mainstream schools where attempts to engage him educationally proved largely unsuccessful. He went on to attend alternative education.

Analysis revealed most of the young people in the sample had moved at least once from mainstream into non-mainstream education (alternative educational, programmes for young people with learning or physical disabilities, programmes for young people with conduct disorder). Young people in the sample reported between one and 12 enrolments in alternative education settings. Some also spent periods outside of education (Dewhurst et al., 2014a; Stevens et al., 2014b).

As noted, schooling changes were commonly a result of geographical and/or placement moves (including family/whānau transience), and some young people disengaged from schools when their living arrangements were unstable (Dewhurst et al., 2014a; Stevens et al., 2014b) with consequences for their academic progress and peer

relationships. One young person's case file summary reported that he participated well at school, was bright and academically able, but had not progressed in education due to his mother's transience. He was also noted as having problems settling into schools and developing peer relationships.

Being expelled from school also required young people to find another school to attend sometimes with little assistance to do so (Dewhurst et al., 2014a). Analysis of the file summaries suggested expulsion and suspensions typically resulted from young people's 'acting out' behaviour including truancy and violence. In many cases young people had experienced a trauma or distraction which appeared to contribute to the challenging behaviour they exhibited prior to being expelled (e.g. abuse or neglect, living with parents who had mental health problems or drug and alcohol issues, their own mental health concerns, relationship difficulties and placement moves). In several cases a young person's use of alcohol or drugs precipitated a school expulsion. One young person who was expelled from two schools for selling marijuana consequently moved into a supportive placement and enrolled in an alternative education programme, where her attendance was reported as excellent.

Other young people moved schools of their own volition and in response to negative experiences at school. These included young people being disciplined by schools after demonstrating challenging behaviours, those who found it difficult to settle into school after moving placements, those who fell behind at school sometimes due to periods of absence, those who experienced bullying and those who associated with peer groups who were involved in offending or demonstrated anti-social behaviours. Again, many of these young people experienced 'distractions' outside of school (e.g. abuse or neglect, living with parents who had mental health problems or drug and alcohol issues, their own mental health concerns, relationship

difficulties and placement moves). For some, moving schools contributed to a cycle of instability; without the structure or routine of school, several acted-out at home or engaged in anti-social activities which in turn put placements at risk.

Interventions to address underlying issues occasionally caused delays in the young person returning to education. A few young people experienced this as unsettling because of their strong interest in participating in education. For example, one young person in a residential substance abuse programme spoke of his anxiety in being unable to complete academic credits while in residence. Following the completion of his treatment he returned to mainstream education and reported positively on being able to engage academically.

In a few cases educational providers would not allow young people to return to school until their behaviours had improved which in some cases required young people to receive interventions (e.g. drug and alcohol or mental health assessments and/or treatment). Several young people experienced delays in receiving the interventions they required because treatment services were not available in their area, were in high demand or young people did not meet their criteria for acceptance (Stevens et al., 2014d).

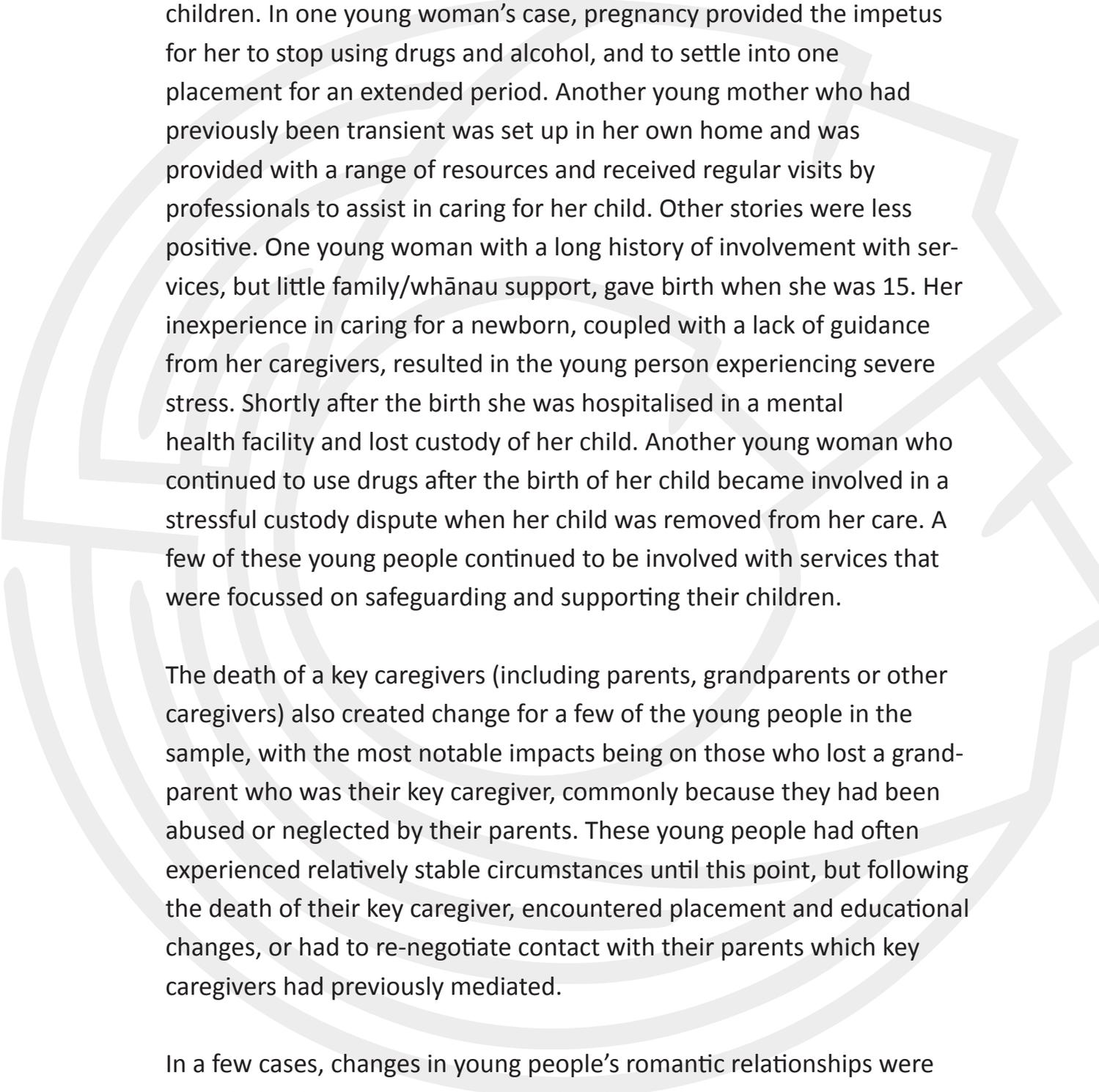
As previously noted, file summaries described several schools and particular teachers as making great efforts to support youth to keep attending school. They did this by building meaningful relationships with young people, by working closely with families to identify appropriate supports (e.g. family/whānau support services, budgeting services, special education support), by engaging multi-agency support and by involving family/whānau in developing plans to improve young people's engagement. In demonstrating consistency and commitment these schools contributed to creating stability for young people. File summaries described other schools that appeared less willing to 'go the distance' particularly where young people displayed challenging behaviour.

Young people's responses to school moves were mixed. File summaries provided evidence of young people struggling to settle into new schools particularly where there was instability in other parts of their lives (for example, placement moves, court appearances, substance abuse) but also of young people responding well to school changes and making efforts to engage, particularly when other aspects of their lives (for example, placements) were stabilised. In one such case, a young person was reported as having settled well into his residence and he enjoyed the structure it provided as well as the school programme. He was noted as participating well in activities and in creative writing in particular. In another case, a young person who was belatedly diagnosed with cognitive delay, was finally able to engage well with a course tailored to his learning needs, after years of struggling at school. As noted in the report on educational engagement, (Stevens et al., 2014b), good relationships between a member of staff (teacher, principal, counsellor or social worker) and the young person appeared to enhance young people's educational engagement.

Other changes and their consequences

While new placements, workers, and schools, were the most commonly recorded changes in young people's circumstances, other significant changes were recorded. These included: the birth of a child, the death of a caregiver or family/whānau member, and the breakdown in relationships, especially romantic relationships.

Several young people were recorded as being pregnant or having babies during their involvement with services, and for the young women in particular, these events resulted in substantial changes in their lives. In several cases, young people appeared to be motivated to achieve certain goals in order to provide for their children. One young man for example, actively sought employment and took driving lessons in order to assist in the care of his soon-to-be-born child. Several young women's circumstances became more stabilised during their pregnancies and in the early days after their babies were born,



they received resources and could access support networks, such as family/whānau rallying around to support these new mothers and their children. In one young woman's case, pregnancy provided the impetus for her to stop using drugs and alcohol, and to settle into one placement for an extended period. Another young mother who had previously been transient was set up in her own home and was provided with a range of resources and received regular visits by professionals to assist in caring for her child. Other stories were less positive. One young woman with a long history of involvement with services, but little family/whānau support, gave birth when she was 15. Her inexperience in caring for a newborn, coupled with a lack of guidance from her caregivers, resulted in the young person experiencing severe stress. Shortly after the birth she was hospitalised in a mental health facility and lost custody of her child. Another young woman who continued to use drugs after the birth of her child became involved in a stressful custody dispute when her child was removed from her care. A few of these young people continued to be involved with services that were focussed on safeguarding and supporting their children.

The death of a key caregivers (including parents, grandparents or other caregivers) also created change for a few of the young people in the sample, with the most notable impacts being on those who lost a grandparent who was their key caregiver, commonly because they had been abused or neglected by their parents. These young people had often experienced relatively stable circumstances until this point, but following the death of their key caregiver, encountered placement and educational changes, or had to re-negotiate contact with their parents which key caregivers had previously mediated.

In a few cases, changes in young people's romantic relationships were recorded as having significant emotional and material impacts on young people, particularly where the young person had been living with the partner and/or their partner's parent(s), or had a child together.

Impact of change on service delivery

As these findings suggest, not only were multiple changes unsettling for young people, they also impacted on the delivery of services which aimed to make improvements for the young person. One young person had three placements in 12 months and because of his difficult behaviour he spent each day with his tracker rather than at school. In one town he was diagnosed with severe conduct disorder and prescribed medication by a psychiatrist. When he moved to another town, the mental health service required a new full assessment before becoming involved. His challenging behaviours continued untreated, and neither caregivers nor schools could manage his behaviour, resulting in ongoing educational and material instability. In this case not only were the young person's physical circumstances and relationships disrupted, therapeutic interventions were delayed, limiting his ability to progress in other areas.

Despite intensive and multiple agency involvement, this file summary points to the difficulties in providing adequate services when a young person's life lacks stability. Services may be unwilling to begin or persist with work if placements are short term and time can pass quickly with what appears to be little improvement for a young person. Young people may find it difficult to engage with and commit to placements, schools, services and relationships if their experience has been that caregivers, workers or programmes do not 'last the distance'. In such situations services may be unconsciously mirroring young people's experiences. Conversely, without 'intervention' it may be difficult to create stability for a young person who demonstrates challenging behaviours or who lives in a family/whānau that is experiencing difficulties.

Resources for managing change

Analysis of the case files summaries suggested the key resources young people called on to help them manage change were their relationships with family/whānau, caregivers, and other professionals involved in their lives. As discussed above, worker commitment and persistence enhanced young people's engagement with services and positive relationships with professionals supported young people through periods of change. There also appears to be a strong relationship between placement stability and effective service provision, suggesting stable placements supported young people through changes in other aspects of their lives, while placement instability sometimes resulted in a cycle of ongoing changes.

Case file summaries also provided evidence that young people commonly perceived family/whānau as a key support during periods of change and valued the on-going nature of these relationships, sometimes regardless of their quality and even when they had experienced harm within family/whānau settings (Stevens et al., 2014a). For many of the young people, family/whānau relationships persisted where other relationships (for example, with caregivers, peers, school support networks and social workers) were intermittent and were not sustained over the long term. File summaries reported on young people's contact with family/whānau members (parents, siblings and/or extended family/whānau) even when they did not live with them, and workers sought to bridge a connection between young people and their families in line with policy and legislative requirements (Stevens et al., 2013). Family/whānau, both nuclear and extended, were often a first port of call for young people despite sometimes troubled relationships and histories, for example acting as emergency placements when other placements broke down. This occurred even when those same families had previously requested

young people be placed elsewhere, or when social workers had, in the past, deemed family/whānau placements inappropriate. In the case of the latter, additional supports or safety plans were usually put in place.

Families/whānau appeared to play different roles in supporting young people through change: as caregivers and/or providers of material support, as providers of emotional support, and in their least active forms as an identity resource. The notion of belonging, of young people having a sense of membership and identity within a family/whānau group, was central to these relationships (Stevens et al., forthcoming, 2014a).

The case file summaries suggested families provided increasing levels of material support as young people transitioned into adulthood, a period of significant change. Despite many young people having at some stage been in care, at the time of the research many lived with their parents or other family/whānau (the remainder lived independently, in residential care or were homeless). Several file summaries raised questions about the extent of support offered to families/whānau to help them overcome original issues of concern particularly where a young person's return home was unplanned.

Analysis suggested that the young people who experienced the greatest stability in their lives commonly had enduring relationships with both family/whānau and a service provider (Stevens et al., forthcoming, 2014a), with services potentially supplementing the roles of family/whānau relationships (as providers of care, emotional support or emotional co-presence) as required. In contrast, young people with less stability were more likely to have only one form of support or to lack enduring adult support.

Summary

Many of the young people experienced significant change during their involvement with services; for some this change came in multiple forms and on multiple occasions. Most had lived outside their families of origin and on average moved nine times during their involvement with services. More so than other types of change (for example, of school or social worker), changes in living arrangements had significant flow on effects for young people, requiring them to negotiate new settings and make multiple adjustments to their lives. Repeated moves also created challenges in service delivery such as completing assessments or putting interventions in place.

Several young people responded positively to placement changes, with more settled behaviour and school attendance. Others acted out or absconded, possibly as a means of demonstrating control over their situation. Formal placement changes were often unplanned, a response to crisis and placed a heavy burden on professionals' workloads.

Many young people had multiple successive workers within the same service. Workers were conscious of the need to sustain relationships and many demonstrated persistence and commitment within the bounds of their organisational policies and practices. Young people responded positively and were motivated by the security of ongoing relationships to take the necessary actions required of them during periods of change.

Most of the young people in the sample moved between schools or educational settings at least once, some spent periods outside of education and a few eventually returned from alternative education to mainstream schools. Stable placements and a reduction of the negative 'distractions' in young people's lives (abuse, neglect, drug

and alcohol misuse, mental health concerns) often resulted in stabilised behaviour and school engagement. Lack of interventions, in particular drug and alcohol or mental health treatment, contributed to several young people spending extended periods outside of education or in alternative school settings, and created challenges for schools struggling to manage students without clinical interventions. Teachers and school staff were the professionals most often identified as offering the persistent and committed types of relationships to young people which supported them through change.

Other significant changes included the birth of a child, death of a family/whānau member or caregiver, and relationship breakdowns. File summaries recorded both the emotional and material impacts these changes had on young people and these impacts could be either positive or negative depending on both the type of change and the availability of support that met the young person's needs.

Young people commonly drew on their family/whānau for support during periods of change, sometimes regardless of experiences of abuse or neglect within their care. Families often provided crisis placements and many were called on when young people were moving into independence; in several of these cases the original cause for concern within the family/whānau (e.g. family violence) continued to be an issue. For some young people family/whānau provided them a sense of belonging more than they were able to provide material or emotional support.

Analysis suggested young people were most well equipped to navigate change when they were supported by enduring relationships with both family/whānau and a service, including caregivers, mentors or other professionals, with services acting to supplement or mediate enduring family/whānau relationships as required. Even when

relationships are not ideal, they may contribute to the resources young people have to draw on. Taken together, the findings from the study reported here, provide an argument for promoting the availability of relationship-based, long term service involvement with young people with complex needs, with variations on intensity of involvement depending on the young person's changing needs.



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