Crime and Context: Understandings of Youth Perpetrated Interpersonal Violence Amongst Service Providers in Regional Australia.

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ABSTRACT

Youth perpetrated interpersonal violence in Australia is a complex issue of significant scope and scale. Evidence suggests a correlation with individual, familial and social experiences of disadvantage and disconnection requiring a multi-systemic response for effective prevention and intervention. To date, a largely unheard voice in the literature is that of frontline workers instrumental to these efforts. This paper, drawn from a larger study of young people's disengagement with education and involvement in crime, presents findings from semi structured interviews with 37 regional service providers regarding their work with young people before the Children's Court for criminal matters. Spanning sectors of Law, Out of Home Care, Mental Health, Police, Youth Work, Child Protection, Health, Education and Indigenous specific services – the majority of participants reported an increasing incidence of youth perpetrated interpersonal violence across family, out of home care and peer group settings. Participants provided rich narratives describing contexts of crime and understandings of crime as forms of communication and connection. Implications for intervention and prevention emphasise the importance of context in informing creative, collaborative, relationship based and connection focused responses that are trauma informed and culturally inclusive.

INTRODUCTION

Conceptualisations of youth perpetrated violence vary across disciplines, jurisdictions, focus, specificity and time. A variety of terms have been used to describe behaviours including threats, harassment, intimidation, physical and/or sexual violence and aggression, social, financial and emotional abuse and damage to property enacted to gain advantage and assert power and control over another in a domestic, family or out of home are setting or within intimate partner and peer group contexts. Aside from definitional debate, evidence suggests youth perpetrated violence in Australia is a complex issue of significant scope and scale. Although the predominant youth perpetrated offence is theft or larceny (35% of all youth offenders), 'acts intended to cause injury' were the second most prevalent offence committed by persons aged 10–17 during the period 1 July 2015–30 June 2016 (15% of all youth offenders) (ABS, 2017). In NSW, a 2012 report by the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues noted the majority of violence matters before the Children's Court in 2010 involved young people being violent, or threatening violence, towards one or both parents, with siblings often witness to violence. When it comes to self-reported criminal and delinquent behaviour, a survey of 12–13 year olds across Australia (*n*=3,581) found that peer to peer violence and fighting was the most commonly reported behaviour (24% of boys and 8% of girls) (Forrest & Edwards, 2014).

Latest data from New South Wales (NSW) Bureau of Crime Statistics (BOSCAR, 2017), reports 3751 persons of interest (POIs)[1], aged 10-17 years represented 8.1% of all alleged offenders proceeded against by Police for domestic violence related offences in the period January to December 2017. Domestic violence related offences included domestic violence related assault; sexual assault; indecent assault, abduction/ kidnap, intimidate/ harass, malicious damage and breach AVOs. Of particular note – 395 young males aged 10-17years were proceeded against by Police for sexual assault, representing 15.9% of all sexual assault cases in this time period. Literature suggests violent and aggressive behaviour among young Australian males is of particular concern. Houghton, Tan, Khan, and Carroll (2013) surveyed 13 to 17 year old students from across eight high schools in Perth, Australia, and found males were significantly more likely to participate in physical aggression than females. In a study of 12 to 16 years old high school students in Victoria, Hemphill et al. (2009) found higher rates of violent behaviour for males than for females.

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[1] POIs are suspected or alleged offenders.

The BOSCAR data indicates in 2017, there were 526 female youth POIs (36%) and 910 male youth POIs (64%) proceeded against for domestic violence related assault in NSW. The comparative rates for adult populations identify 6,867 (16%) females and 35,736 (84%) males proceeded against for domestic violence related assaults. In contrast to the research literature – crime statistics note double the proportion of young female to adult female perpetrators and a steady growth in both female youth and female adult POIs in recent years. From January 2012 to December 2016, there was an average annual increase of 5.6% in female POIs aged 10–17 and 6.7% in females aged 18+ proceeded against by police for domestic violence related assault (BOSCAR, 2017).

Youth violence in regional Australia has been characterised by Grover (2017) as evidencing 'postcode justice' or 'justice by geography' with locational differences in rates of offending, reoffending, and/or sentencing, particularly for domestic related offences. In Western Australia, a 2015 report found that between 2009–2014, 66% of youth perpetrated domestic violence related offences were from metropolitan areas (Broadhead & Francis, 2015). Similarly, although not specific to domestic or interpersonal violence, data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian children suggests greater risk of early onset crime or delinquency, even after controlling for other factors, for urban children (Forrest & Edwards, 2015). These findings are at odds, however with the latest BOSCAR data, where the relative rate of youth perpetrated domestic violence were highest in regional and rural locations (BOSCAR, 2017). Similarly, Grech (2011), found that of the 20 local government areas with the highest per capita rates of domestic assault in 2010, 19 were regional or remote. These findings may, in part, be attributable to reoffending rates, with suggestion that young people from regional areas are more likely to reoffend than those from metropolitan areas (Shirley, 2017).

Apart from locational difference –dynamics of power and control underpinning violence perpetrated by young people toward their parents, caregivers or other peers, mean it is likely to be underreported. A 2015 report by the Women's Health and Family Services in Western Australia which examined violence by young people against a family member, noted "most families do not report their child to the police due to embarrassment, guilt, a sense of needing to manage their own children, and/or a fear of judgment about their own parental capacities" (Howard, 2015, p.3).

The family and social circumstances of young people are not only the site and settings of violence, but also correlates themselves of involvement with the criminal justice system. Young people before the Children's Court for criminal matters in Australia have an increased likelihood of having been exposed to family breakdown and/or victims of family violence (Hemphill et al., 2009; Moore & McArthur, 2014). Indig et al. (2011) found that 54% of young people surveyed in New South Wales youth detention centres had parents who had separated or divorced. Socially, a majority of incarcerated young people surveyed by reported their close friends had been truant or suspended from school and broken the law, while almost half said their close friends had disengaged completely from education (Indig, et al., 2011). Pro-social involvement was found to be a protective factor against recidivism for incarcerated young males in Victorian Youth Justice custody centres (Shepherd, Luebbers, & Ogloff, 2016) and young people incarcerated in the Australian Capital Territory expressed a belief that they had become involved in criminal behaviour after they compensated for poor peer relationships at school by becoming friends with peers who exposed them to criminal behaviour (Moore & McArthur, 2014). Children unable to live with their families and placed into out of home care are noted to be at significant risk for involvement with the criminal justice system.

In a report undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017), young Australian's in out of home care aged between 10-16 years old were noted to be 12 times more likely than their counterparts in the general population to be party to a Juvenile Justice supervision order. The same report outlined that 6.5% of children and young people in OOHC, compared to 0.5% of the general population, were engaged in the juvenile justice system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). Young people who have recently left out of

home care, as well as key stakeholders, have identified a number of factors observed in young people in care, which may also contribute to higher levels of engagement in criminal activity, including substance use, relationship breakdowns, financial instability or hardship, and significant learning or intellectual disabilities (Mendes, Baidawi, & Snow, 2014; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2009). Consistent with the known characteristics of young people in care - Indig et al., (2011) found that adolescents of Aboriginal origin were significantly overrepresented in juvenile detention, making up approximately half of adolescent detainees surveyed in New South Wales, despite representing only about 4% of young adults in Australia. Data retrieved from the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, found that high school education significantly lowered the likelihood of engagement in the criminal justice system, (Ferrante, 2013; Reeve & Bradford, 2014) with Ferrante (2013) noting that the protective effect was greatest for those who reached senior high school. Young people with intellectual disability or below average intelligence quotient have also been shown to have higher levels of engagement with the criminal justice system in Australia (Frize, Kenny, & Lennings, 2008; Haysom, Indig, Moore, & Gaskin, 2014; Indig et al., 2011) and adolescents of Aboriginal origin who are engaged in the criminal justice system have an even higher incidence of intellectual disability and below average IQ than non-Aboriginal young people (Frize et al., 2008; Haysom, Indig, Moore, & Gaskin,2014; Indig et al., 2011).

The complex interplay of individual, family and social factors in the experiences of young people involved with the criminal justice system indicates the necessity of systemic responses to intervention and prevention. However, while there is a reasonable amount of research literature pertaining to young people who are in contact with the juvenile justice system - there is much less known, or written about, the service sector they encounter. This is particularly so from the view point of the service providers themselves, which is interesting given shifts from New Public Management models and the emerging emphasis on universal preventative, collaborative and multi-agency approaches. Howell & Lipsey's (2012) commentary on meta-analysis of juvenile justice research indicates that there are a limited number of studies directly examining service sector issues, practices and interventions with little importance attributed to practitioner voices. The perspectives and understandings of crime held by practitioners may be important determinants of their likely rapport, engagement, management and/or support of the young people they work with. Frontline worker perceptions are also vital for contemporaneous understandings of the unmeasurable aspects of their work; its feel and fit with people and place and how they locate themselves in between. The following sections outline the method and findings of research focused on practitioner perspectives and the meaning and value they hold for intervention and prevention efforts.

METHOD

Data for this paper was drawn from a larger project exploring educational experience of young people before the Children's Court for criminal matters in the Hunter region of New South Wales, Australia. This project was undertaken by a cross–disciplinary research team and was designed in collaboration with the local Children's Court Magistrate in consultation with a steering committee of key industry stakeholders The project aimed to document and describe a point–in–time overview of cross–sector professional insights into the lives of the young people they worked with and the factors perceived as related to the occurrence and outcomes of educational disengagement and involvement in crime. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee on September 6, 2016.

Sampling and recruitment

A snowball sampling method was employed to recruit participants from a cross section of services across the Hunter Region. Steering committee and research team members distributed *Expressions of Interest* invitations to contacts across sectors including Police, Education, Child Protection (Department of Family and Community Services), Health and Mental Health, Juvenile Justice, Youth Work, Indigenous Specific Support Services and Out

of Home Care providers. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and interested participants were reassured they could withdraw from the study at any time without reason. Semi–structured face–to–face or telephone interviews asked participants about the types of crimes committed by the young people they worked with; the engagement of these young people with education; the factors participants felt contributed to disengagement with education and involvement in crime and the challenges and opportunities presented to practitioners in addressing these experiences. A total of 31 interviews with 38 participants were conducted, of these, 27 interviews were with sole participants, 3 were with 2 participants and 1 was with 5 participants. Interviews lasted between 9 and 50 minutes with an average of 29 minutes. It was stressed to participants that they should not provide any identifying information nor specifics about any situation or person and were not required to comment or discuss workplace practices.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim, and analysed using a constant comparative method of inductive analysis. All data was de-identified prior to analysis. For this paper, the lead author read, re-read and coded reflections related to the types of crime committed by young people, and the factors practitioners identified as important to understanding this behaviour. An independent reviewer was consulted who conducted the same analysis and the two then met to compare codes and establish a unified set of emergent themes. This paper reports on convergent and divergent themes identified in respect to crimes committed by young people and the contextual understandings of these by practitioners in the region.

FINDINGS

Analysis of data identified a number key themes related to the types of crimes committed by young people in the region, their perceived incidence and prevalence and factors that contribute to and contextualise young people's involvement in crime.

Violence is common across contexts

The vast majority of participants (i.e., 27 out of 37) used the terms 'assault', 'violence', 'sexual offences' and/or 'AVO's' (apprehended violence orders), to describe the impetus for young people they work with coming into contact with the Children's Court. Crimes described included assaults and serious assaults (against known and unknown victims); grievous bodily harm and assaults occasioning bodily harm, sexual assault and sexual offences, domestic violence, family violence and attempted murder. While these crimes were described alongside theft (larceny), stealing, shoplifting, property damage, malicious damage, vandalism, stolen vehicles, affray, trespassing, break and enter, possession and supply of illicit drugs- participants across sectors commonly described seeing 'a lot' of interpersonal violence – identifying it is a characteristic feature of crimes perpetrated by young people they work with. For example:

> At the moment for example we're getting a lot of DV stuff. I think DV stuff on the whole is quite a common offence for young people to come in …. most young people, if not the majority, come to us with AVOs in place, various family members or neighbours or whatever. (Participant 20, Juvenile Justice)

> We're having quite a lot of violent crimes [I believe]. AVOs. … More assault … there is a lot of violence and we see violence as both women and men, young women and young men. It is like fighting, like peer fighting. (Participant 3, Youth Work)

Interpersonal violence was described as occurring within and across family, out of home care (primarily residential care) and peer group relationships. Participants perceived interpersonal

violence to be not only a common reason for young people's involvement with the Children's Court for criminal matters, but youth perpetrated family and domestic violence and sexual violence as increasing in overall prevalence in their community. Commonalities in the descriptions of interpersonal violence in family and out of home care settings are underscored by the dynamics of care and control that exist in both contexts. Young people were described by participants as assaulting parents (notably mothers), sometimes siblings and other family members as well as residential care and other out of home care workers often alongside acts to damage property. Interpersonal violence in these settings was commonly constructed as unmanaged, or unmanageable behaviour requiring or relying on external parties to enact power and control:

> *… families being increasingly dysfunctional are not dealing with the issues themselves. They're looking to the court to find a solution; jump out, get an AVO, get someone to deal with it that way, instead of somehow people working on the relationships within the family or the family dynamics (Participant 9, Law)*

Competing understandings highlight the complexity for families and care providers in managing risk, and how the sometimes necessary involvement of Police in that process can take matters out of the hands of the family, and the young person involved:

> *Mind you, there are many families where the parents have tolerated certain bad behaviour by the children then it's gotten to a really dangerous stage with knives and physical assaults and all that and they just can't cope anymore. (Participant 9, Law)*

> *…. they assault our staff or they might damage the property or steal our cars …They're in an escalation because of the behavioural issues that they have and why they're with us and the trauma that comes from that. A lot of the time it's them not being able to self-regulate and reacting. Unfortunately, that leads to criminalisation of them, really. (Participant 13, Out of Home Care)*

> *We become the last resort when their behaviour becomes a habit of offending and assaulting staff. It gets beyond what the agencies can deal with at times. (Participant 1, Juvenile Justice)*

Interpersonal violence between peers was discussed in relation to fights, assaults, domestic violence and sexual assault. Participants identified that youth perpetrated crime was commonly committed in the company of peers, including assaults and violence outside the home or care setting. While a number of participants reported observing an increase in sexual offences (known to disproportionately affect female victims), almost a third of participants (n=12), also noted an increase in female perpetrated violence across peer and family settings.

> *We're getting more girls, and the girls that we're getting are more violent and have more mental health issues. There's definitely an escalation in the number of girls and the level of violence that they perpetrate probably in the - over the last 10 years there's been quite an escalation. (Participant 30, Education).*

> *We've found that girls are becoming more violent in their assaults. It's almost like girls have to prove themselves, or they're just - they're becoming more violent than the boys. (Participant 27, Police).*

Violence is multi-determined and multi-systemic

Participants identified factors contributing to youth perpetrated crime (including interpersonal violence), as located within the individual, their family and their community leading to understandings of crime as multi-determined and a complex interplay of risk and sequalae. Individual factors, those located internal to or characteristic of the young person, included observed antisocial attitudes and beliefs, a lack of communication and self-regulation skills, and a perceived prevalence of both diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health issues, learning disability and/or developmental delay. Young people involved in crime were described as 'having a problem with authority figures', with the observation made that this may be rooted in distrust born out of prior (possibly intergenerational) experiences of disadvantage and trauma.

> *They don't seem to trust authority figures or even kind of just adults in general. I'm not really sure where that's stemmed from, whether it's like a history of trauma or whether it's because they've been caught and now they resent authority (Participant 10, Mental Health).*

> *Kids who have experienced a lot of family violence end up distrusting authority figures. They see authority figures as disappointing, unreliable, duplicitous, self-serving and disinterested in them. Their behaviour and their antisocial behaviour evolves out of that general mistrust and expectation that people are going to - are unreliable. (Participant 1, Juvenile Justice).*

Trauma was independently mentioned by 50% (n=19) participants as they discussed the lives of the young people they worked with who were before the court for criminal matters. Trauma was described as a complex, consuming and continuing context for understanding the behaviours of young people involved in crime in the region.

> *We've got a lot of kids here who've witnessed trauma, who are involved in that still, who witness it daily. The effect on them is huge, yeah. (Participant 36, Education).*

> *Domestic violence and abuse, neglect, poverty, overcrowded situations, living conditions - and then you've got on top of that a lot of young people have a lot of other complex traumas that are really, really significant. (Participant 21, Juvenile Justice).*

Consistent with observations of both early relational trauma, and crimes committed in company of peers - some participants presented understandings of crime perpetrated by young people motivated (consciously or unconsciously) out of a need for connection, belonging and identity – to be seen and heard.

> *Often for these people, maybe they don't have that connection with their parents or with any other relatives or elders. Their friends are the only ones who give them that sense of belonging. … so a lot of the (criminal) cases you see people are in company of another person … (Participant 2, Indigenous Support Service).*

> *Need - so many needs. One is being heard. Because it'd be nobody's listening. (Participant 29, Indigenous Support Service).*

Discussion of trauma was also linked to motives or reasons for crime, including interpersonal violence as a means of redistributing power, of regaining or reasserting control.

We've had a client recently who attempted [murder. She explained this as] exercising fairness and equality through the rule or attitude an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; you hurt me, I'll hurt you; which seems fair in her mind…She felt that that was justified and fair and ethical in her mind, even though it wasn't. (Participant 1, Juvenile Justice).

It's mainly for the power and the control because they've never had that. So, these kids - that's what it sort of is. It's them getting them trouble or them getting the payback or however they want to look at it. (Participant 8, Out of Home Care)

Participants noted this to be learned, socially acceptable way of resolving hurts, injustice or conflict in their families and in the regional community.

It's just how they behave. If you - you can have no domestic violence at home, ….because they're surrounded by people who swear and yell and drink and carry on and just are dysfunctional, they grow up thinking that's how we all behave. That's how they end up behaving. (Participant 27, Police).

The terms violence, domestic violence and/or family violence were used by a third of participants (n=13) in describing and characterising the family lives of the young people they work with who are before the Children's Court for criminal matters. Framing this participants also engaged in common and generalised discussion of a perceived acceptance of criminal behaviour among some families in the region. Families were described by some participants as being active conduits to crime in general through modelling and supporting behaviours outside the law and normative developmental behaviours. This included observations of familial transfer of drugs and alcohol, engagement in antisocial behaviour as well as aiding and abetting interpersonal violence in the community.

Yeah pro-criminal attitudes and beliefs are then just prevalent…. It's a known behaviour. Often siblings are committing crimes together. So there's that connection. (Participant 20, Juvenile Justice).

We've had parents that say, I've told him I'll give him a packet of cigarettes if he doesn't miss a day this week, and you're like, he's 13. Oh, well he's going to smoke anyway, so if I can use it to bribe him to get to school, (Participant 30, Education).

A lot of that experimenting is happening at home with the consent of the carers, from the parents. Their first drinking experience is - we've had recently a 12 year old telling her first drinking experience was with her nan….. It's not like a sip of beer… they're shots. It's like let's get wrecked,… (Participant 4, Youth Work).

We've had parents actually take their children to a place that has been set up to have a fight and they have been present while this has happened….. (Participant 4, Youth Work).

The consequences of a perceived acceptance of criminal behaviour was discussed by participants in terms of an inevitability of an intergenerational engagement with criminal justice processes.

A lot of those families the families have within them criminal records so it's not that unusual. It's not - I wouldn't say necessarily that families are happy when their children start offending…. They're not horrified ….. They're not like disgusted and

embarrassed like potentially some people might be from other area (Participant 3, Youth Work).

There's some pretty high-level crime the parents are committing out there and getting away with, and the kids just follow on from that. There's whole families of them, siblings, three or four siblings in each family that are all doing the same thing. (Participant 30, Education).

In this context, participants commonly reported that they felt young people lacked a real appreciation of either the impact of their crimes or their involvement with the Court, these observations were made with some frustration by participants, others of whom struggled with a paradoxical observation that incarceration could offer a 'preferable' environment for some young people.

Some of those things get quite high-level, and it's the people they damage along the way, the assaults they commit, the old people they rob, the shop people and the - it's just like, they got away with it for so long they don't believe me when I say to them, you'll eventually - these crimes will eventually catch up with you. No, no, no, I got court tomorrow, aren't you concerned about that? No, they'll just slap me on the wrist and say, don't be a naughty boy, and I'll be back here. It doesn't impact them because they don't see any consequence. (Participant 30, Education).

Incarceration for our kids is not necessarily a penalty for them, because it's a safe, predictable place. Their health needs are looked at. They're getting three meals a day and they are getting education while they're incarcerated. So lots of our kids don't care if they have to go back. Some of them will think it's more of a home than they've ever had before. …. (Participant 34, Child Protection).

DISCUSSION

The findings presented above detail point-in-time observations of participating practitioners across a range of sectors engaged with young people involved with the Children's Court for criminal matters. The observations describe rich narratives of complex contexts characterised by disadvantage and disengagement as the situations and settings through which young people become involved in crime. In fact a defining feature of narratives presented by participants is that they are notably context heavy. Apart from detailing the types of crimes committed by young people they worked with – participants' discussion of these crimes was firmly cast in a gaze on the transactions and interactions that surrounded them and gave them meaning. Taken together participant's reflections on the crimes committed by young people and the factors that might influence engagement in crime coalesce around two key ideas – 'crime as communication' and 'crime as connection'.

As noted in the findings above, participants discussed crime, including interpersonal violence, committed by young people as a means of finding and forming identity, being seen and heard and as a means of redressing injustice and redistributing power and control. Crime in this way might be understood as a form of communication, an externalized manifestation of airing grievances and meeting needs in a way that participants note may have been learned and/or accepted within their family and social contexts. The primacy of trauma and potentially intergenerational trauma in these contexts is important. It is notably argued that trauma fundamentally impairs a person's ability to symbolize their experience, leading to an intergenerational transmission of trauma through often non-symbolic means and a common inability to narrate feeling states (Alford, 2015). Parenting in this context leads children, in their

efforts to share and bond with a parent, into a trauma attenuated affective and behavioural patterns (Schecter, 2004). Bessel van der Kolk (1987), the seminal author in developmental trauma research, describes children in such families as 'often developing difficulties in emotional involvement with others… frequently characterized by withdrawal and caution lest the wounds of emotional betrayal once again be opened, or by intense involvements and repeated disappointments as nobody is found who can compensate for the sense of loss and betrayal they have carried since childhood. (p. 181)'. The frustration and lack of ability to name, tolerate and regulate feeling states can lead to re-enactment of their own or others trauma – an overt communication of unmanageable and often unconscious dynamics (Pearrow & Cosgrove, 2009).

In a similar way, the findings presented also identify a collective theme as crime as a means of connection. Participants detailed familial and peer transfer of behaviour and experience and a sense of acculturation to pro-criminal ideas and actions that engendered a sense of connection and belonging. Crime in this context was described alternately as a bonding experience and as an inevitability of intergenerational disadvantage and disengagement with systems and structures. While current theory and literature attests to the importance and benefits of belonging for the health and wellbeing of young people, it often assumes a 'wholesome' type of belonging that is consistent with prosocial values and socially acceptable relationships. When belonging is discussed in relation to juvenile crime, it tends towards examining the degree of association between peers, and the transmission of antisocial values, norms and behaviours that are reinforced though intrinsic and tangible rewards (Seddig, 2013; Silverman & Caldwell, 2008). This research suggests that there may be some merit in deeper exploration of the meanings and intrinsic rewards that young people attribute to these relationships (and at different stages of their enactment). Consistent with seminal literature which describes how crime becomes community, and can be associated with the formation of deep social bonds, the sharing of resources, time, support and protection (Ferrell, 1995), co-offending relationships might offer some clues about belonging, consistency and boundaries that can be replicated in non-mandated arenas.

Despite participants obviously being well intentioned and invested, often being able to provide detailed accounts of the lives of generations of families in the local community, common to the narratives presented were signs that the sheer significance of the daily work was taking a toll, with narratives revealing some cynicism, detachment and despondency about the experiences and likely outcome of the young participants worked with. In a way, while participants described young people's crimes as motivated by desires for connection and communication - there was a strong sense of disconnection between the participants and the worlds of the young people they worked with. Remarks and conversations of this type were mostly fleeting and were sometimes overridden or contradicted by the participants. Practitioner perspectives highlight the complexity of youth perpetrated interpersonal violence and the need for joined-up solutions to a phenomenon so much about a lack of connection. More so, the findings of this study highlight that effective intervention efforts should be grounded in evidence, but need to be inherently relationship-based, trauma informed and culturally sensitive - consistent with a more inclusive and responsive 'collaborative methodology' (Burns, Hyde & Killett, 2012). Collaborative approaches are considered apposite in work with vulnerable and at risk families faced with complex issues, when the nature of their challenges fall between the remit of different agencies (McDonald & Rosier, 2011a, 2011b; Robinson et al., 2012). Faced with a seemingly 'wicked problem' the active involvement of many stakeholders in an ongoing process of reflection and problem formation will support responses to this complex social and systemic issue that are reflexive and adaptive to context (Burns, Hyde & Killett, 2012; Walton et al., 2012).

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