

MEDIA RELEASE

Monday 19 December 2016

Young people feel unsafe in residential care

Most young people in residential care feel they are at risk of physical threats, sexual harm, bullying and harassment, and that drastic changes need to be made to improve their safety, according to a new study published today.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has released the findings of a study which explored the experiences of 27 children and young people and their safety in residential care.

Although they believed that it was highly unlikely that children and young people in residential care would be sexually abused by a staff member, many participants raised concerns about physical violence, sexual threats from their peers and from outsiders, and of ongoing bullying and harassment.

With a lack of stability, concerns about their peers and with limited connections to trustworthy adults, residential care was unsafe for children and young people who felt strongly that drastic changes were needed to improve their safety and for risks of sexual harm to be reduced.

In Australia, residential care is considered to be a placement of last resort for children and young people requiring out-of-home care (OOHC) and is used in circumstances where other types of OOHC are unsuccessful or unavailable. In 2015 there were 2394 children in residential care in Australia, almost 5 per cent of the 43,400 children living in OOHC.

Researchers from the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) at Australian Catholic University, Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology spoke to young people aged 10-21 years living in residential care in Australia. It asked them to help conceptualise safety, identify their key safety concerns and discuss the ways that they believed residential care units were preventing and responding to abuse-related issues.

With very little literature exploring how children and young people perceive safety from abuse or peer sexual violence in residential care; this study provides new and valuable insights, directly from young people.

“Most children and young people reported that they did not feel safe in residential care,’ lead researcher Dr Tim Moore from ICPS said. “They advocated for safe residential units: those that were home-like, that functioned as they believed a normal home and family functioned, and where life was better than it was when they lived with their biological families or in foster care.

“They also identified a range of issues that compromised their safety within residential care. Many young people discussed bullying, physical and sexual harassment and violence, and felt ambivalent about staff members’ capacity to effectively prevent or deal with these types of issues, often feeling that they had to be responsible for preventing these issues themselves.

“The participants clearly articulated what they thought could be done to improve their experience in residential care, such as better matching of peers, involving young people in decision-making about

placements, and limiting the number of moves from one unit to another. They also felt that staff should develop a better appreciation of the risks of sexual abuse and other harms, and inform and educate young people about threats, how they are being protected and how they can protect themselves,” said Dr Moore.

The report, *Safe and sound: Exploring the safety of young people in residential care*, is part of a larger project commissioned by the Royal Commission which explored children and young people’s views and perceptions of safety in institutions.

The study also found that children’s experiences of harm were often under-reported, and that children and young people could provide unique observations on the experience of abuse in residential care as well as how best to support children and young people in care.

Royal Commission CEO Philip Reed said the research would directly contribute to the Royal Commission’s final report and may inform recommendations in relation to residential care or OOHC.

[Read the report](#)

Media Contact: Kristy Porter, kristy.porter@acu.edu.au, 0476 820 416