An exploration of distance and home when looked after: Views of young people

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Abstract

This qualitative research explored how distance relates to young people's experiences of being looked after away from home. It sought views of young people living in residential care in Scotland using semi-structured interviews. Thematic Analysis was used to elicit key themes. A global theme of 'Connections' was identified. Feelings of distance were related to how connected or disconnected young people felt towards relationships and places. These 'Connections' were supported through Contact and Familiarity. Themes of feeling disconnected from home, and subsequently feeling further away from home related to a perceived sense of control and constraint from being in care. Shame, guilt and anxiety contributed to feeling disconnected. Feelings of connectedness and/or disconnectedness to home influenced young people's views of their own risk-taking behaviour. This research highlights the relevance of other factors, not just proximity when considering placing young people in care away from home.

Keywords

Youth, adolescent, looked after, residential, secure care, distance, risk, offending, qualitative

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'Yes, what else but home?

It all depends on what you mean by home.

Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in.'

The Death of the Hired Man by Robert Frost

Background

Children are placed into the care of local authorities for a range of reasons including protection from harm and involvement in offending behaviour (The Scottish Government, 2008). The care provided is often in the form of foster care, residential care and secure units. There is much to be gained by improving young people's experiences of care, particularly if one considers the proportion of the prison population with care experience. With estimates suggesting almost one third of the adult prison population identifies as care experienced (SPS, 2016) deepening our understanding of this correlation could contribute towards significant benefits, including potentially improving looked after children's outcomes.

The Children Act 1989 places a duty on local authorities in England and Wales to provide such care within their area and as far as possible allow children to live near to home. The importance of distance between the care provision and a child's home has received increasing attention with numerous reports highlighting the need to keep young people closer to their 'home'. A report by the Children's Commissioner for England suggests that 30,000 children live out of their own local authority, and that over 11,000 of these children are more than 20 miles from home, with over 2,000 further than a hundred miles away (Children's Commissioner, 2019). The increase in English young people being cared for in Scottish residential units is a clear example of this (Gough, 2016).

The National Audit Office (2014) argued for the importance of placing children close to home if safe to do so and suggested that 20 miles or less be considered as close. An independent review of children's residential care in England

(Residential Care in England 2016), concluded that the goal for local authorities should be to have the right home and situated reasonably close to a child's home. Furthermore, the Care Inspectorate produced admissions guidance to residential services in Scotland recommending the need to provide clear information about the practical considerations for young people placed far away from home and how contact, where appropriate, will take place. (Care Inspectorate, 2019). Doran & Berliner's (2001) proposed placement guidelines for young people in the USA and concluded that generally children benefit from placements near family members and children who have continued contact after placement with parents, siblings, or other relatives are less likely to experience disrupted placement. Unfortunately, the evidence they cited for this conclusion is vague and methodologically limited as it explored the role of placements generally rather than distance specifically (Thoburn 1994; VanBergeijk, Kupsinel and Dubsky 1999; Leathers 1999). Doran and Beliner did not gather any evidence themselves to support their position.

The available literature around geographical distance generally sees greater distance between the child's home area as problematic and to be avoided. The Children's Commissioner report (ibid., p.7) states that: 'distance creates obstacles in meeting a child's needs, both practically and emotionally' and 'distance is inherently destabilising for children'. Literature assumes that increasing miles are worse than small miles where in fact this is over simplistic. The literature fails to account for ease of travelling, cultural changes or differences (e.g., Scotland vs England) and how this may impact on young peoples' sense of how close or far away they are from home.

Perhaps more relevant to Scottish young people living in care, are the findings of the Scottish Independent Care Review (Independent Care Review, 2020) which places a significant emphasis on keeping families together and maintaining relationships between children and those who care for them. This points towards the importance of relationships over geography, albeit geography may create obstacles in maintaining such relationships (e.g., distance to travel).

This stance has real face validity and will resonate with anecdotal evidence of many practitioners, as well as being supported theoretically when one considers

the importance of relationships through attachment. John Bowlby's attachment theory defines attachment as 'a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' (1969, p.194). Support for the relevance of attachment theory in practice is evidenced in the work of Ian Sinclair and colleagues who reported that a successful placement is linked to the formation of an attachment relationship (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003; Wilson, Petrie & Sinclair, 2003). A more current perspective, and particularly relevant to care experienced children, is that of Garfat and Fulcher's work (e.g., Freeman & Garfat, 2014; Garfat & Fulcher, 2012) which captures the significance of belonging and connection in their 'Being, Interpreting, Doing' framework.

There is a wealth of 'guidance' aimed at local authorities and the care sector when placing young people in care, albeit the guidance is not always based on robust scientific research. Independent reviews across Scotland and England (Residential Care in England, 2016; Independent Care Review, 2020) both highlight the perpetuation of trauma for children, and the overall failures of the care system. However, these reviews do not offer clarity around the difference to being close to home, remaining in the child's home community and remaining in the child's local authority. The English review referenced 20 miles being far away without a rationale of why this figure is suggested. It is also plausible that there are children who live over 20 miles from their family's home yet are still placed in the same local authority.

Other reviews conclude similar recommendations around the need for proximity to home, yet offer poor or even a lack of methodology, do not provide a clear definition of home and make assumptions that being far from home equates to being far from their home local authority. (HMI Probation, 2012; Ofsted, 2014). Assumptions were made that being placed 'hundreds of miles away' is more traumatic and challenging than being placed a shorter distance away without any rationale or clarification of what the young people felt about being closer to or further away from home (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Both literature and guidance published make assumptions that home is a positive element in a child's life and will reduce risk, and that home is a single geographical place that remains constant. The guidance appears to assume that geographical distance is problematic without clarity over what distance equates to close or far away.

Despite this, local authorities need to 'be cautious about following any hard and fast rule about placement distance and…recognise that the right placement for a child is more important than location' (Residential Care in England, 2016), and distance shouldn't necessarily be assumed as negative (Moodie, 2015).

Notwithstanding the criticisms, guidelines and reviews consistently advocate looked after young people remain closer to home. However, in addition to these criticisms is the difficulty of implementing such recommendations. For example, the Children's Commissioner's report referred to above suggests that local authorities cannot match the level of need locally and therefore become reliant on separate care providers which are often out of area and that children are pushed away from home not because it is best for them, but because of a lack of alternative. This is aligned to the findings from national UK inspections that reported young people are often placed away from their home area due to a shortage of suitable resources closer to home (Audit Scotland, 2010; Ofsted, 2014) and is further reflected in Scotland's Independent Care Review (2020).

A significant criticism of all the literature available is that it does not explore what home means to young people, nor does it recommend to practitioners that they should explore this. The literature generally equates home area with that of the governing local authority area. This is a clumsy and insensitive definition particularly given the complexities of the looked after population, their fragmented histories, and the likelihood they have experienced multiple moves since coming into care. Furthermore, the literature does not explore how young people define home. This is essential given that distance is in turn defined by how home is defined.

Defining home is problematic, indeed rarely is there a clear definition of home that relates to all. Home does not specify whether this should be closeness to birth family, the community in which one has spent most time, or the local authority of the birth family, nor does it take account of those who do not have or never knew their birth family. The definition of home was central to the research reported here and may vary greatly across young people. To ascertain the young people's view on the role of distance, young people's definitions of home were therefore also explored.

Research that uses established methodology to explore the effect of distance from home on looked after young people and their lives, including an understanding of young people's definition of home and their views of being away from home, is therefore required. The importance of seeking young people's views is acknowledged in a range of guidance for the valuable and unique evidence this can provide (Save the Children, 2000; NICE guidance, 2015; United Nations, 1989). Indeed, 'the voices of the children and young people in the care system must be heard at every stage' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016, p.3) and should 'be empowered to have a more active role in decisions about their placements to increase the likelihood that they will be stable and successful' (p.27).

Furthermore, guidance from the principles of good transitions highlights the importance of young people being at the centre of decisions and planning and decision making should be carried out in a person-centred way (Scottish Transitions Forum, 2017).

This research therefore sought to undertake qualitative interviews with young people in the hope that it would enable greater understanding of how home and distance affects young people by listening to the views of looked after young people and enable those caring for young people to make informed choices that can potentially improve care.

This study aimed to explore the lived experience and views of young people in residential and secure care. It aimed to inform and improve practice so decision makers and care staff effectively support young people who may live away from their home area.

When setting out to undertake this research, the purpose was not to conceive distance from home as negative or positive, but to explore young people's view of both advantages and disadvantages of living away from what they defined as home. As stated, given the complexities and fragmented lives of looked after young people, they were invited to define home for themselves.

The study explored the following research questions:

1. How do young people who live in residential and secure care define home?

2. What do these young people consider to be positive effects of distance from home?

3. What do these young people consider to be negative effects of distance from home?

4. What do young people think carers can do to help with distance?

Using thematic analysis, key themes were identified and discussed to develop an understanding of how distance interplays with the concept of home and how young people's views on distance impacts their care experiences.

Method

Papers discussing sample sizes have indicated main themes are highlighted within four to six cases analysed (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006) and in the case of hard-to-reach populations six to 12 cases can offer insight (Baker, Edwards & Doidge, 2012). This research therefore aimed to recruit at least six participants (Sandelowski, 1995), and once initial coding of the data indicated repetition of themes then data collection stopped. All young people who expressed an interest in taking part in the research were thanked for their time.

Participants

All young people were residents in a care centre in Scotland. A total of seven participants, aged 14 to 17 years took part in a semi-structured interview, lasting between 16 and 26 minutes. These interviews ended at the young people's request and when they stated they did not have anything further to add. The relatively short duration may reflect numerous factors and is given further consideration in the discussion. The sample included two females, four males and one young person who identifies as transgender.

Procedure

Ethical approval from the ethics committee of the residential care centre was sought prior to advertisement and recruitment of participants. The ethics committee raised concern about the process of recruiting young people and the

potential complications of them having different definitions of home. This was clarified by the author and measures were taken to ensure the organisation supported the recruitment process which involved disseminating posters to all units within the centre. A young person was invited to give feedback on the design of the poster and amendments were made accordingly. All young people currently residing at their care home had the opportunity to participate in the research.

A set distance of how far young people lived from their local authorities was not a criterion for involvement. As highlighted, the young person's definition of home may vary and subsequently their view of distance may change depending on what is being explored (e.g., feeling close to home when thinking about how long it takes to get home, but far away from home when thinking about friends). Therefore, all young people interested in participating could provide useful contributions.

All advertisement and promotion of the research project took place at the centre. Young people who expressed an interest in the project met the researcher to discuss what was required including issues around consent and confidentiality. Social workers allocated to each young person were asked to assent to participation. Parents and carers were contacted via letter and given the opportunity to 'opt out' and/or raise any concerns about the young person participating.

Once consent and assent were obtained, the interview was scheduled at a convenient time to the young person. All interviews were conducted individually, and all interviews were completed by the same researcher. Interviews took place either within the young person's care-home, or within a building on the campus. All participants engaged in one interview which was recorded by the author. Interview transcripts were anonymised and stored securely on electronic file.

Promotion of the research project continued during the process of interviewing the seven participants. Initial coding of the data suggested repetition of themes and therefore no further participants were sought.

Analysis

Themes were identified at a semantic, explicit level (Boyatzis 1998). The author and a colleague analysed the data, independently and then collaborated and conferred findings following the initial identification of the basic themes. The second analyst (a colleague) helped to ensure the data was being rigorously analysed. The author used reflective logs as part of their role as researcher recognising possible bias and influence. This was particularly relevant given the researcher's situation at the time of data collection, as they were living 'away from home'. Collection of data was terminated when it was felt data saturation had been reached, i.e., when no new themes were being identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data used was analysed using thematic analysis procedures described in Braun and Clarke (2006) and Attride-Stirling (2001). After transcriptions of the interviews were completed, the data was read carefully, and an inductive approach used to identify initial codes from all data.

The next stage of analysis involved grouping the data that referred to similar topics, with some data being included in more than one category. Basic themes were identified and reviewed to determine organising and global themes. These were named and described. The final stage of the analysis was reviewing the data to ensure the organising and global themes were all sufficiently supported by the data. Quotations in the results section are used to illustrate identified themes around young people's views of being looked after away from home. One global theme, two organising themes, and five basic themes were identified.

Results

The analysis elicited one global theme described below:

Home is 'connections'

Young people defined 'home' in a range of ways, with some reporting it as something not fixed and could change over time. Others related it to where their family lived at any given time, and others described it as where they were born.

After defining home, the principal findings from the data suggested that the physical, geographical distance was not the fundamental cause of young people feeling far away or closer to home.

Young people repeatedly referred to the connections they had to home, either through relationships, the place itself, or the space they had there. The maintenance of these connections contributed towards feeling closer to home, regardless of the actual proximity.

> It's my family and they love me and they've got a room for me in both houses if I go and stay...they have a bed each for me in each of the houses.

> I don't really call anywhere home apart from my family house.

> where my Nana and Papa live

Despite young people suggesting home could change over time, the key to defining home was around where those relationships and connections to others were:

> unless they moved [home] would never change

For those young people who had moved more than once, or for those who had been in care for some time, the message of connections to people and places remained:

> as you're younger it's where you are brought up, your house your home stuff like that but I think as you get older…is where I am now…is probably home.

> where you're brought up…just the school, where your family are based.

For one young person, there was a lack of connection to anyone or any place, and he was not able to identify home as anything other than the place he slept:

so even if I had to live outside and sleep in a doorway or
whatever I would still class that as where I lived and my home

Figure 1 below depicts the themes identified.

Figure 1: Global, Organising and Basic Themes Organising and Basic Themes
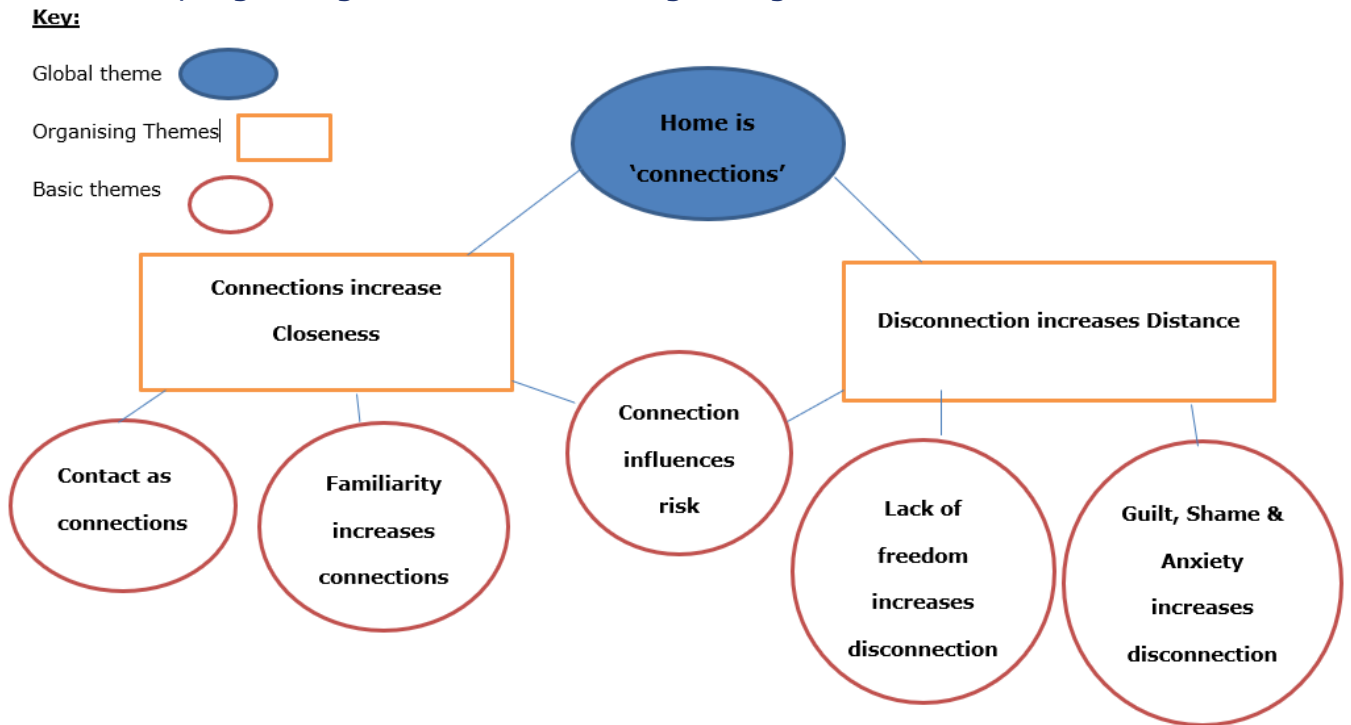
Two organising themes were identified: *'Connections increase Closeness'* and *'Disconnection increases Distance'.*

Connections increase Closeness

Various factors not directly related to geographical distance or proximity affected how far or close young people felt to home. The connections young people made to a place or through relationships impacted their feelings of closeness to home. This suggests how far or close they felt to home was significantly related to how connected they felt to these things.

Two basic themes relating to the concept of Closeness increasing Connections are described below:

Contact as Closeness/Connection

Young people felt connected to their home through contact. Some of the data suggests that availability and access to contact with friends and family contributed to feeling closer to home, with young people describing how access to resources such as telephone contact and travel led to lesser or greater feelings of distance.

> my family aren't able to come down as much because of the distance.

> [Home] it's not that far away it's like a train distance.

> [access to phone and speaking to family] makes them feel closer.

> allowed to go visit them [family] [reduced how far away they felt].

Young people spoke of how supporting contact through resources may provide a means to maintain the connections which would reduce the feelings of distance:

> maybe having visits with them every so often…a letter would be nice

> I think even if we could have Skype or something I could see my mum on a daily basis.

[Access to your phone]…yeah, it makes them feel closer

[makes you feel far away]…now I've disappeared and I'm in a secure unit… I can't speak to them on Facebook or nothing so I don't really know who my friends are anymore.

Familiarity increases connections

The theme of familiarity emerged throughout the data with young people reporting how this impacted on their feeling of distance to home.

Unfamiliar accents of staff and young people impacted upon feeling far from home:

getting used to the accents and all that

Being unacquainted with the residential home, having never visited before also increased feelings of distance:

when I first came…I'd never been [here] before…so home felt a million miles away, like I didn't know the place

I didn't know how to get home…it's not always distance'

Lack of familiarity with the type of residential resource the young person was moving to, along with the setting also increased feelings of distance:

I'd never been to a placement that had six beds…this place was massive, there was a ****, a ****, all these big places and I didn't know how I got here, how to get back home…so it was different.

Young people offered suggestions of how to feel more familiar in their environment so to reduce the feelings of distance from home:

[felt closer to home]…when I'm sitting around with pictures and stuff…if I've got pictures of home it will make me feel a bit better…because there is a bit of home in my hand

a lot of the stuff in my room is from home so it makes it feel more homely

like when the staff kind of sit and talk with you [at supper] …makes you feel a bit more like home before you go to bed…. Because it's just like things that previously happened at my old house.

Disconnection increases distance

Young people spoke in varying degrees about the emotional impact of being away from home. Significant to these feelings was the loss of connection with their family and/or friends:

I never wanted my sister to come up…I felt ashamed of what it looked like here.

there's always at least one time of the day when I just feel rubbish because I know I can't be home …. something bad has happened and I can't just go home and make sure everything is ok.

you'll just feel miserable all the time, just feel worthless and just be like…you don't care.

Lack of freedom increases disconnection

Young people's perceived barriers imposed by being in care contributed to feeling far away from home, which was related to feelings of disconnection from family, friends and/or a certain place:

[Home]…feels far away…. Well I can't just go and see them [family]

[family feel] …miles away…because I'm here and I'm not even allowed outside

[Home]…was like walking distance…I could go and visit whenever I wanted

> It's just the freedom that makes me feel like I'm home or closest to home

Distance influences risk

The two organising themes of 'Connections increases Closeness' and 'Disconnection increases Distance' were linked to one final basic theme of 'risk'. The experience of feeling connected or disconnected (to people and to places) both appeared to impact the young people's risk of re-offending and risk-taking behaviours:

For some young people, feeling low in mood when feeling far away from home influenced their risk-taking behaviours:

> I think there's probably more chance of getting high away from home…. Because I'd just feel rubbish because I wasn't at home.

> [when away from home] you might just start going out doing stupid things like take drugs or something…you could start offending

Young people reported the paradox of how being 'disconnected' to certain things may increase their likelihood of risk-taking, as well as reducing it. Some young people reported that remaining connected and close to negative peer influences when closer to home had an impact on their offending behaviour.

> …you get too carried away…. you can get into trouble…get too confident and get really pally with your friends and you think everything is going good and you get over-confident and then you go and commit a silly crime like I did and get yourself put back in secure.

In addition, data suggested distance and the subsequent disconnect from people and places positively impacted the risk of re-offending as being away from home had allowed time away from peers and time to think about their offending behaviour without negative influence:

> [Distance]…is good because it's gave me a time to rehabilitate and think about what I've done

> [being far away from home]…gave me a chance to change my
> behaviour…like. I can't just go out and do my own thing when
> I'm here.

Discussion

Young people's definition of home varied, it was changeable and not necessarily where their local authority was. This is in turn impacted on their view of feeling closer to or further away from home. Any reference to home was based on the young person's definition of home.

The overarching message from this research was that whilst geographical proximity to a young person's home could impact on how close they felt from home, the importance of connections was significant.

Young people highlighted the importance of familiar connections with their surroundings, as well as physical connection with their family and friends through contact when feeling closer to home. Young people's emotional response to being in care, coupled with the perceived lack of freedom and constraints from being in care, was linked to disconnection with family, friends and places and in turn increased feelings of distance to home and the people they associated with home.

The impact of being away from home on young people's risk of re-offending and risk-taking behaviour differed depending on those who felt being 'disconnected' from certain influences was beneficial, versus those who felt losing the connections with others contributed to their risk-taking behaviour.

Findings suggested that whilst proximity of a young person's placement to their home should be considered when accommodating young people, proximity alone does not determine how close a young person feels to home. Supporting young people to maintain the connections they have to people and places may be significant in reducing the feelings of being far away, as well as supporting them to make new positive connections where they currently are placed. Exploring what home means to young people when looked after is also important for establishing where, who with, and how these connections can be maintained.

These findings are perhaps consistent with other research that found young people with experience of residential childcare reported a sense of belonging to people and places not conventionally associated with home or family (Wilson & Milne, 2012). Similarly, Scotland's Independent Care Review (2020) took a holistic view of families, in recognition that children reported a variety of settings and homes felt like family.

If one is to consider the importance of attachment theory in the understanding of relationships, it is perhaps unsurprising that the findings of this research are supported by psychological theory. The 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' that Bowlby (1969, p.194) defines is ever relevant in the lives of looked after children. The young people in this research described their feelings of connectedness through their experiences of relationships, despite a lack of proximity. These findings are echoed in the work of Garfat and Fulcher (2012) in their Child and Youth Care (CYC) approach, which states that relationship is the foundation of all CYC work, and that connection is the foundation of relationship.

The significance of connection and its impact on young people's sense of closeness to home further supports Milligan's observations (2003; 2005) that home 'is as much a social and emotional concept as a physical one' (Clark, Cameron & Kleipoedszus, 2014, p.5).

Current guidance (e.g., Moodie, 2015; House of Commons Education Committee, 2016) states that continuity and stability is important in achieving positive outcomes for looked after young people. This supports the finding that young people who feel more familiar in their placement are less likely to feel disconnected from their home and disconnected from relationships. Furthermore, multiple placement moves could potentially contribute towards feelings of unfamiliarity.

The significance of familiarity to young people may serve to highlight the importance of managing the sense of unfamiliarity in advance of any planned move, and in the initial stages of moving to a new placement. For example, supporting the young person to know where their placement is, how they would travel to and from it when visiting 'home', showing the young person on a map

so they can see more visually, or supporting and encouraging the young person to have access to items, foods and other things that may contribute towards them feeling more familiar with their new surroundings.

Such findings are in line with literature and guidance around the principles of good transitions for children (Scottish Transitions Forum, 2017) which highlight the importance of young people being at the centre of decisions and that planning and decision making should be carried out in a person-centred way. The principles of good transitions argue it is crucial for young people with additional support needs (such as looked after children) to receive effective co-ordination of transition planning and support at a local level.

The level of resource available to young people and their families, such as contact, access to Facebook or 'Skype', accessibility to transport also related to young people's connectedness and their feelings around distance from home. Whilst there may be risk management considerations around contact and access to such resources, these findings generally highlight the importance of having access and contact to their families and friends so they can feel connected to home. Inevitably, proximity and geographical distance can impact on families' abilities to travel longer distances for contact. Family members' health can also contribute towards this, with adverse health issues potentially preventing them from travelling further distances. Residential care services should consider the resources they have available to them and how these could be best utilised to support contact (e.g., Skype, Facebook) whilst still considering relevant risk management factors.

Further related to the concept of 'risk', young people held some contrasting views in relation to being disconnected and the impact it had on their level of risk-taking behaviour. A significant issue noted was the emotional impact on being away from home which may contribute to barriers to change their offending behaviour as well as leading to potential increase use of substances to manage their feelings of hopelessness. However, the positive impact of distance was also noted, with reports that distance led to reduced contact with negative influences that had previously contributed to their offending behaviour. Those with responsibility should therefore consider the potential positive and negative impact of moving a young person from their home and determine on an

individual basis what would best meet their needs. Collaborating with young people about what they feel may reduce their risk when exploring suitable placements is recommended where possible. What supports and reduces risk for one young person may well increase the risk for another.

Whilst proximity to home did not appear an overwhelming factor to young people in relation to how close, or far, they felt, it still held relevance in relation to contact with family which in turn affected their feelings about their placement. The research suggests that when considering placing young people away from their home, distance should still be considered, but more importantly the impact this distance may have on their risk of offending (if relevant) and how familiar they feel with the placement should be prioritised when identifying placements.

Perhaps, when making decisions about young people's placements, if those making decisions see 'home' as being an important resource and contact with family and friends as a positive, stabilising factor, then it may emphasise the importance of proximity to home. However, as such findings appear anecdotal, proximity to home is not necessarily always deemed a 'resource' or positive for certain young people, either in terms of current placement stability or future outcomes. In which case, it puts in to question the relevance of the guidance that suggests proximity to home is important and emphasises the significance of considering the young person's definition of home. Quantifying where the young person feels a sense of connection is perhaps more relevant than a geographical location.

When interpreting the current findings and making recommendations it is important to note limitations. This study presents the views of seven young people who were living in the same residential care setting at one moment in time. It is a small number, and it would be beneficial to compare the views of more young people across different settings, to consider if these findings were specific to the care setting or if they can be generalised across residential care placements across Scotland and wider.

It is also relevant to consider the influence of the researcher in this study and the potential for bias in interpreting and analysing the findings. Whilst the researcher was conducting this study, she herself was living 'away from home'

and the potential for her experiences to influence her interviews, and her view of the analysis are recognised. To manage this, regular supervision and reflection took place and the researcher kept regular reflective logs during the whole process of the study.

Essentially, the literature highlights the need to explore in more detail the criteria that connects children's characteristics and circumstances when considering placements (Doran & Berliner, 2001). Such criteria should include but not solely focus on geographical proximity to home, family, and resources, including all that is encompassed in the young person's definition of 'home'.

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