

Child Guardian

Views of Children and Young People in Care

Queensland 2006



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Dear Premier

In accordance with section s163 of the *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000*, I provide the Commission's report, *Views of Children and Young People in Care – Queensland 2006*.

I have a responsibility as Commissioner and Child Guardian to listen to and seriously consider the concerns, views and wishes of children and young people. For this reason, and to better understand the effectiveness of recent reforms to the child safety system, I conducted a survey of children and young people in out-of-home care. This report reveals the results of that survey.

The publication of this report recognises that children and young people in out-of-home care have valid views which can (and should) be used by decision-makers, practitioners, and researchers to improve service delivery by the child safety system.

Yours sincerely



Elizabeth Fraser
Commissioner for Children and Young People
and Child Guardian

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Particular appreciation is expressed to:

- the children and young people living in out-of-home care who participated in the survey, and whose views are represented in this report
- foster carers, relative carers, grandparent carers and all other carers who supported the children and young people involved in the survey
- officers of the Department of Child Safety, the Department of Communities and non-government service providers who supported the development and conduct of the survey
- the Commission's Zonal Coordinators and Community Visitors for helping administer the survey
- officers of the Commission who variously designed the study, analysed the data and/or prepared the report.

Glossary

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
Blueprint	Blueprint for implementing the recommendations of the January 2004 CMC inquiry into abuse in foster care
CSO	Child Safety Officer
CAPD	Central Auditory Processing Disorder
CMC	Crime and Misconduct Commission
CV	Community Visitor
CYMHS	Child and Youth Mental Health Service
DChS	Department of Child Safety
FAS	Foetal Alcohol Syndrome
FSO	Family Services Officer
NGO	Non-government Organisation
SEDU	Special Education Developmental Unit
YP	Young people/person

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Foreword

As Queensland's Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian I have a responsibility to listen to and seriously consider the concerns, views and wishes of children and young people in this state. To do this, and to better understand the effectiveness of recent reforms to the child safety system, I initiated a survey of children and young people in out-of-home care.

In January and February 2006, 1703 Queensland children and young people living in out-of-home care responded to the survey.¹ These children and young people have provided their views about their experiences in out-of-home care, particularly their day-to-day interactions with carers, Child Safety Officers and Community Visitors and other more general aspects of the child safety system. In doing so these children and young people have broadened the Commission's understanding of Queensland's child protection system. This will contribute to the establishment of a longitudinal evidence-base for identifying placement characteristics that have a significant and lasting impact on the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people in care.

I believe the information and knowledge provided by children and young people in out-of-home care needs to be shared with the public. Publishing children and young people's views recognises and affirms that they have valid views which need to be understood and used in decisions including both policy and practice.

For this reason – as far as possible and within the parameters of ethical research practice^{2,3} – the information provided by children and young people has been reported without alteration or interpretation, so the community 'hears' their words rather than the Commission's interpretation.

There is a great deal of information in this report that will hearten members of the community who have worked tirelessly to reform Queensland's child protection system. The fact that almost 98 per cent of children and young people who took part the survey told us they feel safe in their current placement is encouraging. However, the two per cent of participants who told us they don't feel safe in their current placement represents a significant number of children and young people whose protective care needs may require assessment. As the survey data is progressively integrated with the information compiled by the Commission through its Child Guardian, policy, advocacy, research and employment screening work, this and other findings will be the subject of further analysis and reporting (particularly in the Commission's Child Guardian Report 2006).

I wish to thank the children and young people for their trust and courage in sharing their experiences and perceptions of life in care with us. I also appreciate the role carers played in making the survey possible by accommodating longer than usual visits and helping children and young people to complete surveys or completing them on their behalf if necessary. I thank them most sincerely for their assistance and support.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the contribution of the Commission's Zonal Coordinators and Community Visitors. Their efforts indicate their high degree of professionalism and dedication to supporting and representing children and young people in out-of-home care.



Elizabeth Fraser
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and Child Guardian

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- 1 Carers completed the survey form for those children who were too young or unable to complete it themselves.
 - 2 The anonymity of survey respondents has been assured and carefully protected throughout the conduct of the survey and subsequent data compilation and report preparation. Completed surveys were returned to the Commission devoid of respondents' names and other identifying details, and any identifying information in the survey responses themselves (eg. names of the respondent's carer, family members, Community Visitor, Child Safety Service Centre, Child Safety Officer) were systematically removed in the presentation and discussion of survey responses within the report.
 - 3 Throughout the conduct of the survey, the safety and best interests of the children remained the paramount concern for the Commission. In the process of obtaining informed consent to participate in the study, children and young people were advised of the Community Visitors' overriding responsibility to identify and respond to safety concerns or issues that may become evident in the course of the survey. Emergent safety concerns and issues were attended to by the Commission in consultation with the Department of Child Safety.

Summary of Findings

This report is the first of many strategies to capture and profile the views of Queensland children and young people in out-of-home-care. It provides a rich and authentic source of data for practitioners, policy makers and researchers with an interest in the wellbeing of children and young people.

Key findings from the survey reveal most children and young people are happy with many aspects of their out-of-home care situation. Reports from children and young people suggest this is influenced by factors such as:

- feeling safe in their current placement
- being treated well by their carer
- being understood by their carer
- being treated the same as others not in care
- knowing who to ask for help
- Child Safety Officers who are nice and care about their best interests
- helpful and responsive Community Visitors
- feeling their situation has improved over the last year.

However, quantitative analyses, supported by comments from children and young people, identified a range of issues of concern. These include the:

- high proportion of children and young people who think their views are not seriously considered
- large number of children and young people experiencing many different care placements
- number of attempts at family reunification
- length of time in care without permanency planning
- lack of confidence that when the department approves something it will actually happen
- high proportion of young people who do not know if they have a case plan
- high proportion of children and young people wanting more contact with their family and their CSO
- difficulties associated with obtaining permission to do things that those not in care can do.

Preliminary analyses also identified issues related to Indigenous status and disability. These and other survey findings will be the focus of further activities by the Commission.

Introduction

Purpose of the survey and report

The Queensland Government has made a significant commitment to reforming the child safety system through its implementation of the Blueprint for reform, arising from the Crime and Misconduct Commission's (CMC's) inquiry into the abuse of children in foster care.

The Commission's survey has yielded important information that will enhance our understanding of the views of children and young people living in out-of-home care, and how current child safety reforms are impacting on them. This information is vitally important in enabling the continuous improvement of services delivered in the child safety system. Equally the survey also represents a powerful way of showing individual children and young people that they have an important voice in shaping the future directions and priorities of the system.

Information gathered from the survey will also inform the Child Guardian's ongoing monitoring of the child safety system and the operations of the Community Visitor Program.

This report details the conduct and findings of the survey.

Background

In January 2004, the CMC released its report *Protecting children: an inquiry into abuse of children in foster care*. The report's recommendations were endorsed by the Queensland Government in its Blueprint for child safety reform. The Blueprint outlined how the CMC's recommendations were to be implemented. It also provided the Commission with increased powers and responsibilities to monitor the child safety system and respond to children and young people on an individual basis.

These powers and responsibilities were to be carried out by a new Child Guardian function. On 1 August 2004 the Commission's name changed to reflect this new function. In line with the Blueprint for child safety reform, the Child Guardian is responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of services to all children in the child safety system.

On 6 January 2006, the Child Guardian reported to the CMC on its implementation of the Blueprint's recommendations (the *Child Guardian Report 2005*). In this report, the Child Guardian outlined the Commission's plan to survey children and young people in out-of-home care. To comply with the Blueprint, the survey was administered by the Commission's Community Visitors, providing an opportunity to independently assess the progress of Queensland's child safety reforms.

The Community Visitor Program provides the Commission the opportunity to determine the issues of importance to children and young people in care. It does this as part of its mandated responsibility to visit children in out-of-home care regularly. Community Visitors capture data on, and resolve at a local level, a range of issues identified by children and young people and their carers.

The Community Visitor Program also provides an opportunity to ask children and young people questions about other things besides direct care issues, particularly through surveys or single question formats.

The survey was administered by Community Visitors during January and February 2006. It was designed to provide the Child Guardian with information about children and young people's experiences of out-of-home care and their satisfaction with the Commission's Community Visitor Program.

Children and young people currently in out-of-home care have a range of insights and opinions that can inform improvements to practices and programs, including the Community Visitor Program. The strengths and weaknesses of the child safety system are not remote policy documents or conceptual ideas to these children and young people, but rather their lived experience. They can tell us what is working for them, and what is not.

Report structure

The report's *Survey Design* section describes the principles behind the survey development, including the consultation process that informed the design. This section outlines the different types of questionnaires administered, that is, questionnaires addressing children and young people's experiences of care and those addressing children and young people's satisfaction with the Community Visitor Program. The different questionnaires administered to children and young people of varying ages are also described, as are the various ways in which the questionnaires were administered.

The report's *Findings* section details what the Commission has learnt from the survey. For the most part, these findings are presented in the form of averages or frequencies. Comments from children and young people are also included to further highlight or exemplify responses to particular items. A detailed list of the children and young people's comments are included in the Appendix.

Finally, the *Future Directions* section discusses some of the planned further uses of the survey data. This includes the intention to conduct more detailed analyses to identify any contextual variables of significance across the issues identified. These may include demographic, cultural, age-specific, gender-specific and harm-related factors that may warrant consideration in care planning and case management practices.

Survey design

Guiding principles

In developing the survey to capture the *Views of Children and Young People in Care* in collaboration with key stakeholders⁴, the following considerations were identified by the research team as core design principles.

- The survey should form an integral part of the Commission’s systemic monitoring framework and augment the Child Guardian’s existing information-gathering activities.
- The impost of the survey on children, young people and their carers should be minimal and should not incite unpleasant memories or emotions for survey participants.
- The nature and focus of the survey questions should address the key issues targeted in the reform of Queensland’s child protection system and be informed by children and young people currently in out-of-home care.
- The language and style of administration should be appropriate to the age, developmental profile, literacy level and ability of the children and young people being surveyed.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people should be particularly encouraged and enabled to participate in the survey and their responses should be capable of differentiation in data analyses.
- The variety of out-of-home care placement options⁵ should be taken into account in developing the survey questionnaire items and administration protocol/s.
- The survey questionnaire items and administration protocol/s must not compromise the quality of the relationships children and young people participating in the survey have with their carer or Community Visitor.
- If opportunities exist to collect information of value to key child protection stakeholders, they should be explored in the context of the preceding principles.

Design process

Consistent with the agreed principles, the survey was developed in consultation with children and young people in out-of-home care across Queensland. With appropriate permissions from the Department of Child Safety, out-of-home carers and children and young people themselves, the Commission convened six focus groups involving children, young people and their carers in Brisbane, Gold Coast, Logan, Beaudesert, Ipswich and Townsville.

The focus groups were convened with the support and assistance of Community Visitors and led by Commission research staff. They were held in local venues such as classrooms and parks that were readily accessible to all participants. One focus group was held in a residential facility. The Commission provided light refreshments to encourage a relaxed, convivial atmosphere and maximise the comfort and engagement of focus group participants.

Focus group participants were advised that the Commission was planning to survey all children and young people in out-of-home care and were told about the purpose of the survey and their role in shaping it. Developmentally appropriate language and concepts were used in advice and information to different groups to maximise understanding of and engagement in the focus group process. For example, children or young people who were unlikely to understand the concept of a survey, were advised it was a set of questions that would *“give children and young people in care a chance to tell the Commission about the things they think the Commission should know about being in care. This includes the things that work for kids, and the things that don’t.”*

4 Stakeholders involved in the design of the survey questionnaire included children and young people, carers and the Department of Child Safety.

5 Out-of-home care placement options include relative care, short and long term foster care, residential care, and supported accommodation.

Focus group participants were advised they could help ensure the right questions were asked by identifying aspects of out-of-home care that the Commission should know about. Prompts were used to galvanise thinking and discussion around aspects of care particularly relevant to child protection reforms. For example, if focus group discussion failed to mention the Community Visitor Program, a prompt of, “*What about having a Community Visitor, how is that for you?*” was used. Additional open-ended comments and encouragements along the lines of, “*Can you tell me more about that*”, or “*So how was that?*” were used to elicit further and focused discussion.

While the age and gender of children and young people participating in the focus group were recorded, identifying information (eg. their name) was not. The youngest child who took part and expressed views in the focus group process was six years old and the oldest was 18. In the tradition of minimally intrusive participant observation, hand written notes of focus group discussion and expressed views were compiled as the children and young people spoke. These notes were available and open to scrutiny by forum participants if they were interested.

Focus group notes were transcribed, collated and analysed to distil key themes and parameters for the survey questionnaire items that emerged across all focus groups, as well as those specific to certain age groups or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Administration implications

Examination of the focus group data, and consideration of age-related comprehension and articulation skills across the focus groups indicated that different and tailored administration strategies would be required for specific age groups being surveyed.

It was evident that the survey should be personally delivered to children and young people with a clear explanation of the survey purpose and process. It was also apparent that carers or Community Visitors might need to complete, or assist with the completion of the questionnaire for children and young people who were too young or otherwise incapable of completing it independently.

Five different survey questionnaires were designed. Two questionnaires were developed to measure satisfaction with the out-of-home care system, two focused on satisfaction with the Community Visitor Program and one asked about satisfaction with the out-of-home care system and the Community Visitor Program. Each questionnaire was customised to reflect the age-related comprehension and literacy skills of a specific sub-group of children and young people, as outlined below.

- *Questionnaire 1* focused on measuring satisfaction with the out-of-home care system among young people aged 9 to 18 years. Young people could choose to complete the questionnaire in the company of and with assistance from their Community Visitor or by themselves.
- *Questionnaire 2* sought to measure satisfaction with the out-of-home care system among children aged from 5 to 8 years. Community Visitors either administered the questionnaire or completed it with or on behalf of the child, depending on the child’s comprehension and literacy skills.
- *Questionnaire 3* sought to measure satisfaction with the out-of-home care system and the Community Visitor Program among children less than five years of age or for children with a disability that precluded self-administration. Carers either administered the questionnaire or completed it with or on behalf of the child, depending on the child’s comprehension and literacy skills.
- *Questionnaire 4* focused on measuring satisfaction with the Community Visitor Program among young people aged 9 to 18 years. Young people could choose to complete the questionnaire in the company of and with assistance from their carer or by themselves.
- *Questionnaire 5* focused on measuring satisfaction with the Community Visitor Program among children aged 5 to 8 years. Carers either administered the questionnaire or completed it with or on behalf of the child, depending on the child’s comprehension and literacy skills.

Report implications

The presentation and discussion of survey data in this report is designed to convey the perceptions and experiences of life in care of the children and young people who took part in the survey as directly and comprehensively as possible. Information volunteered by these children and young people has therefore been documented without alteration or interpretation, so the community ‘hears’ their words, rather than the Commission’s filtering, interpretation or translation of those words. In doing so, the data may sometimes appear erroneous, when they are actually an artefact of the flexibility and adaptability built into the survey design. For example, the age group targeted by each survey questionnaire was clearly identified on the front section of the document, but Community Visitors and carers exercised discretion based on their personal knowledge of the capabilities of individual children and young people who agreed to participate in the survey. As a result, the ages of children who completed each survey questionnaire don’t necessarily accord with the age range one would expect in the frequencies tables and graphs for each questionnaire.

Similarly, although satisfaction ratings for the same aspect of out-of-home-care were sought across all age groups, the wording of the relevant questionnaire items varied to accommodate age-appropriate language. The response options for similar items across the three age groups also varied in scope and sophistication, with the youngest age group choosing between ‘yes’ (satisfied) and ‘no’ (not satisfied) response options, older age groups responding with satisfaction ratings (eg. very satisfied, satisfied, not satisfied, not sure) and young people allocating ratings on a scale of 1 to 10 for some survey responses. Any comparison of relevant item responses across age-groups therefore requires aggregation and recoding of responses, which necessarily loses statistical power in data analyses.

For this report and for ease of communication, data captured from closed (limited choice) survey items are presented in frequency tables or figures where appropriate. Mean response values are also provided as a broad indicator of the responses overall. Samples of the comments provided by children and young people in response to specific open-ended survey questions are provided to illustrate the variety of perceptions and perspectives conveyed by the comments. A complete list of children’s and young people’s comments in relation to those questions is also included in the Appendix.

Limitations

The survey design parameters described above create some limitations in data interpretation and analysis. While the Commission has not embarked on data interpretation and analysis for this report, the following matters should be considered in any ensuing data analyses.

First, the survey respondents represent around 31% of the population of children and young people in out-of-home care in Queensland (at January 2006). The children and young people invited to take part in the survey were limited to those known to the Commission through its Community Visitor Program. The sub-set of survey invitees who agreed to participate was essentially self-selected.

Second, the validity and reliability of responses to the questionnaires completed by carers and Community Visitors on behalf of children and young people in care are uncertain, due to potential administrator bias in interpreting and recording the responses. This potential bias would need to be factored in to any statistical analyses of survey responses.

Finally, potential selection bias in the recruitment process is problematic, as privacy and confidentiality provisions don’t allow for a comparison of respondent and non-respondent characteristics beyond the broad attributes of age, gender, Indigenous status and geographic location. For example, children and young people who experienced the severest forms of abuse before being placed in out-of-home care may have been less inclined to participate in an activity involving thinking or talking about their parents. It is also possible that children and young people who have been in very long term out-of-home care placements were less inclined to take part due to survey questions that may no longer be relevant for them.

These limitations will be carefully considered in future analyses of and reports making use of the data gathered through the Commission’s inaugural survey on the *Views of Children and Young People in Care* in Queensland.