

Absent from care

INSIGHTS PAPER

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Queensland
Family & Child
Commission



Queensland
Government



Key points

- As at 31 December 2022, there were an estimated 833 Queensland children in care staying at a place that was not their approved placement. This represents 7.6 per cent of all children involved with the Department of Children Safety, Seniors and Disability Services (Child Safety), the majority of whom were aged over 14 years of age and had left a residential care placement. More than half (55%) were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children.
- When a young person leaves their ‘authorised placement’ they are sometimes referred to as ‘self-placing’. This wording suggests that the young person has exercised autonomy over their life, but the words can also be used as a label that diminishes the responsibility of adults to either encourage the young person to stay in their placement, or to continue to provide support despite being absent from their placement.
- Insights from stakeholders and young people indicate there are factors that ‘pull’ or attract children away from their approved placement, and factors that ‘push’ them, both of which require responses to prevent young people leaving care.
- Understanding why young people leave their care placement also requires us to understand how they may respond to being removed from their parents and placed with carers they have no prior relationship or contact with. Young people are more likely to leave their care placement when they have experienced a high number of placements in care.
- When young people leave their approved placement they are more likely to be at risk of experiencing harm, exploitation or become engaged in criminal activity, because they receive minimal or delayed support.
- If they seek to return to an approved placement, a young person’s experience will often depend on the individual Child Safety Officer or carer and their relationship and connection. There are currently no clear practice guidelines for workers about engaging with a young person who has left a care placement but is still under a Child Safety order.
- Whether or not a placement is left open and available for a young person who is not using it sometimes comes down to a resourcing decision due to high demand for placements in the residential and out-of-home care systems.
- There is only one specific service that explicitly provides outreach and support to children who self-place – the Brisbane Emergency Response and Outreach Service (BEROS) – and it only services the greater Brisbane area and the Sunshine Coast. Other services, such as youth homelessness services, have contract provisions that prevent them from supporting young people in care.
- Insights from the sector and young people suggest a range of improvements that can and should be made to both prevent and respond to young people leaving care placements.



Background

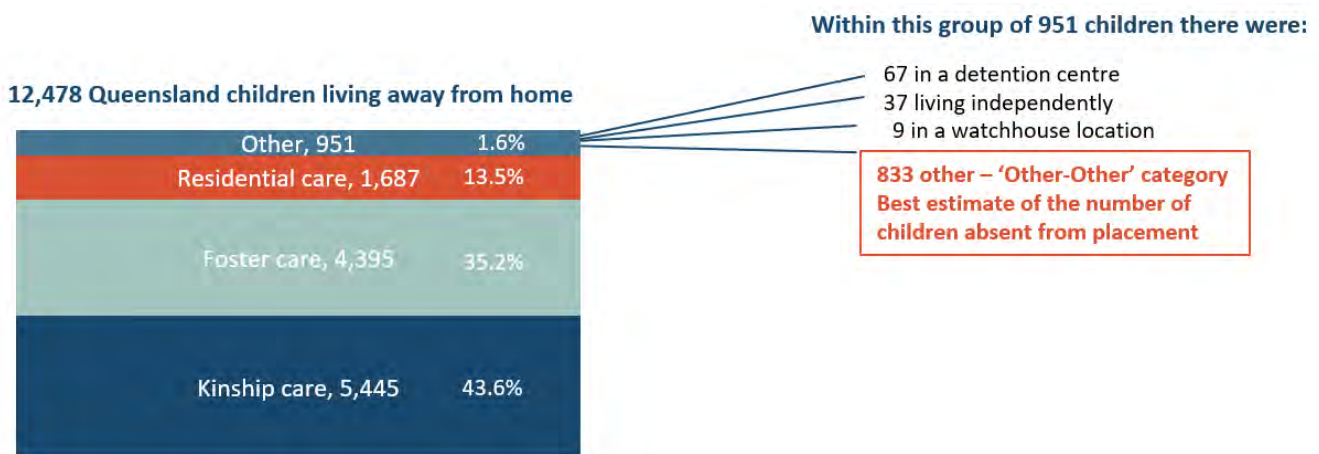
There is extensive legislation, regulations, policies, procedures and practice guides that govern how Child Safety places a child in out-of-home care; how the Government must meet their safety, care and protection needs; and how Government monitors placement safety. Conversely, there are limited explicit requirements or guidance regarding how to respond when a child leaves their approved care placement.

Understanding the shape of the problem

Identifying, on any given day, exactly how many Queensland children are staying away from their care placement is not currently possible without speaking with each young person and their care provider. Young peoples' decisions to leave or return to a placement occur far more frequently, and quickly, than the Department's ability to change their address in the child safety system. Consequently, like most other jurisdictions in Australia, Child Safety does not hold centralised, real-time data on the number of children in the care system who have left their placement, how long they leave for and whether safety assessments and case plans were in place or reviewed at the time they did so. Consequently, there is a lack of meaningful information about these children.

Figure 1 shows most children in the care system on 31 December 2022 were in kinship and foster care placements, with smaller proportions in residential care and 'other' care types. Of the 951 children recorded as living in an 'Other' placement, the Department confirmed that 113 were in youth detention, living independently, in a hospital or medical facility, or in a police watch house. Those remaining – the children in the 'Other-Other' category – included children who had left their placement. To verify where each of these 833 children were, and why they were categorised as 'Other-Other', each child's file would need to be reviewed – a time-intensive approach that is not routinely undertaken, and a process that would be out-of-date by the time it was completed.

Figure 1: Children living in out-of-home care by placement type, 31 December 2022



Source: Information provided by Child Safety in May and August 2023 (Unpublished)



Understanding why young people leave their placement

There are many diverse reasons why a young person might leave their care placement. Insights from stakeholders and young people which indicate that this can be a factor that ‘pulls’ or attracts a child away from their approved placement. Key ‘pull’ factors include wanting to see and be with family, seeking better connections with friends, to be closer to public transport and seeking more independence.

Some children were reported to be placed in different towns to their family and friends where they knew no-one and decided to leave their placement after seeing the activities of friends and family on social media.

“ I was from Brisbane, they put me in Cairns. I'd never been to Cairns in my life, so I left that placement three times and made my way back to Brisbane and they just kept flying me back to Cairns. (Young person)

Every time [child was] offered a placement the geographical location was way on the other side of Brisbane when all of her connections and even the schooling [the Education department] had arranged was way on the other side. (Stakeholder)

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On the other hand, there are factors that ‘push’ them to leave, such as

- A lack of connection with their carers¹ – this may be because they have had numerous carers over their care experience. The QFCC has met several young people who have had more than 40 ‘placements’ before the age of 16. These young people have a legitimate mistrust of the next placement and are increasingly inclined to find their own placement.
- Feeling unsafe, being in unhomelike settings, experiencing household conflict or tension.
- Feeling they are subject to unreasonable rules.

“ I self-placed with my Mum because um, my brother passed away in a resi care house and just being around it just brings up the thought of it so I self-place with Mum and now when they give me a place, I just run away so they don't bother to give me a placement anymore. (Young person)

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Understanding why young people leave their care placement requires us to understand their response to being removed from their parents and placed with carers they had no prior relationship or contact with. It is clear to the QFCC that young people are more likely to leave their care placement when they have experienced a high number of placements in care.



The risks faced when absent from care

When young people choose to leave their approved placement, they are at risk of experiencing harm, exploitation or become engaged in criminal activity. For example in September 2023, media stories appeared highlighting that allegations of grooming and exploitation of children in the Cairns area were being investigated and that three-quarters of the alleged child victims were in the care of Child Safety.¹ This vulnerability is particularly accentuated when a young person receives minimal or delayed supports, meaning they are at particular risk of making unsafe decisions due to their need for access to material basics.

On top of these risks, young people who are homeless will no longer have access to any medication that had previously been provided in care and administered by a carer and will be unlikely to continue their enrolment at school.

The situation presents a particular conundrum for the child safety system which must balance its obligation to provide a placement (which may involve encouraging a young person to return to their approved placement), with providing support and safety planning that risk manages a young person in an unapproved placement. In turn, this presents a level of system, professional and practice challenge for workers.

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Why does suddenly this kid no longer need food when they're self-placing and they suddenly no longer need support accessing school? Like I remember self-placing and Child Safety refusing to buy my school uniforms for me because I wasn't in a placement and my school gave them to me for free because Child Safety, just like, wouldn't do any of that. But if I were in a placement, they would have done all of that for me. I think the support needs for a kid self-placing are higher, but they're treated as if they are suddenly non-existent. (Young person)

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Current responses when a child leaves their placement

While they are still in the care of the state a young person remains entitled to seek and receive assistance from Child Safety. According to a 2023 study by Jemma Venables, young people who leave their placement are most likely to request access to material resources such as pre-paid transport cards, phones and phone credit, grocery and clothing vouchers, sanitary products, and funding for driving lessons or extra-curricular activities.²

¹ For example: N Bucci and B Smee, 'Dozens of vulnerable children allegedly preyed upon in Cairns, upending Queensland's youth crime debate', The Guardian, 25 September, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/25/police-operation-uniform-kalahari-cairns-youth-abuse-children-allegations-charges?CMP=oth_b-aplnews_d-3. L Williams, 'Teens in line of fire from monsters', Cairns Post, 12 September, 2023.

² J Venables (2023). Features of Service Delivery that Young People in Out-of-Home Care Who 'Self-place' and Stay in Unapproved Placements Value When Accessing a Specialist Support Service, *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-023-00939-8> pp. 8-9.



There does not appear to be clear consistency about what types and levels of resources should be provided to children when they are absent from care. Resource provision seems to vary across Child Safety Service Centres and individual Child Safety Officers (CSOs). Stakeholders and young people have reported that food vouchers (never cash) were supplied on request rather than on an agreed schedule, and of wildly varying amounts. It has also been reported that at times, resources have been withheld as a way of encouraging a young person to return to their approved placement. In other cases, a child with a good relationship with their CSO prior to leaving their placement may retain the services and supports already in place.

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One young person gets \$170 grocery vouchers a week whereas somebody else will be on \$50 a fortnight and they've gotta beg for it every fortnight and give a receipt back to prove they're spending it how they said they'd spend it... Every service centre is different. There is no standard. It shouldn't be an argument for every young person. And they talk! They know each other! How come you're getting a hundred bucks and I'm only getting fifty! [Child Safety says] well you made that decision so if you went to a placement, you would get the support. Their risk aversion is putting them [the children] at more risk. (Stakeholder)

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When a child leaves their approved placement, it is often closed due to the high demand for placements, particularly residential care placements. Some stakeholders reported that shortages of placements has led to decision-makers being forced to preference younger children over older ones for available placements.

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It's hard work to keep a placement open for a young person if they leave. As soon as Placement Services attends a stakeholder meeting for the child, we know that their placement will be closed. The reasons we get are the package is expensive, the child has only been there so many nights and that other children need the placement. (Stakeholder)

I've had placements that would just close immediately, like literally like with no warning at all, like just shut. I've had other placements where I didn't go back to for two weeks... I've been, since I was like 10 in like 40 placements... more likely resis that shut ... foster parents are more likely to fight for their kid and to fight to keep it open .. Resis don't care that much, they're much less likely to fight to keep the bed open when they could be making money with the next kid in there. (Young person)

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Children aged 15-17 with no other support may apply for a Services Australia (Centrelink) benefit. For children under Child Safety's care, they may be eligible for a Youth Allowance payment from the age of 16 years, however the rate is determined by the level of care being provided by Child Safety and the length of their child protection order. A 15-year-old child may be eligible for a Special Benefit payment if they are not under guardianship and meet other independence criteria. However, where they are legally still under Child Safety guardianship they will be deemed ineligible, even though they are not receiving any help from Child Safety.

Brisbane Emergency Response and Outreach Service (BEROS)¹

BEROS is a consortium service between Community Living Association (lead organisation) and Micah Projects, and is funded by the Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services.

BEROS works with young people aged 12-18 who are in the care of Child Safety and are absent from care (this includes young people sleeping rough and couch surfing).

The service provides outreach case management to young people Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm. BEROS works alongside young people, Child Safety and other key stakeholders to connect young people to safe and stable housing, increase safety and stability and support young people to access resources.

BEROS also operates a street to home service (after hours outreach) 7 nights a week from 6 pm until midnight. BEROS South engages in assertive outreach to areas young people frequent and sleep rough, responds to Child Safety after hours referrals, provides transports and outreach for young people who are absent from care, responds to young people in crisis and provides welfare checks and emotional and practical support.

BEROS also provides overnight support for up to two nights for young people who are absent from care. Overnight support workers can provide case work support to these young people and support young people to engage with the case management team after handover the following day.

Young people under the age of 16 who are absent from care are not eligible for any government run youth homelessness services, as these are not funded for young people under 16 years. This means children in the care system where their Child Safety funded placement has been closed are left homeless, relying on services such as BEROS to check on them and provide a bed and meal (BEROS is only funded to provide services in Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast).

Consultation undertaken by the QFCC with stakeholders highlighted that the level of concern and attention shown for and to a child returning to a placement can also depend on the individual CSO and carer.



Depending on their relationship with their CSO and depending on what's available and what supports they have outside the system, we will often have conversations about what happened there and what needs to happen differently, what do you need to feel safe. But that's not across the board. There are some nice pieces of work we've seen happen and have been somewhat successful, not always "that's fixed it" but it might mean it's lasted a little bit longer. (Stakeholder)

Extensive work [occurred] between Child Safety and the residential agency to fund and ensure a placement was available to the child when they needed, including funding a contingency model. A new primary residential care placement was opened for the child The child comes in and out but returns to this placement. (Stakeholder)



What needs to change

Young people who are absent from care are at significant risk of exploitation and the system should rightly see this as an aspect of the care system that is in urgent need of attention. It has been openly acknowledged by stakeholders that young people who leave their placements can become involved in property crime or selling sex or drugs to get cash or a place to stay.

Flexible, creative and relationship-based responses are needed to address the reasons why young people leave their placements, and to support them while absent from care until they find a safe alternative (services such as BEROS should be available across Queensland). Insights from the sector and young people suggest a range of improvements that can be made. These include:

To prevent young people leaving a care placement

- prioritising relationship building between children and their carers. Children who experience authentic relationships, for example, feel their carers are genuinely concerned for their wellbeing and are less likely to leave a placement;
- developing workforce skills and care models to achieve this relational stability for children and workers, including the provision of professional supervision;
- taking placement concerns seriously and acting quickly on a young person's concerns; and
- improving access to safe family contact and better supporting social connections.

To address absence from care

- developing clear and explicit processes and plans that guide what should happen if a child is 'absent' or 'missing';
- ensuring safety planning is relational, developmental, individualised and realistic;
- preventing, where possible, the closure of placements when a child is absent. Placement closure can make it very difficult to maintain relational safety with a child or young person and can make their future unknown or confusing;
- making financial supports accessible and consistent, including relaxing Services Australia's eligibility criteria in circumstances where children are self-placing;
- moving investment quickly to provide supports in the home the child is residing;
- placing older children on the transition to adulthood pathway, and accompanying revocation of orders, which will also give them access to resources.



It is clear that a child who is in the care system but absent from an approved placement needs just as much financial and personal support as a child living in an approved placement. These supports need to travel with them regardless of where they live.

Supporting a child returning to their placement

- ensuring return processes, such as return home conversations, take place. When done well, these can support children to successfully return to their placement.
- supporting children to:
 - adjust back to living in their placement;
 - identify and process the feelings and experiences that led to their absence from care;
 - feel safe enough to express their worries and concerns.

The gap in practice guidance for carers charged with maintaining engagement with young people who are absent from care should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Clearer guidance must be in place about how to respond when children in care are at risk of leaving a placement, what supports and services they are entitled to receive when they have left, how to stay in touch with the young person while they are absent from placement, and how to respond if the young person decides to return.

¹ Munford, R. (2022). Children and young people in the care system: Relational practice in working with transitions and challenges. *Australian Social Work*, 75(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2021.1989003>