

Adolescent Perspectives on Experiences within the Youth Justice Secure Estate: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents within the youth justice secure estate represent a uniquely vulnerable population whose voices are often marginalized. Understanding their lived experiences is crucial for developing effective and humane rehabilitation and support strategies. This systematic literature review synthesizes qualitative research exploring the perspectives of young people in secure settings. It identifies key themes related to their daily lives, relationships, education, mental health, and aspirations for the future. The findings underscore the importance of fostering positive relationships, providing tailored educational opportunities, addressing complex needs, and genuinely integrating youth perspectives into policy and practice. This review aims to contribute to a more child-centric approach within the youth justice system, advocating for environments that promote growth, well-being, and successful reintegration.

Keywords: Adolescent experiences, youth justice, secure estate, juvenile detention, systematic literature review, incarcerated youth.

INTRODUCTION

The secure estate for children and young people, often referred to as the Children and Young People Secure Estate (CYPSE) in some contexts, is a critical component of the youth justice system, housing adolescents who have been deprived of their liberty [16, 29]. These settings, including Secure Training Centres (STCs), Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), and Secure Children's Homes (SCHs), are designed for detention, education, and rehabilitation [41, 46, 47]. However, the experiences of young people within these environments are complex and multifaceted, often marked by significant challenges. Understanding these experiences from the perspectives of the adolescents themselves is paramount, as their views offer invaluable insights into the efficacy of current provisions and areas requiring improvement [5, 6].

Globally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) mandates that children deprived of their liberty should be treated with humanity and respect, in a manner that considers their age and the desirability of their reintegration into society [43]. Despite this, concerns persist regarding the conditions and impact of incarceration on young people [23]. Research consistently highlights that young people

in custody often present with complex needs, including high rates of neurodevelopmental disorders, mental health issues, and educational disadvantages [1, 11, 14, 17, 19, 20, 35, 39, 40]. These vulnerabilities can be exacerbated by the institutional environment, which, as Goffman [12] described in "Asylums," can inadvertently undermine individuals' sense of self and autonomy.

While quantitative studies provide important data on demographics and prevalence of issues, qualitative research offers a deeper understanding of the lived realities and subjective meanings that young people ascribe to their experiences [27]. Elevating the voices of children in custody is not just a matter of ethical principle but also a pragmatic necessity for developing effective interventions and fostering positive outcomes [5, 6]. Previous reviews have touched upon aspects of juvenile offender experiences [22], but a comprehensive systematic review specifically focusing on the broad spectrum of direct perspectives of young people within secure settings is needed to synthesize the extant qualitative evidence.

This systematic literature review aims to address this gap by systematically identifying, appraising, and synthesizing qualitative studies that explore the views and experiences of adolescents within the youth justice secure estate. By

doing so, we seek to provide a robust overview of what it is like to be a young person in these environments, highlighting key themes and implications for policy, practice, and future research.

METHODS

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was developed to identify relevant qualitative studies. Electronic databases searched included PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Sociological Abstracts. The search terms were designed to capture concepts related to young people, secure settings, and their perspectives. Keywords and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms included combinations of: "children," "youth," "adolescents," "juvenile offenders," "custody," "detention," "secure care," "secure unit," "prison," "rehabilitation," "experiences," "views," "perceptions," "perspectives," "lived experience," and "qualitative." The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English up to April 2024. Hand-searching of reference lists of included studies and relevant review articles was also conducted to identify additional studies.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

- **Population:** Focused on children and young people (aged 10-25, aligning with definitions of youth justice populations [15]) who had direct experience of being in a secure estate (e.g., juvenile detention centers, youth prisons, secure children's homes).
- **Methodology:** Employed qualitative research methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, ethnographic observations) to explore the perspectives, views, or experiences of the young people.
- **Language:** Published in English.
- **Publication Type:** Peer-reviewed journal articles.

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused solely on the views of staff, parents, or other stakeholders without direct input from young people.
- Used only quantitative methods.
- Were theoretical papers, commentaries, or editorials without empirical data.
- Focused on young people in community settings rather than secure custody.

Study Selection

Identified studies were uploaded to a citation management

software. Duplicate records were removed. Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria. Full-text articles of potentially relevant studies were then retrieved and independently assessed for eligibility by the same two reviewers. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion or by consulting a third reviewer.

Quality Appraisal

The methodological quality of the included qualitative studies was assessed using the framework developed by Mays and Pope [27] for assessing quality in qualitative research, as well as considering elements from the Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods Group Guidance [31]. This framework considers aspects such as the clarity of research questions, appropriateness of methodology, rigor of data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. While formal scoring was not applied, studies were critically appraised for their trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. High-quality studies were those that demonstrated a clear audit trail, rich description of findings, and explicit consideration of researcher reflexivity.

Data Extraction

Data extraction was performed by one reviewer and cross-checked by another. Key information extracted from each study included: author(s), year of publication, country of origin, study aim, participant characteristics (age range, gender, number), secure setting type, data collection methods, and main findings related to young people's experiences and perspectives.

Data Synthesis

The extracted qualitative data were synthesized using thematic synthesis, a method for systematically combining findings from multiple qualitative studies [42]. This involved three stages:

1. **Coding Free-Text Findings:** All text reported as 'findings' or 'results' from the included studies were imported into NVivo qualitative analysis software and coded line-by-line to identify recurrent concepts and themes.
2. **Developing Descriptive Themes:** Similar codes were grouped together to form descriptive themes that captured the content of the original studies.
3. **Generating Analytical Themes:** The descriptive themes were then further analyzed to generate overarching analytical themes that went beyond the

content of the original studies, offering a new interpretation relevant to the review's objective. This iterative process involved constant comparison and refinement of themes until a coherent framework emerged that illuminated the experiences of young people in secure settings [3].

RESULTS

A significant number of studies (over 20) met the inclusion criteria and were included in this systematic review. The studies represented diverse geographical contexts, including the UK [7, 8, 9, 10, 17, 25, 26, 37, 39], USA [2, 24, 34, 36, 38], Australia [33], Ireland [32], and Indonesia [22]. The populations within these studies varied in terms of age, gender, and type of secure facility.

The thematic synthesis revealed several overarching analytical themes concerning the experiences of young people in the youth justice secure estate:

The Pervasiveness of Control and Deprivation

A dominant theme across studies was the profound impact of control and deprivation inherent in secure environments [12]. Young people frequently described feeling a loss of freedom and autonomy, which was a constant and pervasive aspect of their daily lives [7, 23]. This extended beyond physical confinement to restrictions on movement, communication, and personal choices [7, 10]. Many articulated a sense of being "dragged kicking and screaming" into these environments, highlighting a lack of agency in their entry into custody [26]. The emphasis on security and order often overshadowed individual needs, leading to feelings of being "just a criminal" rather than an individual [21].

The Critical Role of Relationships with Staff

The quality of relationships with staff emerged as a pivotal factor shaping young people's experiences, significantly influencing their well-being and willingness to engage in rehabilitative efforts [4, 9, 21, 33, 34]. Positive relationships, characterized by care, respect, and trust, were highly valued [9, 21, 32, 33]. Young people reported feeling more humanized and understood when staff demonstrated genuine interest, listened to their concerns, and treated them as individuals rather than just offenders [21, 32]. Conversely, experiences of disrespect, indifference, or overly authoritarian approaches from staff were detrimental, leading to feelings of alienation and distrust [2, 10, 34]. The concept of "relational security," balancing care and control, was highlighted as crucial for fostering positive environments [33].

Challenges and Perceptions of Education and Learning

Education is a statutory provision within secure settings, yet young people's experiences of it were often mixed and challenging [25, 37, 39]. While some recognized the importance of education for their future, many expressed frustrations with the quality, relevance, and consistency of educational provision [25, 37]. Barriers included a lack of tailored support, curriculum that did not meet their individual needs, and difficulties focusing due to underlying learning disabilities or emotional distress [17, 39]. Some studies highlighted the significant literacy and communication challenges faced by many young offenders, which further complicated their engagement with education [17]. The aspiration to "put education at the heart of custody" was often not met in practice [25].

Mental Health and Well-being: A Constant Struggle

The review consistently revealed that mental health issues, trauma, and emotional distress were prevalent among young people in secure settings, and their experiences of managing these issues within custody were often challenging [1, 23]. Many reported feelings of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and despair, sometimes exacerbated by the institutional environment itself [7, 23]. Access to adequate mental health support was a recurring concern, with young people often feeling that their emotional needs were not sufficiently addressed [23]. The secure environment could inadvertently contribute to feelings of isolation, making it difficult for young people to cope with their existing vulnerabilities [19, 20].

Views on Rehabilitation and Future Aspirations

Despite the challenging circumstances, many young people expressed a desire for change and a focus on rehabilitation [2, 22]. They often recognized their "failings and faults" and saw their time in custody as an opportunity for self-improvement [10]. However, their perspectives on the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs varied. Programs that felt relevant to their lives and offered tangible skills for the future were more positively received [2, 22]. The importance of therapeutic relationships in facilitating desistance and promoting positive outcomes was emphasized [21, 30]. Young people also articulated aspirations for successful reintegration into society, though they often faced significant anxieties about the challenges of returning home and avoiding reoffending [2, 37]. The concept of "learning to be more human" through respectful interactions was also noted [32].

DISCUSSION

This systematic review underscores the profound impact

of the secure environment on young people and highlights the critical importance of understanding their perspectives. The findings resonate with broader literature on institutionalization [12] and the specific vulnerabilities of youth in custody [1, 11, 14, 17, 19, 20, 35, 39, 40]. The themes identified – the pervasive nature of control, the pivotal role of staff relationships, challenges in education, ongoing struggles with mental health, and complex views on rehabilitation – paint a comprehensive picture of their lived realities.

The consistent emphasis on the quality of staff-young person relationships is particularly striking [9, 21, 33, 34]. This aligns with growing recognition within the youth justice field of the importance of "relational security" and therapeutic models of care [4, 9, 21, 33]. When young people feel cared for, respected, and listened to, they are more likely to engage constructively and experience a sense of dignity and self-worth [21, 32]. This finding has significant implications for staff training, organizational culture, and the allocation of resources to foster stable and supportive relationships.

The review also highlights the persistent challenges in providing effective education and adequate mental health support within secure settings [17, 23, 25, 37, 39]. Many young people in custody have a history of educational disengagement and complex neurodevelopmental and mental health needs [1, 14, 19, 20, 21, 40]. The current provisions often fall short of meeting these diverse and profound needs, suggesting a disconnect between policy intentions and lived experiences [25, 39]. This points to the need for highly individualized, trauma-informed, and needs-led approaches to education and mental health care, moving beyond a "one-size-fits-all" model. The findings also reveal the complex psychological journey young people undertake while in custody, often oscillating between feelings of despair and hope [23, 10]. While the institutional environment can be dehumanizing, many young people still harbor aspirations for a better future and engage in efforts towards desistance [2, 22]. Supporting these aspirations requires not only effective in-custody programs but also robust through-care and reintegration planning that genuinely addresses the challenges of returning to the community [18, 30].

Limitations

This review is limited by the scope of available qualitative research. While efforts were made to conduct a comprehensive search, there may be studies not captured by the search strategy or those published in languages other than English. The quality of qualitative research can vary, and while quality appraisal was conducted, the subjective nature of qualitative methodology means that generalizability should be approached with caution. Furthermore, the experiences of young people can be highly individualized and shaped by factors such as gender [8, 36], ethnicity, and specific

neurodevelopmental profiles [1, 11, 14, 17, 19, 20], which not all studies explored in depth.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this review have several key implications for policy and practice within the youth justice secure estate:

- **Prioritize Relational Security:** Invest in training and support for staff to foster genuine, respectful, and therapeutic relationships with young people. This includes promoting consistent staffing, reducing staff turnover, and valuing empathetic approaches over purely disciplinary ones [4, 9, 21, 33].
- **Enhance Individualized Education and Mental Health Provision:** Develop and implement educational and mental health programs that are truly tailored to the complex and diverse needs of young people in custody [17, 21, 23, 39]. This requires greater collaboration with specialists in neurodevelopmental disorders, trauma, and mental health.
- **Empower Youth Voice and Participation:** Create meaningful opportunities for young people to participate in decisions that affect their lives within the secure estate, from daily routines to program development [5, 6]. This aligns with the UNCRC and can foster a sense of agency and respect [43].
- **Focus on Through-Care and Reintegration:** Ensure that rehabilitation efforts are integrated with robust plans for reintegration, addressing housing, education, employment, and community support upon release [18, 30].
- **Address Gender-Specific Needs:** Recognize and respond to the unique needs and experiences of girls in custody, who may face distinct challenges and vulnerabilities [8, 36].

Future Research

Future qualitative research should continue to explore the nuances of young people's experiences, particularly focusing on underrepresented groups and specific challenges such as language disorders [11] and how digital literacy impacts their experiences. Longitudinal studies could track changes in perspectives over time and the long-term impact of secure custody. Further research on the effectiveness of specific therapeutic interventions from the young person's perspective is also needed. Finally, comparative studies across different national contexts could provide valuable insights into best practices [15].

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has provided a comprehensive synthesis of young people's perspectives on their experiences within the youth justice secure estate. Their voices reveal environments characterized by significant control and deprivation, where the quality of relationships with staff emerges as a critical determinant of their well-being and engagement. While challenges in education and mental health support are prominent, young people often maintain aspirations for rehabilitation and a better future. By listening to and acting upon these invaluable insights, policymakers and practitioners can move towards a more child-centric, humane, and ultimately more effective youth justice system that prioritizes the dignity, development, and successful reintegration of these vulnerable adolescents. The findings strongly advocate for a shift from a purely punitive approach to one rooted in care, understanding, and the genuine empowerment of young people.

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