

'Relocating' Adolescents from Risk beyond the Home: What Do We Learn When We Ask about Safety?

Lauren Elizabeth Wroe*, Delphine Peace and Carlene Firmin

Department of Sociology, Durham University, Durham DH1 3HN, UK

*Correspondence to Lauren Elizabeth Wroe, Department of Sociology, Durham University, 32 Old Elvet, Durham DH1 3HN, UK. E-mail: lauren.e.wroe@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

There is an absence of evidence supporting the use of 'out-of-area placements' to address risks adolescents face beyond the home. Approximately one in ten adolescents in England and Wales are 'relocated' from their hometowns by children's social care teams due to these risks. Initial findings from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England situate these relocations as a 'failure' to safeguard teenagers. Using participatory approaches to research design and data collection, this article asks what do we learn about the impact of relocations when we ask about safety? Activity-based, qualitative interviews were conducted with young people ($n=5$), parents ($n=3$) and professionals ($n=15$) based in England and Scotland between 2020 and 2021, asking what worked and what didn't when a relocation was chosen, and what was the perceived impact on safety. Interview data were thematically analysed in collaboration with young people and a Research Advisory Group of professionals, all with expertise in the area. Data indicated a tension between what professionals, and then parents and young people, thought was significant when planning relocations and an ambivalence about the impact of relocations. Considerations for safety planning are suggested to support young people's holistic safety needs.

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Background

'Relocation' and 'extra-familial harm'

Since 2001, social work responses to abuse young people face beyond their families ('extra-familial harm', 'EFH' from herein) have undergone rapid change in England (Department for Children, Schools, and Families [DCSF], 2009), prompted by inquiries, case reviews and campaigns highlighting the significant harm that young people experience when they are exploited, sexually abused by their peers, or severely injured in their neighbourhoods (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020; Hill, 2019; Jay, 2014; Ofsted, 2021; Scott and Skidmore, 2006). Growing political and practice awareness of EFH has situated it (HM Government, 2018) as a safeguarding issue warranting a social work, not solely criminal justice, response (Firmin, 2020; Pearce, 2013); with affected young people more frequently portrayed as in need of support rather than punishment (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020; Jay, 2014; Lefevre *et al.*, 2018). During this time, the numbers of young people in custody in England for 'offending' has reduced significantly, the numbers in residential children's homes or secure placements on welfare grounds has increased (ADCS, 2018; Bateman, 2017; What Works for Children's Social Care, 2020).

Tensions have emerged regarding social work responses to EFH, including whether removing a young person from harmful contexts is in their best interests. Relocations—often termed 'out-of-area' placements (used here to describe placements outside of the child's usual resident local authority area)—can move a young person away from parents/families who often aren't a risk to their safety. Research carried out in England and Wales in September 2019 reported that of the 2,128 young people who, due to EFH, were allocated to social workers across 13 children's social care teams, 215 (approximately one in ten) young people were relocated (Firmin *et al.*, 2021). Initial findings from the national Independent Review into Children's Social Care in England situated this as a failure to safeguard teenagers (MacAlister, 2021), and the social work community and politicians seem divided on their use (Firmin *et al.*, 2021; Hansard, 2020; Scott and Botcherby, 2017).

For some, relocations disrupt (sometimes sever) young people's relationships with their families, peers, communities and local professionals, in

ways that might increase risk of harm (Firmin *et al.*, 2021; Lushey *et al.*, 2017). Out-of-area placements can destabilise young people (Creegan *et al.*, 2005; Harper and Scott, 2005), and alongside the use of secure placements, leave them feeling responsible for harm they face (Ellis, 2018; Hallet, 2016). As such, some children's services departments have invested stretched resources in local alternatives to distance placements; making a strategic decision to only move young people away from their communities in exceptional circumstances (Firmin *et al.*, 2021). Social care innovations have also been measured for the extent to which they reduce relocations (Lushey *et al.*, 2017; Scott and Botcherby, 2017).

For others, risks of physical harm mean that relocations are a risk worth taking—albeit a last resort (Firmin *et al.*, 2021; McKibbin and Humphreys, 2019). In these accounts, social work professionals query the effectiveness of relocations, but see no other options when faced with serious physical risks to young people. Parliamentary debates have surfaced a similar position—noting that, whilst for most young people a distance placement may be a last resort; in cases of exploitation, it may be in a young person's best interests to remove them from a physical threat (Hansard, 2020).

Recent work in this field carried out in England and Wales (Firmin *et al.*, 2021) demonstrated how this tension plays out in the rates at which relocations are used. Some children's services departments used them with less than 5 per cent of the young people they supported due to EFH during a one-month period (September 2019), whereas others used them with 25 per cent of young people supported for the same reasons. This variance was explained by the different positions taken on relocation outlined above. Risk management motivated decision-making across all participating services—with much less consideration given to young people's safety. Questions remain about the circumstances in which relocation—whether used in 5 per cent of cases or 25 per cent—affords young people (and their families) a sense of safety: a critical question for moving beyond political debate about whether relocations should be used, to understanding the circumstances in which they are helpful or not.

Asking about safety

This article asks what do we learn about the effectiveness of relocations and how to plan for them, when we ask young people, their parents/carers and professionals about safety? Young people, their parents/carers and professionals are participants in the research and in addition participatory methods of research design and analysis are used (as detailed below) to understand the circumstances in which relocations contribute to, or undermine, holistic experiences of safety.

Few studies highlight the benefits of young people's participation in research on EFH (Bovarnick and Cody, 2021; Bovarnick *et al.*, 2018;

Brodie *et al.*, 2016; Hamilton *et al.*, 2019; Warrington and Larkins, 2019). Numerous ethical and practical barriers are linked to this approach, including how to use participatory methods whilst ensuring young people's safety during the research process and how to avoid placing undue responsibility on young people for their protection (Bovarnick *et al.*, 2018; Hamilton *et al.*, 2019). These tensions often mean that young people affected by EFH are considered too vulnerable to engage in research, or are excluded from decision-making, beyond acting as research subjects (Cody, 2017; Warrington *et al.*, 2016).

This reflects observations about participation in children's social care more broadly, where it is noted that children's rights to participation (Article 12 UNCRC) in decision-making about their lives can conflict with professional duties to safeguard children. This presents what McCafferty calls a 'dichotomy' in social work that must be overcome by creating the relationships and conditions to facilitate meaningful reception of children's views (McCafferty, 2021). With this in mind, this article asks, what do we learn about the effectiveness of relocations and how to plan for them, when we ask young people and their families about safety?

Methods

Participatory approaches to research design, data collection and analysis

A small body of research uses participatory methods to understand adolescents' experiences of EFH and the care system (see Ellis, 2018). This literature suggests that participatory research can benefit young people (as researchers and/or participants) by strengthening the research process and informing prevention initiatives and responses (Bovarnick and Cody, 2021; Bovarnick *et al.*, 2018; Cody, 2017; Warrington *et al.*, 2016). Such research draws on young people's experiences, to help researchers, policy-makers and services to understand and respond to EFH.

The research questions for this study were conceived of prior to engagement of young people, as such the research can be defined as 'prescribed from above' (Badham, 2004, in Franks, 2011). However, 'pockets of participation' (Franks, 2011) were used for research design and analysis. Young people, parents/carers and professionals were engaged in the design of data collection tools, and young people and professionals were separately engaged in focus groups to support data analysis. Young people, their parents/carers and professionals were recruited as participants and their views sought about the effectiveness and impact of relocations. The findings were published as a set of freely available resources on the Contextual Safeguarding website.

Recruitment of participants

Purposive sampling selected three of the thirteen local authorities (hereafter referred to as services) that participated in Phase 1 of the study, where a survey captured the rate of relocations in each service (reported in [Firmin et al., 2021](#)). Phase 1 services were grouped according to the rate of relocations during September 2019.

- Group 1—0–5 per cent;
- Group 2—5–10 per cent;
- Group 3—10–24 per cent.

One local authority from each group was selected (having expressed an interest in Phase 2 participation). A single point of contact (SPOC) in each service acted as a ‘gatekeeper’ and identified three young people (aged 10–25) who had experienced a relocation in the past year, and one parent/carer and two professionals connected to each young person. Researchers liaised with SPOCs to arrange online interviews due to Covid-19. Researchers secured additional grant funding for wrap-around support for each young person and their parent/carer. Consent was sought from young people, parents/carers and professionals at the start of the study, prior to, and after interviews, in line with recommended best practice ([Jamieson et al., 2021](#); [Ruiz-Casares and Thompson, 2016](#); [Whittington, 2019](#)). Young people who consented to participate were asked if they consented for their parent and two key professionals to be approached for interview.

Where it was not possible to engage young people and their parents (recruitment was impacted by Covid-19, see ‘Limitations’), professionals were still interviewed, accounting for the larger sample of professionals. Due to under-recruitment from the three participating services, additional organisations were contacted and nine participants (young people ($n=2$), parents ($n=2$) and professionals ($n=5$)) were recruited from a residential children’s home and a parent advocacy organisation who had directly experienced relocation.

Young people and parents were offered a high-street gift voucher. This sampling resulted in twenty-six interviews with twenty-three participants ([Table 1](#)).

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews took place between 2020 and 2021 using online video conferencing or telephone, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Interviews explored participants’ experiences of relocations under the

Table 1. Interview participants

Participant group	Participant (n)	Age	Gender	Professional role title	Services	Country
Young people ^a	1	n/a	F	–	Pilot interview	England
	1	13	M	–	Service 1	England
	1	16	M	–	Service 1	England
	1	16	M	–	Residential children's home	Scotland
	1	15	F	–	Residential children's home	Scotland
Parents	1	–	F	–	Service 1	England
	1	–	F	–	National parent advocacy organisation	England
Professionals	1	–	F	–	Residential children's home	Scotland
	1	–	M	Edge of care	Service 1	England
	1	–	F	Head of provision—Pupil referral unit	Service 1	England
	1	–	M	Service manager, looked after children	Service 1	England
	2 ^b	–	F	Social worker, adolescent service	Service 1	England
		–	F	Child protection chair	Service 1	England
	1	–	F	Youth engagement officer	Service 2	England
	1	–	M	Social worker	Service 2	England
	1	–	F	Social worker	Service 3	England
	1	–	F	Social worker	Service 3	England
	1	–	F	Social worker	Service 3	England
	1	–	F	Social worker	Residential children's home	Scotland
	1	–	F	Social worker	Residential children's home	Scotland
1	–	F	Manager, residential children's home	Residential children's home	Scotland	
1	–	F	Social worker	Residential children's home	Scotland	
1	–	F	Parent participation coordinator	National parent advocacy organisation	England	

^aMost young people participated in two interviews.

^bGroup interview with two professionals.

themes: ‘placement’, ‘stability’ and ‘choice’, and specifically their experiences of physical, relational and psychological safety (Shuker, 2013).

Young person interview

The young person interview questions and activity were designed in consultation with young researchers ($n=8$) who are members of the Young Researchers Advisory Panel at the University of Bedfordshire are. The young researchers have an interest in the issues discussed and inform safeguarding research at the University, and for this project engaged in two, one-hour online focus groups to provide feedback on draft interview questions and share ideas for the design of an interactive interview activity. In collaboration with researchers, young researchers designed: a ‘joint interview agreement’ explaining protocols for safe participation in online research; an interactive icebreaker and cool-down game; a card-based activity to facilitate discussions about different types of safety and a ‘roadmap’ activity where young people could describe their journey through placements on a whiteboard sheet identifying moments of perceived safety and risk.

The online, activity-based interview was piloted with one of the young researchers. The resulting interview pack was designed by the research team and posted to research sites to distribute.

Parent/carer interviews

The researchers drafted a semi-structured interview schedule mirroring the questions in the young person interview schedule. A national parent advocacy organisation and three parents were consulted on the design of the schedule, via a one-to-one video or telephone call, with feedback integrated into the final interview design. Parents suggested re-ordering questions to prioritise those related to ‘choice’ and beginning with an open question so that parent participants could direct the narrative before the focused interview questions commenced.

Professional interviews

The research was supported by a Research Advisory Group (RAG) consisting of key stakeholders at a practice and policy level. The researchers drafted a semi-structured interview schedule for professional participants, mirroring the structure of the young person and parent interview. The RAG provided feedback on the schedule during a focus group; this was integrated into the final interview schedule.

Data analysis

Data were thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A coding framework was designed reflecting the structure of the interview schedules:

- what worked well/was unhelpful about the relocation process;
- the impact of the relocation on young people's physical, relational and psychological safety.

Three researchers coded twenty-six interviews in NVivo12 following this coding framework. Each researcher coded interviews from across the three data-sets (young people, professionals and parents/carers). The researchers identified themes from this initial coding and discussed these in a workshop. Following discussion and refining of the themes, an initial set of themes from each of the three data-sets were presented to two focus groups for sense checking. The first focus group was with the Young Researchers' Advisory Panel in an online workshop. Young researchers were asked to comment on how themes were categorised and named. The second focus group repeated the activity with the RAG. Feedback from the focus groups informed secondary analysis of the themes by the research team and resulted in eight to nine thematic areas for each participant group under 'what works and what doesn't' and ten to eleven for each type of safety, under 'impact on safety'. As fourteen of the twenty-six interviews were conducted with professionals, the views of young people, parents and professionals were analysed separately allowing for comparative analysis.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Bedfordshire Institute of Applied Social Research ethics panel. Research participants provided written and verbal consent for their participation in the study.

Limitations

Data collection took place in 2020 and 2021 during Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, placing unforeseen pressure on services and resulting in lower levels of participant recruitment. The findings of this small-scale study are tentative and should be interpreted with this in mind. Participants were recruited as 'triads' (young person, parent/carer and professional) with the intention to analyse the data 'within' as well as across the triads; however, low levels of recruitment and changes to the

recruitment process meant this approach was not tenable. The approach to analysis is outlined below.

Findings

Disaggregation of the three data-sets allowed for comparative analysis; establishing what young people, parents/carers and professionals felt helped, or didn't, when a relocation happened, and the impact on safety. These data-sets are presented below, beginning with themes shared across the data-sets and areas of consensus and contention within them. Following this are themes identified as important to young people and parents/carers but not generally shared by professionals. Finally, young peoples, parents/carers and professionals' views about the impact of relocation on safety are shared.

Section 1: the conditions that support effective relocations

Quality and consistency of support

Quality and consistency of support for young people and parents before, during and after, a relocation was critical for young people, parents and professionals. For young people and their parents, having consistent access to committed professionals provided relationships that supported young people's safety:

I've still got one social worker that's been in the whole time ...
And is that something that you think helped you, having someone there the whole time?
She's been there from the start so she knows, like she's not just ... on a bit of paper.
(Young person, Interview 9)

her eyes was always on him and she said, 'No, this is not the right way, don't talk like that, that is not the right path, it's not good for you. You can just go outside and walk off but people will end up using you and anything can happen. Many kids are getting killed, missing, exploited, we don't want that for you'.
(Parent, Interview 10)

Similarly, professionals shared that relocations were supported if existing relationships could be maintained. This was most notable in one case where the relocation provided an opportunity to maximise support by relocating professionals 'with' the young person:

the discussion that we had was that we were going to be pretty much making our own version of the therapeutic care that he would receive in secure but having the relationships that he already had built up with

ourselves and with [Children House] staff. So, he was supported on an individual basis while he was in [location of relocation] by his two key workers from [Children House]. So, they actually, they relocated with him and it was just two members of staff but they worked on a one-to-one basis with him.

(Professional, Interview 23)

Professionals reported that relocations (and transitions home) disrupted supportive relationships, at times endangering young people who became isolated in new locations. Transfer issues between local authorities compounded these difficulties:

we can't get to that family. So, they're left in limbo with this child not getting any real direct work for a good six months from any sort of support service, like any exploitation service (...). So, he unfortunately experienced a lot more harm after moving than what he had before moving because we never got the opportunity to put in place the support for him.

(Professional, Interview 16)

Access to education, employment and training, or extra-curricular activities during the placement were identified as significant for participants. Sometimes, relocation disrupted activities that were important to young people, whereas for others the move provided access to more youth provision, or better educational opportunities:

Yeah. I felt the safest in [relocation area] still.

In [relocation area]?

Yeah.

Why do you think that?

Because you know it's like because there's more people that I knew when I was in [relocation area] that can help me out than there was in [home area].

What sort of people could help you out in [relocation area]?

There was youth clubs, there was one of the foster carers ... I went there then got a bike.

(Young person, Interview 4)

Whilst relocations could support educational attainment, facilitating access to quality education and the space to engage with it, young people and professionals reflected on the significant disruption moves had on access to educational attainment:

I've got so much books of education books and stuff like that but I teach myself because I like learning, but the system won't let me into college or I'm too high risk to go to [inaudible 26:44], and that's what has happened, because of all the moves and this and that and whatever.

(Young Person Interview)

but sometimes across authority transfers in school can be very difficult, and we have times where young people are then out of education for a

little bit of time while a school place is being sourced and settled in. So often then that can have an impact on their education.
(Professional, Interview 19)

For parents, the issue was access to support at all. This applied before, during and after relocation. Parents shared that they were either excluded from the process, offered unhelpful support that felt unsafe or were positioned as part of the problem:

Supported? Not very well, no. Social workers were all for [young person], obviously. I had my own social worker. Never saw her. I had a clinical nurse who was there any time I wanted, but in the nicest possible way she was too vanilla. All we did was have a gentle chat, and what I'd get back was, "Oh, that must have been really hard for you, and I understand what you're saying". I didn't get anything from it.
(Parent, Interview 11)

So often what parents talk about is the sort of things that are put in place prior can be kind of six-week parenting course. And I think a lot of the parents say, you know, "They're very nice ladies who did this [laughs]." They were nice people, but, at the end of the day, it wasn't relevant to their situation. If you're looking at a kind of reward system of giving an outing to the cinema, a lot of the parenting plans are not going to work when the alternative is they're going to firebomb your house. It seems completely not to grasp the severity of the situation. So while there's some helpful stuff, it's out of alignment with the realities that parents are dealing with really.
(Professional, Interview 26)

Parents and professionals reflected that parental access to supportive professional relationships, that were part of the plan, supported the effectiveness of the move:

Oh yes, she [the foster carer] was also very nice, she was always open and would be like, '[parent], you can call any time', we would talk for hours, she would try to understand [young person], we would pray together. She's just an amazing lady. She made sure that I was also involved in whatever she was doing with [young person], which was nice.
(Parent Interview, 10)

Suitability of the placement

Availability and suitability of placements were significant for all participants, determining the extent to which the relocation was deemed helpful or unhelpful. Professionals shared that low placement availability sometimes resulted in young people being placed in unsuitable accommodation that didn't match their needs. Parents and young people spoke in more detail about what made placements feel safe, or not, with many speaking about the physical quality of the placement, its location, décor

and cleanliness, as well as access to resources and supportive staff. Young people and professionals also noted the importance of matching the young person with the environment, considering the personalities and needs of other young people in the placement:

So was it what you expected when she was moved for the first time when you said it was like really different to where she was going from? Did you have any expectations when she was first moved?
Yes, I did. It was better than I expected. They were nicer placements than I expected. It wasn't like the dormitory style children's home that is stereotypical that I'd imagined them houses.
(Professional Interview, PACE P1)

I suppose they are the children where the greater emphasis is trying to support their safety in a place that they're happy with, because if a child is living in a place where they're unhappy, their safety is compromised straightaway by the fact that they don't want to be in that placement.
(Professional, Interview 19)

Planning

The extent to which, and how, the relocation was planned was significant for all participants. Many shared that whilst the placement was a 'last resort' response to escalating risk, few to no alternative prior attempts to create safety were explored, meaning relocation was used because there were seen to be no other options:

Certain stuff what we spoke about, what could have helped the situation, they never acted on and then it's all too late.
(Young Person, Interview 2)

I've been doing something recently with the parent participation, and what they've been saying recently is there's not much forward planning and there's not really a process by which they're going to get, you know kind of the goal-setting.
(Professional Interview, 26)

So, we were going with secure because we were saying, "We can't manage this anymore, like we're not getting the support that we need, we're going to continually end up in this situation and it's all outwit our control."
(Professional, Interview 23)

Whilst few interviewees identified alternative helpful practices (including professionals), professionals spoke about the necessity of gradual and planned transitions out of placements, and careful planning in the event of placement breakdown, to avoid cycles of harm where external risks remained:

But then at some point placement may break down or they'd want to return, so then they do and then the risks heighten again and they'll be moved again out of area, and then they do really well again. It's a bit of a cycle.
(Professional, Interview 17)

Participants, when asked to speak holistically about relocation, identified circumstances in which relocations were helpful: supportive relationships were maintained; carers and placements were high-quality and were matched with the specific needs of young people. They also identified which aspects of relocations were unhelpful: alternatives were not explored, and planning was minimal and geared towards managing risk, rather than considered, collaborative and geared towards safety.

The following themes were identified by young people and parents/carers and were not consistently present in professional interviews.

Communication and decision-making

For young people, being informed and listened to contributed to a relocation that supported safety. Young people felt confused, isolated and worried when they were not consulted on decisions or informed about plans:

Did you ever feel confused about everything that was going on?

No.

That's good. Why were you not confused?

I did know what was going on.

So did like your workers explain everything to you?

Yeah.

That's good. So did that make you feel safer, knowing what was going on?

Yeah.

Like how?

It's a sort of comfort.

(Young Person, Interview 6)

the people who are in charge of you know what's going on, but they don't tell you until after they've put you in it, so they don't tell you until it's too late.

Is that how you felt sometimes?

Aye, you feel like you put in to something, they don't explain what it's like and how it is ... until you're already there.

(Young Person, Interview 9)

For parents, communication and collaboration around the decision to relocate were critical. These were highly emotive decisions for parents under acute stress, and whose physical safety was at times also compromised. 'Coming together' over plans for children to be placed away from

their hometowns supported parents to make what they described as heart-wrenching decisions with the support of professionals:

what did you feel at the time when [the relocation] was suggested?
It was like my heart was being ripped, but at the same time I felt like I was already being beaten on the ground, and I couldn't fight anymore because I tried to save him and I couldn't. I really felt like I'm losing my child and I felt like it was the worst feeling ever...
And yeah, so because everybody came together. But it was really hard time because as a family we're used to always being together, but at that time we didn't have a choice because if we keep him, he was going to be hurting, and if we let go, we didn't know what the outcome was going to be. But we just had to trust for the best, and like I said before, I really thank god that the best came out.
(Parent, Interview 10)

The initial shock as well when she went into care when I was told that she will be in the system until she's 18.
And you were told that, were you?
Yeah. That knocked me for six. I thought that when she's fixed and better she'd come home, if you know what I mean. So that took a lot of getting my head round.
(Parent, Interview 11)

Supporting relationships with family

Contact with family, and specifically 'planning' around family contact, significantly impacted the extent to which young people and their parents experienced the relocation as effective:

So, first of all, because he was used to this kind of life, running away or just leaving here, just going, he would just turn up at the house, he would go missing again from that foster parent, he would come to us. So, what they end up doing, they asked him the reason why he was coming, he said, 'Because I miss my mum and my sisters, of course'. 'Are you honest? Are you not meeting up with any other people that you're not supposed to?' He was like, 'No'. So, if that is the reason, he can start coming to us for the weekends.

So, it was really amazing because when he comes he will just stay with us in the house, and also it was coronavirus, he wasn't supposed to be going out, so he was really listening and he was like, 'No, truly, I really miss you guys, I just want to be with my family'. So, he would stay with us from I think some time on Friday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Monday morning he would go, we would get our things together as a family, we would just go out and come home, and yeah.
(Parent, Interview, 10)

Where family contact was prohibited, unsupported or restricted by distance, this was felt to have short- and long-term consequences for families, breaking existing bonds or compounding the strain that experiences of EFH had put on the young person and parent, or young person and sibling, relationships:

Because like if you're seeing your family all the time and then you only see them like twice a week, it's like you've built a bond up and then you've broke it because [you can] phone home at like a certain time, they're like, 'Well do you actually care or what?'

Is that, can you see your family at the moment?

I can see them but I can only have two visits a week so I see them once a week and my dad once a week.

And do you find that hard going from seeing them more to only twice a week?

You feel like you've went five steps forward and then about three steps behind.

That's really important. Why is that? Is it because like you said, you've bonded with them?

Yeah, because like social work is trying to make me get a bond with my family more, like make me work on relationships with them but then if it's somewhere that they can't contact me and stuff.

(Young Person, Interview 9)

And instead what we hear from parents is that services will kind of dissuade them from having contact with the child, is what I've come across often. 'The child doesn't want to speak to you,' is what I heard from parents who were very hurt, who were having their own sort of sense of bereavement and grief over loss of the child, and I would kind of say, 'Ignore that, ignore that, and just write to your child, send them gifts, and don't go into them, just let them know that you care about them.' And next thing the child will be on the phone to them.

(Parent advocate, Interview 26)

In summary, professionals shared families' views about the importance of consistent professional relationships and planning around risk (although these did not consistently feature in the relocation stories). There were overlaps between professionals' concerns about placement availability and families' views about quality placements. However, by talking with young people and families about their experiences, a deeper understanding about the circumstances in which relocations were helpful, and those in which they weren't was surfaced; including the importance of communication, collaboration and supporting family relationships.

Section 2: Impact on safety

The data were analysed to understand interviewee's views about the impact of relocations on physical, relational and psychological safety. A

mixed, seemingly contradictory picture emerged, with participants ($n=10$) sharing that relocations resulted in an overall increase in safety, whilst simultaneously reporting a range of negative impacts on relationships and mental well-being, including isolation, self-harm and for three young people, suicidal ideation.

Physical safety

A significant number of young people, parents and professionals reported an overall increase in physical safety as a result of the relocation ($n=10$). However, professionals also indicated that relocations had not negated risk or addressed vulnerability to harm ($n=9$). Whilst two professionals and two young people explained how physical safety had increased through disrupting abusive relationships, three professionals and one young person described how young people had been introduced to new, and in some cases markedly more harmful, abusive relationships and locations. Whilst one young person and three professionals described a reduction in missing episodes, promoting physical safety, three professionals and one young person reported a persistence of, or increase in, missing episodes due to pulls to both supportive and abusive relationships and locations.

Relational safety

Whilst for some interviewees, relocations supported existing relationships with friends and family ($n=6$), many others ($n=13$, including three young people) shared a variety of disruptive and painful impacts on important familial and peer relationships. Two young people, one parent and four professionals described the relationship between the young person and the new carer supporting safety through trust building and boundaries, yet seven professionals shared concerns about the breakdown of supportive relationships between young people and their existing professional networks. Three young people described the placement introducing them to new (safer) friends, but young people ($n=2$), professionals ($n=2$) and parents ($n=1$) also shared that forming new relationships in placements caused young people to feel unsafe. Whilst three professionals described the placement introducing young people to risky relationships, parents ($n=2$), young people ($n=3$) and professionals ($n=4$) explained that relocations disrupted risky relationships.

Psychological safety

Seven professionals and two young people described a positive impact on psychological well-being, three young people reported a mixed picture

and four professionals and one parent described how the young person's mental health did not improve or deteriorated. When asked about the specific consequences of relocations on psychological well-being, all participant groups only described negative consequences. These included the impact of compounded losses ($n=5$), feelings of rejection ($n=3$) and isolation ($n=4$), experiences of trauma (caused by the placement, $n=8$), self-harm ($n=4$) and suicidal ideation ($n=3$). Interviewees reported a lack of access to mental health support ($n=4$) and two young people said they were not able to discuss their mental health concerns with any supportive adult.

Conclusion

The conditions of relocations that support holistic safety

Interviewees' views on the conditions for effective relocations help us to understand the ambivalence in participant accounts of the impact of relocations in two ways. First, they suggest relocations were used due to escalating risk, when no alternative way of keeping young people safe was explored or found. Relocation, viewed only through its capacity to minimise physical risk, was deemed successful. Second, questions about the conditions that support effective relocations revealed a range of factors that supported physical, psychological and relational safety in placements. By asking questions specifically about safety, the data revealed the complex ways in which relocations could achieve physical safety whilst negatively impacting emotional and relational safety if the conditions for effective relocations were not met. This is laid out in [Figure 1](#).

Discussion

The qualitative reports provided by participants indicate that relocation is a common and a substantial intervention with significant consequences for young people and their families. Despite this, the participant accounts indicate that there are not sufficient planning frameworks or thresholds to determine when relocating a young person would be an adequate response to EFH. Significantly, in the absence of this planning, young people can be relocated to manage physical risk, whilst being exposed to a range of relational and emotional harms, as well as other forms of physical risk, through increased missing episodes and limited professional relationships and oversight. Whilst relocating young people was felt by many participants to be a necessary response to significant risk, the qualitative accounts suggest that this finding should be qualified by an 'absence' of alternatives.

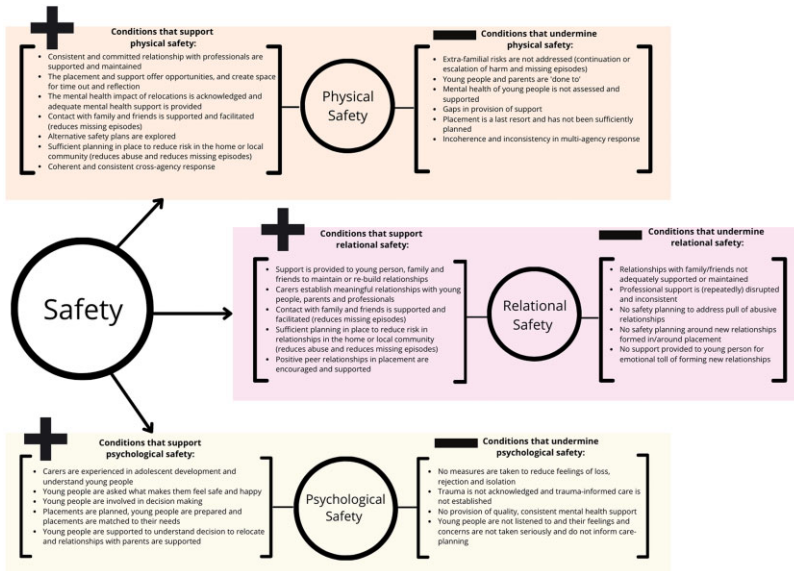


Figure 1: The conditions of safety.

Taking a participatory approach to the research design, analysis and data collection (as described above) have added important nuance to the conversation about 'relocation' in situations of adolescent EFH. Importantly, these accounts have revealed how relocations can be effective at reducing extra-familial risk, whilst having significant immediate and long-term negative consequences for young people. Moving forward, the findings presented here indicate key areas that should be central to decision-making and planning to establish when the conditions for effective relocations are met (Figure 1) and how the adverse consequences of relocation can be mitigated. The findings from this participatory research have been translated into a practice resource for young people, parents/carers and professionals. This article also raises the importance of future research, and investment in, exploring alternatives to relocation.

As discussed, as concern that adolescent EFH should be treated as a safeguarding rather than solely criminal justice matter has escalated over the past decade, there has been a reduction in the numbers of young people in custody in England for 'offending' and an increase in the numbers in residential children's homes or secure placements on welfare grounds. If the shift in youth custody and adolescent care figures corresponds to this policy direction then it could be concluded that by adopting a child welfare response to adolescent extra-familial risk, the responsibility for impacted young people has shifted from youth justice to social care. If so, findings from this article indicate that the

responsibility has shifted to a social care system that is not adequately resourced, and lacking adequate planning, to deliver a response that looks and feels different to the ostensibly more punitive interventions of the youth justice system.

This is unsurprising given the noted ambiguity about what a social care response to EFH more broadly should constitute and whether relocating adolescents from harmful locations is always in their best interests. This research sought to explore the views of young people, their parents/carers and the professional who relocate them, not to answer the question of whether relocation is an adequate response to adolescent EFH, but to understand the circumstances in which it supports the holistic safety and welfare needs of young people, and those in which it doesn't. The findings indicate a challenge for policy-makers and for the sector—which is to adequately resource adolescent care so that relocation is a choice and not the only option.

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