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Systematic Review

Children in the CYPSE—Their Views on Their Experiences: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: Children placed within the Children and Young People's Secure Estate (CYPSE) are recognised as a 'doubly vulnerable' group of children experiencing a range of developmental differences and adverse experiences. Risk factors contributing to their journey into the CYPSE have been explored within the literature; however, empirical research incorporating their views is lacking. This systematic literature review sought to explore the literature pertaining to the views of children within the CYPSE. A thematic synthesis of the data identified three abstract themes: factors relating to the individual, their relationships, and influences of the setting in which they were placed. Findings illustrate the importance of hearing the voices of children placed within the CYPSE to support understanding and action of the involved professionals in order to positively impact on longer term outcomes.

Keywords: CYPSE; child voice; relationships; secure care; vulnerable children

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1. Introduction

England and Wales are unique within Europe in establishing the age of criminal responsibility at 10 years old, with 453 children (aged 10–17 years) held in custody across the UK in May 2023 (Youth Custody Service 2023). Analysis by the National Audit Office (National Audit Office 2022) established that the numbers of children held in custody in the UK has, on average, reduced by approximately 73% in the decade of 2010–2021. However, the latest forecast from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS 2021) predicts at least a doubling of children in custody in July 2021–July 2025 due to courts recovering from the impact of the national pandemic and of an increase in numbers of Police Officers. The Howard League for Penal Reform (2022) established that over two-thirds of children in custody have unmet needs including those linked to social, emotional, and mental health problems. Children in custody have experienced higher rates of poverty, prevalence of drug and alcohol misuse and higher rates of mental health problems (Hughes 2015; Hughes et al. 2012). These are also exacerbated by emotional difficulties (Abram et al. 2003) and traumatic life events (Gudjonsson et al. 2014).

Internationally, children involved in criminal activity are discussed using a range of terminology; for example, they might be part of the juvenile justice system or placed within forensic youth care. Within the UK, children who are sentenced to custody are placed within the Children and Young People's Secure Estate (CYPSE). Children are placed in these settings either: a/as a result of being sentenced for a Detention and Training Order, b/having been remanded by the court to custody or c/having been placed under welfare grounds in a SCH. Table 1 provides an overview of the CYPSE in the UK.

Table 1. Outline of the CYPSE in the UK.

Type of Setting	Description
Secure Children Homes	Accommodating the most vulnerable children in small settings with high staff-to-child ratios including children who are typically 10–17 years old.
Young Offender Institutions	Larger settings which have a closer resemblance to traditional adult prisons and typically include children who are 15–17 years old.
Secure Training Centres	Larger than SCHs but smaller than YOIs and accommodate children who are too vulnerable for a YOI. Typical ages within these centres are in the range of 12–17 years
Secure School	For children aged 12–18 years on remand or sentenced to custody.

The vulnerability of children who have been placed within the CYPSE has been recognised within research and practice over many years; the label 'doubly vulnerable' (Moore and Miller 1999) describes their profile due to unmet needs in relation to a range of developmental domains including physical, social, and psychological needs (Barnert et al. 2015; Ellis and Curtis 2021; Moore and Miller 1999). A qualitative systematic review conducted by Juliana et al. (2024) established psychological needs relating to both positive and negative emotional responses influenced by relationships with staff and peers, alongside challenges linked to the nature of being detained and the associated exacerbation of feelings of isolation and distress. The exploration of the needs of children within Secure Children's Homes by Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield (2023) established the many children have experienced multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, loss, and familial conflict; this can also be compounded by additional Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The nature of these SENDs includes poor academic skills and includes high numbers of children who have previously been excluded from their mainstream school (Rogers et al. 2014); conversely, the same study established that, if educational attainment is improved, children are less likely to become involved in criminal activity. The National Audit Office (2022) established that "children in care are seven times more likely to end up in prison than their non-care equivalents" p. 16. The profiles described indicate high levels of need which, although it is difficult to ascertain whether or not they have a causal relationship with being part of the Youth Justice Service, are nevertheless suggestive of failures within education and wider society in recognising and meeting the needs of this vulnerable population. An additional group which is highlighted as forming a significant proportion of children in custody is those whose background is black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), Taylor (2016). In their qualitative analysis of youth perspectives about both protective and risk factors for engaging in offending behaviours, Barnert et al. (2015) established a relationship between the community where young people live, race/ethnicity, and the increased potential for arrest due to higher police presence.

Whilst recognising the 'within-child' factors impacting on the likelihood of entering the criminal justice system such as substance misuse and poor school attainment, in their exploration of perspectives of incarcerated children, Barnert et al. (2015) also identify contextual risk factors such as living in communities with high crime rates, exposure to deviant peers, and living within a single parent family. Conversely, in the same study, protective factors against children becoming incarcerated include having a supportive family context and opportunities to engage with pro-social peers. Societal expectations of children who have committed criminal offences are often that they should be 'punished' for their crimes (Case et al. 2020). Such punishment through incarceration is argued by Lane et al. (2002) to result in perceptions that those in the CYPSE are 'unworthy' and pose a threat to society through breaking rules. Therefore, society does not hold offenders' perceptions about their sanctions and or circumstances as being important. The nature of this labelling leads to a treatment of the children as adults with implicit expectations from

society that they have the same cognitive and reasoning capacity as adults alongside an ability to make links between cause and effect; Case et al. (2020) term these expectations as 'adulterisation'. This misunderstanding of children as being as cognitively, socially, and emotionally developed as adults was compounded in 1963 when the age of criminal responsibility within England and Wales was set at 10 years old, thus perpetuating a 'deviant' rather than 'vulnerable' label and placing 'adult' expectations on behaviours.

The importance of children being treated as 'children' (moving away from 'adulterisation') is emphasised in the retrospective voices of juvenile offenders as reported by Lane et al. (2002); the participants perceived being 'locked up' as too big a sanction for the adolescent period of development; being incarcerated had taken away their childhood. A potential contributory factor within this is the persistent challenge of social isolation, victimisation, and boredom (Lambie and Randell 2013) that occurs whilst being securely accommodated, having a subsequent negative impact on the developing identity occurring during adolescence. Of relevance is the finding from a mixed-methods study of 46 young males serving sentences (Welland et al. 2020) that recidivism rates in the UK are highest amongst those in the 18–20-year-old age bracket. Lane et al. (2002) established that children being provided with adult rather than juvenile approaches to delivered sanctions increases the likelihood of recidivism. Programmes aimed at rehabilitation instead (such as support in approaches to self-regulation, educational qualifications, sports, and life skills training) were perceived by participants as being more effective in impacting on motivation for change, largely because of feelings of 'hopefulness'.

Article 12 legally states children's right to a voice, freedom of expression, and therefore, a right to be heard (United Nations 1989). However, as established by Lane et al. (2002), when children have been deemed to have committed a crime, children's voices are no longer deemed important or 'worthy' of hearing. Case et al. (2020) (Case et al. 2020, p. 35) concurred, suggesting that "there is a very limited evidence base detailing research conducted in custodial institutions to understand children's perspectives on their education". However, Creaney (2014) evidences that providing children with a voice and genuinely listening to their voices through action is more likely to lead to rehabilitation. This need for action in response to children's voices being 'heard' is also emphasised by Case et al. (2020) in their suggestion that historically, even when children's voices have been elicited, practice has been 'tokenistic' and not always completed; there has been an additional tendency to focus on ratings scales to establish child perspective which has the potential to lose the richness of their voices when enabled to more fully express themselves. Creaney (2014) goes on to argue that motivation for change is more likely to ensue as a result of 'genuine' involvement of the voices of children due to a positive impact on levels of self-esteem. However, a power imbalance is inherent within institutions where there are those in authority and those who, by the nature of their placement, are subservient (Goffman 1961) which, for a variety of reasons, can interfere with the voices of those considered lacking in power being heard. The restrictive nature of Youth Justice settings (as an example of such as institution) therefore adds complexity in the relationships between staff and children with Oostermeijer et al. (2024) advocating the importance of 'relational security' in these relationships to engender trust and respect and thus supporting children's ability to share their voice. Positive outcomes are more likely if adults in power listen to, and act on, the views of children. Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield (2023) suggest that, if this does not happen, children may enact their agency in other more harmful ways.

As a result of their behavioural expression of unmet needs (through involvement in criminal activity), children are placed in institutions which then, according to Enell (2017), have a subsequent impact on the developing identity of the child. Case et al. (2020) argue that this population are consequently subjected to labels that stigmatise and 'other' them. In their research with this population, O'Grady (2017) noted that the children also commented on how the nature of the institution in which they were placed subsequently negatively impacted their developing autonomy. However, this perception is not universal; Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield (2023) established that some children who had been placed within the CYPSE appreciated the feeling of being within a safe place. For them, this meant that the burden of the need to make decisions and look after themselves was taken away from them; with the authors referring to this as 'alleviated agency'. It is therefore doubly important to ensure that voices are heard individually as well as collectively to ensure that blanket assumptions are not drawn. This focus on individual profiles (rather than collective labelling) both acknowledges the developmental stage of the children involved in Youth Justice (YJ) settings alongside supporting their developing identity in a respectful manner.

There is an existing dissonance between provision and children's perceptions of the value of their custodial experiences (Lane et al. 2002); Case et al. (2020) suggest that this has led to the problem that YJ services have been 'developed by adults, for adults' (p. 26) and therefore advocate that children need to be actively involved in co-creating processes and support within YJ in order to support the development of more meaningful and beneficial approaches. Positive outcomes are therefore more likely if adults in power listen to, and act on, the views of children. Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield (2023) suggest that, if this does noy happen, children may enact their agency in other more harmful ways. Empirical research has potential to support a deeper understanding of contributory factors to children engaging in criminal activity; however, there is a reported dearth of literature around the perspective of children in conflict with the law (Barnert et al. 2015; Pederson et al. 2021; O'Grady 2017). This limited evidence base is further compounded by the existing literature primarily focusing upon measurable outcomes rather than lived experiences of the children themselves (Steele et al. 2016; O'Grady 2017) with O'Grady (2017) advocating that this omission of their views provides a rationale for qualitative studies directly exploring children's perspectives.

In order to explore a deeper understanding of factors influencing the experiences of children accommodated within the CYPSE from a psychological perspective, a systematic review of the literature was conducted.

This review therefore seeks to answer the following question:

What are the views of children who have been placed within the CYPSE as to their experiences during their period of incarceration?

2. Materials and Methods

A systematic search of the existing literature about children placed within the CYPSE was carried out on 2 June 2023 using three databases: Web of Science, ERIC, and PsycINFO.

2.1. Identification of Studies

The search strategy used the search terms in Table 2 and followed the Preferred Reporting Item for Systematic reviews and Meta Analysis (PRISMA) diagram (Figure 1) (Source: Page MJ et al. 2021. *BMJ* 372: n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71).

Table 2. Search terms.

	Key Concept	Search Terms
1	Secure Accommodation	"Secure accommod*" OR "Child* prison*" OR "You* Offend* Institution*" OR "Secure Child* home*" OR "Juvenile* Detention*"
2	Incarcerated CYP	"Incarcerate* Child*" OR "Incarcerate* you*" OR "Incarcerate* you* people" OR "Child* in prison" OR "Young Offender*" OR "Juvenile Offender"
3	Views of CYP	View* OR Perspective OR Opinion*

* is used as a wildcard symbol to broaden the search to include words with the same wordstem.

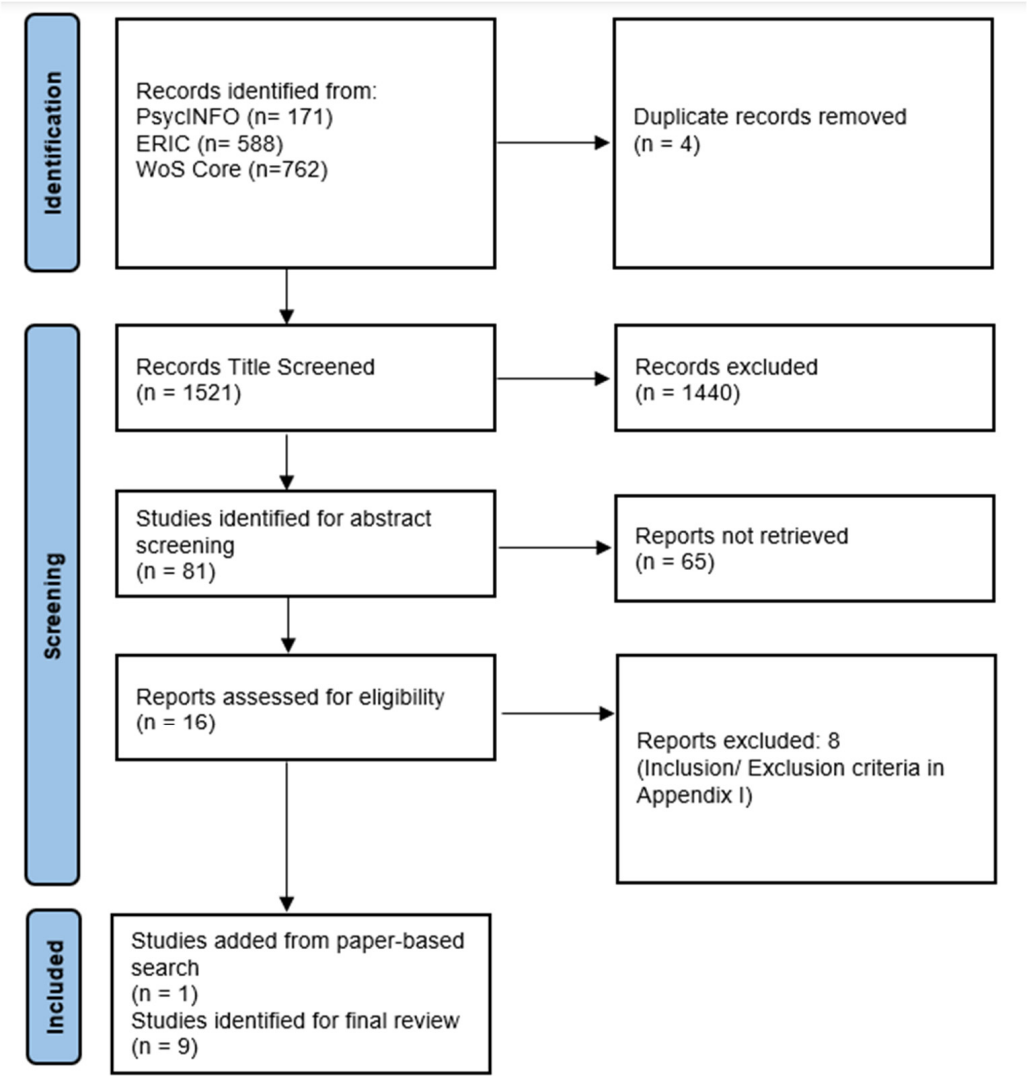

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram.

Table 3 outlines the inclusion criteria.

Table 3. Inclusion Criteria.

Areas of Focus	Inclusion Criteria
Topic of study	Child views on their time within a secure setting. Their views about the setting that they have been placed in Children aged 10–18-years old at time of incarceration
Study methodology	Qualitative study exploring views of CYP
Evidence base	Peer-reviewed journal articles: empirical studies; conceptual papers based on a clear methodology; meta-analyses fields of social sciences, psychology, and education
Other criteria	written in English, publication date from 2000.

2.2. Quality Appraisal

Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence Framework (WoE) (Appendix A) was used to support the appraisal of the methodological quality of each of the studies identified for this review. In approaching the appraisal of the studies, the challenge identified by Noyes et al. (2018) of the need to balance both methodological rigour alongside breadth of depth of understanding of concepts was noted and therefore both lower and higher quality studies (as defined by their rating within the WoE framework) were included. This decision was made in response to both the limited range of studies but also the recognition that potentially lower rated studies still included the perspective of children within the CYPSE and, as discussed previously (Lane et al. 2002; Case et al. 2020; Creaney 2014), these voices are often unheard. The identified studies all included primary data from the voices of children who were placed in the CYPSE (Shafi 2019; Brubaker and Cleary 2023; Day 2021; Ellis 2018; Enell 2017; Jacob et al. 2023; Little 2015; Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield 2023; Reed et al. 2021) although one paper (Day 2021) did include some representation of the voices children who had been released within the last year amongst those who were still incarcerated. The decision was made to still include Day (2021) due to the recent experiences of the children involved. Additionally, there was no delineation in the data between those who had been recently released and those still within the CYPSE and, as there was already a limited data set, the potential addition of a richness to the data selected for analysis was deemed beneficial. However, the less representative nature of the data (in terms of the voices of children who are currently placed in the CYPSE) is reflected in the score provided within WoE C. Details of all the studies included in the review are given in Table 4.

In line with the advice for a qualitative thematic synthesis proposed by Thomas and Harden (Thomas and Harden 2008, p. 4), three overarching criteria were incorporated across the different subsections A-C in the WoE analysis:

i. The quality of reporting (linked to the explicit discussion about sample selection, recruitment alongside aims and context for the study).
ii. The quality of strategies used to ascertain reliability and validity of measures and methods.
iii. The quality of how appropriate the methods were for eliciting the voice of the children involved.

Due to the nature of the profile of the group of children included within this review in relation to their difficulties with language and literacy (Fitzsimons and Clark 2021), point (iii) above was an important consideration. This was due to efforts to ensure that the findings of the included studies included as full a perspective as possible about the views of the children; mitigating against potential barriers through the following of more traditional methods of elicitation in qualitative research such as a strong reliance upon interviews.

Table 4. Overview of studies.

Research Study: Author and Year	Participants			Nature of Views Sought	Data Collection Methods	Key Findings
	Age of CYP	Country and Nature of Secure Setting	Current or Retrospective Views			
Shafi (2019)	13–17 years	England, Secure Children's Home	Current accounts	Views of children in secure settings about their education, factors around educational engagement and journey to incarceration.	Semi-structured interviews and observations (Phase I), case study (Phase II)	Identified opportunities and barriers for re-engagement with learning based on psychological needs in relation to feelings of competency, supportive relationships, and autonomy.
Brubaker and Cleary (2023)	15–20 years	US, Juvenile Detention Centre	Current accounts	Views of children on the quality of their relationships and impact of structural changes in their secure setting.	Phase I focus groups (staff and YP), Phase II quantitative analysis of themes generated in Phase I	YP found having consistency in staff as helpful. YP found change to discussing issues with them rather than staff 'writing them up' as being helpful.
Day (2021)	15–18 years	England, Secure Children's Home, Secure Training Centre, Young Offender Institution	Included boys who had left the setting within the past year.	The views of children who have been placed in YOIs about their time within the institution.	Semi-structured interviews	Views of the children about their behaviour management and how this was used to control and keep them in their 'place'. Too much time spent alone and isolated. Limited opportunities to maintain contact with outside world. Made specific recommendations for future practice in YOI's.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Research Study: Author and Year	Participants			Nature of Views Sought	Data Collection Methods	Key Findings
	Age of CYP	Country and Nature of Secure Setting	Current or Retrospective Views			
Ellis (2018)	13–16 years	England, Secure Children's Home	Current accounts	Female children's perspectives about their pathway into secure care and their views about life within the institution.	Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, case note analysis	Dissonance between staff and child perceptions as to their vulnerability (majority of girls denied their vulnerability). Girls had missed out on childhood. Challenges over placement of two groups of girls; those who were placed for welfare reasons and those who were placed as a result of engaging in criminal behaviour.
Enell (2017)	12–18 years	Sweden, Secure Unit	Current and retrospective accounts from same participants	Primary focus around children's views of assessments conducted whilst they were securely accommodated but also considers their views of the secure accommodation.	Semi-structured interviews	A number of children did not know why they had been placed. Their experiences of the assessment were dependent on the situation and interpersonal interactions during the assessment process rather than the assessment itself. Implications for practice around place and context of assessment were made.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Research Study: Author and Year	Participants			Nature of Views Sought	Data Collection Methods	Key Findings
	Age of CYP	Country and Nature of Secure Setting	Current or Retrospective Views			
Jacob et al. (2023)	16–18 years	England, Young Offender Institution, Secure Children's Home, Secure Training Centre	Current accounts	Children's views on a specific programme focusing upon relationships and the impact of this programme of their time within secure settings.	Semi-structured interviews, focus group	Importance of positive relationships between staff and children. Need for children to be treated with respect. Differences in relationships identified and perceived by the children across the different secure estate settings; more positive in Secure Children's Homes and Secure Training Centres than Young Offender Institutions.
Little (2015)	15–17-year olds	England, Young Offender Institution	Current accounts	Children's views on their experiences within a Young Offender Institution and an evaluation of what works/does not work.	Questionnaire, discussion groups, semi-structured interviews	Identification of poor educational experiences leading up to incarceration. Children in secure settings need to be able to make choices about their education but there are practical barriers which also have a negative influence on engagement. Emphasises importance of listening to children about the educational experiences to then impact on provision.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Research Study: Author and Year	Participants			Nature of Views Sought	Data Collection Methods	Key Findings
	Age of CYP	Country and Nature of Secure Setting	Current or Retrospective Views			
Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield (2023)		Wales, England, and Scotland Secure Children's Home	Current and retrospective	Views of children about their time in the secure setting specifically exploring agency through their narratives.	Semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis of case files	The suppression of agency in children through incarceration leads to violence.
Reed et al. (2021)	Under 18's	US Juvenile Detention Centre	Current	Views of female children about their experiences within a juvenile detention centre.	Semi-structured interviews	As a result of an advisory group created by the research team the girls feedback led to improved services and treatment.

3. Methodological Quality

3.1. Source of Views

The context of a limited range of literature compounded by a focus on outcomes rather than the views of children themselves (Pederson et al. 2021; O'Grady 2017) necessitated an inclusive approach to studies included within this systematic review to include studies outside of the UK and studies which explore both wider and more specific experiences within secure settings. Of the included papers, two focused on the children's views of education (Shafi 2019; Little 2015); two focused on the views of the children about specific programmes/interventions (Jacob et al. 2023; Enell 2017); one focused on the quality of the relationships with staff in the setting (Brubaker and Cleary 2023); the remaining four studies explored the experiences of the children within the CYPSE more generally (Reed et al. 2021; Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield 2023; Ellis 2018; Day 2021). The majority (six in total) of the studies were conducted within the UK, more specifically England (Shafi 2019; Jacob et al. 2023; Little 2015; Day 2021; Ellis 2018; Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield 2023), with only Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield (2023) additionally including Scotland and Wales. Two studies were focused within the USA (Reed et al. 2021; Brubaker and Cleary 2023) and one was based in Sweden (Enell 2017). All countries involved in the studies included within this review have different approaches to supporting children within the YJS; Hazel (2008) established that criminal responsibility commences at 10 years in England and Wales (12 years in Scotland) with the age in the majority of European countries falling within the 14–16 year-old age range. Within the Swedish system (Enell 2017), the CYPSE is part of the welfare rather than judicial system, meaning that a different value system underpins the support for the children within these settings. The USA is the only country included within this review not to have ratified the UNCRC removing the death penalty for children in 2005 (Hazel 2008); Hazel consequently advises caution about translating good practice from this country into settings outside of the USA. This has consequently had an impact on the rating for WoE C for the papers authored by Reed et al. (2021) and Brubaker and Cleary (2023).

3.2. Methods

In considering methodological quality in the included papers, advice from Noyes et al. (2018) was followed in including the evaluation of academic rigour in participant inclusion and reflexivity in data analysis. Five of the studies (Shafi 2019; Brubaker and Cleary 2023; Ellis 2018; Jacob et al. 2023; Little 2015) demonstrated high levels of academic rigour in their sampling through developing an inclusive approach to representing the voices of children across the population of the settings in which they were based (Thomas and Harden 2008, criteria iii). This positively impacted on the credibility of their findings due to the clarity around the links between their lines of enquiry and the conclusions drawn. Additionally, two of the papers (Ellis 2018; Jacob et al. 2023) received high ratings within WoE A for their methodological quality (Thomas and Harden 2008, criteria ii). The approach to analysis within both studies was transparent and rigorous with the authors describing mechanisms whereby they re-visited the data either within the research team (Jacob et al., 2023) and/or with practitioners directly working with the children (Ellis 2018; Jacob et al. 2023). These procedures helped to optimise the reflexivity of the account as deemed important within qualitative approaches to research (Mays and Pope 2000).

3.3. Context of Participants

It is also important to note the distinction between children who are placed within the CYPSE due to involvement in criminal activity and those who are placed due to their child welfare status. There was variability between the included studies as to the following:

a. Whether or not the authors stated the reason for participants' placement within the CYPSE;
b. Which of these groups of children were focused upon for their data collection.

The studies based within the USA (Brubaker and Cleary 2023; Reed et al. 2021) both took place within Juvenile Detention Centres which are for children who have been involved in criminal activity (the children may also have welfare needs but this is not taken into consideration) with the Swedish study from Enell (2017) focusing on those who are placed on welfare grounds (in line with the Swedish system). Four papers only focused on one part of the CYPSE (Shafi 2019; Day 2021; Little 2015; Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield 2023), whilst the paper from Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield (2023) only focused on one group within that setting (those placed on welfare grounds). The highest rated paper within WoE C was Jacob et al. (2023) as the study was based in the UK and included the views of children across the CYPSE. The focus of the children's voices was only on relationships within the settings which was a limitation in the context of this review; however, the data did still encompass a broader perspective of the children's time within the setting.

Overall, none of the included studies achieved a high rating within WoE D, which is likely to be reflective of the difficulties with identifying appropriate studies for the question posed in this review. Medium ratings were assigned to seven of the studies (Shafi 2019; Brubaker and Cleary 2023; Ellis 2018; Jacob et al. 2023; Little 2015; Reed et al. 2021) with low ratings assigned to Day (2021) and Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield (2023). These findings would suggest that there is both scope and need for additional research into the views of children who are accommodated within the CYPSE to include their views on specific aspects of their time within settings (such as educational experiences) as well as their views on the settings more generally.

Evaluation and Synthesis

The approach to analysis of the findings from the review was to utilise thematic synthesis (Thomas and Harden 2008). The aim of this review was to follow a deductive approach whereby the views of children accommodated within the CYPSE are summarised to support understanding of the perspective of the involved children, and also to provide evidence for future practice.

The full texts of the included papers were uploaded to NVivo 14 to support a methodical approach to analysis of data. In line with the procedure described by Thomas and Harden (2008), the analysis of findings included all aspects under the headings of 'results' or 'findings' in an effort to combat the differing reporting styles within the included studies. Both quotations from participants and analytical statements by the research authors were included in the initial data collection. The data extracted focused on the views of the children as to their experience within the CYPSE. As a consequence, four papers (Brubaker and Cleary 2023; Ellis 2018; Enell 2017; Day 2021) also included the views of the staff and these sections within the papers were not included in the data extraction; the Brubaker and Cleary (2023) paper included statistical data which were also excluded. Initially, the findings from each paper were read and then free-coded on a line-by-line basis; patterns were identified during reading and initial themes generated (Braun and Clarke 2006). At this stage, 20 codes were generated, and the coding was descriptive, operating at a 'semantic' level (Braun and Clarke 2006) whereby the focus was on explicit statements within the text.

After the initial analysis and development of themes based on the data from all of the included studies, in order to translate the generated concepts (Thomas and Harden 2008), the descriptive themes were then re-visited to support reflexivity (Braun and Clarke 2006). The descriptive themes were then analysed in relation to the review question and new themes were identified which were also, where appropriate, merged to create hierarchical themes with grandparent and parent codes within NVivo 14. Figure 2 below indicates the themes identified; Appendix B presents the initial codes, subsequent themes, and illustrative examples from the original papers.

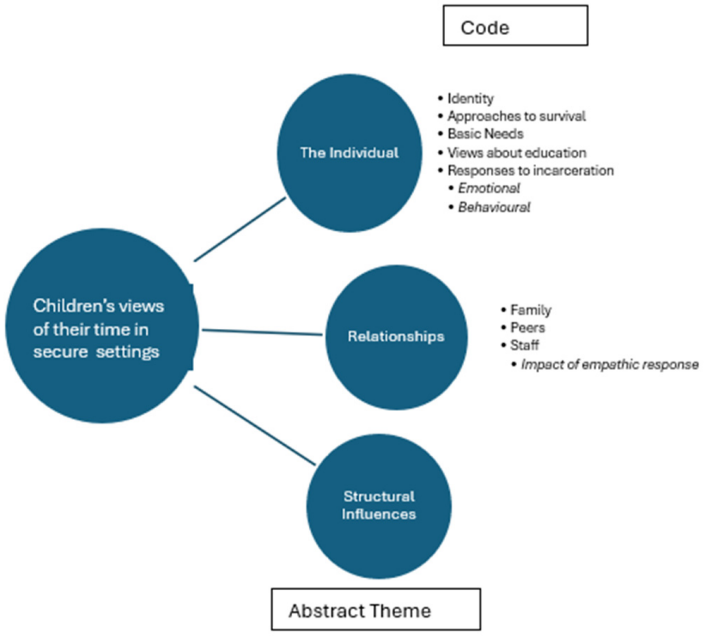

Figure 2. Thematic map.

3.4. NB Codes Written in Italics Are Child Codes for the Parent Code

These themes were inferred (Thomas and Harden 2008) based on potential areas for consideration for both general practice and more specific interventions to support and optimise outcomes for children who are placed within the CYPSE based on their views of factors impacting their experiences whilst incarcerated. For example, the mismatch between their identity in terms of their age and experience and their views of education emerged for some as a barrier to their motivation to engage with their educational experiences; "we do crap stuff, like playing board games. I'm fifteen, not twelve!" (Ellis 2018, p. 160); this was captured within the themes highlighted within the emboldened text above. Overall, three overarching abstract themes were identified from the initial codes; 'The Individual', 'Relationships', and 'Structural Influences' with two of the themes ('The Individual' and 'Relationships') additionally including both child and grandchild themes.

4. Results

4.1. The Individual

The thematic synthesis identified intrinsic factors influencing children's experiences in secure settings, which were coded into survival, identity, emotional, and behavioural responses to the setting, education, and basic needs. Codes generated within this grandparent theme were covered within seven of the included studies (Shafi 2019; Day 2021; Ellis 2018; Enell 2017; Jacob et al. 2023; Little 2015; Reed et al. 2021).

4.1.1. Approaches to Survival

Children adopted contrasting survival strategies: either passive compliance ("put up and shut up"—Ellis 2018, p. 161) or aggression as self-defense and to combat boredom (Day 2021). Day (Day 2021, p. 165) explained this as "children generally described 'fighting for who they are' (also linked to the parent code of identity) or 'relying on themselves' as the only way to survive being in custody." However, children also shared that the externalised 'fight' response described by some was not always due to a need to protect themselves; at times it was also linked to a desire to add more variety to a tedious existence.

4.1.2. Basic Needs

Unmet physiological and psychological needs included food shortages and poor-quality food (Little 2015; Reed et al. 2021), inadequate clothing, and lack of sanitary protection (Reed et al. 2021). Psychological concerns included anxiety about family and post-release life (Day 2021; Ellis 2018; Enell 2017; Little 2015).

4.1.3. Views on Education

Education before incarceration was perceived as irrelevant (Shafi 2019). Negative perceptions often persisted due to poor teaching quality and restrictive learning environments (Reed et al. 2021). However, some children found renewed educational motivation while in custody perceiving that education now had a purpose and was personally relevant (Shafi 2019; Enell 2017; Little 2015).

4.1.4. Responses to Incarceration

Both emotional and behavioural responses to being incarcerated were shared by participants within the included studies; both factors were intrinsically linked (i.e., their behaviours resulted from underlying emotional states). Emotional reactions included fear, frustration, boredom, and hopelessness (Shafi 2019; Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield 2023). However, some viewed incarceration as a place of safety (Jacob et al. 2023).

Children shared how being placed within the CYPSE had resulted in a negative impact on their mental health (Shafi 2019; Day 2021; Jacob et al. 2023) with the associated behavioural responses including self-harm, rule-breaking, and disengagement from learning; often stemming from emotional distress (Shafi 2019; Day 2021).

4.2. Relationships

Within the overarching theme of relationships, three subthemes around the role of the family, peers, and staff emerged from the data alongside a further child theme about the impact of empathic responses from staff.

4.2.1. Family

Contact with family was a key support factor, motivating change with one child explaining "I don't know how I'd cope to be honest [. . .]. I just appreciate what they've done for me innit, and when I get out, I'm going to change" (Day 2021, p. 167). However, separation also caused distress, as children worried about their families' well-being (Enell 2017).

4.2.2. Peers

Ideas related to the theme of peers were identified within three studies (Shafi 2019; Little 2015; Reed et al. 2021). Shafi, 2021 found that "peers can work both ways. They can help or they can disrupt" (p. 333), whilst Little (2015) included reports about the disruptive nature of peers and concerns about personal safety. Despite challenges, participants desired social connection (Reed et al. 2021).

4.2.3. Staff

Staff relationships were the most influential factor in children's experiences (Shafi 2019; Brubaker and Cleary 2023; Day 2021) leading to both positive and/or negative outcomes. When children had an identified mentor or key person within the setting, this was generally a protective factor for their time whilst incarcerated (Shafi 2019; Brubaker and Cleary 2023; Jacob et al. 2023; Reed et al. 2021). Positive staff interactions included genuinely 'hearing' the children; "Because if you do something, they're not going to just call you in for a charge. They're going to talk to you, try to calm you down and see what's wrong with you, or see what the problem is" (Brubaker and Cleary 2023, p. 388), and fostered trust and respect, improving well-being (Jacob et al. 2023). Feedback from teaching staff was found to make a difference in motivation and self-efficacy as illustrated in this comment from (Shafi 2019, p. 33) "because if the teacher gives you positive comments: you can do it. It makes you think you can, even if you can't. It makes you do it".

Conversely, staff who viewed children as mere 'delinquents' contributed to feelings of powerlessness (Brubaker and Cleary 2023; Reed et al. 2021) as illustrated within (Reed et al. 2021, p. 58) "they say it's our fault for being here and we deserve to be treated this way; they talk to us and look at us like we are bad people; they command us like dogs" (Reed et al. 2021, p. 58). Empathy was crucial, with children valuing staff who listened and respected boundaries (Brubaker and Cleary 2023). The impact of these empathic responses emerged as a subtheme within relationships with staff with this vivid description (Jacob et al. 2023, p. 7): "Every professional in that room listened to me [. . .] they were interested in my feelings [. . .] rather than just telling me how I am, how I behave and how they want me to change it".

4.3. Structural Influences

Structural influences encompassed the setting's organisation, procedures, and support approaches, with data from eight of the nine studies (excluding Ellis 2018).

Children commonly felt that regimes and procedures were unfair, citing ineffective grievance systems (Reed et al. 2021) and limited faith in complaints processes (Day 2021) leading to lack of agency. Frustrations included restricted and poorly timed family contact (Day 2021) and behaviour-based limitations on privileges like gym access or education (Little 2015). Inconsistent staff approaches to rewards and discipline further reinforced a sense of unfairness (Reed et al. 2021). This philosophical approach of a focus on the primary identity of the children as 'criminals' or 'delinquents' (rather than 'Child First', Taylor 2016) within the setting had a significant impact on approaches to supporting and responding to behaviours and available activities.

Access to education was hindered by staff availability, timetabling, and resource limitations (Shafi 2019). Some children could only study subjects based on available tutors, whilst others ". . .[were only offered to] study on my own, without a teacher (Little 2015, p. 34)."

Structured routines (including daily activities such as education, meals, and leisure time) provided a sense of security (Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield 2023), with security measures like cameras perceived as protective (Enell 2017). However, exposure to violence and drugs, even from staff, led others to feel unsafe (Enell 2017). The tension between therapeutic intervention and punitive measures created further conflict, with emotionally distressed children feeling ignored or forced into schooling (Reed et al. 2021) and parental contact being denied as punishment (Day 2021).

5. Discussion

5.1. The Individual

Research with children in the YJ service often focuses on risk factors for offending (Case et al. 2020), using causal models (Barnert et al. 2015) and quantitative methods that omit children's voices (Creaney 2014). This review instead prioritises their perspectives on incarceration.

5.2. Unmet Basic Needs and Identity

Children reported unmet basic needs, aligning with Barnert et al. (Barnert et al. 2015, p. 1365) who explained that "Incarcerated adolescents represent a high-risk, vulnerable population with disproportionately high rates of unmet physical, developmental, social, and mental health needs". However, Barnert et al. (2015) also established that, contrary to their expressed views, some participants speculated that peers returned to secure settings due to reliable access to food and shelter. This was a view also echoed within the systematic review from Juliana et al. (2024), thus emphasising the importance of post-release support including meeting needs relating to food, shelter, and warmth.

Beyond physical needs, identity concerns emerged. Children described being labelled and stigmatised by staff (Case et al. 2020), reinforcing a sense of 'otherness' that conflicted with their need for love and belonging (Barnert et al. 2015). Participant expressions of unmet 'love and belonging' needs reveal the tension between the child being 'imprisoned' (therefore needing punishment) conflicting with their developing identity, not just as an adolescent, but also as a human being worthy of love and respect.

5.3. Mental Health and Well-Being

Emotional distress, including boredom, frustration, and suicidal ideation, was common within the findings from this review, echoing findings from Lambie and Randell (2013). Their review linked self-concept and self-esteem to incarceration experiences, though methodological limitations including the absence of a formal analytical framework suggest cautious interpretation.

5.4. Education as a Protective Factor

Education emerged as a potential buffer against negative outcomes. Participants saw renewed value in learning (Shafi 2019; Little 2015), supporting O'Grady (2017), who found education helped restore self-respect; a key factor impacting self-concept and self-esteem (Lane et al. 2002). The role of education in shaping identity and mental well-being (Creaney 2014) warrants further exploration with educational professionals such as Educational Psychologists having a potential contribution.

5.5. Relationships

Children's lives before incarceration were often chaotic (Case et al. 2020), making it unrealistic to attribute improved outcomes to a single factor. However, familial contact was widely valued (Barnert et al. 2015). Its restriction as punishment (Day 2021; Hazel 2008) could exacerbate emotional distress. Unfortunately, this behavioural response to the unmet emotional need for connection often results in the application of punishment and sanctions within the CYPSE.

5.6. The Role of Staff

In a developing recognition of the benefits of a 'welfare' rather than 'judicial' approach to responding to children involved in the YJS (Hazel 2008), the relational environment within the CYPSE is increasingly recognised as a key foundation in balancing care alongside

security (Oostermeijer et al. 2024). Adult voices within the wider literature demonstrate a recognition of the need for positive relationships between staff and the children they are tasked with supporting and the need to demonstrate care and concern (Ellis and Curtis 2021; O'Grady 2017; Pederson et al. 2021; Sander et al. 2010). Staff–child relationships significantly impacted experiences in secure settings. Whilst positive interactions fostered care and connection (Ellis and Curtis 2021), some children described neglect and dehumanisation (Reed et al. 2021; O'Grady 2017). In light of the research evidence around the beneficial short- and long-term impact of relationships, it is somewhat surprising therefore that findings within this review indicated a lack of care on the part of some members of staff (Brubaker and Cleary 2023; Jacob et al. 2023; Reed et al. 2021); so much so that one participant (Reed et al. 2021) likened their treatment to that of dogs, a sentiment shared by voices captured in O'Grady (2017).

5.7. Peer Influence

Though peers were mentioned infrequently, their role in shaping youth trajectories into the YJS is well documented (see systematic review, Pyle et al. 2016). Future research should explore how peer relationships impact rehabilitation (Lambie and Randell 2013).

5.8. Structural Influences

Secure settings' routines contributed to both safety and frustration. Some of the higher-ranking studies within this review (Shafi 2019; Little 2015; Reed et al. 2021) indicated that the structure and routine of the CYPSE helped with feelings of safety. However, rigid enforcement sometimes hindered engagement, particularly in education (Ellis and Curtis 2021). Institutional constraints, such as resource limitations and scheduling conflicts, further affected motivation (Lambie and Randell 2013; Shafi 2019).

5.9. Past Educational Experiences

Children's previous school exclusions are a recurring theme in the wider literature (Case et al. 2020; Fitzsimons and Clark 2021; Hopkins et al. 2016; Rogers et al. 2014). Exclusions were often linked to poor staff–student relationships (Fitzsimons and Clark 2021), learning difficulties (Hopkins et al. 2016), and school-related (rather than individual) factors (Sander et al. 2010). These findings underscore the need for empathetic, relationship-driven approaches in both education and secure settings.

Limitations of the Review

Qualitative research on incarcerated children is limited, restricting the evidence base. Methodological challenges included potential bias in data collection, as findings may reflect only the most vocal participants or socially expected responses. Some studies mitigated this through longitudinal designs and triangulation with staff perspectives. However, capturing the full scope of children's experiences remains a challenge within empirical research.

Additionally, SCHs include children who are both placed on welfare grounds and due to involvement in the criminal justice system; future research could consider differentials in perspectives between these two groups. Due to the psychological focus and one researcher carrying out the review, the databases used were accordingly focused. In future research, additional literature may be identified through the inclusion of databases related to criminal justice and social work and a wider range of search terms to include those used from within broader disciplinary and international perspectives.

6. Conclusions

As has been illustrated within this review, there are a range of interlinked factors which influence the perspective of children who have been placed within the CYPSE. The current review has identified the potential of how listening to the voices of children placed in the CYPSE can have a positive impact on their outcomes; both in terms of supporting the understanding (and thus action) of involved professionals and in relation to support and intervention that 'works'. Their voices elicit themes including the value of relationships, individual differences in the difficulties that they experience which compound their behaviour both within, and outside of, the CYPSE. If utilised within policy and practice, these themes hold an optimistic tone for future outcomes for this population as Nolet et al. (Nolet et al. 2022, p. 61) observed in their study exploring future outcomes of children who had been part of the YJS; "people who develop strong social bonds, either in adolescence or in adulthood, are more likely to desist from crime as a result of the informal social control that these relationships exert".

The voice of this population of vulnerable children has been largely neglected in the literature as demonstrated through the limited evidence revealed through the systematic approach to this review. This review has identified some pertinent areas of further exploration in response to the voices of children who are accommodated within the CYPSE, including aspects relating to the individual (such as their developing identity and emotional/behavioural responses to being incarcerated), the relational climate (including relationships with peers and adults), and the institution itself (rules, routines, and structures). The wider literature offers some commentary on factors which may influence those views including developmental differences in terms of the chronological age of children who have been incarcerated when compared to their social and emotional development. This observation offers potential scope for intervention which focuses on supporting social and emotional skill development alongside supporting involved professionals in their understanding of child development to optimise the efficacy of any intervention. However, it is important to ensure that the previous omission of the voices of children within the CYPSE as to their views on interventions is ameliorated to ensure effective development and implementation of such programmes.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CYPSE	Children and Young People's Secure Estate
ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
BAME	Black, Asian, and minority ethnic
YJ	Youth Justice

Appendix A. Weight of Evidence Evaluation

Article	WoE A Methodological Quality	WoE B Appropriateness of Research Method to Review Question	WoE C Focus of Evidence for Review Question	WoE D Overall Weight of Evidence
Shafi (2019)	Medium	Low	Medium (only one type of secure setting)	Medium
Brubaker and Cleary (2023)	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Day (2021)	Low	Low	Medium	Low
Ellis (2018)	High	High	Medium (only girls who were on welfare order)	Medium
Enell (2017)	Low	High	Low	Medium
Jacob et al. (2023)	High	Low	High	Medium
Little (2015)	Medium	Low	Medium (only one type of secure setting)	Medium
Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield (2023)	Low	Medium	Low (only one setting and one grp within setting)	Low
Reed et al. (2021)	Medium	Medium	Low (only one setting/just girls/US)	Medium

Appendix B. Themes, Codes, and Illustrative Examples

Initial Codes	Grandparent	Parent	Child	Illustrative Examples
Identity	The Individual	Identity		"When I started using drugs, I didn't care about anything, only drugs. Before I used drugs, I was still a child, I'm back to that now" (Day 2021, p. 159).
Surviving		Approaches to Survival		"[it was easier to] put up and shut up so you can just get out fast" (Ellis 2018, p. 161) children generally described 'fighting for who they are' or 'relying on themselves' as the only way to survive being in custody (Day 2021, p. 165). "It is hard to be in a place like this. Even if you might learn something it is a terrible way to do it." (Enell 2017, p. 134)
Feelings about food, environment, sleep		Basic needs		One of the main topics of conversation in the discussion groups focusing on education was actually food, hunger and nutrition. (Little 2015, p. 39) Reports included: incorrect clothing sizes provided, dirty clothes or clothes with holes in them. . .cold or frozen food . . . expired food. . .not being allowed to get water to the point of constipation.. hunger and stomach pains. . .thin clothing and thin blankets. . . refusals of pads or tampons during their menstrual period. . .We heard these complaints consistently across several CYA groups. (Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield 2023, p. 57).
Frustrations with education		Views about education		"we do crap stuff, like playing board games. I'm fifteen, not twelve!" (Ellis 2018, p. 160). The girls reported that they worked too hard for too few school credits and that instruction was boring. (Reed et al. 2021, p. 59).
Positives provided by education				"Because if the teacher gives you positive comments: you can do it. It makes you think you can, even if you can't. It makes you do it." (Shafi 2019, p. 333) "The subjects I'm doing here will be helpful for me." (Little 2015, p. 37)
Education before incarceration				"I kept getting kicked out. . .I didn't like people telling me what to do"; "I got kicked out in Year 9" (Little 2015, p. 32). "school prior to incarceration was reported as boring and irrelevant to their lives" (Shafi 2019, p. 333).
Feelings about the setting and impact on behaviours Worries about the future		Responses to incarceration	Emotional	"I ain't got nowhere to go when I come out. Accommodation is a big problem for me. I don't know where I'm gonna live (Little 2015, p. 36). . . .he had other things to worry about, namely his own personal safety, before concerning himself with his educational development" (Little 2015, p. 36). "they just don't give a shit. It makes me angry, and I just can't be bothered with it all" (Shafi 2019, p. 331).
			Behavioural	

Initial Codes	Grandparent	Parent	Child	Illustrative Examples
Worries about family	Relationships	Role of the family		"You see, my mum used to come and say goodnight and now, when I'm here, when I've been away, she has walked [into my room] and said goodnight although no one is there. When I went away she didn't eat for several days" (Enell 2017, p. 131).
Support from family				"I don't know how I'd cope to be honest [. . .]. I just appreciate what they've done for me innit, and when I get out, I'm going to change" (Day 2021, p. 167).
Views about their peers		Role of peers		"Peers can work both ways. They can help or they can disrupt" (Shafi 2019, p. 333) They seemed to desire more connection with each other (Reed et al. 2021, p. 59).
Distrust of staff Frustration with staff		Role of staff	Impact of empathic response	The children discussed the uses of restraint to manage their behaviours, and in particular the unnecessary uses of restraint and excessive force (Day 2021, p. 166). "I ain't the one locked up, I can go home the next day, I can go home at this time. You gonna be here, not me." (Brubaker and Cleary 2023, p. 391) "they say it's our fault for being here and we deserve to be treated this way; they talk to us and look at us like we are bad people; they command us like dogs" (Reed et al. 2021, p. 58) "officers ask but they do nothing about it. They ask what they could do to help but it's pointless" (Jacob et al. 2023, p. 6).
Positives about staff				"people can have a laugh with staff, staff tell you like their life, you tell them yours, [. . .] it's all about the respect" (Jacob et al. 2023, p. 5) "because if the teacher gives you positive comments: you can do it. It makes you think you can, even if you can't. It makes you do it" (Shafi 2019, p. 33). "They'll pull you to the side and let you know [. . .] he points this out like "Look. I can't do this, and this is the reason why. . ." [. . .] I feel like they still care because they understand how you feel" (Brubaker and Cleary 2023, p. 391).
Organisation of setting	Structural Influences			The tensions between therapy/rehabilitation and security/punishment, and the impact of those tensions on staff–resident relationships (Brubaker and Cleary 2023, p. 383). Every day you got the same staff, so they give you the opportunity for the staff to really get to know you, get to know how you act. . . There's a relationship to be built there, then it can be built better on a community because it's the same staff (Brubaker and Cleary 2023, p. 387).
Unfair rules and procedures				. . .complained about the inaccessible location of secure establishments, the cost of telephone calls to family and friends and that they were often unlocked from their cell to make calls at a time of day when family members and friends may be unavailable (Day 2021, p. 166). Restrictions to learning opportunities associated with their assigned risk level or privilege status. (Little 2015, p. 37). The girls talked often about perceived unfairness in the way that these points were given and taken away and the associated privileges. For example, girls reported that points were sometimes taken away from them without their knowledge, "A" level was extremely difficult to obtain so they lacked motivation to try, some staff were more likely to take away points from certain girls, and rewards were given inconsistently (Reed et al. 2021, p. 58).
Futility about trying to make changes				Issues with the grievance system came up frequently because when girls would make complaints to JDC staff they were often instructed to 'file a grievance.' However, girls indicated that the process of filling out a paper grievance form was rarely effective for receiving a response. (Reed et al. 2021, p. 59) Paul: So, when I was restrained, I had my head down, he just got the keys and on the sly he just flicked it in my eye and hit me in the face. Int: Have you ever complained about things like this? Paul: Yeah, I've done it twice in the past, and nothing happens so I can't be arsed (Day 2021, p. 166).
Unhelpful timetables and routines				The constraints of the secure custodial setting through its structures of line management had been barriers to engaging in the early stages of the process (Shafi 2019, p. 336). Jeremy abandoned the authentic inquiry when the secure setting was unable to timetable Jeremy to have time with his mentor due to the routines and structure of the secure setting. Upon this, Jeremy showed frustration and aggression and disengaged from the process (Shafi 2019, p. 335).
Security provided by routine and structures				Most young people described how they settled into a highly structured routine of waking up, meals, education, activities and sleep. Many appeared to have benefited from this with a number saying it made them feel safe (Lyttleton-Smith and Bayfield 2023, p. 10). If someone gets hurt, they can check the cameras, who it was, and what happened and so on. Someone might fall and then they can check, perhaps you say he pushed me and then they can check what really happened (Enell 2017, p. 131).
Limited choice in education				"I'm doing AS Maths and I can only do that cos there's someone who can teach me that here" (Little 2015, p. 34). "I can only do what the one-to-one tutor can offer" (Little 2015, p. 37).

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