



MEDIA RELEASE

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Residential care contributing to 'criminalisation' of young people

A new report from the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People has found South Australia's highly stressed child protection system is contributing to increased involvement in the youth justice system by some children and young people in care.

The Six Month Snapshot of the South Australian Dual Involved Project: children and young people in South Australia's child protection and youth justice systems provides an initial summary of how the residential care system is contributing to the 'criminalisation' of children and young people in care, either directly, or indirectly.

Of the 51 dual involved children and young people identified between February – July 2021, 92% were living in non-family-based care (primarily residential care placements) before their detention at Kurlana Tapa Youth Justice Centre.

The report suggests that many of the young people increased their contact with the youth justice system while living in residential care due to ongoing and systemic problems like poor placement matching, inappropriate exposure to peers with difficult or offending behaviour within the houses, and deficits in residential care staff training and support.

One young person said, *'They're just brought into like a criminal life 'cause the kids around them are doing – like they're going out at night, stealing, going into cars and whatnot and that's how it all started for me.'*

"Most of the children and young people we spoke to felt let down or overlooked when in residential care. Some young people even told us they preferred to be in Kurlana Tapa rather than in their residential care placement as they felt safer and 'heard' by staff," Guardian for Children and Young People, and Training Centre Visitor, Penny Wright said.

"But it is critical to recognise the extremely difficult working environment faced by dedicated and passionate residential care staff – they are also often victims of a highly stretched system," Ms Wright said.

The South Australian Dual Involved Project also suggests that residential care may have an over-reliance on police involvement to manage the behaviour of children and young people who display high levels of complexity, despite this being 'core business'.

"Children and young people living in residential care are being arrested or detained for behaviours that would not warrant police intervention in a family home. They are often charged with very minor offences but that then starts them on a pathway deeper into the criminal justice system.

One young person described how the arrival of another resident with very challenging behaviour upset her and led to her feeling angry. She said, *'I punched two holes in my walls. That's the first night I got arrested... I punched one hole in the wall. They said, "Hey, don't do that." I was like, "Yeah, you can watch me do the next one," so I punched the next one. It was just two little fist holes, and they're like, "Right, we're calling the cops." The cops came in, "Get on the ground."*

"These dual involved children and young people rely on the state for their care. They are capable of so much more but too many of them are caught up in a cycle between residential care and detention," Ms Wright said.

"The government's introduction of the Sanctuary model, which looks to provide therapeutic, trauma-informed care across all DCP residential care houses, is excellent step forward. But harm is occurring now and we must understand how to prevent that."

The final South Australian Dual Involved report will be released in early 2022.

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