GROWTH BEYOND THE TOWN
A longitudinal study on youth leaving care

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BASELINE REPORT
COHORT 1
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INTRODUCTION

There is not enough information available about how youth transition out of care in South Africa. This is a significant gap, because without understanding what they go through during that journey, we cannot know what their experiences and needs are and most importantly, how to respond to meet them.

Prof John Pinkerton (2011, p. 2412)[1], a world-renowned expert on youth leaving care writes:

> There appears to be no readily available material on leaving care in Africa, China, India and South America. Without knowing more about those regions any claim to there being a global perspective on care leaving cannot be taken seriously. There is a pressing need to find the means to gather the information and understanding that undoubtedly does exists in those and other regions and countries so far not engaged.

Girls and Boys Town (GBT) is responding to this need, through our three-phased intensive research process, which we have named *Growth Beyond the Town*. Currently in Phase 2, the aim is to deepen our understanding of how youth transition out of care, according to an emerging theory on care-leaving developed from Phase 1. Secondly, we want to measure our youths' resilience[2] and pair that with their outcomes in 6 month intervals. Using a longitudinal approach[3], we will be able to predict the likelihood that future youth who join the programme will have successful outcomes after they leave. Those results will give us the information we need to make more informed decisions about an aftercare programme and enhance the Independent Living Skills Programme. We should also be able to see how effective we are in our work, and what our major successes and challenges are, which will enable us to make improvements to the programme.

Data collection occurs in two parts: we collect 'baseline' data, which is the starting point against which future data will be measured and occurs when the youth disengage from GBT. Here, we are testing how resilient the youth are, what are their expectations and how prepared are they to leave. Then every 6 months after they have left, we collect 'follow up' data. This data looks at how they are coping in life, it takes stock of where they are and what their challenges and successes have been.

At the end of 2012, we interviewed 22 youth. What follows is some of the findings from that baseline study. It must be noted that the findings presented are what we believe to be the most interesting and key points that have come from our analysis of the data so far. However, baseline data becomes more meaningful with follow-up data and longitudinal data gains more quality over time. So our understanding of these results and what they mean for young people leaving care is likely to mature over time.

TESTING FOR RESILIENCE

In order to test for resilience as youth exit GBT, we devised a questionnaire made up of 206 items. These items are statements where the youth have to rate how they feel in response to each item – from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For example, *I am feeling great today* – they then rate that item depending on how they feel. The 206 items came from five 'central themes', which are then broken down into 29 areas[4] for measurement (examples are provided below), including:

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[1] Pinkerton, J. (2011) Constructing a global understanding of the social ecology of leaving out of home care, *Children and Youth Services Review,* 33(12), pp. 2412-2416

[2] Resilience is an individual's ability to deal with stress and 'bounce back' after they have been faced with difficult situations in life.

[3] Longitudinal research gathers data on numerous occasions over a period of time from the same people.

[4] We have purposefully omitted the list of areas we measured, to keep this report brief. For the full list, as well as access to the sources used in designing the questionnaire, please contact the researchers.

- **Supportive Relationships** – for example, Supportive family relationships; Supportive peer relationships; Supportive school/work relationships
- **Relationship to GBT** – for example, Positive experiences of being in care; Confidence to contact GBT staff post care
- **Context** – for example, Community safety/risk; Financial security; Engagement in hobbies
- **Personal** – for example, Problem solving; Self-esteem; Resourcefulness; Stress tolerance; Delayed gratification
- **Impression management**

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Sometimes, participants provide an inflated impression of themselves and give answers they think we want to hear, by portraying themselves in a positive light rather than being completely honest. This compromises the validity[5] of the data and we want to reduce it as far as possible. Therefore, we tested for this using a scale developed by van Breda and Potgieter (2007)[6]. Our results show that this might have occurred in three of our measures, namely *team work*, *empathy* and *resilience* – this means that was are currently unsure whether these three areas of measurement are accurate. We will address these concerns through a validation study[7] currently underway and if we find them (and any others) not to be valid, they will be removed from our questionnaire.

FINDINGS

Areas of Increased Resilience

We found that, out of the 29 areas measured, youth were most resilient in the following:

MOST RESILIENT AREAS
School relationships
Community relationships
Relationships with role models
Relationships with GBT staff
High expectations
Self-efficacy
Team work
Empathy

Table 1: Highest areas of resilience

[5] If a research study is not valid, it means it is not measuring what it intends to measure. For example, if we want to measure alcohol use, but in an attempt to put their best foot forward (which is what impression management is), then we would not actually be measuring alcohol use. We'd really be measuring impression management.

[6] Van Breda, A.D. & Potgieter, H.H. (2007). Measuring people's tendency to create a favourable impression of themselves. *Social Work Practitioner-Researcher, 19*(2), 95-113.

[7] Prof Adrian van Breda is currently conducting a validation study on our baseline questionnaire. This study is really important for our larger research project, because it will enable us to trust the data we get from the questionnaire. He will be sending the questionnaire to approximately 500 participants from 10 schools and Child and Youth Care Centres. The validation study may lead us to revise some of the items in the questionnaire.

This report includes findings on the most resilient areas, as listed in the table above, as well as other findings we believe are of interest. *Team work* and *empathy* are not reported on because as explained in the section above (Impression Management), we are not sure how accurate these findings are. Further, due to the brevity of this report, we have not included *all* the findings from the 2012 baseline study.

Relationships

Trust came across as a central theme for youth, in terms of relationships. They expressed how those close to them had supported them and guided them. One of the youth said, about the value of having friendships:

> *Having friends is like having an extended family, it is like having a huge cargo ship on the ocean, an anchor, so having friends is stability in your life. You can also compare them with traffic signals that also guide you sometimes towards safety, and also guide you sometimes towards success…*

Most of the youth indicated they experience school positively and feel well supported in their work. Almost all youth felt they had a teacher who is attentive, notes their absence and tells them when they do a good job. The same is true for those youth who are working and the way in which they experience those relationships. The vast majority (77%[8]) of the youth believe there is someone senior to them who really cares about them, notices when they are absent, tells them when they do a good job and wants them to do their best, indicating towards highly positive and supportive work relationships.

Community Relationships

As shown in Figure 1 below, youth expressed an obvious positive disposition to the communities in which they live when they are not at GBT, so much so, that it may be possible these results are biased and youth may have quite an ego-centric perspective of themselves within their communities and the role they play. 95% of youth believe they are helpful to other people in their community and 73% feel part of their communities. What is interesting however is that 31% of the youth do not respect the people that they live with in their communities.

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[8] Percentages shown have been rounded up to the nearest decimal place.
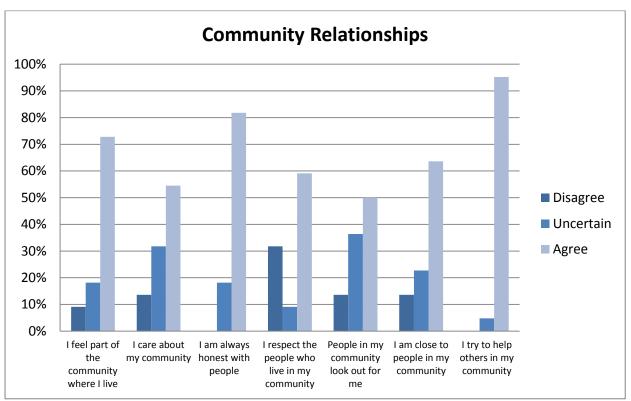
Figure 1: Community Relationships

Furthermore, while youth are quite sure of *their* role in their communities and certain that they are helpful and contributing, the same is not true for the converse. The item *people in my community look out for me* has relatively high uncertainty (36%), as seen below in Figure 2.
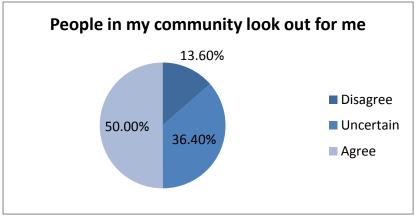

Figure 2: Percentages of people who youth perceive look out for them

This is concerning because it may indicate that the youth are not sure they have support from their community, which is one of the key aspects in community relationships and may be necessary for resilience after leaving care. Further, there is the possibility that high uncertainty (36%) may be expected for youth who have not been in the community for a while and are needing to move there soon because they may be nervous and unsure of what to expect.

Relationships with Role Models

Questions related to role models referred specifically to an adult in the youth's lives, other than their parents, teachers or employers. As shown in Figure 3 below, there is a strong positive trend regarding the youth's feelings toward their role models. The youth feel cared about, supported and encouraged by the positive role models in their lives, which is very encouraging as it means they have someone to look up to and to help them make positive choices.
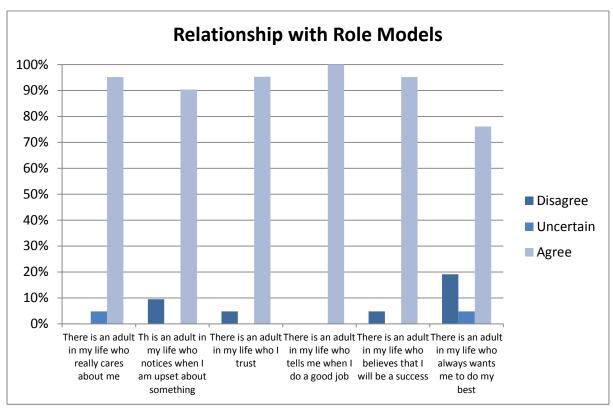

Figure 3: Youths relationships with their role models

Relationships with GBT Staff

The majority of youth feel positive about GBT staff and their relationships with them. The vast majority (87%) feel helped and encouraged to do their best by staff and 76% feel GBT staff members care about their feelings and are around when they need them. One youth said, in relation to staff and taking personal responsibility:

> At Girls and Boys Town, they do not force you to learn anything. You adapt it on your own… It's all up to you when you are ready to commit yourself that you are ready to deal with your problems.

Even so, 90% of youth agree with the statement that there are times when they get angry with their superiors, which is normal and to be expected from any adolescent. The item *I can share my joys and sorrows with at least one GBT staff member* has the most mixed results. Far fewer youth (47%) agree with this statement compared with other items in this scale, many are uncertain (33%) and this item has the largest proportion or youth who disagree with it (19%). Therefore, this should perhaps be considered an area of focus, to understand why youth feel this way.

Community Safety

Community safety was not an area where the youth showed high resilience. It is however, an area where the responses were diverse, which makes sense, given that the youth come from such diverse backgrounds. Figure 3 below illustrates that, despite the fact that 55% of the youth think there is a drug problem and a lot of crime in their community, 54% feel safe and secure and 40% think they can walk around at night. Similarly, another 40% of the youth do not feel they can walk around at night though. It may be interesting to explore further why there is such an equal split between youth that think they are safe to walk around at night and those that do not. Does it depend on where their communities are situated? Or, is this at all an indication of the perceived 'invincibility' of the youth? Or are they living within protective environments?
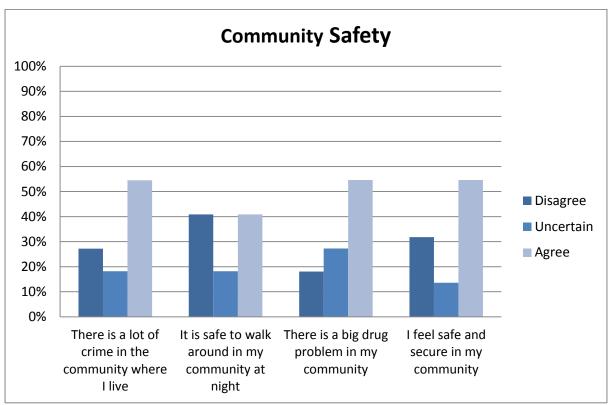

Figure 4: Community Safety

One participant also expressed his desire to 'make amends' with his community and show he has changed.

> …I have to work hard and show my community that I have changed and work for my thing, and not just get things easily without the challenges.

Youth Expectations of Themselves

Youth expectations, as shown in the figure below, yield very interesting results. 100% of the youth that answered this question believe they make the most of every situation, but all of those same youth also agree with the statement they do not always put in their best effort. This might be a reflection that youth occasionally feel down, lazy, or slightly apathetic. Perhaps though, it they were providing honest and realistic answers – that none of us put in our best effort *all* of the time. Life can be messy and imperfect and this may be the participant's authentic expression of that. Only 45% of youth agreed that they want to make improvements in their lives, compared to 22% who disagreed

with this statement. 31% were ambivalent or uncertain about their answer to this question. Generally, the youth do have high expectations of themselves but perhaps lack the resources or drive to know how to make such improvements.
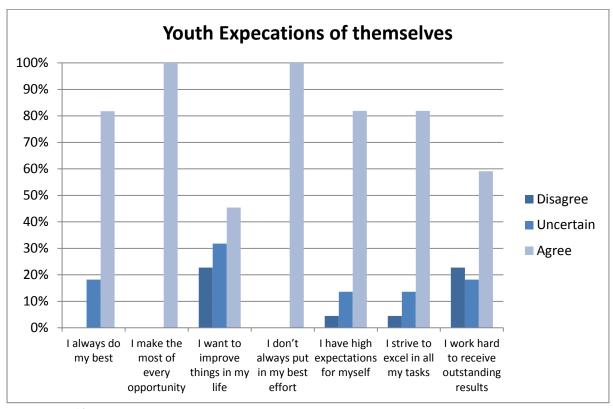

Figure 5: Youth's own expectations

Self-Efficacy

The youth reported high levels of self-efficacy, which is their belief in their own ability. 86% believe they can cope effectively with unexpected events and the same number believes they are able to find several solutions to problems they experience. The youth also believe they are effective problem solvers. There was some uncertainty in their responses, especially for the items *It is easy for me to stick to my plans and accomplish my goals* (27% responded 'uncertain') and *I can usually handle whatever comes my way* (27%) – this uncertainty may be related to anxiety about leaving cre and wondering whether they will cope with the challenges that moving home will present to them. The self-efficacy findings show that there is large amount of self-belief present in the youth at the point when they exit GBT. This highlights the importance of follow up data in order to see how these youth perceive themselves in 6 months and whether those perceptions have changed.

Dealing with Stress

We tested for the ability of youth to deal with stress and difficult situations, because if they are able to do that, they are likely to cope better with life's ups and downs. Understandably, 73% of youth believe there is nothing worse than feeling upset, perhaps consistent with most people in the general population. Other items produced more varied results, as shown in Figure 4 below, such as 55% often feel upset, while 41% do not often feel upset.
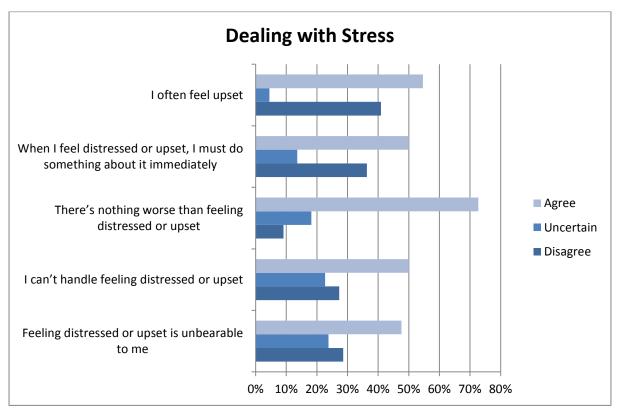
Dealing with Stress

Figure 6: Dealing with stress

How did the youth experience their stay at GBT?

The youth's responses regarding their stay at GBT were generally not positive (47%). However, 63% of those same youth did feel that their stay at GBT was good for them, which is promising and may indicate that, although it was a difficult and not an enjoyable experience, it was valuable. Although the former may be negative feedback and something to keep in mind, one can almost put it aside. Most of us are able to look back on our lives to a time or experience that was unpleasant but helpful; perhaps the GBT experience is like that for many of our youth. Further, this finding, more than likely, refers to the generic feelings an adolescent youth would have toward any restricted residential environment and perhaps even his/her own home. It will be very interesting to see the youth's feelings toward GBT when they have spent time outside of GBT.

How prepared are the youth to leave GBT?

Figure 6 below shows that almost all youth (90%) want to stay at GBT longer and 62% are not ready to leave. This may be linked to the fact that 71% are worried about going back home so they may be feeling nervous and unsure of what to expect. They have also expressed (62%), very worryingly so, that GBT has not prepared them adequately to go home. The youth may be experiencing anxiety about going home and not feeling adequately prepared.
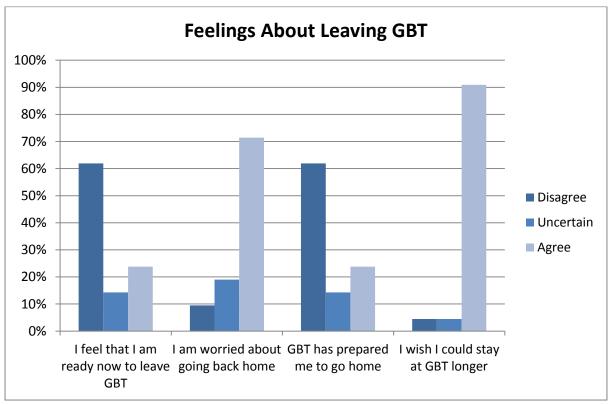
Figure 7: Youth's feelings about leaving GBT

What did the youth learn during their stay at GBT?

Youth reported how they learned how to take responsibility, make decisions, be honest and be respectful, as well as aspects of independent living:

> *The things that I think are important that have helped me change to become the person I am today. That would be taking responsibility for my actions and accepting decision of authority, …So Girls and Boys Town has really taught me how to make the right decisions.*

> *I have learnt independent living and also asking for permission. Those two skills are also important. ..Also to say no, and also be part of an activity.*

In understanding what it means to be independent, one youth reported:

> *[Being] independent is like opening a new account. Wow, that is a good thing that you opened a new account. For example you bought yourself some nice clothes using your money. Wow, that is big. Maybe you went to find a part-time job at Woolworths or something or maybe Checkers, that is great.*

How do the youth feel about leaving GBT?

Generally, youth seem to be excited, but also scared and nervous about leaving GBT. What seems to concern some is leaving the security and structure they have at GBT and entering into a world of uncertainty.

> *You are just scared to know if you are prepared or not. You do not know if you kind of fit in or if you won't.*

Maybe if I can get another year that I can stay here at Boys Town then I will take that opportunity.

I am a little bit worried, excited about going, but nervous about leaving the place because I know I'm going to the outside world, and things are different and they are also a little bit tough, and I know it is no longer the same as Boys Town. I know I might face some little bit of issues or maybe challenges, but I think it will be okay because in Boys Town I have learned a lot of things, especially social skills that will prepare me along the way.

Some youth expressed confidence that GBT would support them once they leave care, although there was ambivalence about the type of support they would need.

Support? I do not know what support I might need because I do not know what I am facing because I am not yet out, so once I am out there I am going to see, because I know if I am in trouble outside and I need a plan or something I need help from them. I dunno; they always help me out you see. They will never leave me stranded.

Finally, there also appears to be some naivety in some of the youths' responses about what will happen once they leave:

What challenges? There is no challenges...

It will be interesting to see whether youth have the same type of feelings once they have had time outside of GBT and to see whether they still feel the same way.

How are the participants experiencing being part of the study?

It seems that youth had a positive experience of their interviews.

The fact that you and Girls and Boys Town is actually concerned about what my plans for next year, and just to know that there will be some kind of support… Even if it is somebody to talk to, just that there will be somebody there for me when I am out of Girls and Boys Town.

I am a bit relieved….it also gave me a chance to plan again or to think ahead about the future.

CONCLUSION

This report has shown some of the results from the first phase of data collection *Growth Beyond the Town: A Longitudinal Study on Youth Leaving Care*. These baseline results provide us with a starting point from which we can later measure the youths outcomes as they move through this transitional journey. During the follow up interviews, we will be able to look at how they are doing in life – do they have jobs and accommodation? Where do they live? Are they working or in school? Are they involved in crime or substance abuse? Have they established meaningful relationships? Through listening to their stories, we will be able to identify the type of impact the programme has had on them and what type of support they need to not only survive, but thrive.