



**Enhancing child safety and well-being in the Northern Territory
Bridging gaps in support services and strengthening community engagement**

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Enhancing child safety and well-being in the northern territory: Bridging gaps in support services and strengthening community engagement

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Abstract

This article reports on a study that provides insights into the challenges faced by practitioners in the Northern Territory (NT) who support families in enhancing child safety and well-being, particularly for children at risk of or exposed to domestic or family violence. Despite increased funding for programs aimed at improving children's safety and well-being, reports and substantiations of child maltreatment in the NT continue to escalate. Interviews with twelve participants from various organizations involved in child protection services, family support services, and residential care shed light on the existing gaps in support services, including limited resources for families escaping domestic violence and inadequate assistance for children transitioning from out-of-home care. The findings emphasize the need for early intervention services targeted at families displaying risk factors for child maltreatment. Additionally, community consultation is crucial for the design and implementation of support programs that align with the unique needs of communities, including the necessity of maintaining connections to community, culture, and family to address concerns related to meeting basic needs. The study calls for a comprehensive approach that integrates community input, cultural safety, and tailored

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support programs to bridge these gaps and facilitate lasting positive changes. By addressing these challenges, there is a potential to mitigate child maltreatment and improve the well-being of children and families in the NT, contributing to the overall welfare of the community.

Keywords

child protection, culture, policy, qualitative, vulnerable families

Introduction

Extensive evidence highlights the significant health disparities and socio-economic inequities experienced by Indigenous populations in Australia compared to non-Indigenous Australians (Calma et al., 2017; Dickson et al., 2019; Galvin et al., 2020). This includes a notable overrepresentation of Indigenous children and young people in the child protection system, including out-of-home-care, as well as an elevated risk of adverse mental health outcomes among this population (Menzies and Grace, 2022; Zuchowski et al., 2022). In the Australian context, the term “out-of-home care” encompasses placements specifically intended for children and young people who are removed from their familial settings by the State as a result of neglect, abuse and unstable family environments (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2021). Existing research consistently demonstrates that Indigenous children and young people who are placed in out-of-home care are among the most disadvantaged members of the community (Eadie et al., 2022; Pizzirani et al., 2022). Specifically, this population is known to have commonly encountered significant traumatic experiences, contributing to their heightened vulnerability and disengagement from services (Pizzirani et al., 2022). Resultantly, there are regions of Australia with a high proportion of Indigenous people who require additional support and consideration of socio-historical contexts.

The concept of historical trauma has emerged in the trauma literature, applied to American Indigenous communities who endured a history of massacres, genocidal policies, forced relocation, and the prohibition of cultural practices (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Similar colonial atrocities have been documented among other Indigenous populations, including Canada’s First Nations, South African Indigenous populations, and New Zealand Indigenous populations (Hoosain, 2018; Paradies, 2016; Roy, 2014). These experiences parallel the traumas endured by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, including forced removal from their lands, the prohibition of cultural practices, and the notorious practice of forcibly separating children from their families, known as the “Stolen Generations” (Grace et al., 2016). These historical traumas continue to have a profound impact on the well-being and cultural identity of Indigenous Australians presently (Menzies, 2019). Notably, in Australia, two distinct Indigenous groups are officially recognized: the Aboriginal Peoples and the Torres Strait Islander Peoples. For the purposes of this article, the term “Indigenous” encompasses both Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander Peoples, reflective of extant work in this area (Menzies and Grace, 2022).

In 2007, an Australian national emergency was declared in response to the “Little Children are Sacred” inquiry alleging (and later unfounded) widespread sexual abuse in the Northern Territory (NT; Hinkson, 2007), a controversial government policy called the “Intervention” was implemented aimed at addressing child protection and social issues in Indigenous communities (Sandy and Clapham, 2012). The Intervention was implemented in the name of protecting children but faced criticism that it lacked justification and took a top-down approach undertaking limited consultation with affected communities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). The NT of Australia, although the smallest in terms of population among the states and territories, is distinguished by its substantial Aboriginal population, accounting for approximately 30% of the NT population compared to the national average of 3% (Northern Territory Government, 2022). The Aboriginal population in the NT is characterized by a relatively young age structure, with a median age of 26 years, in contrast to 35 years for the non-Aboriginal population (AIHW, 2021). Furthermore, Aboriginal children constitute a significant proportion, comprising 43% of all children in the NT (ABS, 2016). In the NT, child maltreatment substantiations continue to rise despite efforts by child protection services (CPS) and family support services (FSS) (NT Government, 2021; Roper et al., 2023). The implementation of the Safe and Supported framework has been initiated to address these concerns and emphasizes the need for revisions in CPS and FSS practices (Churchill and Fawcett, 2016; Commonwealth of Australia, 2021; Salveron et al., 2015). However, understanding the facilitators and barriers to achieving the framework’s goals in the NT context remains limited. The study reported on in this article aimed to explore strategies for supporting children’s well-being and safety by examining the perspectives of staff working with vulnerable families at risk of out-of-home care placement or experiencing significant harm in the NT, Australia.

Enhancing family support services for improved child safety and well-being

Family support services¹ collaborates with CPS to enhance child and family well-being through prevention, early intervention, and tertiary services (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). When a child’s safety cannot be improved or custody is relinquished, legal intervention may result in out-of-home care placements for protection (AIHW, 2021). The trauma associated with such placements highlights the significance of FSS as an early intervention approach to reducing child maltreatment (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). Marginalized parents facing poverty and disempowerment often grapple with trauma-related issues, including substance use and domestic violence, which contribute to child maltreatment (Brown and Brown, 2007).

Family support services are funded by State and Federal Governments in an attempt to address child safety concerns. FSS programs aim to support families to ensure child safety and prevent the placement of children into out-of-home care. Increasing concerns

regarding the scale of child maltreatment have prompted the implementation of multiple policy frameworks (Churchill and Fawcett, 2016; Salveron et al., 2015). Among these frameworks, the Safe and Supported Framework, introduced by the Commonwealth of Australia (2021), highlights the importance of revising CPS and FSS practices to effectively address child protection issues. The Safe and Supported Framework aims to address generational CPS involvement by improving FSS through information sharing, early interventions, reducing the overrepresentation of Indigenous families, and enhancing the workforce (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). Further investigation is needed to examine the implementation of the Safe and Supported Framework, considering criticisms of unrealistic expectations, prioritization of risk elimination, and limited frontline worker consultation (Krakouer et al., 2018; Wanganeen, 2022). Balancing institutional notions of safety, cultural safety, and maintaining a child's connection to culture and identity requires further examination (Krakouer et al., 2018).

Families are typically referred to FSS programs through CPS or following community concerns (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2020). Before the implementation of the Safe and Supported Framework, FSS services faced criticism for poorly targeted interventions, working in isolation, lack of evidence-informed practices, and limited cultural safety measures (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). FSS programs prioritize the child's best interests, employing a collaborative and intensive service schedule to improve family functioning and well-being (AIHW, 2021; Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). A strengths-based approach is utilized to identify goals and create positive outcomes for children's safety and well-being (AIHW, 2021; Commonwealth of Australia, 2021).

An evaluation highlighted barriers to family engagement with FSS, such as housing, trauma, violence, substance use, and poverty. FSS services aim to be evidence-based, culturally aware, and trauma-informed (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). There is limited research in the NT evaluating early intervention and FSS programs. Effective FSS and CPS interventions are needed to reduce child maltreatment and out-of-home care placements. This article reports on a study that aimed to explore strategies to support children's well-being and safety from the perspectives of staff working with vulnerable families at risk of having their children placed in out-of-home care or causing significant harm to their children.

Methods

Participants

This study involved semi-structured interviews with a total of 12 participants, consisting of 10 females and 2 males. The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 60, with an average age of 42.3 (SD = 13.0). One participant self-identified as an Indigenous Australian, although we note this may not be representative of the Indigenous workforce in the child and family welfare sector in the NT. Participants ($N = 12$) had professional experience in roles related to residential care ($n = 1$), CPS ($n = 2$), and FSS ($n = 9$). Their experience

ranged from 1.5 to 20 years ($M = 10.8$, $SD = 7.4$). This diverse representation aligns with the goals of the Safe and Supported Framework. Qualifications included graduate certificates, diplomas, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees in social sciences, community services, and policing, with many holding a Bachelor of Social Work degree.

Participants were purposively selected through a comprehensive process, including examination of support services, word-of-mouth, and professional knowledge. Recruitment involved email contact with organizations to avoid bias. Interviews were scheduled after participants contacted the research team, obtaining verbal consent and confirmation of reading the consent form.

Procedure

This study received ethics approval (H22030) and used a semi-structured interview schedule to explore concerns in child protective practices and identify gaps in service provision in the NT. The interview guide was piloted and deemed suitable. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' experiences with vulnerable families, allowing for participant guidance and clarification (Adams, 2010). This approach is valuable in limited research contexts and sensitive topics (Adams, 2010), like the study of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in the Northern Territory, and potentially distressing subjects, such as trauma-related research. The researcher, with FSS experience, adopted a non-directive approach to minimize bias (Adams, 2010). Due to the emotional nature of child protective services and the potential impact on the researcher's well-being, all participants were offered psychological support following the interviews. The interviews were conducted online using Zoom, with durations ranging from 22 to 53 min ($M = 39.2$, $SD = 12.1$). Zoom provided interview transcripts, which were reviewed for accuracy and then imported into NVivo for further analysis.

Data analysis

The analytic process of this research was guided by a social constructivist ontological position, deemed suitable for qualitative inquiry in this field (Aspers, 2015). This approach recognizes researchers' active role in meaning-making and emphasizes contextual understanding; adopting a social constructivist ontological stance, it enhances interpretive depth by acknowledging co-constructed knowledge between researchers and participants (Piatkowski et al., 2023). To ensure rigor, methods were employed in line with this ontological position and the research aims. Co-construction of knowledge was prioritized through collaboration with insider researchers, aligning research questions and theoretical positioning with workforce perspectives (Braun and Clarke, 2021). An example of this collaboration includes engaging insider researchers in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as incorporating their insights to refine research questions and theoretical frameworks. Reflexivity was employed to address potential biases of the primary researcher in the field of CPS and FSS in the NT (Ide and Beddoe, 2023; Probst

and Berenson, 2014). The first author presented potential themes to the other authors, incorporating their perspectives to refine themes. This approach aimed to ensure diverse interpretations and meaning-making, enhancing qualitative rigor and trustworthiness (Lietz et al., 2006) without relying on researcher consensus (Braun and Clarke, 2023). The first author conducted all interviews and made immediate preliminary reflections after each one. Coding of the interviews commenced once all interviews were completed. Transcripts were finalized, checked by the research team, and imported into NVivo for analysis. Thematic analysis, following a deductive approach, was applied using participant interview responses and relevant literature on FSS to ensure accurate and reliable coding (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Transcripts were coded based on frequently mentioned keywords, which were later refined and grouped to develop potential themes. To ensure rigor, the research team engaged in critical discussions during multiple meetings. Themes were shaped through revisiting the transcripts, challenging biases through critical dialogue, and revisiting existing literature (Braun and Clarke, 2023). Quotations illustrating each theme were compiled, and a list of theme titles and extracts was created.

Reflexivity statement. The primary researcher, who conducted all interviews, is currently employed in the field of FSS and has previous experience in CPS. The researcher acknowledges the personal experiences and insights gained from working in this field. The co-authors played a supportive role, offering opportunities for the primary researcher to reflect on the impact of their insider researcher status on data analysis. They provided critique and feedback throughout the research process. The primary researcher recognizes the influence of their professional experiences in CPS and FSS on the data analysis, while also acknowledging that the interviews conducted in this project have shaped their current practices and challenged their understanding of physical and cultural safety. For example, engaging with participants' narratives and perspectives has prompted the researcher to reassess their approach to cultural sensitivity and develop a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances involved in ensuring a safe and inclusive environment for children and families within different cultural contexts.

Findings

Theme 1: Bridging the gap: Enhancing support for families escaping domestic violence

Participants expressed concerns about the lack of adequate support services available for children and families during critical transition or crisis moments when they are escaping domestic or family violence. This gap in services creates challenges in preventing CPS involvement, as children often return to unsafe environments due to limited resources. Consequently, FSS workers are obligated to file mandatory reports to CPS, which may discourage future help-seeking behaviors. Participants highlighted the specific difficulties faced by male young people escaping domestic or family violence, as there are age restrictions that make it harder for families to stay together, particularly for boys. This

situation not only increases the vulnerability of these boys and young men but also puts the non-offending parent and their children's safety at risk, as they may be compelled to return or remain in domestic or family violence situations in order to provide care for their older male children. Furthermore, the mention of mandatory reports underscores the dilemma faced by FSS workers, who are obligated to file such reports when children are in potentially unsafe environments, despite recognizing the limited support services available for families during critical transition or crisis moments. Furthermore, the mention of mandatory reports underscores the dilemma faced by FSS workers, who are obligated to file such reports when children are in potentially unsafe environments, despite recognizing the limited support services available for families during critical transition or crisis moments.

P4: I see a pattern of women experiencing violence fleeing into the safe house with her little children for years and then this child turns 10 and he's not allowed ... he might roam the streets ... go back to dad ... then the safe house staff have to put in a mandatory report.

Participants suggested alternative approaches to address this service gap, such as establishing facilities for men who are violent and abusive, allowing mothers and children to remain in their homes. They proposed the implementation of residential programs that accommodate perpetrators of domestic violence, relieving pressure on services and reducing the need for accommodations for older male children in domestic violence shelters. Participants also emphasized the importance of holding perpetrators accountable and allocating resources to better understand the underlying trauma contributing to their violent and controlling behavior.

P5: A facility for men so that mothers and children don't have to flee their homes when men are being violent and abusive.

To address these concerns, participants recommended expanding domestic or family violence programs with a focus on intensive interventions that delve into the root causes of domestic or family violence.

P9: I'd like to see the domestic violence programs expanded because my understanding is that they are very general in nature. I'd like to see something more intensive where they start delving into the root causes behind why the domestic violence is going on.

In summary, participants expressed concerns about insufficient support services for families and children during critical transitions when escaping domestic or family violence, contributing to challenges in preventing CPS involvement and discouraging help-seeking behaviors. Male young people escaping domestic or family violence face specific

difficulties due to age restrictions, increasing vulnerability and jeopardizing safety. Recommendations include establishing facilities for violent men, implementing residential programs for perpetrators, and expanding domestic or family violence programs with intensive interventions addressing root causes of violence.

Theme 2: Beyond basic needs: Addressing underlying trauma and systemic issues in family support

Participants identified a worrisome trend where systemic issues, particularly poverty, were often misidentified as child neglect. This misidentification led to a narrow perspective that failed to recognize the broader context and challenges faced by families. The participants highlighted that when parents struggle to meet their basic needs, it creates further child safety concerns. This was eloquently articulated by one participant who explained the far-reaching impact of unmet physical needs on various aspects of family life, including health, finances, and education. The participants, particularly those working directly with Indigenous Australians, emphasized the profound influence of limited housing options and financial instability on their ability to address the underlying concerns of child protection.

P11: Some of the referrals we're seeing lately is this a child protection issue, the parents are acting protectively, they're struggling with housing or finances.

The overrepresentation of Indigenous Australians in the child protection system further emphasized the urgency of addressing basic needs and poverty. Failure to adequately meet these needs and tackle systemic issues hinders the long-term healing and positive change within families, perpetuating intergenerational trauma. Participants underscored the importance of not only providing housing and financial support but also establishing stronger connections to family, country, and cultural identity, particularly for Indigenous clients. They expressed frustration over the ongoing misidentification of these broader issues as child protection concerns by CPS. This finding underscores the divergence between Western perspectives, often shaped by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the comprehensive First Nations System of Needs, which encompasses the interconnectedness of country, culture, identity, respect, and family.

P3: Working with people whose basic needs aren't being met by the government, you then can't utilize a safety framework that talks about keeping families and children safe when realistically the government's response to the housing concerns or the impacts of colonization haven't been addressed.

Several participants expressed concerns that a large proportion of the work with families is directed at meeting their basic needs for housing, food, and safety rather than addressing underlying trauma that contributes to problematic parenting styles. Participants were concerned that there is a growing trend where systemic issues relating to poverty were being misidentified as child neglect. Participants felt that when parents

continue to struggle to meet basic needs, this results in further child safety concerns. The relationship between these variables is articulated well by one participant.

P12: Huge repercussions ... around health, finances, physical needs, education ... the first thing to go out the door when all the physical needs aren't being met ... they've given up themselves, so they've got no energy to engage their children in anything.

The detrimental effects of overcrowded living conditions on families, including high stress levels, increased sickness, and a greater likelihood of domestic or family violence. The lack of space and privacy exacerbates tensions within the household, leading to heightened stress and conflict. Improving housing conditions is crucial to mitigating these negative consequences and promoting the well-being and safety of family members.

P9: When you've got an entire family ... and they're living with extended family who are also packed into one room, it creates an environment where stress levels are high, sickness is high, things like domestic violence is more common.

Participants underscored the importance of addressing basic needs to support individuals in managing their trauma, intergenerational trauma, and homelessness. By providing access to essential resources such as housing, food, and safety, individuals are better equipped to address and cope with their traumatic experiences. Meeting these fundamental needs is crucial in breaking the cycle of trauma and promoting stability and well-being.

P8: Providing people with those basic fundamentals goes a long way to helping them manage their trauma, the intergenerational trauma and homelessness.

This theme highlights the misidentification of poverty as child neglect and the subsequent narrow focus on basic needs. Participants emphasized the far-reaching impact of unmet physical needs on various aspects of family life and stressed the importance of addressing systemic issues and underlying trauma. The overrepresentation of Indigenous Australians in the child protection system underscored the urgency of providing housing, financial support, and stronger connections to family and culture. This finding reveals a discrepancy between Western views, influenced by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the holistic First Nations System of Needs, emphasizing the need for a more comprehensive approach to family support.

Theme 3: Community-led decision making: "A two-way learning approach"

Participants emphasized the importance of effective communication and community consultation in supporting families navigating both their cultural values and unfamiliar

support systems. They highlighted the need for government policies to involve community input to avoid failures and dissatisfaction.

P4: In the past when we've seen things fail, it's because it hasn't been what the community wanted and there hadn't been that appropriate consultation done ... that's a huge issue.

Additionally, the workforce emphasized the need for collaboration between FSS and communities, advocating for culturally safe supports and a two-way learning approach. This approach enables knowledge-sharing between service providers and families, empowering families to navigate the system effectively while respecting their cultural values. By involving communities in decision-making processes, support services can be co-designed to address the unique challenges faced by Indigenous Australians and promote long-term changes that align with cultural values.

P12: Trying to live their both ways and learn both ways of learning, keeping culture strong but also trying to work a system that they're not understanding ... it's about actually communicating.

The workforce acknowledged the unique challenges faced by Indigenous Australians when accessing support systems, emphasizing the importance of involving the community in decision-making processes. They advocated for a two-way learning approach, where knowledge is shared between service providers and vulnerable families, empowering families to navigate the system effectively while allowing families to express their specific needs for long-term changes. This approach promotes a co-design process, giving communities a voice and enabling them to actively participate in shaping support services.

P3: A two-way approach ... speak to the local team around what we need ... and on the flip side of that is that the local team can then say alright well what we need is ... you can show respect in those really little things ... you then get ... built trust.

Navigating cultural values and the need for a two-way approach was, at times, challenging. It required striking a balance between respecting cultural practices and finding common ground for effective collaboration. Participants reflected the complexities inherent in working with diverse communities and underscores the importance of open dialogue and mutual understanding. By engaging in meaningful discussions and embracing cultural diversity, service providers can navigate these challenges and create a collaborative environment where cultural values are respected while promoting effective service delivery. This requires ongoing reflection, flexibility, and a commitment to cultural humility to ensure that all voices are heard and respected in the decision-making process.

P3: Then the flip side of that is, that local team can say alright well what we need is, boys over the age of 10 can't come in because it's culturally inappropriate, we can't have lights on this area because this tree is important to us. And then, when you can show mutual respect in those.

Theme 3 explores the importance of community-led decision making and a two-way learning approach in supporting vulnerable families. Participants emphasized the need for effective communication and community consultation to ensure government policies align with community needs and avoid failures. Collaboration between FSS and communities is crucial, promoting culturally safe supports and knowledge-sharing between service providers and families. By involving communities in decision-making processes, support services can be co-designed to address the unique challenges faced by Indigenous Australians and uphold cultural values. Navigating cultural differences and adopting a two-way approach require ongoing reflection, flexibility, and cultural humility to foster effective collaboration and promote positive changes.

Theme 4: Building stronger futures: Empowering families for lasting change

The participants in this study highlighted the need for preventative support for families at risk of future involvement with CPS. They specifically mentioned children in out-of-home care who face additional risks when transitioning into adulthood. Concerns were raised regarding the lack of support provided to these children during their time in care and as they transitioned into independent adult life, which could potentially lead them back to unsafe environments.

P2: I think preventative work. I think it's something that, like is just so complicated because if we think about the kids that we deal with today are going to be the families of the future, maybe they're going to be involved in child protection.

The participants emphasized the importance of ongoing work with families even after a child is placed in out-of-home care. They noted that most children eventually return home, and without continued support and intervention, they may go back to the same unsafe situations they were removed from. This observation aligns with existing research on the needs of Indigenous children in terms of community connectedness, cultural identity, and family connectedness. This highlights the importance of fostering holistic and culturally grounded support systems.

P6: We work with the young people but then we're finding they're going back to the same situation they came from.

The limited availability of programs to engage youth was identified as a contributing factor to increases in youth offending and potential future involvement with CPS. Participants highlighted the absence of school programs and weekend activities, leaving children with limited options, leading to boredom, conflict, and involvement in delinquent

behaviors. They proposed the introduction of additional therapeutic services in early education settings, creating a comprehensive support system that identifies problematic behaviors early on, and providing families with the necessary assistance to prevent the escalation of challenging home environments and parental trauma presentations.

P3: There's no school program, there's no weekend program. What do you expect children to be doing apart from getting together, arguing, fighting, breaking in, because they're bored.

The participants stressed the importance of “wrapped around” services in childcare centers, incorporating qualified professionals such as social workers or psychologists. These professionals would be able to address concerning behaviors observed in children and offer support to families earlier, ultimately preventing the need for CPS involvement.

P11: having more services wrapped around families in childcare centres as well as a good opportunity to have a social worker or a psychologist If you're seeing some behaviours with children, you've got someone qualified who can talk to the family about it. Get them some help.

The workforce emphasized the need to establish safe and supportive environments that facilitate the engagement of young people while preserving and nurturing their first language and cultural heritage. This approach promotes a sense of identity and self-confidence among children, resulting in increased motivation to attend school, active participation in learning activities, and better engagement with their educational experiences. The use of culturally relevant teaching methods delivered by individuals who possess an understanding of the children's lives and can communicate in their native language, fosters a deeper connection and relatability, enhancing the overall educational outcomes and engagement of Indigenous children.

P4: create these spaces to engage young people in a way that's protecting and supporting them to learn their first language and culture, and once you've got children that have like confidence in their identity, and you know you see an increase number of children willing to attend school, willing to learn, willing to engage, because it's something that can relate to, because they're learning from people that understand their lives and in a language that they can understand.

Theme 4 focuses on building stronger futures and empowering families for lasting change. The participants emphasized the importance of preventative support for families at risk of future involvement with CPS, particularly children in out-of-home care transitioning into adulthood. Ongoing support and intervention for families were deemed essential to prevent children from returning to unsafe environments. The limited availability of programs for youth engagement and the absence of therapeutic services in early education settings were identified as contributing factors to youth offending and

potential future CPS involvement. The participants stressed the need for comprehensive support systems that incorporate culturally relevant teaching methods, wraparound services in childcare centers, and safe and supportive environments to enhance educational outcomes and engagement among Indigenous children.

Discussion

This study provides insights into the challenges faced by practitioners in supporting families and promoting child safety and well-being, with implications beyond the NT. It sheds light on gaps in support services for families impacted by domestic or family violence and children transitioning from out-of-home care, highlighting the need for community involvement and tailored program design. The study's recommendations, emphasizing the integration of community input and cultural safety considerations, offer insights as to how policy intent plays out in practice. By bridging identified gaps and fostering sustainable positive changes, these findings contribute to international efforts in improving child safety, well-being, and poverty reduction. For Australia specifically, the study provides guidance for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers working towards improving child safety and well-being in the NT.

Integrating the First Nations System of Needs and utilizing narrative techniques can facilitate healing (Pizzirani et al., 2022) and disengage families from traumatic narratives (Wanganeen, 2022). Further research on culturally safe programs for men's behavior change in the context of domestic or family violence, and incorporating the First Nations System of Needs, holds promise for reducing CPS notifications related to domestic and family violence. Addressing this service gap is crucial to mitigate the negative impact of domestic or family violence on children (Menziez and McNamara, 2008) and promoting help-seeking behaviors during crises (Menziez and Grace, 2022). The Safe and Supported Framework recognizes the importance of early interventions targeting domestic or family violence to prevent harm incidents reported to CPS (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). Participants emphasized the significance of housing and financial support, while Indigenous perspectives underlined the importance of strengthening connections to family, land, and cultural identity, fitting with extant work (Stafford et al., 2022; Zuchowski et al., 2022). The frustration expressed by participants further aligns with concerns raised by scholars regarding the prioritization of basic needs over cultural considerations by the Western workforce (Stafford et al., 2022; Wanganeen, 2022). To address these issues, a reconceptualization of workforce needs is proposed, encompassing the First Nations System of Needs that balances country, culture, identity, respect, and family. Cultural safety should be prioritized, accompanied by increased education and training. Involving Indigenous leaders and groups will contribute to raising awareness about meeting the needs of vulnerable families in terms of their connections to family, land, and cultural identity. Further exploration is required to examine the complex factors that contribute to the difficulties in effective practitioner action and to critically assess the potential impact of initiatives such as the Safe and Supported Framework, which received significant funding, in bringing about substantial improvements in the field.

The social-ecological approach, as advocated by [Krakouer et al. \(2018\)](#), extends beyond community consultation and encompasses individual and macro-level factors, such as poverty. It emphasizes the reciprocal influence of community and family on a child's development, recognizing the significance of cultural identity and connections to community and family. This approach aligns with the Safe and Supported Framework ([Commonwealth of Australia, 2021](#)), which acknowledges the importance of community consultation. The findings highlight the need for increased community consultation and collaboration with Indigenous organizations, which emerged as a shared priority among participants. [Kemp et al. \(2022\)](#) presents the ethical framework "Kia Tika, Kia Pono - Honouring Truths," which centers the voices and priorities of care-experienced Tamariki and Rangatahi. Grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and participatory rights frameworks, this framework promotes meaningful and culturally safe engagement with care-experienced children and young people, allowing them to contribute their knowledge and shape governance, policy, services, media, and research efforts. In drawing on these frameworks and approaches (e.g., [Kemp et al., 2022](#); [Krakouer et al., 2018](#)) practitioners can foster an inclusive and culturally responsive approach to support Indigenous children and break the generational cycle of family involvement with CPS.

Reflection on research

In interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to acknowledge and address the inherent limitations that may have influenced the authors' interpretation of the data. As researchers with professional experiences in the child protection and family support services, there is a potential for personal biases and oversights in the identification and analysis of certain themes. Thematic analysis, despite rigorous qualitative methods employed, remains a subjective process susceptible to unconscious biases. Efforts were made to mitigate bias by engaging in a collaborative process with participants and utilizing established research methodologies. However, it is crucial to recognize that the construction of themes is influenced by the interaction between researchers and participants, introducing subjectivity into the analysis. The findings of this study highlight a significant theme of dissatisfaction among the workforce participants regarding the insufficient recognition and prioritization of the cultural heritage, community, and familial connections of First Nations families. This emphasizes the need for enhanced cultural safety training within the workforce to ensure culturally responsive and respectful practices. To fully integrate the research outcomes into the existing literature and current workforce practices, further steps need to be taken. This includes disseminating the findings among relevant stakeholders, engaging in dialogue with practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers to encourage critical reflection, and fostering collaborative efforts to improve outcomes for vulnerable families and promote the well-being of children in the care system.

In conclusion, this study provides insights into the challenges faced by practitioners in the CPS and FSS in the NT. It sheds light on the importance of cultural heritage, community consultation, and familial connections in supporting families and addressing child safety and well-being. Moving forward, it is crucial to continue advancing cultural

safety training, promoting research-practice collaboration, and implementing evidence-based strategies to enhance outcomes for vulnerable families and children in the care system. By embracing these recommendations, we can strive to create a more inclusive, responsive, and effective support system for all families in need.

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Note

1. In this paper we use FSS to refer to the two programmatic approaches to FSS in the NT; the Federally funded Children and Family Intensive Support (CaFIS) program and the NT government funded Family Support Services (FSS).

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