



SAFE & SOUND?

Making England safe for young runaways

Thrown away: the experiences of children forced to leave home

G. Rees and J. Siakeu



With children, for children, with you

Thrown Away:
The experiences of children forced to leave home

Gwyther Rees & Jean Siakeu

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Further information

For any queries or further information relating to this report, or the research programme in general, please contact:

Research Unit
The Children's Society
Gallery House
125-131 The Headrow
Leeds
LS1 5RD

Telephone: 0113 246 5131

E-mail: ru@childsoc.org.uk

Introduction

'My mother didn't want me any more and couldn't stand the sight of me.'

Parents and other adult carers have responsibilities to ensure the safety and welfare of children and young people under the age of 18, yet research has shown that many young people (primarily teenagers) are literally forced to leave home. A large national survey of a representative sample of young people aged 14 to 16 found that around 2% – or one in every fifty – had been forced to leave home, temporarily or permanently, at some point before their sixteenth birthday (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

Young people under 16 who are away from home have little or no access to emergency accommodation and no legitimate means of surviving independently whilst away from home. They either have to rely on the support of friends and relatives, or end up sleeping rough or with strangers, with all the inevitable risks that this involves.

This is the first UK report to focus specifically on this issue. It provides information about which young people are likely to be forced to leave; describes the background to their situations and their experiences whilst away from home; and explores responses to their needs.

The aims of the report are to raise awareness of the issue and to promote debate on effective practice and policy responses to the needs of young people who find themselves forced to leave home prematurely.

The report is part of an ongoing research programme carried out by The Children's Society, in partnership with the University of York, into young people who run away, are forced to leave home, or otherwise find themselves on the streets.¹ This research programme began with the first UK-wide analysis of the issues, undertaken in 1999 and has continued with a number of national and local research studies and, more recently, evaluations of projects working with young people.

Previous literature

The fact that a significant proportion of young people who fall into the broad category of 'runaways' have actually been forced to leave home has been recognised both in the UK and elsewhere for some time now.

UK research into young people 'running away' in the early 1990s (Rees, 1993) highlighted the fact that some young people at a refuge for runaways felt that they had been forced to leave home, as the following extracts from quotes in the report illustrate:

'Everything had just come to a head and my dad was trying to get rid of me and beating me up and everything and I just couldn't stand it. He took me to Social Services and just dumped me. He went, "You take care of her".'

and

'The reason I got kicked out of the house before was this bloke, somebody had slit one of his tyres and the police come round to all young lads my age and said to the parents: "We can't prove your son's done it, but we think he's done it, and if it happens again we'll be coming round". My parents went [to me], "Oh get out". I had to go and stay with my friends for about two weeks.'

Similar issues had already been recognised for some time in US research (e.g. Brennan et al, 1978; Adams et al, 1985).

In 1990 a major US study (Finkelhor, Hotelling & Sedlak, 1990, 241–2) estimated that there were 112,600 'throwaway' children and young people (aged 0 to 17) in the USA in 1998 – a rate of 1.79 per 1000 of the youth population. 'Throwaway' young people constituted around 22% of the total 'runaway' population – estimated at 513,400 young people per year.

Most (84%) of young people in the 'throwaway' category were aged 16 to 17 with the remaining 16% all being aged 13 to 15. There was no significant difference according to gender or ethnicity.

This study also highlighted some other key differences between 'runaways' and 'throwaways'. Compared to incidents of young people running away, those where young people had been forced to leave were:

- more often preceded by an argument (59% of 'throwaways' compared to 36% of 'runaways')
- twice as likely to have involved violence prior to the young person leaving (27 % of 'throwaways' and 11% of 'runaways')
- likely to last longer (54% of 'throwaway' incidents lasted a week or more compared to 35% of 'runaways')
- less likely to be reported to the police (23% of 'throwaway' incidents compared to 40% of 'runaway' incidents).

Since this time several other studies have made a distinction between young people running away and being forced to leave. Hier et al (1990) compared the psychological characteristics of these two groups of young people. Ringwalt et al (1998) found that 'throwaway' young people were more likely than runaways to report attempting suicide, using drugs, and dealing in drugs. They were also more likely to have been away from home as a result of abuse, neglect, family conflict and family substance use. Ennett et al (1999) found that young people who were forced to leave home were at higher risk of unsafe sexual behaviours.

More recently, in a follow-up to the 1990 study discussed above, Hammer, Finkelhor & Sedlak (2002) took the decision not make a distinction between 'runaway' and 'throwaway' young people:

'further analysis of [the earlier] findings suggested that the distinction between runaways and throwaways was less than clear cut. Many youth had both kinds of episodes, and many individual episodes had both runaway and throwaway elements. Moreover, the categorization of an episode frequently depended entirely on whether the information was gathered from the youth, who tended to emphasize the throwaway aspects of the episode, or the caretakers, who emphasized the runaway aspects.'

In the UK there has been a tendency to group young people who have been forced to leave home together with young people who have decided to leave home under the general heading of 'running away'.

The largest piece of research to date on runaways in the UK (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999), entitled *Still Running*, found that around one in five young people² under the broad 'runaways' category reported having been 'forced to leave home' on at least one occasion (they may also have run away on other occasions). Overall the report estimated that 77,000 young people run away for the first time each year in the UK, and that there were around 129,000 'running away' incidents per year. Using the above statistics it can conservatively be estimated³ that this figure includes at least 15,000 incidents of young people under 16 being forced to leave home each year.

The *Still Running* study also provided some further information about this group of young people, although this was located thematically throughout the report rather than being summarised in one place. This information made it clear that there were some significant differences in the characteristics of this sub-group of the 'runaway' population:

- As with young people who run away, more females (58%) are forced to leave home than males.
- Young people who are forced to leave tend to be older with a peak around the ages of 15 and 16.
- There is a fairly even representation of young people from different ethnic groups amongst young people who are forced to leave home, whereas black and minority ethnic young people are less likely to run away than white young people.
- Young people who are forced to leave are more likely than average to have been away from home repeatedly in the past (either through being forced to leave or running away) than young people who run away.

Within this overall context there has, before now, been no detailed exploration in the UK literature of the issues faced by young people who are forced to leave. The current report was commissioned by The Children's Society to begin to fill this gap.

Scope and definitions

As mentioned above, there is no clear agreed definition of what constitutes being 'forced to leave' home. In our research we asked young people whether they would define themselves as having run away or been forced to leave home. In some cases this distinction is fairly clear. Some young people clearly feel that they have chosen to run away:

'I didn't really have any reason to run away from home other than the reason that I didn't want to be at home and I just wanted to go and get out of my head all the time'

whilst others have evidently been forced out:

'I got chucked out on and off all the time and I'd come back next day or come back a couple of weeks later, get chucked out again. It got to the stage where she was chucking me out because she didn't want me at all she just wanted me stay out.'

In between these two poles there is a considerable grey area relating to situations where young people feel unwanted to a greater or lesser extent and can end up feeling emotionally pushed out of home, although no-one literally tells them to leave, as the following quote from a young person who categorised herself as having 'run away' illustrates:

'I ran away because my mum, dad and brother they all hated me and I thought I'd overstayed my welcome.'

As the US researchers cited above concluded, there is in fact no clear dividing line between running away and being forced to leave. Nevertheless, as the findings presented later show, there are two good reasons why it is worth producing a report on this issue, however insoluble the definitional issues may be. First, there are a number of important issues relating to young people who define themselves as having been forced to leave which warrant specific attention. Second, despite the definitional difficulties, the experience of being forced to leave home is a very real and significant one for many young people, as illustrated by some of the above quotes.

So, our approach for the purposes of this report has been to use young people's own definitions where data has been gathered directly from them. Where we have cited monitoring data gathered from projects, the definition of whether a young person has been forced to leave is based on workers' perceptions, from the information given to them by young people and referring agencies.

Information sources and analysis

Information sources

Over the last five years The Children's Society's Research Unit⁴, working in partnership with the University of York, has undertaken a programme of research and evaluation studies into the issues facing young people who run away, are forced to leave home or are on the streets.

For this report we have made use of the following data sets from this research programme:

1. A representative sample of over 8000 young people in 16 areas of England. This sample was part of the overall survey of 13,000 young people in the UK emanating from the *Still Running* research project (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). The data was checked and refined prior to the current analysis.
2. A sample of 55 interviews with young people who had experienced being forced to leave home, drawn from a database of over 250 interviews conducted between 1999 and 2003, including the *Still Running* research project and subsequent research and evaluation projects.
3. A complete sample of monitoring data relating to 500 stays at Leeds Safe House, a refuge for young runaways, for a two year period ending in October 2000.

4. A complete set of monitoring and case study data relating to over 350 young people in contact with five specialist runaways projects during specified time periods during 2002.

We have also made some use of data from interviews with lesbian, gay and bisexual young people undertaken by another researcher within the organisation.⁵

The report contains some findings that appear in previous publications (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Rees & Rutherford, 2001; Rees, 2001) as well as new findings stemming from recent research and evaluation activity which has not yet been published.

Analysis

Statistical analysis has been carried out in SPSS, primarily using chi-square tests. Confidence levels of 99% and 95% were used depending on sample size.

Qualitative data from interviews had already been summarised thematically in an Access database and specific analysis of this summary data has been undertaken for the current report.

Case studies which appear in this report have been compiled from interviews with young people and case material from evaluative work. We have followed the practice of anonymising case studies by changing some details and combining information from more than one young person's story.

Notes

¹ Much of this research, including the writing of the current report, has been funded by the Children's Promise fundraising initiative.

² It is interesting that this finding is close to the 22% figure from US research cited earlier.

³ Given that one in five of the 77,000 young people who run away for the first time each year are at some point before the age of 16 forced to leave home, it follows that on average there are at least 15,000 incidents per year. This is a conservative estimate in that it does not include any allowance for repeat incidents of being forced to leave.

⁴ Formerly named 'Safe on the Streets Research Team'.

⁵ A report on this research will be available later this year.

The research findings

Why young people are forced to leave

As a starting point for developing an understanding of the reasons for young people being forced to leave home, we re-analysed young people's responses to an open-ended survey question about why they had left home. These responses were organised thematically.

In some cases, young people provided no more than a terse account of the fact that they were told to leave:

*'Because my mum's boyfriend told me to f**k off.'*

Where young people gave more information about the events surrounding their being forced to leave, the most common factors, in descending order of prevalence, were:

- arguments, poor relationships and boundaries issues
- rejection and feeling pushed out
- violence
- split family issues
- young person's behaviour at home
- being in trouble
- school issues.

Examples of the kinds of responses which were allocated to each of the above categories are provided in Figure 1, which also illustrates the fact that some incidents fall into two or more of the above thematic categories.

The above rough categorisation was used as a starting point for further analysis of the survey data, and also of the data from interviews with young people. To a great extent, the immediate triggers for being forced to leave proved to be a helpful indicator of the key background issues in the lives of these young people. We will now go on to discuss this background context in detail, in order to describe more fully the factors which eventually lead to young people being forced to leave home.

Conflict

Young people who are forced to leave home report high levels of conflict within their families. This can be both an immediate reason for being forced to leave, or an underlying issue. Almost a quarter (23%) of young people forced to leave home said that they did not get on at all with their parents or carers, compared to 13% of runaways and 3% of other young people.

This conflict can be due to a wide range of sources, including:

- issues of boundaries and freedom as young people mature
- clashes of values or expectations
- issues between parents
- the ongoing impact of family change.

Figure 1: Examples of young people's accounts of reasons for being forced to leave home.

Arguments, poor relationships and boundaries issues

'Because my mum couldn't cope with me because we have no patience for each other.'

'My step-dad won't let me have a boyfriend till 16 and my mum has changed her attitude towards me.'

'I left because me and my mum don't get on. We always argue and she was really depressed and told me I had to go as I was making her unhappy.'

Violence towards the young person

'As I was badly beaten all the time and told to leave in the next week or my bags will be packed and I'll be chucked out.'

'I caught my Mom and Dad arguing. My Dad hit my Mom and I went and tried to talk to him but he hit me instead. I swore at him and then he told me to leave because I was disrespecting him.'

'My mum and step dad went through a rough patch and got violent so I had to go and stay with my friends.'

Issues to do with families splitting up

'Left home with my mum and sister and lived in a women's refuge for 7 months.'

'Mum moved her boyfriend in just after my mum and dad divorced. I said I didn't feel comfortable so she kicked me out.'

'I had to leave because I wanted to move in with my dad and she didn't like it so she wouldn't let me in my house.'

Young person's behaviour at home

'I had to leave because I stole my dad's car and got caught smoking weed in my house.'

'I hit my step dad.'

'I used to have a stress problem and smash up everything but I have stopped it all now. But some times I throw one. So she kicked me out (mother).'

Being in trouble

'Because I had a lot of problems with drugs, alcohol and I kept getting into trouble at school and with the police.'

'I had to leave one night because I'd got into trouble with the police and my dad didn't want me in the house until he had calmed down.'

School issues

'I got excluded from school for the third time and was kicked out of my house for a week.'

'Because I got into loads of trouble at school and my mum and dad said I had to go and live with my real dad but I went to my nan's instead.'

CASE STUDY 1

Donna

Donna was forced to leave home 'loads of times' between the ages of 13 and 16. At the age of 11 her parents split up and she remained with her mother. A year later her mother found a new partner who Donna didn't get on with, and she began to run away regularly. She felt 'unwanted and unloved'.

After a row with her mother, she was told to leave home and went to her father's house. However after a few weeks her father also told Donna to leave because he did not approve of her social life (she was 'too much like her mother').

She returned to her mother's house. This pattern was repeated several times until, at the age of 15, Donna moved out of home permanently to live with an older boyfriend.

One additional area of conflict not evident from the survey of predominantly under-16-year-olds related to economic issues. For young people reaching the age of 16 economic factors, including access to work or benefits, were often a reason for being forced to leave home:

'Mum had no money for me. She gave me a week to get a job but I couldn't get one. I thought she was joking'.

Rejection

Clearly, being forced to leave home is in itself an act of (temporary or permanent) rejection. To this extent it is inevitable that the issue of rejection is highlighted in a study of this nature. However, it is apparent from many young people's stories that this rejection is often not simply a one-off event but the culmination of years of emotional neglect and disinterest on the part of parents and carers:

'I was never part of the family and my mum hated that I looked like my dad; that was a major thing... she'd just look at me and was reminded of my dad and she hated it...and I wasn't brainy like my sisters... my sisters were so clever and she hated that as well'.

Survey findings back this up. One in eight (12%) young people who have been forced to leave home feel that their parents do not care about them at all. This compares with 5% of young people who run away and less than 2% of the general population of young people.

Some young people report multiple rejection by parents and other family members:

CASE STUDY 2

Liam

Liam's parents separated when he was 9 and he subsequently lived with his father and a stepmother. When he was 12 his father died and he moved in with an aunt and uncle. He was regularly hit and after one argument during which he was quite severely beaten he was told to leave.

Liam initially went to stay with an older sibling, but then got in touch again with his mother and eventually moved in with her. Unfortunately Liam did not get on with his mother's new partner, there were frequent arguments and eventually he was told to leave.

Liam then slept rough and stayed at some friends' places, before being put in touch with social services. Social services were able to arrange a foster carer, which was at first a positive experience, but difficulties developed over time:

'At first it was all me; I had all the attention, but it wasn't like that after a while'.

At 16 Liam left foster care and moved into a hostel, where he currently lives.

In general, a recurrent theme for young people who are forced to leave home is that of not being wanted, and this potentially has knock-on effects as we will discuss below.

For some young people a key aspect of their rejection by their parents relates to their sexuality. One young woman recounted how she was first forced to leave home at 12 years of age after:

'It was when I first had thoughts, I wasn't sure, I thought I was gay, I didn't know, I just wanted to talk to her [mother] about it.'

This resulted in an argument during which her mother told her to leave home:

'She said to me that no daughter of hers will be gay and if I am gay I've got to leave'

She went to stay with an aunt but was subsequently also told to leave there and went into care.

In other cases, it is young people's fear of parents' possible reactions to their sexuality which leads them to feel forced to leave home:

'I was scared of them finding out, I really thought my dad would kill me'

Although when this young man did eventually 'come out', his father was very accepting.

Violence

Violence is very prominent in the lives of this group of young people. As discussed earlier this can be a key aspect of the events surrounding the young person being forced to leave home. However, as with rejection, it is also a consistent underlying theme in many of these young people's histories.

'I was getting a pasting from my mum and dad practically every day'.

Again the picture from interviews is backed up by survey data. Thirteen percent of young people who had been forced to leave said their parents hit them a lot, compared to 6% of runaways and 2% of all young people.

This theme is in evidence in several of the case studies presented elsewhere in this section. In a number of cases in both the interviews and the survey there were clear connections with domestic violence:

CASE STUDY 3

Ewan

Ewan lived with his parents who were always arguing, splitting up and then getting back together again:

'The only memories I have of my mother and father are of them arguing and my mother cooking dinner and chucking it at the wall. They'd get back together and then they'd finish again'.

Then Ewan found out his father was beating his mother up:

'You see my father was hitting my mother in places where people couldn't see the bruises. When I found out about this and tried to stop him hitting her, my father beat me up and told me to go. Trying to help my mother got me nowhere in the end. He told me to leave. I was 15.'

This case study is reproduced from Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999)

We do not have statistics on this link, but it is consistent with the overall pattern of violence within the families which young people are forced to leave.

Family change

The fourth key theme within young people's histories is one of substantial change and instability. Young people who are forced to leave tend to have had disrupted lives, with high levels of family breakdown and reconstitution as well as bereavements and geographical mobility.

Only around a third (35%) of young people who had been forced to leave currently lived with both birth parents, compared to 58% of runaways and 72% of other young people.

Interviews highlighted cases of young people being moved from one parent or extended family member to another during their childhood.

In addition, young people who are forced to leave are much more likely to have lived in care at some point. Sixteen percent of this group had lived in care, compared to 6% of runaways and around 2% of other young people.

The following case study illustrates both the above themes.

CASE STUDY 4

Petra

Petra's parents separated when she was nine years old. Her father left home and she and her sister went into foster care for a while because her mother couldn't cope. She returned home to her mother when she was 11. After this there were always arguments at home and Petra ran away a few times, usually returning later the same night. On one of these occasions Petra's mother locked her out and she had to spend the night in a neighbour's garden shed.

Eventually when she was 14, her mother told her she had to leave. After spending a few nights at a friend's house, Petra renewed contact with her father and moved in with him:

'That was going OK until he kept going at me, saying he wanted money. In the end I never used to come home at night. I used to stay at my friend's house where I used to live. I used to phone him [her father] and tell him I was staying out. But he used to get sick of me [staying out] nearly every night so I come home one night and he just said 'Right, you can leave tomorrow.'

She returned to her mother's, but things quickly deteriorated and she was thrown out again. She was picked up sleeping rough by the police and referred to social services, who placed her in foster care. Unfortunately this broke down as Petra was accused of stealing money, and she moved into a children's home, where she now lives:

'They've helped me quite a lot actually. They've helped me find somewhere to stay and given me money when I needed it. I'd recommend social services to anyone if they need them.'

This case study originally appeared in Rees & Rutherford (2001)

Whilst the main focus of our analysis here is on young people's lives, it is important to recognise that their parents and carers will have also been through the same difficult issues.

As an earlier research report in this research programme (Rees & Rutherford, 2001) has illustrated, where parents have been through the major disruption caused by violent family environments and family breakdown, this will have left its toll on their ability to cope and this can be a strong explanatory factor in young people being forced to leave home. The high rate of young people being forced to leave lone-parent families is perhaps indicative of parents' own difficulties in coping with the legacy of these experiences. Similarly, within reconstituted families young people are often caught up in emotional triangles with their birth parent and step parent, which ultimately are resolved by the young person being told to leave or feeling pushed into this position, as several of the case studies in this report show.

Being in trouble

Young people who have been forced to leave home are likely also to be young people with problems and issues of various kinds in their lives. As with young people who have run away, those who have been forced to leave have much higher than average self-defined rates of problems both at school (including truancy, exclusion and being bullied) and in their personal lives (alcohol, drugs, and offending) than the general population of young people (see Table 1).

Comparing young people who have been forced to leave with young people who run away, the former group have even higher rates of problems than the latter with drugs and truanting. Twenty one percent of young people who had been forced to leave home said that they had a problem with drugs, compared to 13% of runaways and 3% of other young people. Fourteen percent said that they often truanted, compared to 8% of runaways and 3% of all young people. In interviews, drug use and drug dealing came across as common features in the lives of many young people who are forced to leave home.

It is clear that the link between drug issues and being away from home works both ways. Some young people initially became involved in drugs whilst they were away from home, whilst others were forced to leave home because of their involvement with drugs.

This dual and reinforcing pattern is common to other areas of young people's lives where they are 'in trouble'. The roots of these issues can often be traced back in young people's histories, to earlier events and experiences. Young people often spoke of 'getting in with a bad crowd'. Whilst it would be misleading to say that this was always caused by other factors, it is clear that many young people, having experienced rejection and neglect at home (often combined with problems at school), turn to ultimately unhelpful peer relationships and group memberships as a means of belonging, as the quotes below (from two different young people) illustrate:

'If my family were around me more and showed me that they loved me, or that someone cared for me, I sometimes think that I would have been a lot better.'

'It was a relief finding someone [on the streets] to share my problems with .. But, in the long run, I'd have done better if I hadn't have met him.'

Young people's behaviour in the home

It is clear from young people's own accounts that in some cases their own actions have often been a key factor in their being forced to leave home. In surveys (see earlier quotes) and interviews some young people identified behaviours such as being violent, being drunk, stealing from other family members, and putting other people at risk as reasons why they were forced to leave:

CASE STUDY 5

Craig

Craig had a relatively stable existence until the age of 13 when he got involved with a group of older young people and started drinking heavily. When drinking he would become violent and was arrested several times, eventually being convicted of assault. At this time (aged 15) he was thrown out of home by his parents due to his behaviour.

He returned home after a brief period on the street. However, by the age of 16 the drinking and fighting had worsened and as a result there was constant conflict at home. One day, during an argument with his parents Craig started destroying property and felt forced to leave:

'I can't blame my mum and dad, they did their best and still do.'

At the same time, some young people felt that this behaviour should be understood in the context of their lives as a whole and the past behaviour of other family members. This is summarised by one young person who reflected on her parents' unwillingness to accept their part in the problems she was experiencing:

'They [parents] blame me for everything and they think that all the things I have done have affected their lives and they think that only they've got problems [but the problems] weren't just coming from one way.'

Overview

In summary, the lives of young people who are forced to leave home are marked by high degrees of rejection, violence and disruption. Often as a consequence of this, these young people also have significant problems in their school and personal lives. Young people's reactions to all these factors can sometimes lead to actions which ultimately contribute to their being forced to leave home by their parents and carers. This analysis highlights the long-term and multi-faceted nature of the problems faced by these young people. This picture has significant implications in terms of working with these young people and attempting to resolve their situations, as will be discussed later in this report.

Table 1: Comparisons between young people who have been forced to leave home, young people who have run away, and other young people in the general population

	Forced to leave	Run away	All other young people	Sig. 1 .v. 2	Sig. 1 .v. 3
Don't feel cared about by parents	11.9%	4.7%	1.3%	<.001	<.001
Don't get on with parents	23.0%	13.1%	3.2%	.001	<.001
Hit often by parents	13.0%	6.3%	1.4%	.006	<.001
Living with both birth parents	35.2%	57.9%	71.9%	<.001	<.001
Living with lone parent	38.6%	24.2%	20.0%		
Living with parent & step-parent	26.1%	17.8%	8.1%		
Have lived in care	16.0%	6.2%	2.2%	<.001	<.001
Often truant	14.4%	7.8%	3.0%	.010	<.001
Often bullied at school	14.4%	12.2%	4.6%	.194	<.001
Have been excluded from school	27.8%	26.0%	8.6%	.610	<.001
Have problem with alcohol	24.6%	20.1%	5.4%	.004	<.001
Have problem with drugs	20.7%	12.8%	3.5%	.174	<.001
Have been in trouble with the police	18.2%	16.1%	4.6%	.449	<.001

Note: The final two columns of the table show the p-values for significant tests of the difference between column 1 and 3, and column 1 and 3 respectively. The statistics used were the continuity correction statistic for 2x2 tables and the chi-square statistic for larger tables.

What happens to young people who are forced to leave home

The previous discussion, to a great extent, has applied to all young people forced to leave home under the age of 18. However, there are some significant differences in what happens to young people who are forced to leave home depending on whether they are under or over the age of 16. This is because there are some key differences in the way 16- and 17-year-olds away from home are viewed by agencies, and some limited additional options available to them.

In the following discussion we will focus primarily on the experiences of under 16s away from home as there is more research data available for this group, but will also draw out some of the issues for 16- and 17-year-olds based on research interviews done with young people in this age group.

Where young people stay

Under 16-year-olds who are forced to leave home tend most often to go to family (44%) or friends (39%), with around 18% sleeping rough or at a stranger's. The proportion of young people who sleep rough is, perhaps surprisingly, lower than for young people who run away. This suggests that when a young person is forced to leave home they are likely to turn to someone they already know.

Risks

On the face of it, it might be expected that these young people are less likely to be at risk whilst they are away since, in general terms, a strong link has been found between sleeping rough and being hurt whilst away. However, survey findings suggest that the opposite is the case. Whilst around 14% of young people who run away say that they were hurt (physically or sexually assaulted) whilst away from home, the figure for young people who have been forced to leave home is significantly higher, at 22%.

This heightened risk is at least partly explained by the fact that young people who are forced to leave home tend to stay away much longer than those who have run away. Seventy six percent of the former group stayed away for more than one night, compared to 43% of runaways. This, in itself, increases the likelihood of risky experiences.

In interviews young people who had been forced to leave described being physically and sexually assaulted on the streets or by people they stayed with.

'This guy picked me up on the road. He said, "I'll give you a bed so you can crash out tonight." When I stayed, he tried jumping into bed with me. I grabbed my bag and ran out of there.'

Seeking help

There is no statistical data available from surveys on help-seeking by young people (either running away or being forced to leave) whilst they are away from home. We are therefore reliant on information from interviews with young people and these may not necessarily be representative of all young people who are forced to leave home.

Bearing this caveat in mind, it does appear from young people's own accounts that they tend to turn to family and friends for help, and that they are rarely referred to any agencies whilst away from home. This applies equally to young people who run away and those who are forced to leave. To an extent this appears to be due to lack of knowledge of what help might be available within the locality:

"Even when I was 16 I didn't know there were hostels that young people could go into. I didn't have a clue about them until I phoned social services because I was that desperate and they said 'How old are you?' and I said '16'. After about one hour they put me through to [a hostel]. In [place name] there's not advertisements about hostels or anything. I just did not know anything about them. And then people say 'Why didn't you get in touch with social services?', it's like the stigma of social services. I just wanted to go somewhere where I could put my head down."

The exception seems to be where young people already have an established relationship with a professional such as a social worker.

Access to specialist runaways projects

There are now a number of specialist runaways projects in the UK (see concluding chapter) and it is interesting to explore the extent to which these are accessible to young people who are forced to leave home. As part of a national evaluation of five runaways projects in 2002, monitoring information was gathered about 355 referrals to the projects. Of these referrals, only 20 young people (less than 6%) were classified as having been forced to leave home. As would be expected from the research findings presented earlier, these young people were predominantly female (75%) and aged 15 to 16 years old (70%). The sample is too small for any further analysis of characteristics but the most striking differences were in the sources of referrals for this small group compared to young people who had run away.

Table 2: Proportions of young people who had been forced to leave home, by source of referral

Source of referral	Total	Forced to leave	
		Number	Proportion
Self	50	7	14%
Other non-agency	19	2	11%
Police missing person referral	145	1	<1%
Agency	141	10	7%
Total	355	20	6%

Only one young person referred via police missing person reports was categorised as having been forced to leave home. This is not surprising as it would seem unlikely that many parents would tell a young person to leave home and then report them as missing to the police. At the other end of the scale, 14% of self-referrals of young people had been forced to leave home.

Monitoring figures for Leeds Safe House (a direct access refuge for young people away from home) for the years 1998 to 2000 also show high rates of usage by young people forced to leave home. Being forced to leave home was an important contributory factor explaining young people's situations for more than a third of the stays at the refuge over this period.

The above evidence suggests that the availability of direct access services is an important first step in meeting the needs of this group of young people.

Survival strategies

Young people under 16 who were not able to find help from family and friends, and ended up sleeping rough had very limited options for surviving whilst away, having no access to benefits and virtually no access to emergency accommodation:

'Some nights I didn't know where I was going to stay and it was raining. I was starving, constantly, I was always hungry.'

These issues are particularly pertinent for young people who are forced to leave because they will have had little chance to prepare for their departure, and they also tend to stay away longer than young people who run away.

Some young people talked about resorting to using drugs in order to cope with the feelings of being on the streets:

'You don't want to be sitting on the street all day sober. It's depressing and it's cold and it's wet. If you're going to be sitting there you want to be stoned out of your mind so at least you don't care whether you're hot, cold, wet, dry.'

It is hardly surprising then, that some young people turned to illegal survival strategies:

'When you're on the streets, you team up with others. That's when I started to get into trouble, nicking cars and shoplifting.'

For young people aged 16 or 17 barriers to access to benefits whilst away from home was a key issue:

'And, like claim-wise, they should have a scheme for us where we can get money so if we have to pay for somewhere to live, we've got a little something to help us along and we don't have to be doing more robbery, selling their body for money, robbing food from shops.'

What happens in the end

With or without agency intervention, most young people under 16 return to the place they were forced to leave. Other less common options for young people in this age group are to remain with a relative or friend, or to enter the care system. Research (Stein, Rees & Frost, 1994; Safe on the Streets

Research Team, 1999) has also indicated that there are young people under the age of 16 who either run away or are forced to leave, and become completely detached from any legitimate support.

Whilst there are no statistics available, it is clear from interviews that amongst 16- and 17-year-olds it is common for the departure to be more permanent and many end up losing touch with their family and living in hostels or on the streets:

CASE STUDY 6

Sandeep

Sandeep lived with his father, mother and younger sister. They moved from Scotland to London. He had problems at school: truanting, getting suspended and finally expelled. This was largely to do with drug use. He started stealing from his parents and they threw him out when he was 16. He slept rough for a month. He slept in parks – ‘anywhere’.

‘I didn’t know of anywhere to go. I was coming off crack cocaine and I wasn’t thinking straight. I got jumped, had fights, was beaten up and robbed while I was sleeping. It was depressing. I had suicidal thoughts. I knew I had screwed myself up.’

He survived by shoplifting, begging and going to soup kitchens and day centres. After a month, he went to a cold weather shelter and later on to a hostel. He has never returned home.

‘I was kicked out once and I have never returned because they told me not to. I don’t speak to them any more.’

This case study is an extract from one that appeared in Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999)

Research has shown that young people who are away from home (running away or forced to leave) repeatedly under the age of 16 are at high risk of homelessness and social exclusion as young adults (Simons & Whitbeck, 1991; Craig & Hodson, 1998).

Summary and conclusions

Summary of key findings

This report has described the circumstances in which young people are forced to leave home, the background to their situation and their experiences whilst away from home.

In summary, whilst young runaways as a group have significantly higher than average problems at home, at school and in other areas of their lives than the general population of young people, some of these problems are even more prominent amongst young people who have been forced to leave home. In comparison to young people who have run away they are:

- more likely to experience physical abuse, conflict, and feelings of rejection at home
- more likely to have experienced family breakdown and reconstitution
- more likely to truant from school
- more likely to define themselves as having problems with drugs
- more likely to have been away from home (run away or forced to leave) repeatedly in the past.

There are also key differences in experiences of being away for this group of young people. In comparison to young people who have run away they are:

- more likely to stay away for lengthy periods of time
- more likely to stay with friends whilst away and slightly less likely to sleep rough
- more likely to report being hurt or harmed whilst away from home
- less likely to be reported as missing to the police.

The issues faced by this group of young people are often complex and multi-faceted and it is clear that attempts to meet their needs will present a number of challenges.

Implications for practice

Before moving on to recommendations stemming from the research findings, in this section we briefly discuss some of the implications of the findings for professionals working specifically with young people who are forced to leave.

Specialist projects for children and young people who run away or are forced to leave home have been operating in the UK for over 20 years now. The earliest initiatives were refuges providing short-term emergency accommodation to young people and projects working with young people on the streets. In more recent years a wider range of practice models have been developed, including 'misper' schemes, which receive referrals from police of young people reported as missing and then offer support to those young people, usually on their return home.

Recently, following the publication of the Social Exclusion Unit (2002) report and guidance from the Department of Health (Biehal & Wade, 2002), the Government announced short-term funding for a range of new projects throughout England. As a consequence there are currently between 20 and 30 specialist runaways projects in England, many of them only established fairly recently, using a range of models of intervention.

There is, however, currently only one refuge (in London) for under 16s away from home in operation in the UK. The DfES is to fund several new community-based refuge projects in England; and in Scotland there are plans to open a refuge in Glasgow.

The projects discussed above generally work with young people who have either run away, been forced to leave, or are at risk of being in one of these situations. Within this overall target group the particular circumstances and backgrounds of young people who have been forced to leave home present a number of challenges in terms of working effectively with parents and carers, and with agencies that might provide services, as well as with young people themselves. We briefly discuss

these challenges below, making reference to a publication on learning from practice with young runaways (Rees, 2001).

First, in terms of working with young people, the complex, numerous and often inter-twined problems at home, at school and in their personal lives described earlier in the report are likely to frustrate simple interventions. Historically, services for young people who run away in the UK have tended to favour short-term crisis interventions. Evidently there is a need for a timely intervention with young people at the time that they are away from home, aimed at either negotiating a return home or helping the young person secure an alternative safe place to stay. However, learning from practice suggests that unless this is followed up by a longer-term intervention the problems are likely to recur. This is likely to be even more pertinent for young people who are forced to leave home given their even more significant problems in all areas of their lives.

Second, there are challenges in working with parents and carers. Runaways projects and many other youth projects have tended to favour taking on a 'young person centred' advocacy role, supporting young people to represent their views to key adults in their lives. Again, evaluation and practice learning has raised questions about the appropriateness of advocacy models for some young people who run away from home. Given the need to negotiate with frustrated and rejecting parents, and given also the fact that young people's own actions will often have contributed to their being forced out of home, these concerns are likely to be highly relevant for this group of young people. It would seem likely that mediation approaches would have a greater chance of success in resolving the immediate crisis which led to young people leaving home. Bearing in mind the problems also being faced by parents and carers themselves, approaches which address these issues are also likely to be needed in order to find a full resolution to the issues being faced by the young person within the family.

Finally, the particular issues faced by this group of young people are often likely to require a multi-agency response. Being forced to leave home, particularly under the age of 16 could, in itself, be regarded as a child protection issue. In addition, the high rates of physical abuse experienced by this group of young people may fall within the threshold for statutory intervention. However, given that most young people who are forced to leave home are in their mid-teens, securing an appropriate statutory preventative response is a challenge. Literature has highlighted the tendency for child protection services to miss out on the issues faced by teenagers (Rees & Stein, 1999), and this has been confirmed by practice experience with young people who run away or are forced to leave.

In summary, the often complex set of issues presented by young people who are forced to leave home will require interventions which can find a balance between short-term and long-term needs, and also the balance needed to work effectively with young people, parents and professionals.

Conclusions

The research findings have important implications for practice and policy in relation to young people.

The importance of early preventative work

The research has emphasised the long-standing and complex nature of the problems which lead to young people being forced to leave. Most young people who are forced to leave home in their mid- to late-teens have run away from home previously, often repeatedly. Therefore any interventions which work with young people who run away at a younger age could form an effective early preventative strategy for young people who may later be forced to leave home. As reported in Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) young people themselves often comment on how early interventions could have prevented the problems which eventually led to them being away from home. This reinforces the importance of investment in preventative strategies, and of a policy agenda which strengthens and promotes help-seeking at times of stress and change, ensuring services are available to families, and to children and carers as individuals.

The provision of accessible services

Most young people who are forced to leave home turn to people they know, although this strategy is not without risks. Very few are reported missing to the police, and it seems relatively uncommon for young people who are forced to leave to be referred by other people to helping agencies whilst away. As discussed earlier, direct access services are more successful in engaging with this group. A

significant challenge here is not only to provide such services but also to ensure that young people are aware of their existence when they need them. Research has shown that many young people do not know where to seek help in their local area when they run away or are forced to leave home. It is also important that services are culturally competent in dealing with diversity, and that young people perceive this to be the case.

Provision of safe emergency accommodation

Around a fifth of young people who are forced to leave home under the age of 16 sleep rough, and a larger proportion are at some risk whilst away from home. These findings, together with the fact that refuges have been well used by young people who are forced to leave, highlight the importance of access to safe emergency accommodation for this group. Current Government initiatives to pilot various models of refuge provision are welcome. There is still a need for a national network of safe provision for young people under the age of 16 who are away from home.

Effective models of intervention

Work with young people who run away in the UK has tended to focus on a narrow range of approaches (primarily short-term crisis intervention and advocacy work). These approaches may not be the most effective for young people who have been forced to leave home. The complex and intertwined problems which these young people are facing at home, at school and in their personal lives are unlikely to be resolved through short-term interventions; and advocacy may not be the most effective way of engaging with parents and carers. There is a need to pilot and evaluate alternative approaches incorporating mediation, whole family approaches and longer term support.

More effective protective responses

Being forced to leave home, particularly under the age of 16, is potentially a child protection issue and should certainly trigger agencies' concern for the young person's safety and well-being. The high rates of physical abuse experienced by this group of young people (also found in US research) indicate that many of them would fall within the threshold for statutory intervention. However, most young people who are forced to leave home are in their mid-teens and, as discussed earlier, child protection services often miss out on the issues faced by this age group. The current research therefore highlights the need to review current approaches to child protection and to ensure that older young people have access to effective protective responses.

Improved benefits access for 16- and 17-year-olds

Economic factors are key for some 16- and 17-year-olds being forced to leave home. There are also significant barriers to accessing financial support for young people in this age group who are away from home. The current review of benefits issues for this age group is a positive step that we hope will lead to reforms which address these issues.

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