

SAFE & SOUND

Key Policy Issues for Runaways

As part of The Children's Society's Safe and Sound campaign, this summary looks at the history of policy developments for young runaways, and highlights some of the areas that The Children's Society believes still need to be addressed.

Running Away

Pioneering research by The Children's Society¹ indicates that an estimated 77,000 young people under the age of 16 run away *for the first time* each year in the UK, and there are around 129,000 incidents per year of young people running away over night. From these figures we can estimate that around 100,000 young people run away from home or care every year and that approximately one in nine young people will run away for at least one night at least once before their 16th birthday. There are a wide range of reasons for running away, the most common of which are family conflict and experiences of abuse and neglect.

The term 'running away' is short-hand for a range of circumstances where children and young people choose to leave home, are forced to leave home, or stay away without permission, for at least one night. It covers a diverse range of incidents. The term 'runaway' is generally used for children and young people under the age of 16, because many of the legal and financial systems and services that relate to children change at the age of 16. It is important to recognise, however, that there are young people aged 16 and 17 who also leave their homes for a variety of reasons, and experience many of the difficulties and dangers faced by runaways under 16.

Most young runaways only stay away for one or two nights, often with a friend or relative, and the majority of runaways eventually return home safely. On the other hand some spend continuous periods of six months or more away, living on the streets or with acquaintances they meet. Some young people run away repeatedly and those who first run away before the age of 11 are particularly at risk of running again. Whilst running away can provide a breathing space and sometimes can highlight problems, young runaways face significant risks. Around a quarter sleep rough and one in seven are physically or sexually assaulted whilst away. Two thirds of young people who run away and stay with a stranger get hurt. In extreme cases, young people who have been away from home for a long time, who are less likely to be noticed as having 'disappeared', can be the target for murder, as was the case in both the West and Neilson serial killings. There are also very clear links between running away and the sexual exploitation and abuse of children through prostitution.

Young runaways come from all sectors of the community. The rates of running away are as high in rural areas as in towns and cities, and there is little or no difference in rates of running away in rich and poor areas. However, we do know that some young people are more likely to run away than others – including young people living in step-families and young people with experience of living in substitute care. There is evidence of lower, but still significant rates of running away amongst minority ethnic groups, which also shows that

¹ All references to facts, figures and patterns of running away in this paper are based on:

Safe on the Streets Research Team. *Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK*. London: The Children's Society 1999

Rees, G and Rutherford, C. *Home Run: Families and young runaways*. London: The Children's Society 2001

Rees, G and Siakeu, J. *Thrown Away: The experiences of children forced to leave home*. London: the Children's Society 2004

minority ethnic young people who runaway are likely to stay away for longer than the average for runaways. There are very strong links between running away and a number of other issues and problems in young people's lives – including change and instability within the family; parental problems; difficulties at school; problems with drugs, alcohol, offending and depression; and youth homelessness and social exclusion after the age of 16.

Over the last decade or so there has been a gradual increase in the number of projects aimed at meeting the needs of young runaways in the UK. These have tended to be voluntary sector initiatives and have predominantly fallen into four broad categories: provision of emergency accommodation, work with young people on the streets, schemes which respond to young people reported as missing to the police, and centres offering a specific service to runaways. In 2002 the Government's Social Exclusion Unit published its findings and recommendations on improving responses and services for young runaways, and the government immediately issued guidance and funding to implement some of the report's key recommendations.

THE 'SAFE AND SOUND' CAMPAIGN PRIORITY ISSUES

Coordinated responses and services for runaways

Most children who run away will stay in the area close to home, and may be found quite quickly by relatives, friends and neighbours or other people who look for them. Some will return home themselves before anyone else finds them. Some children will turn to caring friends and relatives when they leave home, who may already be aware that they have gone missing and can alert police and their parents or carers to the fact that they have been found. But some young people can still stay missing for long periods and be within their home area for some time without anyone knowing where they are. A small number of young people will travel a long way, to entirely different parts of the country, where none of the community members or services, like health, youth services, or local police would know or recognise them, or even know that they are a runaway. They can take some major risks to get far away where they think nobody could find them, such as hitch-hiking, and when they get that far away, they are literally all on their own.

A child who runs away from their home will usually be reported to the police by their parents or carers as a missing person, and the police and other key agencies can be put on alert to look out for them. If they were actually forced to leave home evidence shows that it is much less likely that they will be reported missing. Until relatively recently there was no national coordination of police records about missing persons, which made trying to find young runaways, or to find out where they had come from when they were found, particularly difficult if they had left their home area.

Sometimes a young runaway might first come into contact with agencies through a youth worker who approaches them on the street, or at a health clinic or 'drop-in' service because they need some kind of help. A very small number may find a refuge. Sometimes the first time they come into contact with a professional who is able to help them may be the police arresting them for an offence.

Even if a child is missing for only a short time, and returns to their home the next day, the problems that caused them to leave still need to be looked into, not least to see whether there might be abuse or neglect that needs to be investigated by child protection agencies. The family may need on-going support to improve their relationships and address the causes of the child leaving home. If the child is already looked after by foster carers or in a children's home, then running away should trigger concerns about why the child is unhappy in their placement. The government-recommended good practice is now that there should be an

independent interview with every child who runs away when they are found and return home, even if the problems seem quite minor.

All of these complexities show that social services, police, voluntary sector and health services all have vital roles to play in making sure that runaways are known about, found, and their problems are appropriately addressed. Making sure that each agency knows how to work together effectively, however, requires real co-ordination. Many children at risk can 'fall through the gaps' between the work of different services. Without coordinated joint-working a child could be returned to a dangerous home environment, may fail to receive the vital services they need to address their problems, or may even go unrecognised as someone who is missing from their usual home. This need for coordinated action was a central feature of the recommendations made by the Social Exclusion Unit in 2002, and the accompanying guidance issued by the Department of Health requires each local authority to ensure several critical functions in coordinating responses to children missing from home and from care:

- There should be a named lead person responsible for coordinating responses to runaways
- Multi-agency protocols about how to respond to children who go missing need to be developed and agreed between all the key agencies in the area
- There should be annual reports on what has happened locally in relation to children who go missing, so that patterns and problems in responding to runaways can be monitored and addressed.

In October 2003 The Children's Society did a telephone survey to see how local authorities were progressing with coordinating protocols and services for runaways. Ninety one local authorities responded to us (60% of all authorities), and their responses indicated that just under half have developed any protocols for runaways. Only 7 authorities could say they had implemented all three of the recommendations above. The survey did also identify some areas of the country that had made real progress and showed a strong commitment to improving.

There is still a lot of work to be done to ensure coordinated responses across the whole country, and to ensure the right services are available for children who run away or are forced to leave home. As well as the implementation of government recommendations, the issue of coordination across local authority boundaries needs more attention. Children who run to places outside of their home local authority can have great difficulty accessing services because they are away from home, and can't or won't be able to get parental consent. Things like tracing back social services or medical records, or getting access to housing or mental health services, can be extremely complicated and can prevent the child from receiving the help they need. Even areas that do have protocols on how local agencies should work with each other can find it extremely difficult to provide all the help needed for children who are formally considered to be residents of another local authority. Mechanisms need to be developed for ensuring that children can get direct access to the services they need to help them, wherever they are, and to coordinate responses across local authority boundaries and between regions.

One key aim of the Safe and Sound campaign is to push for the development and implementation of these kinds of protocols and services, to ensure the effective coordination of all the responses needed for young runaways in every area of the country.

A safe place to stay

Children have been running away from home for a very long time, but before 1991, any organisation that provided a safe place to stay for a runaway under the age of 16 was committing a criminal offence, unless they got the parent's consent first. For children who were fleeing unhappiness, conflict or abuse at home, or who had been forced to leave by the very people who were supposed to care for them, their only options were to sleep rough, or to stay with whichever friend, acquaintance or complete stranger was willing to take them in. In 1985 The Children's Society was the first organisation to start providing emergency care for runaways, even though there was a risk of being prosecuted, because we felt it was so important to provide a safe place for children to stay. We built on this experience by leading the campaign to change the law, so that organisations like ours could legally provide a safe haven, or refuge, for children.

Successful lobbying, involving over 10,000 of our supporters, ensured that The Children Act 1989 included special provisions to create registered children's refuges (Section 51 of the Act). This allowed refuges to care for a child away from home without their parents being told of their location, for a maximum of 14 days in one stay. Parents or carers and police, however, would be informed that their child had been found, and was being looked after in a safe place, as soon as possible. During their stay at the refuge the child's problems could be explored, and preparations could be made for a return home or to more appropriate care. This was the first time that young runaways and their need for safety and protection had been explicitly addressed in national government policy.

In 1991, as soon as the Children Act was implemented, The Children's Society opened the first legally registered children's refuge, and over the years since then we, and other charities, have run several other refuges across England and Wales under the Children Act's provisions. Today, only one 'fixed' children's refuge of this kind remains, in London. Some new ways of ensuring safe emergency accommodation for runaways, under section 51 of the Children Act, are in the early stages of development in five areas of the country. The Children's Society is one of a range of organisations that will pilot these projects, with funding from the government. They will explore more flexible ways of providing safety for children at risk, such as integrating the ability to provide emergency accommodation when needed within a drop-in centre that provides a wide range of other services for children on the streets.

Despite all the developments since 1985, refuges and other forms of safe accommodation for children who run away, remain a vitally important policy issue. Only a minute proportion of the children who run away today can get access to refuge provisions. Practical experience of running refuges has shown that they are very expensive to run, and no single local authority has enough demand for them to justify funding a refuge on their own. There is not yet any national basis for commissioning children's refuges or deciding where they should be. When it can be found, most funding comes only for periods of up to three years, and it is therefore very difficult to ensure stability of service for children. One of the critical questions, therefore, is how an infrastructure of 'flexible' and 'fixed' refuge projects can be funded on a long-term basis, and whether it should be national or local government that takes responsibility for setting them up.

Refuge is also a short-term 'emergency' accommodation option. There is a shortage of safe, supported accommodation for children who keep running away, who cannot or will not return to parents or foster carers even after they may have found help at a refuge.

The second key aim of the Safe and Sound campaign is to raise awareness and build momentum behind the goal of ensuring a network of safe, accessible accommodation for runaways right across the country.

SOME OTHER RELEVANT POLICY ISSUES

Protecting or punishing children at risk on the streets?

One of the most serious risks children face in leaving home is being drawn into prostitution by adults who exploit their emotional vulnerability and their need for money and accommodation. Through running services for runaways, like refuges, drop-in and streetwork projects, The Children's Society and others became increasingly aware of how many young people were being abused through prostitution. Just as worryingly, we found that they were often being picked up by police, cautioned as prostitutes, and returned to their life on the streets, rather than being treated as a child who was missing from home, and being abused.

Between 1989 and 1995 a total of 2380 cautions were issued, and 1730 convictions for prostitution offences were made against children under 18 in England and Wales. During the 1990's we promoted a different way of looking at children involved in prostitution – that they should not be seen or treated as criminals, but as children who were being abused. We believed it was wrong to be punishing children for something that was more dangerous and harmful to them than to anyone else. As awareness of the problem grew, police and government started to change their approach, and in various parts of the country police worked together with social services and voluntary sector projects, to develop ways for all to work together to protect children at risk of, or already involved in, prostitution. Learning from these pilots, the government formally issued guidance to all police and local authorities in 2000, entitled "*Safeguarding Children at risk of, or involved in Prostitution*", insisting that child prostitution had to be tackled by special child protection committees in every area, and saying that criminal punishments should not be used on children except as a last resort.

The guidance issued in 2000 was followed in 2003 by the new Sexual Offences Act, and the creation of a raft of new offences, with heavy penalties for adults who abuse children through sexual exploitation of any kind, including pornography, prostitution and the trafficking of children from country to country for the purpose of sexual exploitation. These have been very important steps in reversing policies that used to criminalise rather than protect children.

While it is very rare nowadays for a child to be cautioned or prosecuted for offences related to prostitution, there are still a very small number who are punished each year, because they return 'persistently' to prostitution. The government's own figures show that in 2001 there were 8 cautions, 14 prosecutions and 6 convictions of children under the age of 18 under section 1 of the Street Offences Act 1959. While this is an enormous decrease from the thousands of cautions and convictions given in the early 1990's, they show that the laws that criminalise children can still be used to punish them. This includes offences such as soliciting, loitering or living on immoral earnings. Children who keep returning to prostitution are very likely to feel as though they have no other choice, especially if they have a drug addiction, or if they have a relationship they find hard to give up with the person who is their pimp. At The Children's Society we believe that any child involved in prostitution needs care and protection, not punishment, and this is no less true for those who are trapped in a persistent cycle of coercion and drug problems they find hard to escape. We believe that the law still sends the wrong message, still punishes a small number of children in desperate need of help, and needs to be changed. During 2004 the Home Office is reviewing the laws on prostitution, which will be an important opportunity to finally remove the laws that criminalise children who are abused through prostitution.

While thinking has changed about child prostitution, there are other risks children face on the streets, and dangerous survival strategies they often adopt, where there is still a tendency to

punish rather than to protect. If children are drawn into drug dealing, addiction, or adopt other risky strategies for surviving such as begging, they are more likely to be seen and treated as a nuisance or a criminal than as a child in a desperate and dangerous situation. The next accommodation they find themselves in may be prison rather than a safe caring environment.

It may not be until the young person is locked up for criminal offences that someone can actually get them help for their drug problems, or indeed that the authorities find out they were being abused through prostitution. We believe that's too late, and that prison is no place to provide the kind of care that such a troubled young person needs. We need to follow the example of how thinking about child prostitution has changed, and make sure we respond to all children on the streets as children who need protection from the risks they face, including involvement with crime, rather than punishing them as criminals who happen to be children.

Child protection and teenagers

All young people under 18 have the right to be protected from harm. However our longstanding practical experiences and research have shown that the current child protection systems and practices do not generally respond as well or as rapidly for teenagers at risk of harm as they do for younger children and infants. In many such cases, the fact that the young person is nearing 16 means a new referral will not be a priority for the stretched resources of the social work teams. In some cases the young person's own choices and behaviours, such as involvement in gangs, drug dealing, injecting drug use or self harm, are what put them at the most immediate risk, and the 'traditional' child protection system, which tends to focus on abuse or neglect by a relative or carer, can find it difficult to provide an appropriate response.

Many young people facing significant stress, abuse or neglect at home create their own strategies for changing, escaping or coping with their situations. These can include running away, living with older friends or sexual partners, becoming pregnant, heavy drug and alcohol use, self-harm, or even suicide. On the other hand, some young people we find facing these kinds of risk in their teens have no background of abuse or neglect at home, but come to be at risk through trying to cope with stressful and emotionally traumatic events, such as bereavement, bullying or negative reactions to their sexuality. Some teenagers find themselves under the negative influence of particular friends or partners, which encourages them to take significant risks with their own health and safety. In many such respects, the child protection system, its tools and current practices, are poorly equipped to protect a young person whose problems do not necessarily revolve around the quality of parenting at home. To add to the challenges for the child protection system, many such young people feel old enough to make the critical decisions about their own safety, and 'vote with their feet' by disengaging from services if they do not get the responses they need.

Clearly the risks inherent in running away, unsafe and exploitative sex, self-harm, and drug, solvent or alcohol misuse, are ones that a comprehensive system for safeguarding children and young people should address. However, referrals we make to child protection teams about such situations for teenagers are rarely responded to effectively. In many such cases referrals will be 'bounced back' to the voluntary agencies who made them, such as ours, saying that we are probably doing more to protect the young person than any statutory response could offer at that point. This might be true in the immediate situation, however without the support and resources that they can receive by being recognised by social services as being 'at risk', it can still be difficult to meet their wider, on-going needs for support and safe accommodation.

This year, in the Children Bill 2004, the government is introducing the first major reforms to the child protection system since the Children Act was introduced in 1989. Responsibilities

and accountabilities for safeguarding all children will be strengthened, and new statutory Local Children's Safeguarding Boards will be established in every area. We are urging the government to consider the idea that Local Children's Safeguarding Boards should be required to pay specific and equal attention to the safeguarding of young people, children and infants as three distinct groups, as part of their overall remit. For example, the needs of a 15 year-old at risk of harm, and the challenges for professionals in protecting them are can be a world away from the needs and professional challenges in protecting a 9 month-old baby. 'Safeguarding' children and young people is also much wider remit than protecting them from deliberate abuse and neglect by adults. Resources for the new systems will need to be sufficient to ensure that young people approaching adulthood do not fall down the list of priorities as a result of having to ration child protection resources. It will also be essential for the new Boards be involved in the developing and reviewing local arrangements for responding to all children who go missing from care and from home.

Welfare benefits and housing support

One of the biggest issues for 16 and 17 year old runaways is access to financial support. Young people are legally entitled to leave home and live on their own at 16, and often leave care at sixteen if they have been looked after by the local authority. Many may not want to, or be not be able to go back home after running away if they are 16 or over, especially if they have been thrown out of home, and they are unlikely to receive any alternative accommodation from children's services. The current benefit system is complicated, confusing and discriminatory in respect of this age group and there is no automatic entitlement to benefit. It can be particularly difficult for a young person at this age to find accommodation from a housing authority. They are not entitled to housing benefit in the same way as adults, and even if they could find the money they cannot legally enter into tenancy contracts in their own name until they are 18. They may want to continue in education but often find it impossible if they have no stable address or income to support them. They cannot, however receive jobseekers allowance even if they are looking for work. Trying to find and keep a place to live and to make ends meet for a homeless 16 or 17 year-old is not only daunting, but almost impossible, and something that most other young people of their age will not have to try and do until they are a great deal older.

The Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education and Skills are currently reviewing the financial support available to 16 and 17 year-olds, and The Children's Society is working closely with them to unpick the many ways in which the welfare and housing benefits systems currently fails 16 and 17 year olds.

A SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE ABOUT RUNAWAYS IS ALSO AVAILABLE AS PART OF THE SAFE AND SOUND CAMPAIGN

For more information or questions about the Safe and Sound Campaign contact

If you are interested in the policy issues for young runaways, and the policy and lobbying work of The Children's Society, please contact: Kathy Evans on 020 7841 4572 or by e-mail at kathy.evans@childrenssociety.org.uk, or visit the 'Learn' section of our website at www.childrenssociety.org.uk