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15,000 UK CHILDREN THROWN AWAY EACH YEAR, SAYS RESEARCH

More than 15,000 children in the UK, aged under 16, are thrown out of home each year by parents who hit, neglect and reject them, says research from The Children's Society, published today (24 March 2004).

Of these, one in five (21%) are physically or sexually assaulted while away from home. Few of these children are ever reported missing to the police by their parents, so their plight often goes unnoticed.

Thrown Away: young people forced to leave home is the UK's first research into the plight of unwanted children who are thrown out, or forced to leave home. It is part of The Children's Society's *Safe and Sound* campaign calling on government to make England a safer place for young runaways.

Bob Reitemeier, chief executive of The Children's Society, says: "These are society's disposable children – thrown away or fleeing family violence. We have a responsibility to make sure these children have somewhere safe to go and someone sound to turn to."

The research highlights the dangers these young people face and reveals the main reasons they are thrown out:

- **Family breakdown** – 23% (one in four) said they did not get on with their parents. Only a third lived with both of their birth parents;
- **Violence** – 13% said their parents hit them a lot;
- **Rejection** – 12% felt their parents didn't care for them.

As one teenager explains: "I was badly beaten all the time and told to leave in the next week or my bags would be packed and I'd be chucked out."

Another says: "My dad hit my Mum and I went and tried to talk to him, but he hit me instead...When I complained, he told me to leave."

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Children under 16 have almost no direct access to emergency accommodation so many stay with other members of their family (44%), or 'friends' (39%), with around 18% sleeping rough or at a stranger's house.

But more than 3,000 say they have been physically or sexually assaulted by strangers on the streets, or by so called 'friends' and relatives who offer them a place to stay. Three in five (58%) of children thrown out of home are girls.

"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," says one child.

Some are forced to beg, steal or deal drugs or become involved in prostitution to survive because they are wary of approaching social services, the police and other agencies to seek help.

"The fact that these children have suffered severe rejection at home makes them more likely to use drugs, more likely to run away for longer and more likely to be abused by adults who appear to offer them friendship and somewhere to sleep," says Bob Reitemeier.

"We need to offer family support so these problems can be resolved. And we must give these children somewhere safe to stay if family breakdown reach crisis point."

The Children's Society has launched the *Safe and Sound* campaign to make England a safer place for young runaways and is calling for:

- Local authorities to put in place guidance on young runaways as required by the government
- A national network of safe emergency accommodation to provide refuges for young runaways
- Family mediation services to help families in crisis and help prevent children running away or being thrown out
- Child protection reform to improve protection for older children.

The Children's Society is rallying its supporters to challenge their local authority to pass the charity's *Safe and Sound* test to ensure it has plans in place for young runaways. Supporters can sign up to the campaign by visiting this website

www.childrenssociety.org.uk/safeandsound

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Notes to editor

- The Thrown Away report is part of The Children's Society's five-year national research programme into young runaways, funded by the Children's Promise and undertaken in partnership with the University of York. The programme was launched with the publication of the Still Running research in 1999, which involved over 13,000 children and young people, and has continued with further local and regional research projects together with the first ever evaluation of eight projects working with young runaways.
- The Children's Society's Still Running research (1999) estimates that 100,000 children run away from home or care every year.

What The Children's Society has done for young runaways over the past 18 years:

- 1981 – we first investigate the issues of young runaways
- 1986 – we open Britain's first 'safe house' for young runaways
- 1989 – our Young Runaways research reveals the link between abuse, prostitution and running away
- 1991 - The Children Act is implemented. The 10,000 letters from our supporters to MPs ensure that our amendment to allow refuges to operate legally is included
- 1993 – We publish Hidden Truths, which reveals young runaways experiences on the streets
- 1994 –95 – Running - the risk report highlights that children are being cautioned and convicted for prostitution. The Game's Up report reveals the numbers involved. The charity campaigns to change the law so that child prostitutes are seen as victims of abuse and not criminals
- 1997 – We convene the first national conference on child prostitution. Social services and senior police officers support changes to the practice of prosecuting child prostitutes
- 1998 – The government agrees to change police guidelines so that child prostitutes are not treated as criminals
- 199 – We launch Still Running, our largest ever survey on the UK's young runaways
- 2001 – Drawing heavily on our Still Running research, the government's Social Exclusion Unit publishes its consultation paper on young runaways
- 2002 – The government calls on all local authorities to provide plans for young runaways
- 2003 – We launch Safe and Sound – our groundbreaking campaign calling for local authorities to ensure young runaways have a safe place to go and the support they need.
- The Children's Society is an innovative national children's charity working directly with 50,000 children and teenagers in 90 towns and cities across the UK. It helps children at risk on the streets, children in trouble with the law, young refugees, children with disabilities. It is a voluntary organisation of the Church of England.