Safeguarding children
and young people who
go missing in London

Iryna Pona
Executive summary

“I thought things would get better, but people just weren’t bothered with me so I just gave up.”

(Quote from the young person who received support from The Children’s Society’s project)

Each year around 100,000 children and young people in the UK run away from home or care. Around 60% of all missing persons cases reported to the police involve children and young people with majority of them being adolescents aged 12 to 17.

From our research and work with children and young people we know that running away is a signal that all is not well in a child’s life. When things go wrong young people do not always know how, or feel able, to ask for help. Instead, many of them run away from home or care and become exposed to great risks in order to survive – staying with strangers or begging and stealing to survive. In some cases going missing signals that a child is under the influence of a predatory adult or even peers trying to exploit them, enticing them away from home with promises of fun and excitement.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness of the risks of running away, particularly in relation to child sexual exploitation and, increasingly, involvement in criminal activity. Changes to national and local policies have been made aimed at improving responses to this vulnerable group of children and young people and ensuring that agencies are working together to keep young people safe. Despite the progress made, many young runaways still do not have an offer of help when they need it and continue slipping through the net of services until their cases are deemed ‘high risk’ or only get a tokenistic support that is not sufficient to help them resolve the issues they face.

The Children’s Society has over 30 years’ experience of research, campaigning and direct work with children and young people who run away from home or care. In July 2015, The Children’s Society launched a network of services across London to tackle the risks facing the city’s vulnerable young people, specifically looking at providing responses to young people who run away or go missing in London.

This report explores the scale of children running away or going missing in the capital and looks at how recent national policy changes have impacted on local responses to children who are reported as missing from home or care.

The report is based on responses to our Freedom of Information requests to 33 London boroughs and the Metropolitan Police Service. Throughout the report we have also used

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1 Since the information collection for this report has been undertaken the Department for Education and the National Crime Agency published official top line data from local authorities and from police forces respectively on the number of children who went missing from care and from family homes. This official data will be referenced where relevant in this report. The data we sought to establish through
anonymised cases studies and quotes from our direct work with young people who run away or go missing.

**Key findings from FOI responses**

- From 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015, a total of 25,622 reports were made to the Metropolitan Police of a child (under the age of 18) going missing from home or care in London. The number of children who went missing will not be the same as the number above as some children go missing repeatedly. In around 20% of cases reported to the police children were classified as absent during the period of time when both categories were in operation.
- Across 24 boroughs that provided us with some answers on the number of children going missing from home or care more than 4,000 children and young people were reported as missing to the police, many on multiple occasions. Around 2,000 of these young people were young people in care, both in placements within the boundaries of their home local authority and in placements outside the boundaries of their local authority. The actual numbers would be higher as data provided by some local authorities was very patchy and inconsistent and 9 London boroughs either did not respond to FOI or did not provide the data.
- Data supplied shows that the number of looked after children going missing from placements outside their local authorities is higher than number of children missing from placements within the local authority boundaries. This may be indicative of complexity of issues children in out of area placements face and the need to focus on how their needs can be best met to decrease the risk of going missing. The data shows that there are a lot of gaps in information on children who go missing. Data on children missing from family homes is patchier, and many local authorities could not provide data on children reported to the police as missing but classified as absent.
- Children who go missing in London face many risks, including those linked mental health, gang and crime as well as the risk of child sexual exploitation.
- Not all children get help when they return after missing episodes. Most children who are reported to the police as missing but assessed as being absent do not get Return Interviews. Only 4 London Local Authorities, 1 in six that responded, indicated that they offer Return Interviews to children who are classified as absent. And although Return Interviews for looked after children are prioritised across the majority of London boroughs, children missing from the family home still miss out on this vital opportunity to get help early.

FOIs for this report covers the same period of time as the official statistics published by the DFE and NCA. However, the FOI responses provide a more detailed insight into responses to children classified as missing and absent. The data provided through FOIs does not always match the data provided in the official bulletins. Further analysis is needed why there are discrepancies in numbers.
Key recommendations

National policies
- **Data.** Information obtained from London boroughs shows that there are still considerable gaps in data collected about missing and absent children and considerable gaps in data shared between services. The government should introduce a missing person database to ensure that data is collected and shared. There is a need for a clear guidance on how data about missing and absent children should be shared.
- Clarification in national policy is needed on entitlements for children classified as absent and those placed out of their areas, particularly around safe and well checks and Return Interviews. It is of paramount importance that absent children have a Return Interview and any intervention they may need to prevent issues in their lives from escalating further.

Safeguarding missing and absent children locally
- **Data.** London boroughs should ensure that they have information on all children who go missing from home or care in their area, including those who are classified as absent by the police
- **Return Interviews.** London boroughs should ensure that all children who are reported missing have access to Return Interviews to ensure that risks to the child are prevented from escalating. It is particularly important that the lack of Return Interviews for children missing from home and children classified as absent is addressed as the data show that these groups of children are most likely to miss out on the offer of a Return Interview.
- **Looked after children in out of area placements.** We call on the London authorities to adapt the principles of the Children’s Society’s Handle with Care campaign to ensure that all out of area placements – which present additional risks to vulnerable children - are made with due regards to children’s wishes and feelings
- **Young people accommodated in hostels and supported accommodation.** Considering the high number of cases in London of older teenagers who present as homeless to local authorities and are accommodated in supported accommodation, hostels etc., and London boroughs should work together with the Met police so that all such locations are known to the police. This would mean they can be identified as addresses where vulnerable young people are accommodated when young people are reported as missing. London boroughs should also commission training for accommodation providers to ensure that they have good understanding of the risks faced by children who go missing, always report young people as missing to the police and signpost them to support services.
- **Independent Return Interviews.** London authorities should learn from best practice examples across London and commission independent Return Interview providers to deliver Return Interviews to young people who go missing.
About The Children’s Society

The Children’s Society is a national charity that runs local services, helping children and young people when they are at their most vulnerable, and have nowhere left to turn. We also campaign for changes to laws affecting children and young people, to stop the mistakes of the past being repeated in the future. Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children and young people they are on their side. For more information visit www.childrenssociety.org.uk.

In July 2015 The Children’s Society launched a network of services across London to tackle the risks facing the city’s vulnerable young people. A range of projects will bring together the expertise of practitioners to reach out to young people facing issues such as sexual exploitation, trafficking, destitution and going missing from home. It will also advocate for some of the most vulnerable young people living in the city, such as refugees and migrants and young people who are disabled.
1. Introduction: teenagers’ running away is a cry for help

‘I was 11 when I first ran away. Everyone in our house was always arguing and fighting, and after one really bad argument I ran away. It became a bit of a habit. I just kept running away, the police would find me and bring me back home.’
(The young person quoted in Make Runaways Safe launch report⁶)

‘The reason I was running away as bad as I was because I had a boyfriend then. At the time you don’t get any attention from the workers when you are in a care home, because there are loads of other people to deal with, so to me that was the person who would give me the attention, so I would just go back to there, it is just attention isn’t it, and that’s what I wanted’

(From a young person who gave evidence to the Inquiry into children missing from care⁷)

From our direct work with children and young people we know that running away from home or care is always a signal that young people need help to deal with serious issues in their lives. Children run away due variety of factors. Some face problems at home or school and do not know how to cope or where to ask for help. Others run away enticed with promises of love, affection, fun and excitement only to be exploited by predatory individuals while away from home.

1.1. Scale of children going missing

The true scale of children going missing from home or care is not known. Our research estimated that around 100,000 children and young people run away from home or care in the UK each year. It also shows that as many as two thirds of them may not even be reported as missing to the police by their families or carers.⁸

The latest statistics published by the National Crime Agency in December 2015 showed that across police forces in England and Wales a total of 127,762 incidents of missing children were reported to the police. The number of children reported as missing to the police recorded as 66,806.

The data from the police shows though that around 60% of all cases of missing persons reported to the police relate to children and young people, with the majority of them being adolescents aged 12-17 (93% of all cases of children reported as missing to the police). Older adolescents aged 15-17 are the group most reported missing to the police – 36% of all reports of missing persons, children and adults, relate to this age group⁹.
Children who run away from home or care are some of the most vulnerable children in our society. Many of them are known to children’s services prior to running away. Most often children run away from neglect and abuse, conflict, family breakdown and parental drug and alcohol misuse. These children are more likely to have learning difficulties, disabilities and be in care. They are also more likely to have problems at school and not attend regularly.

As a majority of young runaways are adolescents, particularly older adolescents, they are not always perceived by professionals as vulnerable enough to require support, but as resilient and able to cope. Thus, many of them are left on their own to deal with their issues, often resulting in more frequent episodes of running away, behaviour that is perceived to be challenging, and with young people developing a belief that they cannot be helped.

Eva is using substances daily – she says it helps her block out the pain of her past and cope with the present. It’s impacting on her attendance at college and she is at risk of being expelled. Eva’s outlook now is that she thinks that life is tainted so she should just lead the life she currently has.

(Comments from practitioner on the case study from our Seriously Awkward report)

Risks of running away

Young runaways are not safe while away from home or care. Our earlier research suggests that one in four children and young people who run away are either hurt or harmed while away; experience sleeping rough or staying with a stranger; or steal, beg or do ‘other things’ in order to survive. Going missing is also recognised as one the key risk factors of child sexual exploitation (CSE) as highlighted by research and horrific and shocking cases of child sexual exploitation across the country including in London. Cases we see in our direct work with children and young people show how vulnerable these young people are and how complex their stories are.

Case study: Maya’s story

The Children’s Society’s project in London began working with Maya because she was regularly going missing. Maya was a looked after child, who, despite her vulnerability and suspected learning difficulties (she was never formally assessed) was placed in supported accommodation, where she could live very independently. Coming and going without drawing notice. In order to stop her from going missing her social workers threatened to withdraw her allowance. Young person came from a background of parental substance misuse and it was known that when she was missing she was drinking and it was suspected that she was taking drugs as well. The supported accommodation was not always reporting her as missing. Maya is aged 16.

Not her real name. All names in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity.
1.2. Key policy changes

In recent years, a growing understanding of just how vulnerable young people who go missing are has put the response to this very vulnerable group high on local and national agendas. This has resulted in a number of changes aimed to improve the safeguarding of these vulnerable children and young people. Some of the most important changes in recent years include in Box A:

Box A. Changes in policy and practice in relation to children who run away from home or care or are reported missing

- Revised statutory guidance on young runaways and children who go missing from home or care, published in 2013, changed the definition of a missing child and placed a requirement on local authorities to provide Return Interviews to all children and young people who are reported to the police as missing (this would include those who are classified by the police as absent)
- Police forces across England have rolled out new definitions of missing and absent whereby a missing child is “anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.” An absent child is someone who is ‘not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk.”
- The government introduced a number of changes to improve safeguarding of children who go missing from care, particularly from children’s homes.
2. Young runaways in London – the scale of the problem

In April 2015 we sent Freedom of Information requests to 33 London boroughs and the Met police force in order to establish a bigger picture of how many young people go missing from home and care in the capital, what is known about the risks they experience and what support they are offered following missing episodes.

Out of 33 London boroughs 30 responded to our request (88% response rate). Of the 30 that responded 27 (80% response rate out of all London boroughs) could provide full or partial answers to the questions we asked. The London boroughs that did not provide data either refused on the basis that information is not readily available and retrieving it would exceed the limit of time that is allocated for FOIs, or because the data we requested was scheduled for publication by the Department of Education in autumn 2015.23

Across London the data from the Metropolitan police reveal that from 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 there were 25,622 reports of missing children made to the Met police. The Met police introduced new definitions of missing and absent persons in July 2014 and were able to provide information on the number of episodes assessed as missing as well as those assessed as absent.24

Graph 1. Number of episodes of missing and absent children under the age of 18 reported to the Met police in 2014-15, by location missing from25

Based on FOI response from the Met police
Here it is important to note that as many children run away on multiple occasions, the number of episodes does not equate to the number of individual children who went missing in a given period. The NCA report on missing persons data 2014-15 showed that during 2014-15 total number of children categorised as missing by the Met police was 12,357 and those categorised as absent 1,295.

The high volume of missing episodes for children missing from home and for children missing from care is worrying for a variety of reasons discussed further in this report. In the next chapters we will look separately at specific vulnerabilities of children who go missing from home and children who go missing from care and review the data submitted by London boroughs in response to our FOIs.

With the introduction of new police definitions and new revised guidance we also set to explore what responses are on offer to those classified as missing and those classified as absent by the police. The very limited research available on how children classified as absent are safeguarded shows that - in the absence of detailed guidance and robust safeguards to prevent absent children slipping through the net - these children are at risk of not receiving adequate safeguarding responses and vital opportunities for early intervention and preventing risks escalating may be lost. All these questions and responses received are explored in the chapters below.
3. Children and young people who run away from family home in London

“Young people that are running away from home, you see, they’re not always reported as missing by the families, and when they are reported as missing they’re not seen as a risk because of their age. Sometimes children aren’t assessed as being missing, so after the definition they are assessed as being family absent, which means they don’t get access to safe and well checks or returning interviews so they have to go under the radar. They’re not given that opportunity to be listened to. So for example, just last week we were notified that a young person who’s regularly going absent to her boyfriends, but she’s at clear risk of indicators of sexual exploitation, it’s not being escalated to missing so she’s not getting that chance to talk about what’s going on for her.”

(Practitioner at The Children’s Society’s project in London)

3.1. Children and young people who go missing from home in London based on FOI responses from London Local Authorities

The Children Act 1989 specifies that local authorities have safeguarding responsibility for all children residing in their area and should make help available to those who may be at risk of harm. Safeguarding children missing from home is the responsibility of local authorities and it is important that this responsibility is taken seriously.

Our previous report on local authorities’ responses to children who run away from home or care showed that there was a real confusion about whose responsibility it was to safeguard children who go missing from home, with very few local authorities providing them with Return Interviews and some even stating that it was the responsibility of the police alone to deal with these children.

Across 22 local authorities that provided data the total number of children missing and absent from home across London added up to 2,149.

The number of children reported as missing from home per local authority varied significantly from one area to another, ranging from 10 (the lowest number reported) in one area to 294 in another (the highest area). Across all areas there does not appear to be any special correlations between factors that would explain such huge difference in the number of children who are reported as missing. These differences may be explained by different information sharing processes in place between the police and local authorities. This issue is explored further down in the document.
3.2. Why it is important to ensure that children who run away from family home receive appropriate safeguarding response

Around 735,000 adolescents aged 10 to 17 live in London. And although the majority of young people in London grow up in supportive families and go on to become successful adults, some of them will face risks that make them vulnerable.

- **Conflict at home**
  Problems and conflict in relationships is one of the key reasons why young people run away from home as shown by our research. The quotes below taken from case notes confirm this.

  ‘A’ reported that she is very unhappy at home and feels *nobody wants me there*. ‘I just cause trouble for everyone… My brother just makes fun of me I don’t speak to my step dad. ’

  H’ reports he feels I should be *kicked out*’

  A’ also feels rejected by her biological father who doesn’t return her calls or texts.

  *(Taken from case notes from work with young runaways in London)*

  The breakdown in relationships may be brought out by changes in the family structure, parental alcohol or drug use, violence, overcrowding and many other reasons.

- **Experiences of abuse and neglect at home**
  Last year in London, around 27,000 children aged 10 to 17 (inclusively) became ‘children in need’, for reasons ranging from abuse and neglect in families, to antisocial behaviour or dysfunctional families. This means that around 1 in 25 adolescents in the capital who live with their families are known to children’s services because they have needs that may be detrimental to their health, well-being or safety and that require support from statutory services.

- **Risks outside home**
  As a big metropolitan area, London is a place of many exciting opportunities as well as many risks. Our earlier report on London showed that older adolescents in London feel less safe in many community places than their peers across the country. Young people growing up in London face risks of child sexual exploitation and gang involvement.

  The London Assembly’s Police and Crime Committee’s report into tackling child sexual exploitation in London reports that *the Met anticipates it will receive between 1,800 and 2,000 referrals a year. From January 2014 to October 2014, the Met reported 1,612 referrals of CSE, including 265 positive interventions and 55 detections*. Of these 1,612 referrals 78 per cent were referrals of a vulnerable child or young person, where they are being targeted and groomed but no evidence of any offence. 20 per cent were reports with evidence of a child or young person being targeted for opportunistic abuse through the
exchange of sex for drugs, perceived affection, sense of belonging, accommodation (overnight stays), money and goods etc. And 2 per cent were reports with evidence of a child or young person whose sexual exploitation is habitual, often self-denied and where coercion/control is implicit.\(^{31}\)

London also has around 170 gangs that may involve and target children and young people specifically.

- **Poverty in families**
  London has higher concentrations of child poverty than anywhere else in the UK and children in London are more likely to live in poverty than the UK as a whole, with over 433,000 children living in poverty – more than 2 in every 10 children\(^{32}\). These children and their families face daily struggles choosing between basic essentials such as food, heating or clothing.

Research has shown\(^{33}\) that there is a significant relationship between a family's economic status and running away rates for children. Poverty and financial struggles may be a contributory factor in family conflicts as well as in neglectful behaviour. Also, families experiencing poverty are more likely to live in areas where there are a range of social problems including gangs and a high crime rate.

- **Young people substance use or mental health issues**
  Children also may have their own issues as shown in the case notes below:

**Case study: Zara’s story**

Zara was brought to the attention of The Children’s Society’s missing service as she had previously been absent from school. Zara engaged in a return interview, which exposed a multitude of ongoing hidden risk factors such as serious substance misuse, significant self-harm and mental health issues including early indicators of CSE. A comprehensive return interview report of grave concerns was shared with relevant professions which included a recommendation to refer to [specialist substance misuse project]. As Zara had no current/historical statutory or early help services in place, she was identified as a child in need but professionals in child in need meeting in the absence of staff from The Children’s Society decided that a referral to [specialist substance misuse service] was not necessary and did not link the child into appropriate services. A few weeks later Zara took a potentially lethal overdose resulting in a hospital stay, shortly after, Zara returned to school with a bottle of alcohol. An emergency child in need meeting was reconvened and The Children’s Society’s staff attended, all parties subsequently agreed to refer the child to [specialist substance misuse service] along with a care plan in place to support Zara during the summer holidays. Zara is 13 years old.
4. Children looked after by London Local Authorities who go missing

‘One social worker used to visit after each running away episode. It is good when someone cares’.

(From a young person in care)

4.1. What FOI responses from local authorities tell us about children missing from care in London

In our freedom of information requests we asked London boroughs about the number of children looked after by them who go missing either from placements, both within their boundaries or outside their boundaries. We also asked about children looked after by other local authorities, but placed within their boundaries, who go missing.

21 London boroughs provided information on the number of looked after children they are responsible for and who are placed within the boundaries of the borough. But only 10 could provide data on the number of young people in this group who were classified by the police as absent.

In addition, 21 boroughs provided information on the number of looked after children they are responsible for who are placed outside their borough and go missing. 11 provided information on the number of looked after children placed outside the boundaries of their local authority who were classified by the police as absent.

16 boroughs provided information on the number of looked after children who are the responsibility of other local authorities but placed in their local area. Of these, only 6 could provide data how many of this group of children are classified by the police as absent.

The total numbers for each group of children across as they have been submitted by local authorities are presented in the graph 2 below. It is important to note that the totals in each group of children and also in each of the categories (missing and absent) are based on different size samples of local authorities as explained above and in each group the sample of local authorities that could provide data on absent children is smaller than those that could provide data on absent children. The actual number of absent children is likely to be higher. The graph illustrates the data provided but cannot be used to compare numbers across groups of children and categories because of the patchiness of the data.
Even the incomplete data provided by London boroughs suggest that a significant number of children looked after by London boroughs placed within or outside their responsible local authorities go missing. Across 21 London boroughs 1,209 looked after children they are responsible for went missing (assessed by the police as missing or absent’.) The higher proportion in boroughs that could provide information went missing from placements outside their local authorities.

4.2. Why it is important to ensure that children who run away from care receive appropriate safeguarding response

Last year there were also 7,060 adolescents aged 10 to 17 who were looked after by London Local Authorities. It means that around 70% of all children looked after by London boroughs are adolescents, confirming the seriousness of issues affecting adolescents in the capital. They are more likely to be at risk of significant harm and need to live away from families to stay safe.

Children in care are three times more likely to run away than other young people. Certainly, data provided by the Met police in Graph 1 confirms that although children in care make up a small proportion of London child population, the number of episodes of children missing from care makes up a big proportion of all missing episodes in relation to children.

- **Vulnerability due to earlier experiences of abuse and neglect**

In recent years there has been a lot of focus on young people who run away from care and there is a growing recognition that their earlier experiences of neglect and abuse – around 60% of children in care are looked after because of abuse and neglect they experienced in their families, as well as a lack of protective networks, makes them particularly vulnerable to the risk of harm when they run away.
• **Risks of exploitation**
The 2012 APPG inquiry into children missing from care, which was supported by The Children’s Society, highlighted the increased level of risk these children face to being targeted for exploitation. This could take the form of either sexual exploitation, or as we are increasingly seeing through our practice with looked after children, criminal exploitation\(^{37}\).

• **Children missing from residential and foster care**
The most recent reforms that the government introduced to improve the safeguarding response to children missing from care related to children placed in residential children’s homes. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into sexual exploitation by groups and gangs found that of the 16,500 children were found to be at high to sexual exploitation, more than a third (35%) where children living in residential care.\(^{38}\) And the APPG on Missing and Runaways Adults Inquiry into children missing from care found that perpetrators have specifically targeted children’s homes because of the vulnerability of the children.\(^{39}\)

At the same time the data from the Met police shows (Graph 1), many looked after children go missing from foster care as well and therefore this group requires as much of a focused response as children missing from children’s homes.

• **Children missing from out of area placements**
Out of 10,000 children looked after by London Local Authorities, 6, 250 are placed outside the boundaries of their home local authority (with 1, 780 placed 20 miles or more outside). London local authorities also have 4,620 looked after children placed within their boundaries that are the responsibility of other local authorities\(^{40}\).

Amongst children missing from care, children missing from out of area placements are a major concern. Their isolation from usual social networks and a lack of support in areas where they are placed makes them particularly vulnerable to falling prey to individuals targeting them for abuse and exploitation.

With young people who go missing from out of area placements the issue is complicated, because of the absence of an effective system of quick information sharing about missing children across the border of local authority and police force areas. Currently, in many areas police forces have the capacity to share reports about missing children only with the local authorities in which a child is reported missing. With children in out of area placements, the information sharing process depends on effective communication between the placing and the host local authorities which is known to work poorly in many cases\(^{41}\).
Case study: Lucy’s story

Lucy is 14 and placed out of borough. Lucy had frequent missing episode where she would gravitate back into the responsible borough. On one occasion Lucy had returned to her local area unable to return to her placement as she had no money. Lucy was provided with the train fare and taken to the station. Lucy was not escorted back to her placement by an appropriate adult nor was provision put in place to ensure she did in fact board the train and return safely. Providing Lucy with money, which lacked emotional support or supervision, increased Lucy’s risk of harm due to the strategic slow response that the geographical elements highlighted and lack of communication between professionals. Professional responses to Children’s placed out of borough are reactive rather than proactive. Out of borough children are less likely to engage with services and build trusting relationships with professionals. Lucy systematically requested to be placed back in borough to be closer to her family she felt isolated and detached. Placing Lucy out of borough did not stop/reduce the missing episodes nor disrupt the inappropriate relationship.

(Case study from our work in London)

The Children’s Society’s recent Handle with Care campaign highlighted the issues faced by children placed in out of area placements, and called on council to make placement decisions with due regards to children’s wishes and feelings (for more information see Appendix A).

- **16-17 year olds living in supported accommodation, hostels and other types of unregulated accommodation**

22% of looked-after 16-17 year olds live in neither residential children’s homes nor foster care, but in what is collectively termed 'other arrangements'. Unlike foster and residential care, these placements are not regulated under the Care Standards Act 2000 and as a result will not be inspected by Ofsted.

Young people who seek help because of homelessness also often find themselves in similar types of accommodation. The Southwark judgement requires local authorities to accommodate these children under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 and thus to give them a looked after status but often - mostly in cases where children have experienced years of ineffective interventions from services - these young people refuse to become looked-after and subsequently are accommodated under the Housing Act or Section 17 of the Children Act, with no, or minimal, support from services.

Our recent report ‘Getting the House in Order’ found that teenagers in London are twice as likely to seek help with homelessness compared to their peers outside the capital. Most young people experience homelessness because of a breakdown in their relationship with their families and our research found that in one quarter of the cases we examined young people had been sofa surfing with friends for some time before they came to ask for help.
Over half of the children seeking help with homelessness had a history of failed interventions from Children’s Services, one third had serious mental ill health issues and over a quarter were at risk of sexual exploitation. These highly vulnerable older adolescents are at particular risk when they go missing.

Staff in accommodation units, hostels, residential units, just their kind of understanding about the risks for young people, they’re not required to have any training on safeguarding or sexual exploitation and what we find is that actually when we do go to residential units and we train staff on what those vulnerability factors are and the risk of going missing, we get more reports of missing episodes from those places where we’ve delivered training.

(From interview with the practitioner at The Children’s Society’s project in London)
5. Risks experienced by young runaways in London

Case study: Sarah’s story

Sarah’s mum was diagnosed with serious illness and Sarah has been struggling with coming to terms with that. She has been socialising with one particular friend who is repeatedly reported missing and both young people are known to truant from school and mix with a known drug dealer. She has experimented with class A drugs and she ‘hates school’ her attendance is currently in the mid 60%. Sarah shared that her peer group are older than herself she also explained when she was 15 years old she was in a relationship with a 21 years old male. Sarah has reported self-harm, she will cut her arms and legs and has also reported that once, she ‘tried to drown herself’. Sarah states that she finds it very difficult to cope with her mum’s diagnosis, but loves to spend time with her.

(From case notes from work with young runaways in London)

5.1. What FOI responses from local authorities tell us about risks to children missing in London

We asked London boroughs about the number of young people who went missing and were identified as being at high risk of harm.

16 London boroughs could supply this data. Across these 16 local areas 746 young people were identified as being at high risk of harm; in 177 cases there was a risk of CSE, in 125 cases involvement in crime, in 36 cases gang involvement and in 47 cases there were mental health problems. In the remaining cases, a reason was not specified in the response.
Graph 3. Risks identified for missing young people in London

These responses provide a very helpful insight into what significant risks young people feel. A recent focus on CSE has increased the awareness of this particular risk among professionals, young people and the general public. At the same time the extent of other risks such as involvement in criminal activity, gang association, risks associated with poor mental health (e.g. risk of self-harm) are poorly understood. But as the data shows, these risks are equally present in young people’s lives and need to be adequately addressed.

**Risk of being exploited**

In recent years numerous cases across the country draw attention to and raised awareness of the link between the child sexual exploitation and running away. From our direct work with young people in London and elsewhere in the country we know that young people do not always understand that they are groomed or being exploited as the case study below explains.

*Five young people placed in the same hostel were groomed and sexually exploited by a group of 10 men. The young people had been going missing on a regular basis and found in the company of men, often under the influence of drugs. Despite concerns raised by voluntary sector organisations and the police, the young people did not recognise their sexual exploitation. In this case the police investigation resulted in men being charged with various sexual offences.*

*(Case study from direct work with young people at risk quoted in Getting the House in order report)*

From our direct work with young people, we know that often pressure from peers or older friends to take part in activities proceeds experiences of exploitation. For example, involvement in drugs, alcohol or petty crime is often used by as a means to entrap,
blackmail or control children and young people who may then go on to be exploited sexually or criminally.

A young girl recently released from a youth offending institute was placed in supported accommodation where she was targeted by men looking to sexually exploit her. She was regularly going missing. After a series of complaints by The Children’s Society staff the supported accommodation provider decided to relocate the girl in order to protect her from the risk. The men found her new accommodation however and continued to exploit her as well as began to exploit another young person sharing the accommodation with the young person they exploited.

*(Example from practice)*.

- **Risk of becoming a victim of crime or involvement in criminal behaviour**

From our research we know that some young runaways engage in stealing and begging in order to survive. In other cases young people may go missing because they are manipulated and coerced into criminal activity in the same way as they are coerced and groomed for sexual exploitation.

“We had a boy last week, 17, went missing. He came from an area known for its gangs, moved completely out of the city into another area and [he] didn’t seem to really acknowledge that this was around gang involvement and gang activity and the exploitation linked to that. He quickly went missing and had been trafficked to sell drugs.”

*(From an interview with a practitioner from The Children's Society's in London)*

Some groups of young people are especially vulnerable to being targeted. An inquiry supported by The Children’s Society into children missing from care and feedback from practice suggest that local authorities, immigration staff, police, legal practitioners and other frontline agencies continue to fail to correctly identify and protect children, including unaccompanied migrant children and children trafficked within the country, forced into criminality who are victims of trafficking and exploitation.

These children are often prosecuted, most commonly for cannabis cultivation, forced stealing or immigration offences (for example, having false documentation that may have been provided to the victim by their trafficker). While they may receive a punitive response for involvement in criminal behaviour, their vulnerability as a victim of trafficking or exploitation is often not recognised and not responded to.
6. Responses to children who go missing in London: information sharing and Return Interviews

“My advice to anyone who’s thinking of running away is don’t do it. It doesn’t help. You need to find someone you can talk to and let them know how you are feeling.”

(Quote from the young person who received support from The Children's Society's project)

‘Don’t give up on us. Offer us help persistently until we agree’

(Quote from the young person who received support from The Children's Society's project)

6.1. What FOI responses from local authorities tell us about risks to children missing in London

- Information sharing

The responses to our Freedom of Information request to the Met police showed that the police have somewhat different processes and procedures in place in relation to children assessed as missing and absent.

With children recorded as missing, the Met said they send a notification to the local MASH (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) in the relevant borough, both when a child first goes missing, and when they return to home or care. For children recorded as absent, the police only send the notification when the child returns. The Met will only record a child as absent for a maximum of 24 hours before they are upgraded to missing. The Met police record all children under 13 as missing rather than absent.

We asked London boroughs what information sharing protocols they have in place to ensure that no child falls through the net of services. There was no consistency in how London boroughs answered this question.

All London boroughs are covered by the same police force that has –according to the Met's FOI response - a system in place to send information about missing and absent episodes to the relevant local authority. In addition, all London boroughs are signed-up to a pan London protocol on CSE.
Despite this, the responses provided by boroughs make it clear that each local area has its own processes in place, its own criteria for what data is shared and jointly assessed, how frequently it is assessed and who is involved.

The answers from boroughs also highlighted an overreliance from local authorities on police getting the risk assessment right and using this to decide on further actions, rather than undertaking their own assessment or critically reviewing the police’s assessment.

The Metropolitan Police’s Freedom of Information response explains, for example, that London reports of children classified as missing are sent to the local authority at the time the missing report is created, while absent reports are shared once the child returns. A number of responses from London boroughs stated that they do not have information about absent children.

Another issue of concern is looked after children placed outside the boundaries of their local authority. If a looked after child is placed in another local authority, arrangements need to be made between the originating and hosting local authorities to make sure that reports are shared between them without delay. It is important that information is available to each local authority at the time at which the risk to the child is assessed (either by the police or through joint assessment), which is not always the case.

- Return Interviews

We asked London boroughs who they offer Return Interviews to and how many were conducted. There were some consistent responses in relation to looked after children who went missing and are classified as missing by the police, while the responses to other children were less consistent. 27 London boroughs provided information on groups of children they offer Return Interviews to as presented in the table 1 below. Of them 13 Local Authorities could provide data on the number of interviews conducted with missing children and 5 on number of Return Interviews for absent children as presented in table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Return Interviews offered and conducted by missing type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LAs that offer return interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing from home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing from care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Absent from home</td>
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<td>Absent from care</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2. Return Interviews conducted by missing type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of individual return interviews conducted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing from home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing from care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent from home</td>
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<td>Absent from care</td>
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</table>
Criteria used by Local Authorities for offering Return Interview (by number of Local Authorities)

Responses to FOIs showed that children classified as missing and in a small number of areas those classified as absent will be offered Return Interview if they meet one or more of the above criteria:

- Missing overnight or over 24 hours
- Missing on two or more occasions or frequently without authorisation
- Known to have mental health issues
- Known to have disability (including learning disability)
- Engaged or believe to have engaged in criminal activity
- Known to be at risk of sexual exploitation or known to be in contact with persons posing risks to children
- Own looked after children
- Children subject to child protection plan
- Children in Need
- Children harmed or hurt while missing
- Children involved or affiliated with gangs

Although these criteria are not universally applied across London boroughs. A small number of responses (3) indicated that children known to have mental health issue or those known to have disability (including learning disability) may not be listed among the criteria for interviews. Another issue that came through responses was that the offer of Return Interview may depend on whether a young person is perceived to be high risk or not.

There was a variation in whether looked after children who are placed within the boundaries of local authorities by other local authorities are being offered Return Interviews by local authorities of their placements. 11 responses stated that they offer Return Interviews to looked after children placed within their boundaries by other local authorities.

6.2. The importance of effective information sharing and Return Interviews

Effective prevention and response to children running away requires a collective and concerted effort by all local agencies – children’s services, police, health and voluntary sector - to piece together and effectively share information about a child who may be at risk.

Running away or going missing from home or care indicates that a child may be at risk of harm. Our research shows that running away is often preceded by conflict with parents or carers; family breakdown or poor relationships; experiences of abuse and neglect; or problems at school\(^5\). There is also a risk of child sexual exploitation or involvement in crime or gangs, either as a consequence of, or a reason for, a child running away. The link between running away and risk of sexual exploitation is proven and although not every child
who runs away is sexually exploited, many children who are sexually exploited are known to have run away or gone missing, even if for only a short period of time.

Return Interviews provide an opportunity to place the child’s needs and experiences at the centre, gives them an opportunity to talk and to be listened to, and to have their feelings and experiences taken seriously. It allows professionals to offer a child support as early as possible to protect them from harm and to prevent any risks from escalating further. For that reason the statutory guidance for children who run away or go missing from home or care requires that local authorities provide Return Interviews to young runaways.

From our direct practice we know that Return Interviews – if the information is appropriately shared with relevant agencies involved with the children - can help with building intelligence around child sexual exploitation and evidence for prosecution.

From our work with young runaways, we know that Return Interviews can help with prosecution of child sexual exploitation cases in two ways. Firstly, it may help children understand that they are in an exploitative relationship and disclose abuse. Our practice shows that children often do not recognise that they are exploited or feel reluctant to talk about it with services. A conversation with an independent, trusted adult can be an opportunity to explore issues like consent and healthy relationships, which can be a first step to children recognising that their own relationships are exploitative.

Secondly, information shared by children in Return Interviews can help with identifying ‘hot spots’ – areas to which children are known to go missing– and individuals who target children for sexual exploitation. Return Interviews allow workers to explore with a child what connections they make, where they go and what happens during a missing episode.

‘It’s not just ‘boyfriend’ grooming, you see other girls and boys grooming young people, and taking other young girls to sex parties or parties where they can get drink and drugs.’

(A project worker from The Children’s Society)

Availability of such evidence can help the police with their investigations and the Crown Prosecution Service with building a criminal case. It can also help protect other children from potential risks.

If Return Interviews are provided when a child first starts to go missing, they can lead to a reduction of missing episodes overall. The report of Ofsted’s thematic inspection on missing quotes a 30% reduction in missing children incidents over a year as a result of return interview provision in Worcestershire.

Our practice also demonstrates that an effective Return Interview and intensive support work can reduce the number of missing episodes and in many cases stop children running away altogether, as they get help dealing with the issues that originally caused them to run.
Return Interviews can also lead to savings. The financial and social cost of children running away to public services and wider society is high. It is estimated that each missing person’s investigation costs the police between £1325 and £2415.\textsuperscript{49} This is just the police cost. The long-term cost of unresolved issues that make children run away is much higher, both to the individual and to society.
Conclusion and recommendations

Teenagers growing up in London face many risks and when they run away from home or care and require a serious and concerted response.

The data we received from London boroughs shows that responses to children who run away or go missing are not consistent across boroughs. With 33 separate local authorities within London, there are marked differences in the numbers of young people known to local authorities who go missing, both from home and from care, policies on who is entitled to Return Interviews, understanding of risks and information sharing arrangements.

It was obvious from the responses that in some areas of London, responding to risks of running away and protecting those who go missing is taken very seriously with progress being made in terms of data collected, information shared and risks assessed and understood. In a small number of areas local authorities go beyond what is required by guidance and offer Return Interviews even to children placed within their boundaries by other local authorities and for those classified as absent.

In other areas progress is much slower and services are not prioritised, with some areas making Return Interviews available only to children missing from care. Risks and responses to all other groups are still considered the sole responsibility of the police, contrary to the requirements set out in statutory guidance.

There were particular gaps in responses in relation to children classified by the police as absent, particularly those who may go missing frequently but always for less than 24 hours and as a result do not receive a safe and well check or a Return Interview despite possible risks associated with frequent running away episodes.

To improve responses to all children running away in London we recommend the following:

National policies

- **Data.** Information obtained from London boroughs shows that there are still considerable gaps in data collected about missing and absent children and considerable gaps in data shared between services. The government should introduce a missing person database to ensure that data is collected and shared. There is a need for a clear guidance on how data about missing and absent children should be shared.

- Clarification in national policy is needed on entitlements for children classified as absent and those placed out of their areas, particularly around safe and well checks and Return Interviews. It is of paramount importance that absent children have a Return Interview and any intervention they may need to prevent issues in their lives from escalating further. This is particularly important in cases of repeated running away episodes.
Safeguarding missing and absent children locally

- **Data.** London boroughs should ensure that they have information on all children who go missing from home or care in their area, including those who are classified as absent by the police.

- **Return Interviews.** London boroughs should ensure that all children who are reported missing have access to Return Interviews to ensure that risks to the child are prevented from escalating. It is particularly important that the lack of return interviews for children missing from home and children classified as absent is addressed as the data show that these groups of children are most likely to miss out on the offer of a Return Interview.

- **Looked after children in out of area placements.** We call on the London authorities to adapt the principles of the Children’s Society’s Handle with Care campaign to ensure that all out of area placements – which present additional risks to vulnerable children - are made with due regards to children’s wishes and feelings.

- **Young people accommodated in hostels and supported accommodation.** Considering the high number of cases in London of older teenagers who present as homeless to local authorities and are accommodated in supported accommodation, hostels etc., and London boroughs should work together with the Met police so that all such locations are known to the police. This would mean they can be identified as addresses where vulnerable young people are accommodated when young people are reported as missing.

- London boroughs should also commission training for accommodation providers to ensure that they have good understanding of the risks faced by children who go missing, always report young people as missing to the police and signpost them to support services.

- **Independent Return Interviews.** London authorities should learn from best practice examples across London and commission independent Return Interview providers to deliver Return Interviews to young people who go missing.
## Appendix A. Handle with Care campaign in Greater Manchester

Our [services in Greater Manchester](#) support hundreds of young people in care or who have run away from care – but we know that too often these young people don’t get the support they need. That’s why we’re campaigning to ensure that when a young person in care is placed out of their local area, they get the support they need to settle and thrive.

Working with young people affected by this issue, we have developed some key steps that we want all local councils in the region to take to improve support and ensure their moves are handled with care.

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<tr>
<td>![Phone]</td>
<td>Give them the resources and support they need to keep in touch with their friends and family, such as visits and access to computers and phones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![Briefcase]</td>
<td>Provide them with a much notice as possible before a move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![Luggage]</td>
<td>Make sure they are supported with their moves – including providing luggage or boxes, help with packing and appropriate transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![Megaphone]</td>
<td>Ensure all the relevant support services, including other local councils, know a move is happening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![Ear]</td>
<td>Enable them to have their voices heard through Children in Care Councils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![Smile]</td>
<td>Ensure they get the same level of face-to-face time with crucial support workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![Certificate]</td>
<td>Involve them in the training of professionals, so their voice is heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![Book]</td>
<td>Plan moves around their education, particularly thinking about exams and coursework</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References

1. All quotes from young people in this report are from earlier consultations with young people supported by The Children’s Society’s projects.
5. Make runaways safe
17. Jago, S et al. What’s going on to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation? How local partnerships respond to child sexual exploitation 2011 University of Bedfordshire, Bedford
20. The previous definition of a missing child included ‘missing for 24 hours or more’. The revised definition removes the references to the duration of missing episode in recognition that a child may be very vulnerable even if she or he goes missing for a short period of time.
24. The NCA release on missing persons data showed reported that in 2014/15 there were 22,220 number of incidents of missing children, 3,077 number of incidents of absent children and that the actual number of children who were classified as missing or absent was 12,357 and 1,295 correspondingly.
25. This graph and table relate to the last three quarters of 2013-2014 only, as the Met had only implemented the new absent/missing definitions from this point
Estimate taken from End Child Poverty statistics and ONS 2013 population estimates


Blog (May 2014) New changes promise better protection for children in care

The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care. 2012

The Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation In Gangs and Groups Interim report (November 2012)

The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care

The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care. 2012


APPG on Runaways and Missing Children and Adults (2012) Inquiry into children who go missing from care

The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care. 2012.

Rees, Gwyther Still Running 3 2011 London: The Children’s Society

Revised statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, DfE. 2013. London: HM Government


Ofsted Thematic report on children who run away

Dr. Karen Shalev Greene and Dr. Francis Pakes Establishing the Cost of Missing Person Investigations report from the University of Portsmouth. 2012 Portsmouth: University of Portsmouth
It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect.

The Children’s Society is a national charity that runs crucial local services and campaigns to change the law to help this country’s most vulnerable children and young people.

Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children and young people they are on their side.

Further information
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