Living on the Edge: the experiences of detached young runaways

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Introduction

This report focuses upon the experiences of young people who, whilst aged 15 or under, become detached from their carers and are away from home for continuous periods of four weeks or more.

There is no everyday term to describe young people in this situation. Terms such as 'street youth', for example, are used in American literature. However, the experiences described in this report reveal that young people may find themselves in a number of different situations and the term 'street youth' would exclude many young people who have not spent time on the streets. The term ‘detached’ has therefore been chosen to describe these young people as this term evokes the over-arching themes of living outside key societal institutions, self-reliance and a dependence upon informal support networks that are apparent in these young people’s experiences.

This introductory section provides some background to the issue of detached young people and outlines the aims and methodology of the research.
Background

Whilst a lot is known about the reasons why children and young people run away, relatively little is known about the experiences of detached young people whilst they are away from home.

Evidence of young people becoming detached in the UK has appeared in previous research studies (Stein et al, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Stein et al identified a group of ‘detached’ young people who were under the age of 16 and, after being forced to leave or running away, had become completely detached from any legitimate support. Most of these young people had lost contact with educational agencies, social services and most other formal agencies apart from street work agencies. In Still Running (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) six percent of the young people interviewed had become detached from family or substitute care under the age of 16 for a continuous period of at least six months. Detailed analysis of these interviews confirmed the findings of previous research (Stein et al, 1994): that the majority of this group had not run away repeatedly but had become detached on the first or second incident of being away.

In relation to interventions with this group of young people, Stein et al (1994) highlighted the benefit of street-based work as being that work with the young person took place on territory they felt comfortable with and allowed them to dictate the pace. However, there were limitations as work took place outside of office hours when other agencies were not available and the environment was not always conducive to structured work with young people. Stein et al also identified drop-in services as being useful for detached young people as they enabled workers to spend focused time with them whilst having access to information and the ability to support young people with contacting agencies and setting up appointments. The drawback to this type of scheme was that young people could become dependent upon the level of support on offer and may be discouraged from developing their own support networks.

Browne and Falshaw (1999) found that there are few counselling services available to street children in the UK. The counselling that did exist focused on confronting delinquent behaviour and conduct disorders, for example, offering anger management, rather than addressing the young person’s own experiences as the recipient of abuse or crime.

The Social Exclusion Unit (2002) reported that detached workers or outreach schemes were more successful in engaging with detached young people than the police or social services.

Previous research has therefore touched upon the issue of young people becoming detached from parents and carers and offered some insight into the experiences of this group of young people in the UK. However no research has previously focused exclusively on the experiences of these young people and there is therefore a lack of detailed and up-to-date information. The research described in this report aims to add to the limited knowledge previously held about a vulnerable group of marginalised young people whose needs have, thus far, been largely unmet by practical interventions in the UK.
Overview of the study

**Aims**
The main aim of the research was to find out about the experiences of young people who, whilst aged 15 and under, were away from home for four weeks or more. The research concentrated upon four main areas:

1. Events leading up to the young person becoming detached.
2. Experiences whilst detached, concentrating upon identifying both formal and informal support networks; survival strategies employed; risks; coping mechanisms; what agencies they approached for help; barriers faced to accessing help and support.
3. Outcomes and repercussions of being detached.
4. Young people’s views on what ought to be done both to prevent young people becoming detached and to respond to the needs of young people who become detached.

**Definitions**
The term detached refers to a situation where a child or young person has left or been forced to leave parents or carers and has been detached from parents, carers or relatives, for a period of four weeks or more.

The term young people is used to refer to all of the research participants, who were aged between 13 and 21.

**Methods**
The study consisted of one-off semi-structured face-to-face interviews with young people. This method was chosen because the research was primarily exploratory and it was felt important to have a broad framework of enquiry whilst allowing scope for discussion of any additional issues raised by the interviewee which might be of significance to the research.

**Sample**
The research sample included young people aged 21 years of age and under who had been away from home for four weeks or more before the age of 16.

Twenty-three young people took part in interviews. The age of the young people ranged from 13 to 21. Nineteen of the young people described themselves as White British. The remaining young people were dual heritage - White British/South Asian, Bangladeshi, Indian Hindi, and Black-Caribbean.

The interviews took place in six geographically dispersed urban areas of England.

**Confidentiality**
A high threshold of confidentiality was offered to young people participating in the research, as valuable and important information may not have been disclosed if young people feared a breach of confidentiality. Confidentiality was offered to young people apart from where there were exceptional circumstances and a young person, or someone else they identified, were in extreme and immediate danger. Extreme and immediate danger refers to situations where:

- life is at risk
- a person is in need of hospitalisation
- a young child discloses historical abuse and, as a part of this disclosure, identifies that other young children and young people are or may be presently at risk.

This model of confidentiality has been used in previous research studies into sensitive topics (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Pearce et al, 2002).

**Analysis**
Data from interviews was placed on an Access database. A thematic analysis of the interview content was undertaken.
Research findings

In this main chapter of the report key patterns stemming from an analysis of the interviews are summarised. The discussion follows the chronological order of young people’s lives, beginning with an exploration of young people’s backgrounds and histories before becoming detached. It then looks at the events surrounding the process of leaving home; young people’s experiences whilst away from home; and finally what happened to young people after their period away from home. In order to assist in summarising a complex phenomenon we have constructed three anonymised illustrative case studies – Chloe, Ben and Briony – based entirely on information provided by young people during the interviews.

We also asked young people for their views on what might be done about the issue of young people becoming detached, and a summary of their responses is provided at the end of this chapter.

Before becoming detached – young people’s backgrounds and histories

This section looks at young people’s lives before the first time that they became detached for a lengthy period of time. Young runaways in general have been found to have much higher than average rates of problems within their families, at school and in their personal lives (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). It is no surprise then that these issues were also evident in the current research.

It is notable that there was no consistent pattern to the extent of young people’s running away prior to detachment. In fact, in line with the previous UK research findings referred to in the introduction, a considerable proportion of the young people had little or no experience of being away and became detached very quickly after running away or being forced to leave home. For example, in six cases young people had had no experience of running away or being thrown out prior to becoming detached. Another six young people had only run away or been thrown out of home once before the incident of becoming detached. Most of the other young people had run away more than three times before becoming detached.
CASE STUDY 1 – Chloe

Chloe lived with her mother, father and younger sister. Chloe was very close to her father but was aware that he hit her mother on a regular basis, which caused a lot of tension in the family home. He also spent time away from the family serving a number of prison sentences. During these periods, Chloe’s mother found it very difficult to cope with looking after her two daughters and social services became involved with the family. Chloe and her sister spent some time living in foster care but returned to live with their mother. When Chloe was 12, she found out that her father had died over a year ago from a heroin overdose. Chloe had been told that her father was once again in prison and was very upset when she found out that he was in fact dead and that her mother had lied to her. The relationship between Chloe and her mother deteriorated rapidly.  

…continued

CASE STUDY 2 – Ben

Ben lived with his parents and four siblings. His parents were both heavy drinkers and cannabis users and Ben and his siblings were often left to fend for themselves. Ben’s older brother was his main carer, ensuring that Ben was clothed, fed and kept safe. When Ben was seven, his mother left his father, taking Ben and an older sister with her. By the time Ben was ten, he had stopped going to school completely and was using alcohol and cannabis.  

…continued

CASE STUDY 3 – Briony

Briony lived with her mother and stepfather and older sister. When Briony was nine, she was sexually abused by a relative. From this time Briony had a social worker who she saw on a regular basis. Briony did not get on with her stepfather because he was very strict and did not allow Briony to do many of the things that her friends were allowed to do. This caused a lot of conflict which affected the whole family. Briony was close to her mother but resented how her mother never took her side against her stepfather.  

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As illustrated by the above examples the young people interviewed had usually, before the first time that they became detached, experienced high rates of disruption in their lives, together with negative experiences of parenting and often had parents who were facing problems of their own. Linked to these issues many of the young people had experienced disruption in their education. We now go on to discuss these themes in more detail.
Family change and disruption

The young people had often experienced family change – the separation of birth parents, the introduction of step-parents and the loss of a parent through bereavement. Only six of the 23 young people were still living with both birth parents at the point that they first became detached. In addition, a number of the young people had experienced a significant family bereavement or had completely lost touch with one of their birth parents. Further, three young people were lied to about who their parents were, and the discovery of this had a significant impact:

On her fourteenth birthday, Becky's grandmother told her that she was not her father's biological daughter and that he had adopted her. Up until this point, Becky and the man she thought was her father had always got on well. However, this revelation changed everything – including how Becky and her stepfather, as she now thought of him, related to one another. There was a lot of conflict and violence. Becky began rebelling, running away and using heroin to help ease the pain she felt. When she was 15, Becky's mum told her to leave.

Negative experiences of parenting

A high level of conflict with parents was a theme in the majority of young people's backgrounds and was often a trigger to being away. Conflict between parents and young people often arose because the young person became involved in activities of which parents disapproved. Examples were: staying out late or overnight, drinking alcohol, smoking cannabis, hanging out with friends that parents did not like, getting into trouble with the police, not attending school, going out with older boyfriends, and attending raves. Additionally, conflict was also a feature of family life where young people perceived a parent as being unnecessarily strict, setting rules and limits upon behaviour that the young person thought were unreasonable. Some of the young people experienced conflict with an individual within the family that acted as a direct trigger to being away and becoming detached. Young people described how dynamics with a biological parent, step-parent or sibling, for example, led to them running away or being forced to leave home.

In addition, a majority of the young people had experienced abuse, neglect and/or rejection by parents and other family members:

Courtney's father had rejected her from a young age because she was born a girl when he wanted a boy. This rejection manifested itself in the different way that Courtney was treated compared to her two younger brothers. Whenever anything went wrong, Courtney was blamed and her father beat her up on a regular basis. Courtney's mother was also frightened of Courtney's father and did not feel able to protect or defend Courtney, who felt unwanted by the whole family. She began self-harming and then running away. In the end, Courtney decided that it was better being homeless than living at home and never returned to live with her family.

Tyrone believes that his father rejected him because he does not look like his father and is different from the rest of his siblings who take after their father in appearance. Tyrone has learning difficulties so recognises that he is very different from the other members of his family. Tyrone's mother cared for six children, having her first child at the age of 14, and was heavily involved with alcohol and cannabis. After throwing Tyrone out at the age of 11, she put the phone down on him when he called to talk to her and Tyrone never attempted to make contact with his mother again.

Jay's father stopped coming to contact visits, simply not turning up one day when Jay was aged six. After getting help from agencies due to being physically disabled, Jay feels that his mother did not need him any more and lost interest in him.
Parental problems

From the descriptions of the young people’s home lives, it is clear that a number of the parents of the young people were experiencing difficulties themselves, including domestic violence (four cases), parental substance use (six cases), mental illness (three cases) and physical illness (one case).

*Because of all the arguing and fighting between Jade and her older sister, their mother would have an asthma attack and sometimes end up in hospital. This played a large part in the father’s decision that one of the sisters should leave home and resulted in Jade being thrown out of home at the age of 14.*

As a consequence several of the young people had ended up in a caring role in relation to a parent:

*Stacey cared for her mother who was a heavy drinker and had to put her to bed and make decisions about her medical care. In addition she had to care for her younger siblings by, for example, trying to ensure that they were fed.*

*From the age of seven, Jay acted as a carer for his mother who was in a wheelchair due to being disabled with arthritis. Jay cooked and cleaned and attended to his mother’s personal needs.*

School

Nearly half of the young people who participated in the research had stopped going to school before they were 16 (11 cases). Some of the young people had left school permanently before they became detached (nine cases). For example, one young person stopped attending school when he was ten after three years of continuously missing school. Another young person stopped attending secondary school after attending for the first day as she did not like being told what to do and liked doing things her own way:

*‘I liked primary school and then I went to high school but I didn’t like it so I just didn’t go. I don’t like being told what to do, how to do it and when to do it. I’ll do it my way and in my own time, and the teachers wouldn’t have that.’*

Some of the young people were excluded from school and never returned to any form of education. Three young people, who were excluded or left school because they were experiencing a number of problems, were told that alternative arrangements were being made to enable them to continue with their education, but commented that these alternative arrangements never came to fruition.

Other young people missed large chunks of schooling because they did not attend school during the time they were detached (seven cases). For a number of these young people, the unstable and chaotic nature of their lifestyle whilst they were detached made it difficult for them to engage with any form of education. For example, after being excluded from school, one young person was attending college to study for her GCSEs. However, a lack of money for transport to college, not having clothes to wear and staying at different friends’ houses were barriers to maintaining attendance:

*‘I got chucked out of college .. because of living at loads of different people’s houses and not having no money to get into college or having no clothes or anything, I never used to go to college and I used to have weeks and weeks off college.’*

There were also examples of young people maintaining their education whilst detached (three cases). For example, two young people managed to continue attending school whilst they were detached and another two young people returned to school to successfully sit their GCSE exams.
Events leading to young people becoming detached

The information presented above has provided a backdrop to the events that led to the young people becoming detached from home. This section looks in more detail at the specific events and circumstances that immediately preceded young people leaving home.

CASE STUDY 1 – Chloe (continued)

By the time Chloe was 13, there was a high degree of conflict between her and her mother, with Chloe refusing to speak to her mother unless it was absolutely necessary and refusing to keep to any rules or boundaries which she set.

Chloe began running away. At first Chloe either stayed at friends’ houses or stayed out all night, returning home when she felt like it.

After a while, Chloe began running away for longer periods of time, on one occasion running away for three weeks which she spent with an older group of people, taking amphetamines, drinking alcohol and generally partying.

When she returned from being away, she was placed in a children’s home from where she promptly ran away. Chloe was then placed in a secure unit away from her home town for four months.

After returning to live with her mother when she was 15, Chloe met her boyfriend, who was eight years older than her and started to spend more and more time with him. Through her boyfriend Chloe became introduced to heroin and started using.

She had been excluded from school and had left education permanently. One day, Chloe’s mother told her that she wanted her to leave the family home for good and Chloe was thrown out of home.

…continued

CASE STUDY 2 – Ben (continued)

One morning, when Ben was aged 14, he woke up to find that his mother and sister had gone, taking with them some personal belongings. At first, Ben stayed with a number of friends. He contacted his father, who made it clear that Ben was now left to fend for himself. Other family members were not willing to help Ben and he found himself living on the streets.

…continued

CASE STUDY 3 – Briony (continued)

When Briony was 15 she ran away from home for a night. When she returned the next day, her stepfather locked her up in her room and threatened her with a number of punishments. Her mother came into her bedroom to shout at her, blaming her for all the problems in the family. That evening Briony jumped out of her bedroom window, and spent the night walking around the town she lived in.

…continued

As the case studies illustrate, events leading to a young person becoming detached can be a response to a particular incident or a culmination of a history of family problems, conflict and abuse. In four cases, young people cited physical abuse as a trigger to an episode of becoming detached. One young person ran away because she had suffered abuse, both sexual and physical, from a member of her extended family, for eight years. The trigger for running away and staying away for four weeks came when she told her father about the sexual abuse and he did not believe her.

…continued
Becoming detached was not only a consequence of a young person deciding to run away – young people were also thrown out of home by a parent (ten cases). Two young people were abandoned by parents and left in the family home on their own. For example, one young person’s father moved to be with his girlfriend and left the young person living in the flat on her own when she was 14.

The majority of young people became detached at the age of 14 or 15 (18 cases). There were a few cases where young people became detached aged 13 and under, the youngest at the age of nine.

Experiences of being detached

The above two sections have provided a summary of the contexts in which young people may become detached. However, the central focus of this research study was on the experiences of detached young people whilst they are away from home and these are covered in some detail in this section.

As the continuation of the three illustrative case studies below reveal, there is considerable diversity in the experiences that young people have whilst they are detached. This can be in relation to the length of time they are detached, where they go to, who they approach for help and support and what survival and coping strategies they employ. For example, some of the young people were detached for a month (four cases) whilst others were detached for over a year (eight cases). One young person was detached continuously for a five-year period.

CASE STUDY 1 – Chloe (continued)

Chloe moved in with her boyfriend, who initially supported her and financed their heroin use. However, money ran out and Chloe’s boyfriend threatened her with violence if she did not go out to work on the streets as a prostitute. Sometimes Chloe’s boyfriend would beat her up if she did not bring enough money home.

CASE STUDY 2 – Ben (continued)

Ben stole from shops to survive, stealing goods for both personal use and to sell on to make money. Other homeless adults showed him how to survive on the streets and looked out for him, becoming his only friends. However, some homeless adults were not always so kind to him and Ben was beaten up on a number of occasions because, for example, he slept on someone else’s patch. Ben was now using cannabis and alcohol on a daily basis. On the odd occasion he would stay at a friend’s house but Ben mostly slept rough for two years, becoming firmly entrenched in a lifestyle of living on the streets and committing crime as a means of survival.

CASE STUDY 3 – Briony (continued)

Briony went to stay with a friend and spent the next two months staying with a number of friends. Some days she did not know where she was spending the next night but usually managed to find somewhere to stay. Briony did not have any money of her own but relied upon friends and their parents for food and anything else she needed. Briony did not attend school during this time. She knew that her mother had reported her missing and that the police were looking for her. On one occasion she had a drink spiked with amphetamine by the person she was staying with and ended up in hospital.
Where young people stayed

As the above case studies show, young people stayed at a variety of different places whilst they were detached from home.

With two exceptions, the young people stayed with friends, both peers and older adult friends, at some point whilst they were detached. Young people had varied experiences of staying with friends. For example, one young person stayed with just one friend whose mother was very supportive and helped her to find somewhere to live and access more permanent support. Other young people stayed at a variety of friends, moving from place to place, sometimes staying with people they did not know. Young people identified issues that arose in relation to being reliant upon the willingness of friends’ parents for places to stay or feeling that they had out-stayed their welcome:

‘It wasn’t very nice at all because it made me feel as if I was being selfish and to them [friends’ parents], it’s as if it’s [the house] a doss house. I used to think to myself, “if you don’t want me here, just tell me” ... [some of the parents] were always arguing and I used to listen to see if I came up in their arguments.’

Young people also disliked having to move around from friend to friend and being reliant upon others:

‘[I was] fed up of moving and living in different places; having to expect other people [to do things for you] as I have always been independent.’

Young people often faced uncertainty about where they were going to sleep that night, which they found stressful and worrying.

In addition to staying with friends, there were examples of young females staying with older boyfriends whilst they were detached (four cases). One of the young people did, in fact, run away in order to spend time with her boyfriend:

When Nicole was 11, she started going out with her boyfriend who was six years older than her. She began a sexual relationship with the boyfriend when she was 12 and started running away for weeks at a time to be with her boyfriend. Nicole believes that young people should be able to have consensual sex under the age of 16 and that the laws in Britain are too strict for young people.

Several young people slept rough at some point whilst they were detached. For some, sleeping rough was an occasional and last resort when they were unable to stay with a friend. For other young people, the majority of their time detached was spent living on the streets and sleeping rough. Young people slept in parks, shop doorways, bus shelters, a disused factory, car parks, hospitals, train stations, caravans, stairways in a block of flats and gardens.

Survival strategies

The case studies offer some insight into the survival strategies that young people employed whilst they were detached. A majority of the young people resorted to illegal activities to support themselves whilst they were away as there were limited opportunities for them to access legitimate financial support.

Stealing: The most common survival strategy cited by young people was stealing – many of the young people described how they stole from shops in order to survive. Young people stole food or other goods to sell on to others in order to get money.

A number of young people were also involved in other criminal activity such as street robbery, stealing cars and burglary (five cases). As a result of their involvement in crime, some of the young people were in trouble with the police during the time that they were detached (four cases).

Selling sex: The exchange of sex for money was a survival strategy employed by two young women whilst they were detached. In both cases, heroin use was also a feature and the young women sold sex to finance their drug use as well as to survive.

Begging: Begging was a relatively unusual survival strategy. For one young person begging was their sole source of survival, whereas for another this was a one-off incident when the young person was desperate for money.

Earning money: Some of the young people were able to earn money by working whilst they were detached in order to support themselves (four cases). For example, one young person, aged 14, worked full-time for a roofer; another washed dishes part-time in a restaurant and two young people carried out babysitting.
**Substance use:** Substance use was very common amongst young people whilst they were detached (17 cases). The majority of these young people were using substances prior to becoming detached but increased their use during the period of detachment. Other young people starting using a particular substance whilst they were detached. For example, of the three young people who used heroin whilst they were detached, two had not previously tried it. Polydrug use was also a feature of young people’s experiences (eight cases). Cannabis was the most common drug used (nine cases). Young people also described using amphetamine and ecstasy. One young person admitted that he had used pills regularly but said that he did not know what drug he was taking:

*Silly little pills like Heineken stars ... I dunno [what they are]. I’ve never hallucinated on it … when I took ‘em, I felt like I was whizzing – awake … And then when you get halfway through the buzz, everything just starts turning into a blur … Basically it makes your head go and you’re smiling away.*

Extensive alcohol use was also a feature of young people’s experiences whilst they were away. For some of the young people, drinking alcohol formed part of their daily life whilst detached. As with drug use, many of the young people had used alcohol before becoming detached but their use increased after becoming detached:

*Tyrone started drinking at the age of seven and drank regularly for a month at the age of nine. Once he was detached permanently at the age of 11, alcohol became a continuous part of his everyday life.*

Substance use was clearly a coping mechanism for some young people. For example, one young person described how smoking cannabis helped him cope with being detached:

*‘It was just to take my mind off things. It did help me in a way. It helped me a lot. It helped me calm down; it didn’t make me so aggressive… It just basically took my mind off the problem.’*

Another young person described how using heroin helped her feel protected and as if nobody could hurt her. When using heroin:

*‘I was in my own little world; nobody could come and hurt me. I had a wall around me where no one could get through. That feeling where nobody could hurt me, I liked it and I just wanted to stay there; nobody could hurt me whatsoever.’*

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**Sources of support**

As well as resorting to the survival strategies highlighted above, young people also received some support from others whilst they were detached. The majority of this support was informal and provided by friends, friends’ parents and other adults. As mentioned previously, the large majority of young people relied upon friends at some point whilst they were detached for somewhere to stay. In addition, all these young people also relied upon informal networks, to varying degrees, for the provision of other things such as food, money, emotional support and company. For those young people, who spent the majority of their time detached living on the streets, older homeless adults sometimes looked out for them and offered support. This support took different forms such as directing young people to services for homeless adults, sharing whatever they had with the young person or attempting to ensure that the young person did not get involved in risky activities or behaviour:

*After living on the streets for a few weeks, Craig moved into a squat with older homeless adults who shared their money, food and cigarettes with him. Whilst the majority of the adults were using crack, two of them were vigilant in their attempts to deter Craig from becoming a user.*

There was limited experience of young people accessing formal help and support whilst they were detached (five cases). Those young people who did access formal help were often reluctant to give agencies or project workers full details about their situation:

*Jade contacted her social worker on one occasion when she had nowhere to stay but did not give her social worker any further details about what was happening in her life. She also accessed a drop-in service providing counselling, advice and general support but stopped attending after a few sessions because she felt what was going on in her life did not leave time for attending the project.*

*Melissa received holistic support from a sexual exploitation project, which she found very helpful.*

*Subadhra went to Connexions who said that they were unable to help her and suggested that she go to social services, which she did not want to do.*
Craig accessed a runaways project, where he had previously seen a project worker, to have a shower. Craig did not want to talk to any of the workers about how he was living and refused the intervention of his key project worker to enable him to return home.

The remaining 18 young people did not approach any formal service provision for help or support. Young people offered a variety of explanations to explain why they did not access service providers for help. For example, young people did not always know of places where they could go for help or support. One young person said that there was nowhere to go for help and support:

‘There was no agencies where I was at all for young people.’

A second young person thought that there was nowhere to go to help people in her situation:

‘I didn’t think that there was anywhere to go.’

Other young people identified specific reasons for not wanting to go for formal help. One young person was fearful of going to social services because she was scared that they would break the family up:

‘[I was] frightened of destroying the family.’

Past negative experiences of social services influenced another young person’s decision not to approach formal help. Two young people did not like or trust their social workers:

‘Because I didn’t like [name of social worker] I thought that if she told me to go and meet these people [project workers from a runaways project] that I would get done by the police: that she would set me up.’

‘With a social worker, they’re the friend you don’t want. They don’t leave you alone and they’re horrible.’

Young people also wanted to be independent and self reliant and did not want to return home, which they feared would be the outcome if they accessed formal support systems.

**Risks**

Young people were also subject to a number of other risks in addition to those highlighted in the case studies. Some young people were assaulted by strangers but many of the young people were placed at risk either by people they stayed with or by other people that they knew whilst out on the streets. Even though sleeping rough appears to be the most risky survival strategy, evidence from the young people’s experiences reveals that staying with friends is not necessarily risk free.

**Physical assault:** Many young people were physically assaulted whilst they were detached (eight cases). This took a number of different forms in relation to where the assault took place and the perpetrator. For example, one young person described how, on a number of occasions, he was beaten up for sleeping on someone else’s patch. Another young person was beaten up on the streets by his brother’s friend and sustained an injury that later required medical attention. Other young people were subject to abuse by the people they were staying with. Some of the young women who stayed with older boyfriends were subject to physical violence by their boyfriend.

**Staying with inappropriate adults:** As mentioned earlier, some young people were offered somewhere to stay by older adult friends who were not parents of peers (five cases). Several young people were abused or placed at risk by adult ‘friends’:

Jason, aged 14, moved in with older friends who took his wages off him, involved him in a situation where he was beaten up by five adult men and locked him up in a cupboard under the stairs when they wanted him out of the way.

Whilst away for a month at the age of nine, Tyrone stayed with an adult man who was a cannabis dealer. Both cannabis and alcohol were made available to Tyrone and he smoked and drank on a regular basis.

Melissa, aged 15, stayed with an older female friend who worked as a prostitute. Through this friend Melissa became introduced to heroin and prostitution.

**Forced to take drugs:** Some young people were forced to take drugs whilst they detached (three cases). For example, one young person was forced to smoke crack by a group of young men and collapsed as a result of this. A second young person woke up, after sleeping rough in a car park, to find puncture marks and bruising in his arm and feeling very strange. He thinks that some older homeless people who were also in the car park that night injected him with heroin whilst he was asleep.

**Lack of food:** Young people experienced periods of time where they had very little food to eat and were hungry on a regular basis. Some young people described how they lost a lot of weight and one young person said she had developed an eating disorder whilst away.
Extreme experiences: There was evidence of some of the young people being in some very dangerous situations and resorting to desperate measures in response to the situation they found themselves in:

One young person ran away from home and, after being away for two to three months, was abducted and locked up in a drug dealer’s flat for four months.

One young person who lived on the streets for a long period of time described how he had seen ‘all sorts’ and cited, as an example, having witnessed a man being shot in the head.

One young person, who was abused by the older adults he was staying with, self-harmed to express the fear he felt and eventually attempted suicide by drinking bleach and painkillers. He was diagnosed as being mentally ill and sectioned for six months.

Feeling scared or at risk: Some of the young people who stayed with friends for the whole period that they were detached never felt scared or at risk, whereas some young people were scared when they were sleeping rough. Others were frightened by incidents that occurred whilst they were away. For example:

- one male described himself as being ‘freaked out’ when propositioned for sex by an older adult male
- another young person felt very frightened when he was locked up in a cupboard
- one young person was specifically frightened of the gangs that roamed the area
- another young person was very frightened and thought that she was going to be killed after being abducted and held in a flat for four months
- one young person was frightened by the death threats she was receiving on her mobile phone.

Not only was there the impact of having to deal with things that actually took place, there were also worries that young people carried round inside of them about what might happen to them. For one young person, one of the worst parts of being away was what she imagined could happen to her:

‘What goes through your mind when you’re out there – things that you think could happen.’

Positive aspects of being away
Despite these risks, for many of the young people, being detached removed them from situations that caused them immense stress and upset and they preferred being detached to living at home. Aspects of being away that the young people enjoyed included:

- having the freedom to do what they wanted to do
- being away from the control of strict parents
- enjoying the company and comradesship of friends and other young people on the streets
- being independent and self-reliant
- having their own space.

Many of these young people had conflicting feelings about being detached as the majority of young people also identified negative feelings about being away; indeed a couple of young people described there being nothing good about being away.

Experiences and feelings that young people did not like about being away included:

- having to be reliant upon friends
- missing family members
- being worried about what was happening to family members in their absence
- feeling lonely, cold, anxious, depressed and frightened
- having sex with lots of different men
- not coping well with what was happening to them.

Young people identified help that they would have liked whilst they were detached, including somewhere to stay, food and someone to talk to:

‘What would have helped me is somewhere to stay … Somewhere safe.’

‘If there had been just something simple like a drop-in place where you could go once a week to have a meal if you were hungry.’

‘Having someone close to talk to – a friend, worker, social worker, anything like that … Just someone that I could have half an hour to talk to, to let things out, cry; stuff like that.’
Events after detachment

This section of the report outlines the experiences of young people after they were detached. For some, detachment ended because the young person returned to live with parents or other carers. Others were able to access formal support once they were aged 16. Some young people continued to be homeless and reliant upon risky survival strategies.

CASE STUDY 1 – Chloe (continued)

Through older friends who worked on the streets, Chloe began attending a project that worked with women involved in sexual exploitation. She was now 17 and had been using heroin and working as a prostitute for two years. The project helped Chloe to get on to a methadone programme. Chloe is still working as a prostitute but has left her violent boyfriend.

CASE STUDY 2 – Ben (continued)

Whilst under the age of 16 and living on the streets, Ben did not want any help from agencies, preferring to rely upon himself for survival. When he was 16, Ben began to feel that he was depressed and that he would welcome some support to help him find somewhere to stay. He approached a project that provided support with housing issues. One of the project workers helped Ben to find some bed and breakfast accommodation, where he stayed for a short time. Ben then spent time living in a number of hostels interspersed with periods of living on the streets. Ben finds it difficult to live by rules and regulations set by others and frequently finds himself back on the streets.

CASE STUDY 3 – Briony (continued)

Whilst in hospital Briony called her social worker and explained why she did not want to return home. The social worker contacted Briony’s mother and arranged for Briony to go and stay with her grandmother when she came out of hospital. The social worker referred Briony to a project for young runaways who mediated between Briony and her mother. Briony is now back at school and living with her grandmother. She sees her mother regularly and visits the family home. Her relationship has improved with her stepfather and she is a lot happier.
As Ben’s case study highlights, some of the 
young people’s experiences of being 
detached under the age of 16 did not end. 
After the age of 16, 14 of the young people 
either became formally homeless and spent 
time living on the streets interspersed with 
periods in bed and breakfast accommodation 
and hostels or moved into supported housing 
projects for young people. Most of the 
remaining young people returned to live with 
their parents. In one case, the young person 
was thrown out again by her mother and 
found herself living on the streets again 
before finding private accommodation. In 
three of the cases where young people 
returned home, the young people were still 
running away. Some young people were 
unable to return to live with their families 
whilst they were aged under 16 and 
alternative living arrangements such as living 
with friends on a permanent basis or living in 
a foster placement were made.

Whilst some of the young people were able 
to find somewhere to live after being 
detached, other issues that had been a 
feature of being detached were still prevalent 
in their lives:

Becky left her violent boyfriend and, after 
spending some time living on the streets, 
moved into private accommodation with her 
present partner. However, she was still using 
heroin and selling sex. She intends to stop 
using heroin in the near future, having made 
four unsuccessful attempts to come off it, 
and plans to leave the area to enable her to 
make a break from heroin and prostitution.

Melissa returned to live with her parents, 
came off heroin and began a methadone 
programme. Whilst continuing to sell sex, 
Melissa is receiving counselling and has 
plans to start college in the near future.

Substance use and criminal activity 
continued to be a feature of many of the 
young people’s experiences since being 
detached. Some of the young people also 
identified themselves as being depressed or 
experiencing other emotional difficulties.

There is some evidence (six cases) of young 
people receiving support once the period of 
detachment ended, including in relation to 
risk of running away, risk of sexual exploitation and 
provision of counselling. There is also evidence 
of young people engaging with training or 
education providers after being detached – for 
example, two young people returned to school 
and four started vocational training or 
attending college.
Young people’s recommendations to help other young people who become detached

Young people were asked about their ideas about what could be done to prevent young people from having to be away from home and what should be done to help young people who have to be away and are away for four weeks or more. These recommendations focused on a number of key themes.

**Young people’s ideas to prevent young people from having to be away**

**Somebody to talk to:** It was recognised that young people need someone to talk to, to discuss their problems and any difficulties that they are having at home. The general attitude was that young people need places where they can go to, where they are made comfortable and not asked too many questions but, if they want to talk, there is someone there they can talk to.

**Mediation with family members:** Once young people had discussed their worries and concerns, there was a common view that if young people still felt unable to talk to parents, then there should be professionals who could intervene between the young person and their parents with the aim of resolving conflict and difficulties to prevent further arguments and general conflict. Some young people commented that because of the statutory role that social services fulfilled, they would prefer that this kind of mediation was undertaken by other independent agencies.

**Support for parents:** A number of the young people who participated in the research recognised that parents needed support with their own problems and issues. It was suggested that social workers should spend more time taking children and young people out to offer them the opportunity to engage in certain activities that their parents may not be able to afford and to give the parents a break.

**Drop-in places for young people:** Young people recommended that there should be drop-in projects for young people that offer an array of services such as information and advice on a range of issues, including counselling; support with housing that young people could access before running away; and for general advice and support to help them sort out any problems or issues in order to prevent them from having to run away. Alternatively, if the young person was unable to resolve the problems with their parents, then they should have access to information and services that would help them to find somewhere to stay.

**Drugs education:** It was recommended that there should be more preventative work undertaken with young people to educate them about the realities of taking drugs.

**Young people’s ideas to help young people who become detached**

**Somewhere to go:** It was recommended by some of those interviewed that young people should make sure that they have somewhere to stay before running away so that they do not have to sleep on the streets. A number of the young people thought that there should be hostel-type accommodation, specifically for the under-16 age group. The consensus amongst the group of young people who made this recommendation was that this accommodation should provide a bed, hot water and food with staff to talk to if the young person chose to. However, young people should not be subject to questioning but further support should be available to those who wanted it. Somewhere that a young person can get their own space was also identified as an important function of the hostel-type accommodation.

In addition to hostel accommodation, it was suggested that blankets and food should be given out to those young people who were not able to get a bed for the night so at least they had some food and a blanket to keep them warm if they had to be out on the streets overnight.

**Drop-in facilities:** Young people identified the need for drop-in projects that provided a range of services such as showers, general advice and support to find housing. In addition, when necessary, these projects should be able to provide young people with more specialised support with, for example, access to drug treatments. Such projects should adopt an open door policy and not exert pressure upon the young people to talk to them but be there to help and support them if they want to change their lives. Counselling services and less formal systems for young people to talk about their concerns and worries, were identified as an important part of what was needed for young people who experience being detached.

**Social services:** Young people also identified the benefits that can be gained when a young person likes an allocated worker and stressed the importance of ensuring that a young person has a social worker who they like and can trust.
Discussion and conclusions

Key themes

A number of themes have arisen from the research findings presented in this report.

The diversity of young people’s characteristics and backgrounds
The experiences of the young people who participated in this research project confirm findings from previous research – young people who become detached may have extensive prior experience of running away for short periods, or they may have little or no history of running away. Just over half of the 23 young people either had no previous experience of being away or had run away or been thrown out on just one occasion before becoming detached. This finding has very important implications for policy and practice as we discuss below.

The lack of intervention in young people’s lives prior to becoming detached
The report highlights that young people who become detached have often experienced high levels of abuse and conflict in the family home and that parental problems were a feature of many of the young people’s home lives. Yet, in almost half the cases, there were no agency interventions with the family or the young person before the young person became detached. In addition, it is notable that around half the interview sample had stopped attending school regularly well before the legal minimum school leaving age. These patterns suggest both that these young people’s needs are not visible to responsive services and also that drop-out from universal education services is not acting as a trigger for early interventions.

Reliance upon personal and informal networks
As identified earlier in the report, all of the young people relied upon informal networks for support whilst they were detached. However, there was diversity in the extent of the reliance upon informal networks and the form that this reliance took. Some of the young people focused completely upon one person, or a group of people, for support whilst others were primarily self-sufficient. Some of the young people relied upon support from peers whilst others relied upon support from adults. The research identifies that, although young people overwhelmingly prefer to receive support from informal networks, a number of them were placed at risk by those they turned to for help and support and a number of the young people were subject to abuse and forced to participate in risky activities such as taking drugs and prostitution.

In contrast relatively few young people turned to agencies for help whilst they were away from home, and many actively avoided coming into contact with statutory services for fear of being returned home.
Key themes continued

Where young people slept
Linked to the above point, but deserving acknowledgement in its own right, is the issue of where young people slept whilst they were detached. All of the young people spent at least some time whilst away staying with friends. Some slept at friends' houses all or the majority of the time they were detached. Others predominately lived on the streets but stayed at friends' houses on rare occasions. Nearly half of the young people also slept rough whilst they were detached, with the majority resorting to this strategy when they were not able to sleep at friends' houses. Although the dangers of sleeping rough have been well documented, the experiences of this group of young people suggest that young people may also be at significant risk when they stay with people that they know. As well as describing actual events they had experienced whilst they were detached, young people also portrayed the stressful nature of finding somewhere to sleep – of going from friend's house to friend's house feeling unwanted and that they were a burden on others; and of being frightened when they slept rough or wandered the streets at night because they had nowhere to go.

Perception of risk
The above two themes relate to young people's perceptions of risk. It is important to recognise that risk is a theme that came up in young people's lives prior to becoming detached as well as while they were away from home. A number of the young people faced significant risks at home, including sexual abuse, physical abuse or neglect because of a parent's substance use, and some ran away to escape a risky situation in the home, preferring to face being at risk on the streets.

Many of the young people engaged in risky survival strategies whilst they were detached, such as selling sex, committing crime and using drugs. Some of the young people were unaware of the risk that they placed themselves in by engaging in risky behaviours.

Some of the young people ran away and stayed with adults through their own choice but unwittingly placed themselves at risk – for example, young females aged 12 or 13 who stayed with their adult boyfriends with whom they have a sexual relationship and the nine-year-old child who stayed with a drug dealer and was provided with alcohol and cannabis on a daily basis.

The experiences outlined in this report emphasise that young people are not always aware of the potential risks they face when engaging in certain activities or making judgements about what action they should follow whilst detached. In some cases the lack of alternatives may compel a young person to follow a course of action that they are aware is inherently risky.

Perceptions of maturity
A recurrent linked theme was that young people felt they were more mature than peers of the same age. Some young people had been forced into a position of taking on responsibilities beyond their age due to circumstances at home. Others felt that they had matured considerably through their experiences whilst away from home.

However there were some apparent risks to this perception of maturity. Some of the young people had become involved in relationships and activities normally restricted to adults. Whilst they themselves felt able to handle this early maturity, their accounts of their experiences raise concerns that they were also particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In some cases, there were unforeseen consequences of involvement in relationships and activities that were damaging to the young person.
Concluding comments

In summary, this research has revealed that young people who become detached from parents or carers often have high levels of problems in their family background, at school and in their personal lives. There were often no agency interventions with the young person and their family before the young person became detached. The events that lead to a young person becoming detached are often complex and becoming detached can often happen instantaneously or very quickly after one or two incidents of running away or being thrown out of home. In addition to examples of young people running away or being thrown out of home by parents, the research revealed examples where young people were abandoned in the family home by parents and left to fend for themselves. Once detached, young people are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, often taking recourse to risky survival strategies. Experiences whilst detached can impact upon events after the period of detachment has ended. For example, some young people continue to practice risky survival strategies, such as involvement in crime and substance use, and become submerged in particular lifestyles. Being detached can also precede youth homelessness.

The findings presented in this report, and summarised in the key themes above, present two key challenges to practice and policy aimed at safeguarding and meeting the needs of children and young people.

Preventing young people becoming detached

The first challenge relates to prevention. One of the key themes of the Social Exclusion Unit’s (2002) recommendations on young Exclusion was a focus on primary prevention. By and large, the young people who participated in this research project slipped through the net of prevention. As discussed above, there was often little or no previous ‘running away’ behaviour to trigger an early preventative response. However, there were other warning signs – in particular problems within the family and disengagement from the education system – which might have served as a trigger for agency involvement.

Mediation with family members before the event that led to the young person becoming detached has been identified by previous research (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Rees and Siakeu, 2004) as a possible preventative response. It is also recommended by young people participating in this research project as the most likely intervention to resolve conflict and prevent a crisis which leads to young people becoming detached.

Previous research and practice have highlighted the importance of school-based preventative work (Rees, 2001; Smeaton and Rees, 2004). School staff are also often in a position to identify that there are issues or problems with a young person when no other agencies are yet involved. As this report has highlighted, many of the young people who become detached are not previously known to services and stop engaging with school at an early age. Once a young person disengages from school, this should signal the need to alert the appropriate agency so that early interventions can be established. This may prevent events in the family spiralling to the degree that it is no longer possible for the young person to remain in the home.
Responding to young people who become detached

Clearly then, a better early response could potentially have prevented many of the young people becoming detached, but it seems unlikely that there would be no young people who slipped through the net. This leads on to the second key challenge – responding to young people once they have become detached.

Previous research and practice experience has shown that young people who become detached and spend time on the streets in city centres often have different characteristics and experiences than other young runaways (Rees, 2001: 31). There are a number of interconnected factors in the experiences of young people who become detached that make it difficult to implement responsive interventions. Their family lives tend to have been chaotic or unsettled, there is a high level of disengagement from school, and often a lack of agency involvement with the young person and their family prior to becoming detached. In addition, many of these young people have been forced to take responsibility for their own survival, both at home and whilst away from home, and the norms and values that govern their lives differ to those of mainstream society. These and other experiences mean that it is often difficult for detached young people to live in accordance with rules set by others and do not predispose them to conventional approaches of intervention.

Projects that engage with marginalised young people on the streets need to establish trust and credibility with young people. This raises particular challenges in relation to confidentiality policies. Projects who breach confidentiality may lose credibility and be perceived as unworthy of trust, thus losing their ability to engage with young people (Rees, 2001). Therefore, when working with detached young people, there is need for a careful balance between ensuring a young person’s immediate safety and retaining a relationship to the long-term benefit of the young person. By the very nature of the experiences of young people who are detached, interventions should focus upon long-term engagement and trust-building. This can offer the opportunity for crisis intervention when a young person experiences a breakdown in their survival strategies.

To conclude, this report has identified that the issue of young people becoming detached is a complex phenomenon, both in its causes and responses, and presents a challenge for both policymakers and practitioners. In doing so, the research has highlighted the needs of a group of young people who have often been rejected or abandoned by family, missed or failed by service providers, and have therefore become marginalised and as a consequence are at a particularly high risk of social exclusion.

References