Lost Youth
Young Runaways in Northern Ireland

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Thanks also to the researchers (and other collaborators) – to all members of the Safe on the Streets Research Team, who laboured to produce the original UK-wide study which preceded and informed this work; to the staff at EXTERN for their help and hospitality; to workers at The Children’s Society for their support.

Special thanks to Gwyther Rees for his guidance and contributions, pragmatism and patience. Also to Joanne Stevenson for all her efforts and advice and to Bill Lockhart whose commitment ensured the success of the project. Thanks also to those who read and commented on earlier drafts of this report – Mike Stein, Nick Frost (University of Leeds) and Penny Dean (The Children’s Society).
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FOREWORD

I am delighted to support the publication and launch of “Lost Youth: Young Runaways in Northern Ireland”. It presents a very comprehensive picture of the lives of some of the most socially excluded young people in Northern Ireland.

On reading the report I was surprised at the extent of the problem of young people running away from home. Overall, 16% of young people surveyed in Northern Ireland said that they had run away or been forced to leave home at some point – in some cases this was just for a few hours. However, one in 11 (9%) had spent at least one night away from home on the last occasion they had run away or been forced to leave. These are quite shocking figures.

This research uncovers a significant social problem which needs to be addressed. It will be of interest to government, statutory providers of services (such as the police and social services), the voluntary sector and, indeed, the general public. The results of the research and its recommendations need to be highlighted and debated.

The Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government 2001 – 2004 places a strong emphasis on reducing social exclusion. The extent of the problem of young people running away from home, and the evidence of their experiences whilst away, supports the case for an urgent response at both the practice and policy levels. This should clearly be delivered in an interagency context. At the local level it might best be addressed by the formation of a specialist sub-group on “Children Missing from Home and Substitute Care” within the Children’s Services Planning Committees.

It is also my hope that the creation of a Northern Ireland Children’s Commissioner will go a long way towards helping to tackle the problems these young people are facing and giving them a much needed voice.

JANE MORRICE, MLA
Lost Youth stems from a major research project undertaken jointly between The Children’s Society (England and Wales), the Aberlour Child Care Trust (Scotland), Extern (Northern Ireland) and the University of York. Published as Still Running – Children on the Streets in the UK in 1999 the report gave the first comprehensive picture of the nature and extent of the issue of children running away from home across the United Kingdom.

Lost Youth now gives a more detailed and up-to-date analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland. Like Still Running it makes a number of significant recommendations which identify the need to develop a range of responses and services for young runaways involving statutory, community and voluntary sectors.

In June 2001, The Children’s Society made a response to the Consultation on Youth Runaways undertaken by the Social Exclusion Unit (England and Wales). It is worth rehearsing some of the key messages contained in that response.

First, we would highlight the need to ensure that children and young people have a say in the decisions that effect them and to have their opinions taken into account. This should be developed within a framework which acknowledges the rights of Children and Young People. There is a need for a centrally resourced strategy which will pull together and co-ordinate initiatives and funds. This should take a long-term approach to the funding of services of young runaways.

There is a body of research and practice that identifies the need to develop a range of responses and services for young runaways. These need to be developed in a locally appropriate manner and will require better joint working and resourcing through multi-agency partnerships. Services should be carefully targeted and should set specific and meaningful performance indicators to be monitored and evaluated through co-ordinated service planning protocols.

Monitoring of need and auditing of services are requirements of children’s services planning and must be a first step to tackling any issue. It is a requirement within children’s services planning to plan services for children missing from care specifically. However our experience to date is that service planning is not consistent across the United Kingdom. Establishing a specific Young Runaways Plan is the most coherent and appropriate way to ensure the planning and delivery of services to all young runaways.

We welcome the establishment of an inter-departmental working group (including representatives from the Scottish and Northern Ireland Executives) led by the Social Exclusion Unit. However, we believe that the respective Departments of Health in each country have a clear role as the lead departments for children and young people who are at risk of significant harm. Nonetheless, there is a substantial proportion of children who fall below this threshold of harm but for whom a number of government departments have responsibility. A cross-cutting, cross-departmental approach is clearly needed to ensure all children and young people have access to information and resources to make running away less likely. Such an approach enables the provision of holistic child-centred services.

The Children’s Society, Extern and Aberlour are committed to continuing research and development in relation to our social justice goals for young runaways. We extend an open invitation to others to join with us in our quest.

PENNY DEAN
Director for Children and Young People
The Children’s Society

BILL LOCKHART
Chief Executive
Extern
FOREWORD

The current climate crisis is a global emergency that requires a rapid and systematic transformation of our economic and social systems. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Kyoto Protocol have set the stage for international cooperation, but much more needs to be done. 

In this book, we explore the latest scientific research and policy developments that are shaping the future of climate action. We highlight the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, and offer concrete solutions that can help us achieve a sustainable future.

The contributors to this book are leaders in their fields, with a deep understanding of the issues at hand. They come from diverse backgrounds, but share a common goal: to create a better world for generations to come.

We hope that this book will inspire you to take action and become part of the solution. Together, we can build a world that is healthy, equitable, and sustainable for all.

Misti Erickson
Co-author
February 2023
INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

INTRODUCTION

This report seeks to give an accurate portrayal of the phenomenon of young people under 16 who run away or are forced to leave their home in Northern Ireland.

In doing so it leans heavily on a previous study, Still Running, which was the first UK-wide exploration of running away. Still Running gave a detailed analysis of the situation in all four countries of the United Kingdom. Via additional data collection and analysis with a sharpened focus, we are able to present a comprehensive consideration of the current situation in Northern Ireland. Our findings suggest that it is in some ways the same but in other ways rather different from Wales, Scotland and England.

This report draws on information collected during two phases of fieldwork. The original and substantive work was carried out during early 1999 as part of Still Running and a second phase was finished in early 2000. Overall, then, survey questionnaires were completed by over 1,300 14-16-year-olds in 15 schools across Northern Ireland, contact was made with 49 agencies who either worked with runaways, or had practical knowledge of the issue (and detailed interviews undertaken with 21 of the professionals within these agencies) and in-depth interviews were conducted with 34 young people with experience of running.

The research provides clear evidence that running away amongst under-16s is a widespread occurrence in Northern Ireland. We found that the experience of running varied from a brief incident to an abiding, habitual pattern of behaviour. It was clear from the accounts of the young people that running away is always significant and usually psychologically complex. For most the exit from home is prompted by a substantial degree of unhappiness and upset – being away is a mixture of confusion, discomfort, anxiety, regret and danger – and returning, anything from a new beginning to a new ordeal.

If, as could reasonably be suggested, running away provides a peep-hole into the difficult existences of many young people, often those who have not otherwise come to the attention of the helping agencies, then this research throws up questions which merit careful consideration by all of those who purport to champion the needs of children.

It highlights a failure in many instances to deal with the causes of young people’s problems and often even to neglect the symptoms – it underlines a persistent deafness to young people’s thoughts and feelings – it shows that even those who do fall into the current ‘safety net’ often fare no better than those outside it.

And, since the family is at the centre of many of these concerns, our findings suggest that, at a basic level, more families need more support, particularly when they encounter breakdown and reconstitution. If we accept that the family is often subject to internal change and (society would appear to have some way to go in coming to terms with the plurality and fluidity of the modern family) then we should also accept that we need to help young people to cope with the complex transitions that they may encounter in early life.

In the conclusion to the report we propose a number of ways in which young people could be prevented from running away and in which better support could be given to those who do
spend time away from home. It rests with parents, practitioners and policy makers to take on
the challenge of reducing the risk that many of these young people face — that of drifting into
marginalisation and detachment from society.

We should add that we are aware that there is a wider debate to be had about running away
in terms of structural issues — politics, economics, social institutions, etc. Given its empirical
focus, these areas rest largely outside the remit of this study, but we are confident that, despite
this, the research offers a valuable insight into the subject.

**THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH**

To explain the basis upon which this piece of work is grounded it is necessary to elucidate
a number of issues.

**Definitions**

Perhaps the most basic is to clarify the definition of “running away” which we have worked
to. A number of terms associated with different facets of running away are in common usage
— being thrown out, homeless, roofless, on the streets, absconding, going missing, sofa-surfing.
All have significant meaning in this context and serve to amplify what we wish to convey in
our use of “running away” — that amongst those who run away there are a broad variety of
experiences and, indeed, that many young people are in some way forced to leave home rather
than choosing to leave.

For reasons of succinctness in the text we have used “running away” throughout the report
as an umbrella phrase to encompass all the differing experiences of being away from home.
On occasions where there is need for complete precision we make a distinction between those
who run and those who are forced out.

It is also important to be aware that we made a conscious decision not to impose a pre-
defined concept of running away during the fieldwork for this study. It was decided to encourage
and embrace a diversity of definitions from all who took part to enhance a full understanding
of what running away really means to those involved.

The final element in defining our approach to definitions is to add that, in keeping with
the premise of the previous paragraph, we did not specify a minimum duration for a running
away incident. This meant that we collected some data on brief episodes of running, but the
main preoccupation in the report is with those who stay away from their home at least overnight
— unless otherwise stated all the reported statistics relate to young people with this experience.

**Previous research**

As has already been stated, this study builds upon the work done during 1999 which
culminated in the *Still Running* report.

*Still Running* itself was conceived as a response to a number of gaps in previous knowledge
from studies of the issue. These key studies in the history of research into running away had
provided important insights into the phenomenon. However, they were somewhat limited in
their scope in that they focused on sub-groups within the overall population of young people
who run away — young people reported as missing to the police, young people making use of
a service for runaways, young people missing from care. They were also geographically limited,
concentrating on restricted areas of Great Britain. It was, therefore not possible for them to
convey a full picture.

We make reference to these studies in the text of the report and it seems appropriate to
mention them here — *Young Runaways: Findings from Britain’s First Safe House*, Newman, The
Children’s Society, 1989, [Analysis of missing persons reports and interviews with young people
- England and Wales]; *Young Runaways: Exploding the Myths*, Abrahams and Mungall, NCH
Action for Children, 1992, [Analysis of missing persons reports from five police authorities in
England and Wales]; *Hidden Truths: Young People’s Experiences of Running Away*, Rees, The
Children’s Society, 1993 [Questionnaire survey of young people plus interviews with users of
young person’s refuge in Leeds]; Running the Risk: Young People on the Streets of Britain Today, Stein et al., The Children’s Society, 1994 [Questionnaires and interviews with young people and professionals involved with four projects for runaways in England and Wales]; Nowhere to Hide: Giving Young Runaways a Voice, Barter, Centrepoint/NSPCC, 1996 [Interviews with young people staying in refuge in London]; Going Missing: Young People Absent from Care, Wade et al., Wiley, 1998 [Questionnaires and interviews with young people who had run from care and with social work professionals and carers involved - England].

These studies of aspects of running away in Britain were preceded by a large body of research in the United States. Although we do not make extensive use of these works there is one primary text which offers a good overview and to which we refer in this report – The Social Psychology of Runaways, Brennan et al., Lexington, 1978.

The leads given in these key texts were developed in Still Running to provide an exhaustive and thoroughgoing analysis of running away across the UK. The study drew on information from over 13,000 young people and over 400 agencies in 27 different areas selected to ensure a wide and rigorously representative sample. Hence it also seems appropriate to contextualise this country-specific report by giving a very brief overview of the findings in Still Running (other findings are referred to in the main body of the report).

**Prevalence and characteristics**
- One in nine young people in the UK run away from home or are forced to leave and stay away overnight before the age of 16.
- Over half (54%) only run away once, but around one in eight (12%) run away more than three times.
- Around a fifth (19%) of young people said that they were forced to leave home rather than run away.
- More females (11.5%) run away than males (8.5%).
- Young people who start running away before the age of 11 are particularly likely to go on to run away repeatedly.

**Triggers**
- Problems at home are the primary reason for running away.
- There are a wide range of problems and family conflict is the most common.
- Over a quarter of young people run away due to physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.
- Young people who live in step families or with a lone parent are significantly more likely to run away than those living with both birth parents.

**Experiences**
- The majority of young people remain in their local area when they run away.
- The experience of being away had negative and positive aspects. Many young people felt that they had time to think and relief from pressure whilst away. However, many felt lonely, hungry or frightened, and a large minority had faced risks such as sleeping rough and being physically or sexually assaulted whilst away.
- The majority of young people rely on friends and relatives for support whilst away, but around one in seven relied solely on more risky strategies including stealing, begging, and ‘survival sex’ (performing sexual acts in return for money, food, shelter or any other basic need).
- Most young people return home of their own accord.
**The legal position of young people under 16 who run away from home**

When reading this report one needs to be clear about the status under the law of a young person who has run away, to fully appreciate the vulnerability of their situation.

It is an offence to “harbour” any child under 16 who has left home (the Children [Northern Ireland] Order 1995). Only in certain limited circumstances can a young person apply to the court for a Residence Order (the Children [Northern Ireland] Order 1995) which grants rights of parental responsibility to a new carer. It is common practice for the police to return a young runaway to her/his parents or carers at the earliest opportunity.

For these three reasons it is not legally or practically possible for a young person to choose to leave home under the age of 16.

The only exception to this is legislation which offers sanctioned time out if a young person elects to take refuge. Across the UK there is legal provision for the setting up of refuges which are exempt from the laws on harbouring to enable them to accommodate young people under 16 for a brief period. These provisions are laid down in Article 70 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

As yet no refuges have been set up, so, despite the legal framework being in place, this is not an option for under-16s in Northern Ireland.

[Since the implementation of the Children Act in 1989, five have been set up in England and Wales. Only one now remains in operation in London (run by a consortium of voluntary and statutory sector bodies) after the recent demise of the Leeds Safe House (run by The Children’s Society), which means that there are now bed spaces for only 12 young people in one location in the UK].

In addition to this under-16s have no legitimate options to support themselves or find a place to live whilst away from home. They are not entitled to any welfare benefit, have limited ability to work, should legally still be attending school and cannot enter into a contract to obtain independent accommodation.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

All our decisions about research design were premised on the main agreed aims of the project and informed by a set of baseline ethical principles.

**Aims**

- To estimate the prevalence and characteristics of young people under 16 running away or being forced to leave home.
- To learn more about patterns of running away and/or being on the streets, including reasons, circumstances and events whilst away and on returning home.
- To identify the potential needs of the young people in the target group and to explore appropriate responses to these needs.

**Ethics**

- All participants would be given as much information as was practicable according to the situation. They would also have the opportunity to question the information-provider who would make every reasonable attempt to answer all queries. This would enable fully-informed consent to participation.
- Equally, it would be stressed in all settings that the respondent had the right to refuse to participate and that they retained this right throughout their participation in the process. Any withdrawal at any point would be respected without question.
- With particular reference to the involvement of young people it was decided, given the age-group concerned and the nature of the study, that parental consent to participation would not be sought – young people would be credited with the maturity to give their own informed consent.
• All participants would be offered confidentiality. (The only limit on this was the proviso that in exceptional circumstances it might have to be breached – for example, if an interviewee indicated that any young person was at serious risk of harm or that their life was in danger. Even then the participant would be informed before the issue was taken further).

• All participants would be given anonymity: information would only be shared within the research team and conveyed judiciously in reported findings to prevent the identification of any individual or school.

These principles were applied throughout the research with appropriate fine-tuning as necessary within different components.

Methods

The data contained in this report was collected during two phases of fieldwork and through two complementary methods: a schools survey and interviews (with agency professionals and young people with experience of running away – in three stages, as described below). The pattern of data collection is detailed in the following table:

Table 1: Research phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE ONE (Spring 1999)</th>
<th>Schools survey (all three areas)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28 agency contacts/short interviews (Strabane and Belfast)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 detailed agency interviews (Strabane and Belfast)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22 in-depth interviews with young people (Strabane and Belfast)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE TWO (Spring 2000)</th>
<th>15 agency contacts/short interviews (Carrickfergus)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 detailed agency interviews (Carrickfergus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 in-depth interviews with young people (Carrickfergus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 (additional) agency contacts (Belfast)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 (additional) detailed agency interviews (Belfast)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each research component merits full explanation here, as does the sampling strategy employed.

Sampling

Due to the smaller population of Northern Ireland it was not possible to replicate the sophisticated sampling technique used for England in Still Running (where 16 areas were selected according to criteria including population density, economic conditions, and levels of minority ethnic residence). Instead the areas chosen were purposively selected – Belfast, because it is the largest city, and Carrickfergus (to represent a suburban area) and Strabane (rural area) using census data and taking into account the need to include a geographical spread. The Northern Ireland sample could not hope to give as precise a picture as the UK-wide sample, but it is representative enough of the whole population to give reliable and significant findings.
Figure 1: The sample areas in Northern Ireland

Survey

Once the sample areas had been selected the schools survey was undertaken to achieve an overall picture of the size of the issue – to produce estimates for numbers of under-16s who run away, look at identifying characteristics of this group and acquire some indications of reasons for running and experiences whilst away from home.

Schools were chosen as the most obvious forum for obtaining a captive set of suitable respondents. However, in the nature of the issue of running away, there is an inherent irony in this. It may well be (as previous research has suggested) that runaways are over-represented amongst those who are regular non-attenders or are excluded from school. This approach would also preclude the examination of running away as an issue for young people with special needs who do not attend mainstream schools. In Still Running these weaknesses in the main sampling strategy were redressed by administering additional surveys in pupil referral units and in special schools. This did not happen in Northern Ireland and so it is possible that the estimates for overall prevalence slightly underestimate the situation here.

Access to schools necessitated a staged process. The director of the education board in each of the three areas was written to with information about the research and to seek permission to speak to schools. After this headteachers were contacted individually. In Strabane and Carrickfergus all upper schools were approached and all took part. In Belfast a representative sample was compiled of grammar and secondary modern, Catholic and Protestant and schools with single sex intakes, and headteachers were contacted. There were a number of refusals in Belfast, but in each case a similar substitute school was found.

The questionnaire was completed by 14 and 15-year-olds – all those students in Year 11 who were present on the day of the survey. Since our aim was to gather information on running away from young people under 16, and since propensity to run increases with age, we would have preferred to survey those in the year above. However, the fieldwork took place between March and June and the potential logistical difficulties of examination timetables and school leaving for those in Year 12 dictated that this was not sensible.

In order to facilitate the completion of the questionnaires each school in Northern Ireland was visited by a member of the research team. A presentation was given to the year group during which they were offered the opportunity to ask questions of their own. The questionnaires were then completed individually in class.

The survey itself included sections on background information (demographic characteristics, family form, quality of relationships with carers, school experiences and personal issues), actual running away experience (if applicable), and general views on how young people who run, or
are at risk of running, might be helped. Some questions had a tick-box format with room for additional comments, whilst others were open-ended.

**Data processing and analysis**

The data from the questionnaires was input onto a database. Quantitative data was then transferred to SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for statistical analysis, and the answers to open-ended questions were transferred to TextSmart for initial analysis and coding.

The statistical analysis made use of a variety of robust non-parametric tests. Chi-square tests were used for bivariate nominal data. Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used for bivariate data with one ordinal and one nominal variable. Correlations using Kendall’s tau-b statistics were calculated for bivariate data involving two ordinal variables.

Where a result is reported as statistically significant, this means that the p-value of the test was less than 0.05 (i.e. often termed “95% confidence”) unless otherwise stated.

Whilst the survey provided a large dataset of quantitative information at the end of phase one, the interviews were an evolving strand during both phases of fieldwork. The first stage was work with agency professionals.

**Interviews with professionals**

Those professionals who contributed their thoughts included social workers, police officers, youth workers, housing workers, advice centre workers, education workers and various others involved in area-unique projects with differing roles.

Initial contact was made with the more easily identifiable of these workers (primarily those in the statutory sector) and a short interview undertaken over the telephone. In these interviews we gathered basic information about the specific worker’s knowledge of young people running away in their area, their estimate of numbers and typical characteristics, and an explanation of what the agency did. This data was then assembled to construct a picture for each area. This served to give an outline of agency views and offered a forum to obtain other useful local contacts. Once all relevant contacts had been made, the group was distilled to those with best knowledge to do full, tape or minidisc-recorded interviews (both face-to-face and over the phone). Through these we were able to acquire a more detailed insight into the problem in each area (including an understanding of the gaps in service provision as perceived by the key players), and to source potential runaway interviewees.

The information from both short and long interviews was entered onto a database and was used for a thematic analysis of the interview content.

**Interviews with young people**

The culmination of the process for each area was the in-depth interviews with young people.

As mentioned above, agency contacts were the prime source for young people to interview. The main venues for these interviews included youth advice and drop-in projects, youth and community centres, children’s homes and streetwork projects: also, hostels, in the case of some interviewees who were 17 or older at the time of interview but had had a running career that had begun before they were 16.

Potential participants were sent written details about the research before a visit to the venue. The researcher(s) would then call and talk to young people who had expressed an interest in taking part and then conduct interviews as appropriate. All young people were paid £5 expenses for their participation. This payment was not conditional on completing the interview and did not in any way relate to the quality of their story, or the length of the interview.

The young people’s interviews were in three parts. The first mainly consisted in the interviewer clarifying the purpose of the research, explaining the ethical principles and the policy on confidentiality, and offering the young person the chance to withdraw in the light of this explanation. (Clearly there was the opportunity for informal, off-the-record discussion at this point in the interview).
The middle part was the semi-structured interview itself which covered the young person's current situation, an overview of their life, detailed discussion of the times they had run away, a section on their involvement with school, social services and any other relevant agencies, and their views on what could be done to help young people who run away. This part of the interview was tape or minidisc-recorded with the young person's consent.

The concluding part was flexibly structured to debrief the young person. The interviewer asked the young person how they felt and, if necessary, offered advice and information about ways to deal with any emotional or practical issues that had arisen during the interview. The interviewer also used this period to return to any matters which might relate to the previous discussion on confidentiality (e.g. child protection).

As with the agency workers' interviews, the information from the young people was summarised and stored on a database along with pertinent quotes. The analysis of the data included drawing up a pen picture of each young person's story, categorising issues experienced by the young person and looking at their views on what might be done to help young runaways. It also developed to encompass a more detailed chronological analysis of many areas of the young person's life, most especially in relation to their running career.

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**Case study 1 – Michael**

Michael had never met his father. During his childhood he had become very close to his uncle, who lived nearby. When Michael was 12 his uncle died. Michael was devastated:

"He was the only one who ever listened to me ... It just made me go mad. I was doing all these strange things ... just going out and trying to cut my wrists and stuff ... taking drugs and starting up drinking, and all."

Michael said that his mother had always hit him, but after the death began to beat him severely on a regular basis:

"After my uncle died she started hitting me hard, really hard with weapons and stuff ... one time she broke a tennis racket over my leg - I had to go to hospital. She threw me down the stairs and I broke my arm ... and, you know, just really, really hard beatings."

Michael began to run away frequently – his mind was in turmoil and he could find no peace at home:

"I'd just go to the streets ... just to clear my head a bit when I get confused about something."

He often stayed away for days or weeks at a time, staying secretly in friends' bedrooms or sleeping rough and stole food to feed himself and alcohol to keep warm and blot out his problems.

His running only stopped when he was placed in a secure unit as a result of his offences. He then moved into the residential care. He is beginning to settle and find some stability and is happier in care:

"It's better here than it is at home - there's more freedom and they don't hit you."
OVERVIEW

In this chapter we briefly present some key findings, based on the survey of school pupils, looking at:

- How many young people run away
- Which young people run away
- Why young people run away
- What happens when young people run away

We will then go on to explore the latter two categories in much more detail in subsequent chapters, making use of the in-depth interviews carried out with young people as well as the survey.

HOW MANY YOUNG PEOPLE RUN AWAY IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

The survey of over 1,300 young people carried out through schools enables us, for the first time, to estimate the number of young people who run away in Northern Ireland.

Young people in the survey were asked a basic question about whether they had ever run away, and then a number of more detailed questions about their experiences, including how many nights (if any) they had stayed away for. We are therefore able to estimate the proportion of young people who run away, and those who stayed away overnight.

Overall 16% of young people surveyed in Northern Ireland said that they had run away or been forced to leave home at some point. However, this was sometimes only for a few hours.

One in 11 (9%) of those surveyed had spent at least one night away from home on the last occasion they had run away or been forced to leave. Because most of the young people were some way off their sixteenth birthday at the time they were surveyed (with some only being 14 years of age) this is an underestimate of the proportion of young people running away over night in Northern Ireland. Making an allowance for this factor, we estimate that just under one in ten (9.9%) of young people in Northern Ireland will run away or be forced to leave and spend at least one night away from home before their sixteenth birthday. This compares to an estimate of around 11% for the UK as a whole. Although the Northern Ireland estimate is lower than that for the rest of the UK, the difference is not large enough to be statistically significant, so there is a lack of evidence that the rate of running away in Northern Ireland is substantially different from that in England, Scotland or Wales.

We were also able to compare rates of running away in the three areas surveyed in Northern Ireland. Although the rate of running away in Strabane was slightly higher than in Belfast and Carrickfergus, again the differences were not significant. This matches the finding for the UK as a whole that there were no systematic differences in running away rates in city, suburban and rural areas.
In summary then, our key estimates are shown below:

**Figure 2: Key estimates of running away in Northern Ireland**

- One in ten young people in Northern Ireland run away or are forced to leave home, and spend at least one night away from home before the age of 16.
- There are around 3,500 running away incidents per annum in Northern Ireland.
- Over 2,000 young people under 16 run away from home each year in Northern Ireland.

**WHO RUNS AWAY?**

Previous research has shown significant differences in rates of running away amongst different sub-groups of young people. It is therefore interesting to explore whether such differences are evident in the Northern Ireland survey.

**Gender**

The rates of running away for females and males were almost identical in Northern Ireland (slightly higher for males but not significantly so). This is an interesting contrast with the rest of the UK where several research studies have found that females are significantly more likely to run away than males.

**Age**

Just over half of the young people (52%) who had run away overnight had first done so as teenagers. Just under one in five (19%) had done so before the age of 11.

**Household type**

In the survey we asked young people about the current state of family form in which they were living. Effectively, since the survey asked retrospectively for details on the last episode of running, this meant that there was a possibility that family form may have subsequently changed. However, given the difficulties of attempting to capture the intricacies of changing family form which occur in some young people lives, we felt this was the best strategy and that it would provide useful broad information on family context and running away. (We were able to redress the issues of developing family context and running behaviour in the young people’s interviews, wherein we asked about the chronology of events and the interaction of these with running incidents – these will be considered in the next chapter).

Eight in ten young people in the Northern Ireland survey were living with both birth parents, which is a higher proportion than for the UK survey as whole (seven in ten). Correspondingly fewer were living with a parent and a step-parent (4% in Northern Ireland compared to around 10% for the UK).

There were significant differences in running away rates amongst young people living in different family forms:

**Table 2: Running away rates amongst young people living in different family forms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family form</th>
<th>% running away overnight</th>
<th>No. of people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both birth parents</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and step-parent</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One in five young people living in a household with a parent and step-parent had run away overnight compared to 13% living with a single parent and only 7% living with both parents. These figures are almost identical to those for the UK as a whole (21%, 13% and 7% respectively for the same family types).

To highlight the significance of this relationship one might say that although only one in twenty-five of our sample lived with a step-parent, one in five of them will have run away overnight as compared with less than one in fourteen of those who live with both birth parents. The figures point to family form as being a key factor linked to young people running away.

**Economic factors**

Earlier research on running away has sought to uncover links between economic disadvantage and running away. Rees (1993) proposed that there was a connection from a study of young people in Leeds.

The schools survey in this study sought to look at household poverty as it might relate to running away behaviour by asking two questions of the respondents: how many people in their household were in paid employment and did they have free school meals. It was felt that these indicators could give some reliable, if rather limited, information on the domestic economic circumstances of each young person.

When the data was analysed there was little evidence of a link between poverty and running away in Northern Ireland. The difference in running away rates amongst young people, according to the two measures described above, were not significant. A full analysis of the data across the UK suggested that there was no clear evidence of a direct link between poverty and running away. It was not the standard of living within a household but rather the quality of relationships that was a strong determinant of running away behaviour.

**Other factors**

Previous UK research has indicated much higher than average rates of running away amongst young people living in substitute care, and significant differences between young people of different ethnic origins. In the Northern Ireland survey sample there were insufficient numbers of young people in care, and in minority ethnic groups, for us to be able to explore these differences.

**WHY YOUNG PEOPLE RUN AWAY**

Exploring the issue of why young people run away is a complex task. As other research in the UK and elsewhere has shown, running away is often a response to long term problems which young people have experienced. In this chapter we begin to explore young people’s reasons for running away by looking at the information given in the survey by young people about the most recent time they ran away. We will then go on in subsequent chapters to look at the wider context in which running away took place.

Young people were asked two questions about the reasons for running away/being forced to leave on the most recent occasion. First, they were asked to categorise their reasons into one or more of four categories. The results are shown in the table below:

**Table 3: Broad reasons for running away (survey questionnaire)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>% selecting this category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems at home</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal problems</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems at school</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen, most young people selected more than one category. The most common category was problems at home, selected by almost three-quarters of the young people who had run away overnight.

Of those young people who did not say they ran away due to problems at home, 13% said it was due to personal problems only, 5% due to school problems only, and 8% due to personal and school problems. Thus problems classified as 'personal' were clearly the second most important explanation for running away, and school problems alone were relatively rare.

Young people were also asked an open-ended question about why they ran away or were forced to leave. Almost half of those who had been away overnight answered this question. Because of this response rate (both in terms of proportions and numbers) it is not possible to come up with estimates of the proportions of young people running away for different reasons. However, the explanations given by young people illustrate the whole range of reasons identified in previous research on running away, with explanations often covering more than one reason.

**Family-based reasons**

In *Still Running*, the most common family-based reasons given by young people throughout the UK for running away on the most recent occasion were: arguments and conflict (27%); violence or the threat of violence (12%); emotional abuse (scapegoating and differential treatment of siblings) (9%); emotional neglect and rejection (6%); parental disharmony (6%); step-parent issues (4%); and boundaries and control issues (4%).

These reasons were all regularly mentioned by young people in the Northern Ireland survey as the following quotes from eight young people who completed the survey questionnaire illustrate:

**Figure 3: Sample reasons for running away (survey questionnaire)**

"Because I was having problems with my parents, arguments and too much was said and dad hit me several times."

"My mum was pestering me, blaming me for everything, saying I marked her clothes, she was doing this constantly for two years and she always told lies about me. She used to hit me really hard until one day I hit back in about form 1. By form 2 she learnt other ways to get at me. It got to the stage when I had to leave."

"Because I didn’t like it at home. My parents were calling me names - i.e. 'stupid cunt' and ‘stupid bastard'."

"I ran away because my mother kept shouting at me for no reason and was treating me different than my other sisters."

"I didn’t feel loved and thought my family would be better off without me."

"Fights were going on in the house."

"I hate my mother’s boyfriend."

"Because I felt trapped and my family is too strict."

**Personal problems**

As we have already seen, the second most common set of factors leading to running away were personal problems. Young people’s comments indicate a wide range of issues, from relationship troubles (with boyfriends or girlfriends) to problems with alcohol use, but depression and difficulties in coping were the most common themes as illustrated by the following two quotes:

"I had just gone through a very bad experience in my life a couple of months beforehand and it all got too much trying to cope with it on my own. I couldn’t tell anyone about it as it would only hurt them too much."
“I ran away because I was very depressed. My mother was drinking heavily and my family had found out that I was sexually abused for many years when I was younger.”

School issues

Although school-based problems were not usually a primary reason for running away, there were often school issues which were mentioned as additional or contributory factors. Issues relating to pressure at school and problems with peers were occasionally mentioned as the sole reason for running away:

“I was under too much pressure from school.”

“Problems with my school friends, they didn’t want to know me.”

Issues specific to Northern Ireland

There was almost no mention in the survey of any reasons for running away specifically linked to Northern Ireland sectarianism. One exception was the following:

“My parents felt that they couldn’t control me any more and they sent me to live with my gran. She lives in a dominant Protestant area and my father thought that it would teach me a lesson. I have had run-ins with the police twice and got caught shop-lifting, drinking and smoking.”

However, there may be limits to the kinds of information that people will disclose in a survey of this kind, and as we shall see later the in-depth interviews give more information on this issue.

In general, the kind of information gathered in the survey must be regarded as no more than a rough indicator of the immediate triggers which led to young people running away. As we will see in the next two chapters the real reasons for running away are usually much more deep-rooted and complex than the above analysis would suggest.

EXPERIENCES OF RUNNING AWAY

We will go on in Chapter 5 to explore young people’s experiences of being away from home in some detail. This section briefly presents some of the main basic findings from the survey about running away.

Number of times young people had run away

The majority of young people who said they had run away had done so only once and only one in five of the young people had run three times or more. Looking only at those who had run away overnight, the proportion is slightly higher (25%).

As with the UK study, the Northern Ireland survey showed a strong link between the early onset of running away and repeat running away. Over 30% of those who had run away more than once had started running away before the age of 11, compared to only 10% of those who had only run away once.

How long young people were away for

Just over half of the young people in the survey had only been away for one night on the only or most recent occasion that they were away from home. Around a quarter had been away two to six nights and a quarter for a week or more. There was no difference between males and females in this respect.

Young people who had run away more often also stayed away longer on average. However, as shown in the UK study, this does not necessarily mean that there is a developing pattern to running away. It seems more likely that young people who run away repeatedly display a different pattern from the outset.
Running away or forced to leave?

Of those young people who had stayed away for at least one night, six out of every seven classified themselves as having run away and the remaining one in seven said that they had been forced to leave home.

Where young people slept

More than half the young people went either to friends (33%) or relatives (23%) on the only or most recent occasion that they ran away. Of the remainder, most said that they slept rough, amounting to 36% of all the young people who had been away over night. This is a higher proportion than for the UK as a whole (25%).

The proportion of runaways sleeping rough was not significantly different in the three areas, although it was slightly higher in Belfast.

There were however large differences in behaviour according to sex:

Table 4: Where young people slept by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Males were most likely to sleep rough (41%) and quite unlikely to go to relatives (7%). Females, on the other hand were most likely to go to relatives (41%).

There was also a strong association between the number of times young people had run away and whether they slept rough. 24% of those who had run away once said they had slept rough, compared to 61% of those who had run away more than once.

Similarly, young people who slept rough were also likely to stay away longer than young people who did not. Three-fifths (60%) of those who slept rough stayed away for more than one night, compared to 56% of those who slept at relatives and 34% of those who stayed with friends.

All in all, then there is a group of young people who run away more often, for longer periods, are more likely to sleep rough and consequently face greater risks whilst they are away.

How far young people travelled

In the schools survey, two-thirds of the young people who were away for at least one night said that they did not go outside their local area. Even amongst the other third, it appears that many did not travel very far, and only seven mentioned travelling to a large city (three to Belfast and two each to Dublin and London). This fits with the findings of previous UK research which has indicated that runaways tend to stay local rather than seek “the bright lights”.

There were no significant differences in responses to travelling outside the area according to where young people slept, how many times they had run away, or how long they spent away.

SUMMARY

The survey shows that running away is a common phenomenon in Northern Ireland – an estimated one in ten young people run away overnight before the age of 16. This figure is in line with estimates for the UK as a whole. It means that there are around 3,500 overnight running away incidents per year in Northern Ireland, and that over 2,000 young people run away for the first time each year. There is no evidence of differences in running away rates in
the three areas surveyed. However, at a more individual level there are differences in running away rates for young people in different household types, with young people currently living in step-families the most likely to have run away. There was less evidence of an association between poverty and running away, and it appears that it is the quality of family relationships rather than economic factors which affect the likelihood of a young person running away. Indeed, in most cases, young people report that it is problems within the home environment (such as conflict, abuse and neglect) rather than personal or school problems which led to them running away.

Most young runaways in the survey had only run once or twice, but there is some evidence of repetitive running away and this is linked to an early age of onset of running away. Inevitably, there was considerable diversity in young people’s experiences of running away, ranging from some young people who run away for one night and stayed with relatives to those who had run away for several weeks or more and had been at considerable risk (see Chapter 5 for further discussion).

**Case study 2 – Connor**

Connor had been running away from home since he was 9.

Now 14, he first ran because he felt caught between his warring separated parents. He lived with his mother who was continually putting his father down and making allegations that he used to beat her up.

Connor was so upset by this that he ran out of the house and spent the night sitting in a subway with no coat or food. The next day he went to the local library for warmth and shelter. His older brother came in and took him home.

After this he ran frequently; partly, he said, because his mother found a new partner who moved into the house. Connor often fell out with his mother’s partner – he said that he treated him unfairly and sometimes hit him.

“My mum’s boyfriend was hitting me ‘n’ all...and I wanted to kill him. And my mum started taking his side... and then I thought I wasn’t wanted in the family.”

It was easy for him to spend nights away because, even at 9, he had a key to the house and could let himself in and out without his mother knowing.

Connor began to run away regularly and over time his running activities became increasingly dangerous. One episode, when he was 13, escalated from a “jaunt” to Belfast (where he intended to “have a good time” drug-taking with three friends) to boarding a ferry across the Irish Sea. When they landed Connor was not even sure where they were. The group had very little money so they slept in a barn and stole food and cider from local shops. Eventually, after a few nights, the farmer caught them and they fled back to the ferry terminal to catch a boat home.

When he got back his mother initially refused to take him in. Connor spent a brief spell in foster care whilst social services negotiated a return home.

Connor said that he still runs away now, but not so often. Although he made light of it, he said that he had considered suicide on a number of occasions, once even writing a letter to his mother and going with a friend to the place where they intended to drown themselves, before abandoning the idea.

He said that the worst thing about running was going back:

“When you say (to yourself) ‘you’re gonna do it you don’t really think about it that much - you just, like, disappear... it’s... say a couple of hours later... that’s when you start to think about it... you just run away... and then you’re scared to go back... scared of what your family are gonna do when you get back and it makes you stay out.”
The home context

In next two chapters we will look at the contexts within which young people run away or are forced to leave their home – whether that be the micro-context of their immediate home life, the personal and psychological sphere, or the wider macro-context of issues outside the home and external influences.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the place where a young person lives and the people with whom they live have been shown to be a primary influence on running away, as shown in previous UK and US research (Rees, 1993; Brennan et al., 1978). In this chapter we will show how information from the schools survey, interviews with young people and interviews with professionals in Northern Ireland serves to support this premise.

When considering home context we are generally referring to the family unit in an individual household. We will use the convention of referring to other family members as "extended family". This is not to preclude the fact that there may be a number of different home contexts from which young people run not least that of substitute care; these will be covered later in the chapter.

The family context

We have already seen in the previous chapter that there are large differences in the rates of running away for young people living in different family forms, with young people in step-families being the most likely to run away, followed by young people living with a lone parent, and then young people living with both birth parents. We will now look at issues of quality of family relationships and how this might affect the likelihood of young people running away. Later in the chapter we will explore the links between quality of relationships and family form.

The quality of relationships with parents and carers

Previous research (Brennan et al, 1978) suggested that it was the quality of certain aspects of parent-child relationships within the family that were most closely linked with running away.

Although it was not possible to fully replicate the extensive scales used in the US study within the constraints of our survey, we did attempt to gauge the nature of familial relationships by asking six basic questions. The responses are shown in the tables opposite:
Table 5: Quality of family relationships by whether run away

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family form</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Had not run away</th>
<th>Had run away</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t get on with parents</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t feel treated fairly</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t feel understood</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t feel cared about</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think parents are too strict</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents hit a lot</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were significant differences between runaways and non-runaways, with runaways expressing more negative views of family relationships, on all six questions. Combining the answers to the six questions illustrates the above point even more clearly.

Table 6: Running away rates by negative responses on quality of family relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of negative response</th>
<th>% running away overnight</th>
<th>No. of people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 4</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 6</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost two-thirds of those young people who felt very negatively about their relationships with their parents had run away overnight, and a third of those with three or four negative responses had done so.

So our survey reinforced the finding that the quality of parent/carer-child relationships (as viewed by the young person) were a strong indicator of the propensity to run.

Links between family forms and the quality of family relationships

Given that family form and quality of relationships would seem to be key determinants of running behaviour we were led to then look at the links between the two.

The evidence from *Still Running* was that those young people who lived in a household which included a step-parent or with a single parent might tend to express more negative views about their domestic relationships. However, a test of the link between family forms and quality of relationships actually showed no significant difference in the number of negative responses for young people living in the different family forms. That is, in Northern Ireland (unlike the UK as a whole) there is no evidence that young people living with a single parent or with a parent and step-parent express more negative views about their relationships with their parents/carers than young people living with both birth parents.

A combined analysis of the influence of family form and quality of relationships on running away rates indicates that both are significant factors in their own right, although the quality of relationships appeared to play a somewhat bigger role than the type of family the young person lived in.
In summary then, we can conclude that young people who are unhappy in their family are much more likely to run away than those who are happy, irrespective of the type of family they live in. In addition, irrespective of the quality of relationships, young people living with a single parent or with a parent and step-parent are somewhat more likely to run away than young people living with both birth parents. However, as will be shown in Chapter 5, there was some evidence of young people not living with both birth parents being more likely to run to a relative, and we could speculate that the existence of a parent in another location might offer young people an additional place to run to.

The interviews with young people allowed the opportunity to explore home context issues in greater depth. Where possible in these interviews we sought to establish a chronology of events to enable a greater focus on how developments within the family might affect running behaviour.

In this section we will firstly look at young people’s accounts of family context before they began running away. We will then look at how this might have changed if they continued to run.

**The family context before running away**

An initial analysis of family context on all the interview sample pointed to four areas of interest: changing family form, parenting issues, sibling relationship issues and parental problems.

The majority of our sample had experienced a change, or often a number of changes in family form – this most often being due to parental separation or divorce, or more rarely, due to bereavement and/or reception into substitute care. At the time of interview only a quarter of the sample were still living with both birth parents. A third were living with a single parent (mostly mother but in one case with father) and another third were living with mother and a step-father. It was sometimes difficult to glean at what point a step-parent had been introduced, but one might reasonably assume, given the ages of the young people interviewed relative to their running behaviour, that in most cases this was before running away began.

The accounts of the young people underline the shifting nature of family context and the difficulty for many young people of recalling exactly when changes had occurred. More than half of the group had experienced changing partnerships for their main carer, whether these had become permanent relationships or were of a more transient nature. Four of the group referred directly to the serial relationships of their mothers before they had first run away and often how damaging these had been to themselves and the family. One young person spoke of his mother’s second marriage to a man who he described as a monster, who was violent towards both his mother and himself and three siblings. As he reflected:

“It’s always stuck in my mind, it’s always been there – I don’t know if it’s influenced any of the things I’ve done but it’s always been there.”

Other young people in single parent households alluded to the frequent presence of “mum’s boyfriend” around the house and sometimes referred to attempted “control” of their behaviour by these men:

“When I’m watching the TV he’d come in and take it off me. I’d go to him, ‘I was watching it first, and he’d grab me arm and twist it round … then he’d take the controller and I’d go upstairs and start shouting swear words ‘n’ all and trashing my room.”

Parenting issues were often a particularly strong strand in the young people’s stories: on a more minor level conflict over what was acceptable behaviour, boundary setting, expectations and so on, and on a more serious level, abuse of different kinds.

Often the arguments were over disagreements as to acceptable behaviour:

“She just couldn’t get on with me no more and I was doing her head in … not coming in, staying out late, and drinking and all this, that and the other …”
"I just wanted to live my own way. My mother didn't want me to do half the things I was doing and I was just going on ahead and doing them and ignoring her half the time."

For young women the main contentious issue was often expectations over household chores and/or child care:

"If my mum wants to go out she always gets me to babysit and sometimes I had plans to go somewhere else ... if I didn't babysit there'd be a big argument and sometimes the arguments would get really bad and they'd build up for a long time."

"She gets me to do all of the housework if she's not feeling well – she'll go to bed and leave me to do the housework and look after the wee ones."

However, equality of opportunity in terms of domestic drudgery was present in at least one household. One young man was an exception to the pattern:

"My uncle says I'm a glorified babysitter – I always babysit my brother and sister – and ... I make a lot of coffee for my mum and dad as well ... and I think I just got a bit fed up of it."

A number of the young people alluded to there being a culture of perpetual strife between themselves and one or more of their parents – half of the group spoke of ongoing conflict:

"I can't honestly remember what the argument started over, but it was just arguments constantly ... and I just felt like I was being pushed away to one side."

"My ma pisses me off ... I just don't like her ... full stop ... done."

A social worker summed up the tensions that exist in many homes:

"Mainly it's relationship difficulties, unrealistic expectations by parents in terms of what to expect of a teenager ... they expect perfect children and they can't come to terms with children who no longer are (children), who are pushing boundaries. Parents just can't cope with it – they don't want them to grow up."

A substantial proportion of the interviewees in the purposive sample referred to abuse prior to their running away. In most cases this was physical abuse:

"My mum's boyfriend was hitting me 'n' all ... and I wanted to kill him. And my mum started taking his side ... and then I thought I wasn't wanted in the family."

"My mother blamed me for not going to school for a whole week. She took the poker to me and told me that I was telling lies and she beat me with the poker. That's why I don't live there."

"He (father) used to just throw me out, 'n' all, in the street. Erm ... say if it was raining or snowing, he used to throw me out with just a t-shirt on. I mean, I was freezing – really, really cold, and I had no friends or anything out there."

There were also reports of emotional abuse:

"She's always made sure that nobody hears, like, if she threatens me or if she tells me to get out and not bother coming back, or if she's even saying anything, you know, like ... really nasty to me, I think she makes sure nobody hears her so she can deny it later – so it's my word against hers."

and of neglect and rejection:

"He (uncle) was the only one that ever listened to me – everyone else just pushed me aside and never talked to me or nothing."

Interestingly, none of the interviewees in the Northern Ireland sample referred to sexual abuse. It is a moot point as to whether this meant that none had actually suffered such abuse – estimates of prevalence amongst the general population have often proved to be problematic
Lost Youth: Young Runaways in Northern Ireland

(see The Research Team (Queen's University, Belfast) 1990) – and it is difficult to say definitively whether our runaway sample would be more likely to have been victims of sexual abuse. One might, however, point to the evidence from the UK-wide interviews where a number of young people spoke of sexual abuse as part of their home context prior to running away.

The issue of sibling relationships was spoken of by a number of young people. This was relevant in three different ways, the first being a perception of differential treatment amongst siblings by the adult(s) in the household, the second that of inter-sibling conflicts, and the third of aspirational desire to replicate an older sibling’s running behaviour. A quarter of the interviewees referred directly to differential treatment by their parent(s).

“It was like one rule for one and one rule for the other, so it wasn’t fair. It was horrible.”

“My mum wanted all girls, a ‘perfect’ family.”

In one case it was actually the favouritism bestowed on one child which led to conflict between both the adults and between the siblings and contributed towards the running away of the ‘favourite’:

“Dad doesn’t love them … my dad always says when he’s drunk that he loves me the best, so he does. And they can’t handle that.”

A number of interviewees spoke of the tensions within a household caused by sibling rivalry - many indicated that they were fed up with ongoing rows and fights with siblings,

“I despise my mum and I really, really hate my sister.”

and some that they were being bullied or physically abused at home by older siblings:

“My sister, she started hitting me as well – sometimes my mum just got so fed up she didn’t want to hit me anymore, so my sister came in and she started hitting me.”

The third aspect of sibling relationships which formed part of the context prior to running in a number of cases was that of older siblings who had previously run whom the young person looked up to. One young person said that her older sister had run more than 25 times and another boasted:

“My big brother’s run away I don’t know how many times … I’m trying to break his record! (laughing) His record’s 54!”

The final element of home life which was frequently a part of the context for the young people in the interviews was that of parental problems – physical or mental health problems, domestic violence, alcoholism and parental relationship difficulties. Parental problems were spoken of directly by more than a quarter of the interviewees.

One of the most prevalent problems was domestic violence: one in seven of the young people talked about this. Mostly this was male partner’s violence but in one situation it was the young person’s mother who was the perpetrator. The other issue most often spoken about was that of alcoholism of parent(s): again one in seven of the young people talked about this.

In two cases this had led to young people being moved to alternative care, either with a relative or with the local authority. For those who remained at home the situation became extremely difficult:

“My father drank and I was supposed to do everything in the house.”

“She’s a whole different person if she’s drinking. Sometimes that can be a good thing because whenever she’s drinking she will come in and give me a big hug … (and be) in a really soppy mood, but there’s other times when she’s drinking she’s in a really bad mood … she’s got into fights, she’s come home black and blue. She’s not been able to get up out of bed next morning, she’s fell downstairs, fellen (sic) out of taxis … she’s got into a fight with a man and he’s actually hit her. She gets in a real state at times.”

The mental health of a number of parents was spoken about by a significant number of the interviewees, sometimes directly, as though there had been a diagnosis at some point:
"She suffers from depression ... she's in bed a lot so I'm just left to do stuff ... There's been times when she's been in bed ... maybe all day ... she might get up in the morning and make the wee ones breakfast and make herself breakfast, and go to bed about 11 o'clock in the morning and just stay in bed all day until the next day."

and sometimes in a more flippant way:

"She was a bit of a 'schizo' ... moody, vile moody!"

In two cases the interviewees made reference to physical ill health of their parent(s). Both young people talked about this specifically in terms of the additional tensions it caused at home:

"I argue with my mum a lot. She's not very well and I feel guilty about it."

"She takes it out on me and my two sisters."

Younger incidents of first running away

An additional layer of analysis which we undertook when considering all the aspects of home context was to divide the interviewees into those who had first run away before they were eleven and those who were over that age for the first incident. This was partly to see if there were any differences between the two groups but also to allow us to identify key messages from the younger age group, this being a particular consideration because the UK survey suggested that those who run before secondary school age are more likely to have an extended 'career' of running (i.e. run more than three times).

A quarter of our sample fell into this category, and, without exception, they had all run on a number of occasions – the majority more than ten times and none with less than five incidents in total.

But was there any difference in the early life home context for this group? In some cases there was insufficient detail in the interviews to be able to fully explore these issues. However, it was apparent that of this group there was some commonality of experience in terms of early home context.

Early separation from at least one birth parent was an experience of the majority of the group. Four of the young people had been mostly brought up by a single parent (one being by father, due to mother's mental health problems, the others by mother) and these separations from a birth parent had mostly (3 out of 4) occurred in infancy (in one case before birth). In addition one young person had been taken into care during infancy due to parental alcohol problems.

Abuse was prevalent amongst the group – only one did not report any abuse. This was most often physical abuse by the single parent caring for them (in five out of the six cases) and for some this was combined with rejection and neglect:

"... When I was born my ma wanted me up for an adoption ... she abandoned me – when I was just one day old she abandoned me. My daddy had to take over. My daddy bring me up until I was eleven or twelve."

It was interesting that in none of the four cases where there had been a single parent carer at the time of first running interview did the young person make reference to a new, stable relationship for their parent. This would imply that despite the fact that separation of the birth parents had occurred early in the young person's life in the majority of cases the parent had not subsequently formed any lasting adult relationship.

A comparison of the two groups, under-11s and over-11s, certainly seems to suggest that amongst those in the younger age group there was a significant concentration of some of the most notable aspects of a problematic family context – most particularly separation and abuse. It is also worth pointing out that given the relatively young age of first running incident this group of young people must have had these difficult experiences at a relatively younger age.

In general, therefore, it would seem that those who run away early in their lives have had a more disrupted early existence than those whose running is postponed.
Lost Youth: Young Runaways in Northern Ireland

There are two further issues which we wish to highlight in referring to age-related first incidents of running away. Unfortunately they were not clearly identifiable in sufficient volume within the Northern Ireland interviews (often because young people could not accurately recall the timescale for all the events during their lives) but were apparent in the UK-wide data. The issues concern the likely differences in home context for those who run later in their childhood.

- A higher prevalence of parental problems as an antecedent to first running (this possibly being because the older first runners were more able to identify and be aware of these problems by the time they ran).
- A higher frequency of reporting of conflict over the behaviour of the young person, often related to offending, drinking, drug-taking and so on. This often linked to problems of control and boundary-setting for the parent(s).

The developing family context

We will now briefly consider the developing family context for those who ran away repeatedly. It would be reasonable to say that in general those aspects of family context which the young people identified as being problematic prior to their first running away continued to be the main causes of their running behaviour. There were isolated incidents of, for example, bereavement, new physical abuse (by a single mother and by a recently-introduced step-father), geographical instability, parental relationship difficulties, and particular conflicts over rebellious behaviour, but no significant patterns amongst these.

Many of the young people indicated that there was an ongoing culture of conflict between themselves and their parent(s) which would boil over at various points. One young person spoke of the incessant triviality of the arguments:

“When I look back now it was petty things and the arguments should never have happened – but when you’re 14 years old you make these things out to be ten times the size that they really are ... It would’ve been the likes of the time I would’ve been able to stay out at night, who I was hanging around with, how much money my mum was giving me ... things like that.”

Often there was a perpetual power struggle, with parents vainly attempting to assert control:

“She tried to ground me all the time and I just walked out. I says, ‘I’m not putting up with you.’ I used to call her all the names under the sun – just whatever came into my head I’d say it.”

Perhaps more pertinent in examining the development of the family context is that there was frequently evidence of an acceleration, an increase in the intensity of the problems. For example, in one case the level of responsibility for a younger sibling given to a young woman in the sample had been so inappropriately extended over time that the interviewee indicated that she was increasingly taking on the role of being concerned for their psychological wellbeing, in lieu of her mother:

“Wee Danny would see this ... see different men coming in and out a lot and see me and mum fighting and me having to leave, and I just think it might be affecting him as well – it’s not fair on him seeing all of this happening.”

This blurring of appropriate roles was quite shockingly revealed to her:

“Whenever I first moved to (place name) one of our neighbours actually thought Danny was mine – I nearly died!”

In situations where there was abuse it was often the psychological burden in the longer term that underlay a continuation of running behaviour:

“He made my life miserable, like, you know, and he tortured my life. He nearly made me rip the life out of me. He hasn’t given me a life. It’s just recently I’ve just started getting on my feet again.”
"I'm a typical boy who doesn't have a mother to look after him - I feel sad because your mum holds the spokes of the whole family and without one there's no family. I have tried to be the best son I can be and to show her my love but she keeps on throwing it back in my face."

One noteworthy feature in a number of cases of persistent runaways was planned moves away from the main family unit in response to the problems and conflict at home. These were evident in five of the young people's stories and were either with family or sometimes with friends. In the case of moves to extended family or separated birth parent, these were usually initially regarded as permanent moves (although none of them proved to be so); in the case of moves to friends they were (almost) always viewed as a temporary, respite measure. One young person reflected on how much she had enjoyed being away from home:

"The people I've went to stay with have actually been nicer to me than my mum's ever really been. She's ... sometimes she gets in a bad temper and ... she can just be really, really cruel at times."

Variations on the theme of moving to a different home as part of a running career, were evident in a number of the interviews. Two of the young people had run to the other parent and stayed with them for a period of a few months in a bid to provoke a successful permanent move. A number of others had run to members of the extended family to seek time out from home.

Hence there is some clear evidence in both the above examples of planned moves (whether that be by the parent(s) or the young person running away) of ongoing instability in terms of family context for those who had an extended running career.

**THE SUBSTITUTE CARE CONTEXT**

One of the main findings in all previous UK studies of running away is the increased prevalence of running away amongst young people who live in substitute care. We had hoped to consider whether this finding applied equally in Northern Ireland, but, unfortunately, across the whole of our survey sample there were only three people living in foster care and none in residential care. We are therefore restricted to a brief summary of the results from the UK-wide survey to highlight the broad issues of substitute care and running away. (During the interviews we did talk to a number of young people who were either currently living, or had in the past lived, in substitute care – we will reflect on their experiences later in this section).

In terms of the UK-wide survey the findings on running from substitute care were stark and unambiguous:

- Young people currently living in foster or residential care were nearly five times more likely to have run away overnight (around 45% had done this) compared with those living in families (around 9.5%).
- 30% of young people who had ever lived in care had run away overnight.
- Of those who had spent some time in substitute care there was in increased likelihood of frequent running (not necessarily always from care): 32% had run away more than three times. Only 13% of those who had ever run but had never been in care had run as often.

There is a danger in reading too much into the headline figures from the data. The issue is in fact rather complex primarily because young people's care careers are often not straightforward, permanent and unchanging.

One illustration of this was that the survey revealed that of those who had spent some period of their lives in substitute care over half had run from their family on the most recent occasion (and of these over a third had only run once). Further to this, of those currently in care who had experience of running, only around half had run from care on the most recent occasion.
It is also worth remembering that those in care would be much more likely to have experienced the types of home context which might be conducive to running away (as described above) before they enter the care system. Hence the propensity for running of those in care would necessarily be higher. And, as suggested in previous research, a large proportion of those who run from care had already started running away while still living with their families.

For all the above reasons it is unjustified to see the high rates of running from care as an indictment of the care system. One might add that despite the focus on running from care, it probably represents a rather small proportion of overall running away - in the UK-wide survey only 3.4% of the sample had run from care on the most recent occasion (2.1% from foster care and 1.3% from children's homes) as compared with 96% who had run from the family.

The main gap in knowledge on running away from substitute care, despite extensive previous research on the subject (most particularly in Going Missing, Wade et al., 1998), was the interaction between the changing home contexts of substitute care and family for those (the majority) who move between the two. Information from the interviews with young people in Northern Ireland was somewhat limited so we have included some references to those done across the UK in order to fully consider the issues.

Almost half of the young people we interviewed in Northern Ireland had some experience of living in substitute care (13 out of 28). There would appear to be two identifiable subgroups: those who were already looked after by the local authority before they started to run and those who had run prior to being placed in care.

**Being in care before running away began**

This group was characterised by the early age at which they had come into care: most during the first three years of life and none later than the age of seven.

With one exception (long term fostering by relatives) these young people had had a number of placements, both fostering and residential and all had gone on to have extensive running careers.

All of the group had experienced severe disruption in their early years - bereavement of a parent or parents, debilitating alcoholism, rejection and/or psychological inability to care for infants. In one case a young person had spent much time coming to terms with the death of her mother from a stigmatised terminal illness:

"My mum died of AIDS. There's nothing I can do about it. It's done ... but I'm more aware of it now and I'm more understanding. I don't like people cracking jokes about it."

Just one of this group had run before the age of eleven. It is interesting to note that this would suggest that however disruptive their care and pre-care experiences, the majority conformed to the stereotypical pattern of not running away until adolescence.

Unfortunately there is little information in the Northern Ireland interviews on these young people's feelings about their care career. Just one young man alluded to the burden of being in care:

"Sometimes you can't handle being in a home - you get stuck because you lived in a home."

In the UK-wide interviews there was a clearer indication that generally this group tended to have more negative feelings about both the process of being taken into care and of being in care:

"I didn't understand. Ran up to the attic and locked myself in. I was thinking, 'Where am I? Where's my mum?' At that age I was too young to understand anything."

**Being in care after running away began**

The majority of interviewees in the care group for Northern Ireland had started to run before being placed in care.
There were several pertinent common features of this group. All of them had only entered the care system in adolescence, the youngest being twelve on reception into care. For nearly all, their care experience was either currently or previously a stay in a children’s home.

Virtually all of this group had continued to run whilst in care. However, as a number indicated, the reasons for running had usually changed. In most cases it had become running to be with friends (in most situations a peer group in the home community, rather than other residents) or relatives whom the young person wanted to visit. For both types of incident the running tended to be planned, proactive rather than reactive, and usually acknowledged as temporary rather than an escape from major problems in the home, as had been the case when living with their own family (e.g. there was no mention of conflict with other residents or with staff as a cause of running from care). So, although the running away pattern continued, it tended to ameliorate in terms of being planned and in some ways contained.

Most of this group had a relatively positive view of their children’s home (although, interestingly, the young man quoted below indicates his preconceptions of what care is usually like):

“It’s better than it is at home – more freedom and they don’t hit you … they’re (other residents) dead on. It’s not like any other children’s homes that you would see (where) they all pick on new ones, ‘n’ all. It’s not like that.”

In our Northern Ireland interview sample there was extremely limited experience of foster care for those who had run before becoming looked after.

It would be fair to say that, even in the minds of professionals, there is a preconceived idea that the majority of incidents of running away from care are about peer pressure and group escapes:

“When they go into care, because there is an atmosphere within the units of running, that, then, just fomented it and they continue then, unabated – the residential system is really failing these kids.”

Although the young people in the Northern Ireland sample did mention this as a reason for some of their running behaviour, in most cases, for both of the identifiable subgroups described above, there were more serious underlying causes. This echoed the findings from the UK interviews.

A third group was identified amongst the UK interviews which was not present in the Northern Ireland sample – that of young people who had first run after returning home from substitute care and were then re-admitted to care. However, there was little depth to this data and the main finding was that the main contributory factor for running behaviour was a highly problematic family context.

**SUMMARY**

Detailed analysis of young people’s histories indicates that the quality of family relationships is a, or perhaps the, key determinant of running away. A background of changing family structure (most often through parental separation or divorce and the introduction of step-parents) and significant issues in relationships between the young person and parents (including conflict and various forms of abuse, neglect and rejection) were key aspects of the family context for most of the young people interviewed. Conflict with siblings and problems which parents themselves were having were also sometimes important contextual factors. Young people who started running away at a young age were likely to have had particularly troubled family experiences usually involving separation from a parent and/or abuse.

UK research has shown that young people who have experience of substitute care are much more likely than average to run away. Unfortunately the survey in Northern Ireland did not include enough young people with these experiences to estimate the prevalence of running away amongst this group. However, almost half the interview sample in Northern Ireland had lived in substitute care, and their experiences are similar to those for other UK findings on this issue. Whilst some of these young people had been in care from a young age, those who had
entered as teenagers tended to have already started running away from home before moving into care, and had then continued this pattern.

**Case study 3 — Diane**

Diane’s mother was an alcoholic and had mental health problems. She had never seen her own father, but had a younger brother whose father used to physically assault her mother and both of the children before he moved out when she was 10.

As she got older Diane was often expected to take responsibility for the house and for looking after her brother. By 14 she was frequently babysitting until the early hours and would barely see her mother the next day as she recovered from her drinking binges. She became increasingly concerned about her mother,

> “She’s a whole different person if she’s drinking ... she’s got into fights, she’s come home black and blue. She’s not been able to get up out of bed next morning, she’s fell downstairs, fell out of taxis ... she’s got into a fight with a man and he’s actually hit her. She gets in a real state at times.”

and about the effect of her mother’s behaviour on her brother:

> “Wee Danny would see this ... see different men coming in and out a lot and see me and mum fighting ... and I just think it might be affecting him as well – it’s not fair on him seeing all of this happening.”

One weekend she refused to babysit (because she had plans herself) and a row erupted. Her mum eventually stormed out claiming that she had called the police. Diane’s aunt, who lived close by, took her and her brother in. Her mother came back the next day, but would only allow her brother to return home, so Diane stayed with her aunt. Living in such close proximity to her family was especially difficult because her mother tried to stop her seeing her brother.

> “I would be walking past and I’d see Danny out in the street and I would go over to him – mum would shout over and say, ‘Come on away from her.’ ... Then there would be an argument in the middle of the street.”

After some months, a reconciliation was achieved and Diane moved back home. But soon the situation got worse again. Her mother became depressed and was drinking heavily, arguing with Diane regularly and sometimes throwing her out. This sometimes forced her to approach friends’ families to give her a bed for the night, which proved to be a positive experience:

> “The people I’ve went to stay with have actually been nicer to me than my mum’s ever really been. She’s ... sometimes she gets in a bad temper and ... she can just be really, really cruel at times.”

Diane now lives in a stressful limbo:

> “I know it will happen soon again ... each day I wonder, you know, ‘tonight will I have to leave again and go to stay with somebody else?’”

She feels her social worker does not really take account of what she is going through:

> “When the problems start again ... Simon just says these things are ‘normal’ and there’s nothing they can do—he says it’s just ‘normal teenage stuff’ so I just have to kind of grin and bear it.”
The ongoing problems have so damaged her relationship with her mother that she has made a vow to herself:

“I've promised myself whenever I've turned sixteen I'm just going to move ... just somewhere really far away to get away from my mum.”