THE WIDER CONTEXT

In this chapter we will look at a range of issues within the wider context of a young person's life which might promote running away, or being forced out of home, under sixteen. These could broadly be divided into issues in the personal sphere, related to physiology and psyche – feelings, motivations, drug and alcohol use, offending, mental health – and issues in the external sphere, to do with how the community and its institutions exert influence over the lives of young people – school, peer group, economic factors, sectarianism.

We also consider agency intervention in the lives of young people, whether that be before running started or after, and look at young people's perceptions as to what effect this had had on their behaviour.

THE PERSONAL CONTEXT

The survey contained a checklist of ten items: it divided between those related to a young person's inner feelings and their concerns and anxieties over external issues. The responses for runaways and non-runaways are shown below:

Table 7: Personal issues by whether run away

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>% of young people with negative view</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling fed up/depressed</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling under pressure</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling lonely</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not feeling good about yourself</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about the future</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with boy/girlfriends</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with drugs</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with alcohol</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting in trouble with the police</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other problems</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results show a strong association between most of the personal issues and the likelihood of running away. Runaways score significantly higher than non-runaways on nine of the ten factors (the exception is "worried about the future" where the difference was marginal).

Particularly notable is the link between running away and problems with drugs, alcohol and offending. Around a third of the young people who identified themselves as having these problems had run away, and similarly around a third of young people who ran away ticked each of these items on the checklist.

Although one might reasonably infer that those with troubled personal lives are more likely to run away overnight, the figures should be regarded with some caution. As indicated previously, the survey was unable to establish a chronology of events in young people’s lives and therefore it is not possible to say how these factors interrelate with running incidents. In order to do this we had to look at the evidence from the young people’s interviews (with the caveat that sometimes interviewees were unsure about the exact timing of events in their lives).

**Substance usage – alcohol, drugs and solvents**

When we look at the evidence from the interviews with young people in Northern Ireland there is a clear indication that the use of intoxicating substances is a common factor in their experience. (Unfortunately, due to gaps in the data on personal issues in this sample, we would be hesitant in saying that this truly represents the situation – it is likely that the prevalence of these issues is under-represented here).

The majority of the experiences reported related to drinking at a young age. Although there was some ambiguity in the data, it seemed apparent that in a large proportion of cases this was closely related to peer influences (discussed below) and mostly formed a context for a continuation of running, rather than as an antecedent to the first episode (although some of the interviewees spoke of alcohol use prior to running away).

Most of the young people seemed not to regard their drinking as a problem. Some viewed it rather pragmatically, as a means to an end, that of escaping the psychological pressures of their situation:

"Last night my head was fried up. I was out with my friends and I just went down and bought drink … and collapsed myself. I drank a 10 glass bottle of Bacardi and four bottles of WKD (Irn Bru and vodka)."

Also, especially for young males, there was often an element of bravado:

"It gets me poleaxed … a two litre bottle of cider. It gets me way out of it."

From a purely practical perspective, one young person talked about the use of alcohol when on the run:

"It was how I was keeping warm at night sometimes."

It is worth noting that most of the young people who spoke directly about drinking within the Northern Ireland sample were sixteen and under when interviewed. Not only did this mean that the parameters of ‘problem drinking’ were perhaps difficult for them to conceptualise, it also meant that very few of them had (yet) developed lifestyles which might allow serious, heavy drinking: they were too young to have become alcohol dependent. For the UK-wide sample around one sixth spoke of alcohol use as a serious problem for them, often starting prior to their first running away episode.

The use of illegal drugs was common amongst the Northern Ireland interviewees. Just under a third of the sample talked about using drugs, usually on a regular basis. A number of the young people spoke of the availability of drugs:

"My friends would go and get them off dealers … they're everywhere around here, it's really easy to get them."
Lost Youth: Young Runaways in Northern Ireland

There was little indication that drugs use related to a pre-running context for any of the group – most often it was the use of cannabis (occasionally ecstasy or LSD) and in a recreational context. As indicated with alcohol use, the main link to running was perhaps that peer group use helped to perpetuate ongoing episodes of running after the initial incident (i.e. young people would run away to be with a group who were using drugs).

In the UK-wide data drug use was also mentioned in terms of being a cause of conflict between young people and their parents and thence leading to running away. This was an issue which professionals also alluded to:

"They can't cope with what their children are getting involved with and that basically they have no control."

There was also more evidence of harder drugs: crack cocaine and heroin. Professionals in Northern Ireland frequently acknowledged that the presence of hard drugs was minimal. However, there was a strong feeling that it was just a matter of time before they became a more regular feature of daily life in the province, exacerbating the problems for young people in difficult situations:

"You wouldn't as readily get the heavy drugs in Belfast as you would in other places ... because things have been quite controlled by the paramilitaries – but that is changing, almost as we speak."

Solvent abuse was mentioned by a number of the group – around one in five had misused aerosols or glue, some recreationally,

"When I was about 14 I used to do it all the time, just as a laugh ... a whole gang of us, relaxing."

some to a serious extent:

"I ended up taking it in my room, I got that addicted to it, and then I knocked myself out and then my mum found me."

In most cases, as with drug and alcohol use, there was a degree of vagueness as to the age at which this activity took place. However, in contrast to the other substances, most of the young people clearly indicated that solvent abuse was something that they had done when younger and given up some time ago. One might reasonably suggest, therefore, that solvent abuse does often form part of the context prior to first running away.

It is worth noting that there was substantial evidence from the interviews of alcohol, drugs and solvent use leading to other problematic behaviours which might contribute to an unsettled existence: stealing to acquire the substance or finance its acquisition, disruption of education and conflict at home.

Therefore, in a general sense the usage of these substances was contextually significant for running away behaviour. Although it was sometimes difficult to precisely determine the chronology of a young person's substance usage, one could confidently say that it is a factor in a substantial number of cases, particularly in the perpetuation of a running career.

Offending

When referring to 'offending' in this section we are talking about offences other than the criminal acts referred to above in the section of drug and alcohol use, such as buying alcohol under 18, the use of illegal substances, etc.

More than a third of the young people interviewed in Northern Ireland spoke of offending behaviour in relating their stories. In the majority of cases this was theft, usually from shops, and in most cases the young person concerned said that they had not (yet) been caught.

The relationship between offending and running away was not explored in great depth in the interviews. One issue identified in the UK-wide young people’s interviews (but not in those in Northern Ireland) was that of the friction caused at home as a consequence of the young person’s offending and how this could be an important factor in the build up to running away for the first time.
"When I was 14/15 I used to get in trouble a lot. I got in with the wrong crowd and me and me dad had a big argument and started fist fighting. I were really badly beaten up and I left that night and I didn't come back for two week."

Amongst the Northern Ireland sample, for a number of those who ran for an extended period of a few nights or more there were indications that stealing to survive became an issue. However, the main feeling was that petty offending contributed to an insidious culture of ongoing minor delinquency. Most of the offending was relatively insignificant and often cultivated within a peer group, and none of the interviewees in Northern Ireland, even the minority who had had formal involvement in the criminal justice system (for example, those on probation), mentioned it as a major factor preceding or coinciding with their running away.

**Mental health issues**

When considering the subject of mental health and young people one encounters a number of difficulties, not least problems of definition and professional reticence over labelling young people as having mental health problems.

In writing this section we have adopted a loose definition, encompassing a general recognition that young people’s relating of happenings — such as suicide attempts, self harm incidents, destructive rages and feelings of depression — are all tangible indicators of a deeper mental ill health.

The most commonly reported issue was suicide attempts. Almost a quarter of the interviewees said that they had made serious efforts to take their own lives.

"... I tried to commit suicide and I tried to jump off a bridge and throw myself in front of a train and everything."

Significantly, in more than half of these cases the young person had tried to commit suicide on more than one occasion. However, there was insufficient detail in most cases to rigorously determine whether the suicide attempts preceded first running away. Often it seemed they were part of a general ongoing unhappiness and had come after less serious running away episodes.

Self harm was mentioned by two of the interviewees, in both cases some time after they had begun an extended running career:

"When I was in the hostel ... I just cut myself ... sliced myself with a razor. It's better to hurt yourself than hurt somebody else."

Anger as a contributory factor in running behaviour was directly spoken of by a number of young people. Two interviewees specifically said that it was an uncontrollable surge of rage, after a slower accumulation of anger, that was the trigger to the first time that they ran away:

"It was just ... pressure ... see, I used to get name calling at school and instead of saying something I'd just let it build up inside me ... I just bottle it up. Something small sparked it off and I just sort of said to myself, 'To hell with it, I'll leave'."

"I just got so angry ... I kept on getting angrier and angrier and I just says to myself, 'Right, I'm not going home tonight!'"

Another interviewee spoke of the need to get away to displace her fury:

"If I'd have stayed I probably would've hurt somebody or hurt myself — it was an escape."

Whether one should classify these examples of anger under mental health is debatable: however, they do show significant inner turmoil for the young people concerned.

Four of our interview sample in Northern Ireland spoke of more significant difficulties with anger. All had had professional help with managing their anger: one had a diagnosed behavioural disorder, caused by a chemical imbalance in his brain, which was treated with psychiatric drugs; the others had undertaken ‘talking cures’, with psychologists, psychiatrists
or youth workers. All of them indicated that this problem had preceded their running and in most cases that it had disrupted their childhood.

Others in the sample spoke of different manifestations of mental health problems. One interviewee spoke of his 'mania' (in response to the death of a significant family member) during a phase of frequent running:

"I felt out of control. I felt like I was going crazy."

Another pondered her 'broodiness', an ongoing sadness and preoccupation with difficulties at home:

"I know it will happen again soon ... each day I wonder, you know, 'Tonight will I have to leave and go to stay with somebody else?'"

Aside from the specific incidents which the interviewees referred to, one often got a feeling, either when interviewing a young person or when listening to a recording during analysis, that there was a deep sense of psychological unease for some: from phrases such as, "my head was fried up", to what were clearly hurtful revelations about feelings of rejection that would last a lifetime:

"Sure I feel sad ... that's the only way I can tell you how I feel. I feel sad because your mother's the important part of your family you need. I mean, your mother holds the spokes of the whole family ... I'm a typical boy, hey? ... who doesn't have a mother to look after him."

There were frequent indicators that many of the young people carried a burden of depression and/or confusion about their lives which formed a significant part of the context for their running away.

There are two other personal issues which are considered as part of the wider context for running away in Still Running: sexuality and special needs. There were no specific references made to sexuality as a contextual factor for running away by the Northern Ireland interview sample. Special needs were mentioned only once. We would suggest that more specific and focused research needs to be done to establish whether these issues are linked to running away amongst under-16s in Northern Ireland.

**RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS**

The significance of peer relationships as a primary influence on young people's behaviour as they grow into maturity is widely acknowledged. Previous research (e.g. Brennan et al, 1978) has underlined the importance of peer relationships in contributing to running away. In a general sense the relevance of running away as an issue in young people's lives was demonstrated by indicators from the survey; 40% of young people said they had a friend who had run away. Amongst young people who had themselves run away overnight the proportion was much higher (86%) than for those who had not themselves run away (35%).

It is possible to identify from our data five ways in which the influence of peers might come into play in the context of running away:

- **Peer pressure to run away.**
- **Running away to accompany a friend.**
- **Being drawn to a bad peer group** — causing the young person to choose to leave or being forced out because of the negative impact on relationships with parents.
- **Escape from a situation of poor relationships with peers.**
- **Use of friends as secondary support** — facilitators providing food, shelter, companionship whilst they themselves remain at home.

These factors are clearly identifiable in the interviews with young people, with more than two thirds of the interviewees speaking about one or more of them.

It was interesting to note the differences in prevalence of reporting. One of the most mentioned issues was that of the 'pull' of the peer group: the strength of attraction to a bad
peer group causing friction at home and leading to running from home to the group, who were often mainly older with their own resources (especially accommodation) and access to the prohibited pleasures of alcohol and drugs:

"I was drinking a lot and I was taking drugs, because everybody else around me ... because it was always older people, I never used to hang about with people my own age ... my mum sort of got sick of it."

Equally frequently reported was the issue of young people obtaining constructive support from their peers. Around a third of those who mentioned peer issues talked about friends supplying them with secondary support (i.e. without running away themselves) whilst away from home – from an occasional meal, to somewhere to go for a chat in the day, to, in one case, a hiding place under a bed for a few nights, to convincing their own parents to give temporary shelter to the runaway. This type of support was even evident amongst the youngest of runaways, as one interviewee indicated when talking about an experience at the age of nine, when she hid under a bush for two nights in the army camp where her family lived:

“One of them (my mates) used to come out and see me before she went in at night, to make sure I was alright ... she brought pillows down for me.”

The importance of close individuals, “best mates”, as co-runners was often reported by the young people. More than a quarter of those who talked about their peers had run as a couple (or, in one case, a threesome), in most cases as co-conspirators, escaping from problems at home, but in the accounts of two interviewees with the other party acting as the expert, with confidence borne of previous experience:

“My friend, Stewart, suggested running away with me, ’cos he’d done it an awful lot before.”

The other two types of peer influence were much less reported: only two of the young people put forward peer pressure as a significant factor in causing them to run. One of them spoke of his experience of care:

“I was forced to go by the rest of my friends in there. They said, ‘Look, do you want to run away, this is getting too much?’ I thought I was being ‘one of the boys’ and said yes.”

In contrast to the importance of peers as an influence promoting running away, one reformed career runner talked about the need for peers as a support in re-acclimatising back into normal life: when asked what had most helped her to stop running she said:

“Getting back into school and being around people my own age.”

It is worth noting that, with one exception, in all instances where peer influence was reported as relevant to the context for running, the young people concerned were between the ages of eleven and fifteen (where details of age were accessible). This clearly underlines that peer relationships are not of significance in relation to running away during first school but are of burgeoning importance during secondary school and adolescence.

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

School is widely acknowledged to be a defining experience in the lives of young people. Previous research on running away has highlighted the significance of a young person’s relationship with school (or the lack of it) as a factor affecting running away behaviour. Rees (1993) found that those young people who reported frequent truancy were more likely to run away and Stein et al. (1994) found that many young people who were on the streets had become detached from school at an early age.

The schools survey in Northern Ireland found that young people who had run away were much more likely to have a negative view of school, to have truanted, been excluded and been bullied. They were also much more likely to categorise themselves as having difficulties with learning.
Table 8: School issues by whether run away

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Had not run away</th>
<th>Had run away</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t like school</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often truant</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often bullied</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have been excluded</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have difficulties with learning</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews with young people confirmed these findings. The majority of interviewees who talked about their experiences at school said that they viewed it negatively. More than two thirds expressed feelings from irritation and frustration to outright hatred of school. For many this was encapsulated in a poor relationship with teachers – a strong sense of “them and us” was communicated by a number of the young people:

“It’s mainly the teachers, like – I don’t mind doing the work.”

“... they just had no respect for me and I had no respect for them.”

There were also a number of interviewees who experienced difficulties with their peers in the school context. A number of the young people talked about bullying, in two more severe cases as a direct cause of running away:

“I was getting bullied an awful lot and I was missing a lot and my mum was getting depressed ... I’d get hit and get name-calling and stuff stole off me and just annoying and being cruel to me.”

There was a high degree of time away from school, whether chosen or imposed by others. Many of the interviewees shared a sense of boredom and alienation and often they voted with their feet:

“I just walked out one day and never came back.”

More than three quarters of our sample had truanted regularly and over 40% had been suspended from secondary school. Four of the group had been permanently excluded from school.

In the light of these findings it is not surprising that, amongst those who were old enough at interview to have been eligible, there was a lack of educational qualifications (interviewees were asked specifically about GCSEs). Less than half had any GCSEs, and perhaps as significantly, those who had seemed to attach little importance to their achievement: most could not recall how many passes they had despite having relatively recently done the exams. Other issues in their lives tended to assume more relevance than whether they had some exams under their belt. However, one young man spoke of his pride at having passed some GCSEs despite his circumstances at the time:

“I was on the street when I was actually doing me exams, me GCSE’s – and I still passed them.”

It should be noted that there was a contrastingly positive view of school expressed by others amongst the group. A third of those who talked about school made positive statements and one young woman indicated that in fact school was something of a haven from the horrors of home:
"It's kind of like an escape - if there's something wrong at home I can go to school, I can get on with my mates and just forget about it."

In most cases it was impossible to establish a chronology of events relating to negative experiences at school and incidences of running away. As with other context issues young people's experiences of school become so enmeshed in day-to-day existence that unless they were of extraordinary significance it was difficult to divorce them from the overall flow of life. Hence, in most cases a negative experience of school accompanied a generally negative experience of life and was one of a number of contributory factors towards running away.

We should also mention that in the UK-wide study a sub-sample of young people attending pupil referral units was surveyed. It was found that 40% of them had experience of running away.

THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT

There are two senses in which the community provides a context for young people's running away behaviour in Northern Ireland. The first is that of close-knit families providing, mutual inter-familial support (i.e. by offering respite care to young people when there are problems at home). The second is the social control exercised by self-appointed "protectors of the community", the paramilitaries, within the areas studied.

Community Support

The interviews with young people and professionals provided ample evidence of the existence of an informal support network within communities. It was apparent that the extended family and close friends often acted as a safety net for young people at risk of running, as two project workers reflected:

"... the norm in local communities for a lot of young people ... when there would be regular conflict within the family and they would be out of the house for two or three nights ... there certainly would be a tendency for them to go to another member of the extended family."

"The networks that young people have means that they can do a circuit of friends and extended family and that keeps young people off the streets."

It was felt that this applied across the whole of Northern Ireland, in contrast to the rest of the UK:

"Belfast or Northern Ireland would be different ... to Great Britain, in the fact that because it's a small community-like province, young people who find themselves homeless are much more likely to go to family or friends - grannies are very (popular) ... and more extended family rather than sleeping on the streets."

One worker spoke about why he felt that some particular communities had a strong tradition of self-care:

"When we were focusing on that area (West Belfast) people were saying to us that they always could find somewhere to stay ... that's a fairly politicised, with a small 'p', energetic, vibrant place to live and work, and that has a lot to do with 'The Troubles' and the ghettoisation of that and people pulling back their own power. Within that scenario what tended to happen was that they look after themselves, they look after each other ... and they will look after their own young people and they're a very proud people to do that."

This idea was underlined by the experiences of the young people whom we interviewed. Around a third spoke directly of spending time away with relatives, whether for occasional nights or for pre-planned extended stays.

Other young people had had stays with friends whilst away from home. For the majority there was a general impression that this involved an agreement with the friend's parents: the
stay was ‘officially sanctioned’ (although there was sometimes an ambiguity over whether they were informed that the young person was on the run). In fact in at least two of the interviews young people indicated that because their parents wanted them out of the house, arrangements were made so that they could go to stay with local friends of the family. In one case, almost immediately after the young person had come home from his first incident of running away, the situation had become so bad that the mum sought alternative care for her son (for what was to be the first of two extended stays with the same family):

“I went to stay with him (friend) for a while, but my mum knew about that … she actually phoned to confirm where I would be going and staying … it was brilliant … I stayed there for a few months.”

This community care network has a number of wider effects on relationships within and beyond the family. One might assume that the network is entirely positive, that fundamentally it serves to bolster and support the family and to protect young people. This may be the case in the long term but in the immediate circumstances it may in fact cause tensions within the extended family. When a young person has run away they will often be seeking an ally against their parents. For example, one young person spoke of how he had run to an aunt’s house and stayed there for a few nights without his parents’ knowledge, and how she then acted as his advocate in delicate negotiations to get him back into his own home:

“We made the agreement that I would go into the back hall if my mum and dad came, and my aunty would say that I wasn’t there … so I ended up staying there for four days without my mum and dad knowing where I was besides my aunty saying, ‘I’ve seen him and he’s alright, but I’m not telling you where he is’ … It worked out that mum and dad came down to my aunty’s and I said to my aunty that I wanted her to sit in and we came to an agreement …”

A further aspect of community support was the difficulties it might cause in a close-knit community: those who took in runaways could be seen to be undermining another family. In some cases this prompted a contradictory response in parents who harboured their children’s friends:

“… Even though they’re staying in somebody’s home it doesn’t actually mean that they will eat there … They might get breakfast there but they rarely are welcome at the family table at teatime. You know, teatime is seen as the time when everybody gets together as a family.”

“It’s like, ‘Well, he’s staying in my son’s room. As long as I don’t see him, then he’s not really here,’ sort of thing. And that way his parents can’t come round and accuse me of doing anything. It’s like, ‘Well, it’s nothing to do with me, it’s my son that’s looking after him.”

**Paramilitary activities**

The second issue, that of social control and paramilitary activities, is somewhat more complex. Many of the young people who we talked to indicated the pernicious effect on their lives of existing in communities where they felt monitored, inhibited and fearful. Many of the professionals were especially loquacious about the effects of paramilitary control on young people’s existences.

In order to fully appreciate the omnipresent nature of the social control exercised by paramilitary groups one needs to briefly explain the social context which they have defined and within which they operate. A project worker reflected on his long experience of working with young people in Northern Ireland:

“(In) all the stories that young people tell there are elements that are touched by, if you want, euphemistically, ‘The Troubles’ – and often if they are into acting out behaviour, which in other cultures is just ordinary adolescent behaviour, probably the most
conservative people and the most ruthless people are the paramilitaries, who don't tolerate young people experimenting."

As a project manager explained, the paramilitary groups on both sides of the divide have for some time allocated themselves the role of community police, exercising a power over various elements of the community which they consider to be undesirable. This self-defined and self-ascribed role was evidenced by one project worker, who referred to the wording on a poster which he had photographed,

"This was a public notice that was put up around (the estate). It said — PUBLIC NOTICE — It has been brought to the attention of the local active service units of the (paramilitary group) that many young people in this area have been involved in constant harassment and intimidation of pensioners and local loyalist families. They have also been involved in other anti-social behaviour i.e. joyriding, graffiti, criminal damage, burglary. We, the (paramilitary group), now demand that these activities cease immediately, or we will be forced to take action against those responsible. There will be no second warning. By order of ..."

and he added:

"That's the nature of the area - you can't really go against these here boys because they rule the estate."

As indicated in the notice, for young people the most obvious element of paramilitary control is the restrictions placed on what is labelled "anti-social behaviour". According to one worker this could be:

"Anything from ... joyriding to theft, break-ins to indecent assault."

However, the definition is 'flexible':

"It's very subjective ... my own personal view is that a lot comes down to the amount of power the individual families have. A family, for example, that is known to support particular paramilitary groups might be treated far more leniently than others who have less connections and less power."

The response will vary, sometimes according to gender,

"Generally speaking there has been a tradition of dealing with young women's behaviour at a local community level differently than they would with young men ... for paramilitaries to be more inclined to put young men out."

and always according to the type of rule-breaking:

"... the paramilitaries make a decision, supposedly on the basis of community demand, that a young person is either punished in a particular way, knee-capped or beaten or whatever, and are actually put out of the community, depending on the severity of their anti-social activity — sometimes that can be a lifetime demand ... In some instances they're asked to leave Northern Ireland or Ireland — in other instances they would just be put out of their own community and they could basically go anywhere else in Northern Ireland for a number of months. It varies depending on how their activities are viewed."

For the less severe punishments it will be the young person's peers in the local community who do the punishing:

"It's the older ones, 16, 17 and 18-year-olds who would be the ones who do the punishment — they get sent out to deal out whatever punishment needs deals, you know. They're the eyes and the ears for what's going on on the estate and they will then filter the information back to higher above."

And the punishment is, on occasion, intentionally humiliating and as public as possible:

"They even go as far as breaking into the house to bring the person out and give them their beating if they have went too far over the line ... I've worked with a youngster who's actually been told, 'We will come for you at 6 o'clock.' At 6 o'clock they took him
out, they tied him to a lamp post, they poured paint over him and they poured a bag of feathers over him and left him."

A number of the professionals interviewed indicated that there was sometimes room for manoeuvre once a young person was under threat:

"You can go to the local (paramilitary group) guy and say, 'Listen, I know my son's in trouble. We're doing this, we're doing that, we're doing the other. Will you give him a fortnight to see if he can change? And they will actually work with you.'"

"If they see that this youngster's being worked with by Probation, by other youth groups or whatever ... they will actually hold off and they will meet you half way."

"But obviously they will only give you a certain length of time and if that youngster's showing that he's not willing to change, they will step back in and say, 'I'm sorry, he's had his chance, we have to teach him a lesson'."

One young person spoke of two occasions when it had been deemed that he had stepped out of line and suffered the consequences, despite protesting his innocence:

"Once I was punched ... for something I didn't even do, but I was blamed for it 'cos one of the Top Man's sons said it was me ... and then, the second time, I was just threatened, just cautioned."

Specifically, in terms of effects on running away, one young person explained how he had been targeted whilst on the run because he had entered the wrong area:

"I was beat up once by Protestants ... at Somerton ... I was hanging about. A couple of them come up to me and started hitting me, so they did, and I got up and run. I got two black eyes and a big scar down the back of my neck."

This underlines the geographical restrictions that some young people feel — they are unwilling to run to 'alien' places because the consequences may be severe. As one young woman said:

"When you come over here you have to watch where you're going. In Carrick it's not as bad, but in the likes of Belfast you can't really walk about too far if you don't know your way around."

There are also perceived limits on where one can go within one's own community:

"I just thought, because it's paramilitaries that runs the estate, that 'cos we'd gone into the empty houses we'd get hit."

One young person spoke about a conflict that he became caught up in whilst on the run when he was fifteen. He was sheltering in the grounds of a hospital but was threatened by the paramilitaries due to the criminal acts he was committing to survive:

"I started getting involved in a lot of trouble ... got involved with the paramilitaries ... If I hadn't've got out of there I was gonna get shot."

In contrast one young woman said that she felt safe on the streets because of the presence of paramilitaries:

"I have a lot of friends in paramilitary groups ... I've always been looked out for by them ... on the run especially."

However, she subsequently revealed that this support came at a cost, when her friend and sometime co-runner fell foul of the paramilitaries:

"There was one point where Denise got into trouble with the (paramilitary group) and I got told if I kept on hanging around with Denise that they were going to have to do something about it 'cos I was getting myself into trouble. They were doing it more on a friendly basis, if you know what I mean. They were trying to say to me they don't want to have to do anything, but if I went on hanging about with her, whatever happens to her would have to happen to me to make it fair ... God knows what they
would've done, probably nothing too serious, like, but sure they would've shook us up a bit! They started following Denise about and then, whenever I was with her I would notice, 'cos I would know them, hanging about and watching us.'

Several professionals reflected on the geographical paralysis that this culture imposes on young people:

"The nature of life here is that you learn the skills of surviving within (your community) – you don't move easily outside it, both geographically and in terms of your mental capacity to adjust outside … young people don't move easily out of their own communities."

"The kids are territorialised – they will not go out of their own area because they know that if they go down into the town centre they could be a target for other kids that are hanging about … so rather than going down there to try and find somewhere to sleep or whatever, they'll just move around their friends' homes."

A number also talked of how, in extreme cases, it can cause young people to flee:

"Recently we had a punishment shooting here and the child couldn't cope with knowing paramilitaries and knowing the ones that did it – being their friend he just couldn't cope with the situation of still living here … he ran because he just didn't want to stay in the home … nervous at night, saying like, 'If they done it to my parent will they come to me next?'"

As one worker said:

"... although you can dodge the police, and that's what a lot of teenagers get into, it's very hard to dodge the paramilitaries if they're living in your community. And once you start to break the rules, their rules, then they also have long memories and some young people run from that."

Generally, then, young people were either straight-jacketed within their communities or, for those who came up against the system, were forced out.

Interestingly some professionals indicated that there was a rejection of the status quo by some young people, who chose to socialize away from their communities in order to mix:

"Some of the kids collect in a park (name) ... and you go to them and say, 'What are yous doing, guys?' 'Oh, we're just all hanging down round here together.' 'Well why don't yous hang round up in your estates?' 'Because when we're up there we have to be seen to be staying away from these people because they support different factions, whereas if we all come down here we can mix and nobody's giving us any hassle.'"

However, one got the impression that this was a minority activity.

**AGENCY INTERVENTIONS**

The last element of context which we will look at is young people's experiences of 'helping' agencies before and after running away.

It was decided that it would be unrealistic to expect to obtain useful data on agency intervention via the survey for a variety of reasons – lack of space, difficulty in formulating appropriate questions, etc. – so this section is entirely premised on the information gathered in the interviews with young people. Therefore one should not regard this section as being conclusive but more as giving an indication of the types of intervention young people might experience and how they might tend to regard the agencies and their roles.

We will focus on agency intervention as a context after running away has started. Aside from those who had first run from substitute care (five of the sample) or who had first run
after returning home from a spell in care (eight of the sample) — and who must therefore have had at least some contact with a social worker — there was little evidence of social work involvement in the lives of the young people before they had run away. Of the other young people only three had had a social worker before running, one for a brief period due to problems at school when he was much younger. Just one other agency was mentioned: a mental health organisation who provided practical support to one young woman’s mother when she was suffering a bout of depression.

This suggests that there is a strong possibility that the majority of first time runaways (who will not have had contact with the care system) are unlikely to have had any agency involvement prior to running away.

**Interventions after running away started**

The picture changed radically when information was sought about agency interventions after starting to run away. More than three quarters of the group had had involvement with a social worker and all had had contact with at least one agency in the wake of running away.

Social workers were by far the most encountered agency professionals for the young people interviewed — as mentioned above, the majority of the sample had contact with social services under the age of 16.

Interviewees reported mixed views on social workers — perhaps not unsurprisingly, given the roles and responsibilities which social workers have to undertake in their professional relationship with a young person.

Half of those who registered a view had had positive experiences,

> “I’ve liked all the social workers I’ve had … they always do their best for me, I’ve found.”

although those who had not felt happy tended to be vociferous in their condemnation:

> “Social workers promise you the world but you don’t get it. They lull you into a false sense of security, telling you that everything is OK and that they will be there for you … when you get into the big, bad world and you have to cope with loneliness, they don’t want to know.”

> “When the problems start again … Barry just says these things are ‘normal’ and there’s nothing they can do – he says it’s just ‘normal teenage stuff’ so we just have to kind of grin and bear it.”

A number of the young people had had lots of different social workers and some indicated that they resented having to deal with the changes:

> “They are always moving on to better jobs … They act as if they know me just because they’ve read my file.”

Across the interviews one got the impression that often the most important factor in young peoples’ assessments of the usefulness of social workers was whether they liked the individuals who were working with them:

> “I liked her (first social worker) because if I needed anything she’d take it out of her pocket and say, ‘There’. I don’t like my social worker now … He doesn’t listen to me or care.”

> “I didn’t get on with your man, John, and I didn’t like him. He gave me the creeps, so he did, so I told him to get out.”

> “They don’t really help … I think they make the situation worse – they make you want to mess up just to annoy them, ‘cos you don’t want to please them.”

Interestingly, despite the large proportion of young people who had experience of substitute care in residential homes, only one spoke directly about residential staff:
"You'd get the odd one or two that were dead on ... some of them treated you like an idiot. They'd sit and they'd put you down ... There was one of them I hated ... he used to start on me ... he used to try to wind me up when he was on shift ... and then he'd try to sanction me, you know, give me a punishment for it — usually it would be 'You're not allowed out this weekend.' I made a lot of complaints and eventually he got the sack."

The next most often mentioned agencies were youth work initiatives. More than half of the group had been involved with some form of youth work programme (possibly because this was one of the routes used when recruiting a sample to interview in the first place). All said that their experience had been positive:

"It's a cracker ... They take you out and stuff and they're honest with you and ... listen to you."

"Since I started this here, (name of organisation), like, the programme, it's been really good, so it has."

"This project helps me too — I get a lot out of it. You get to be yourself ... don't have to have a 'hard man' face on."

The other agency which many young people had encountered was the police. The majority talked about them only in passing, as a brief reference when explaining how an episode of running away had ended with the police returning them home. Those who spoke in detail talked variously of rough treatment,

"... Because I was in trouble before they know me, type of thing ... just stopping me, asking me questions, shoving me about and if I say the wrong thing the batons come out or else (I get) a dig in the side of the head, away you go, type of thing."

"The police picked me up then and they knew I could run away that time 'cos I was older, and they'd grab you by the throat and throw you into the car and stuff like that there, calling you names 'n all ... then they take you home and they get all nice."

and of the ineffectiveness of the police response to running away:

"There would be loads of times when the police wouldn't pick me up. They'd drive up and ask, 'Are you (interviewee's name)?' and I would say, 'No.' and they'd just drive off."

"They're stupid. They can't run either ... they're all too old."

"My mum phones the police and tells them I'm back and then the police come out to have a talk to me. They says, 'You can't do it again or else you'll be in serious trouble,' and then they go ... they (always) say the same thing."

For the older age group — eleven of the sample who were 16 or older at the time of the interview (whose running careers had begun before they were 16) — five were currently living in a hostel and three more had previously stayed in one (or more). Some of them reflected on life in the hostels:

"There's people here for you, to teach you what's right and wrong. They teach you how to cook. They've activities for you ... They teach you to stand on your own two feet."

"Some of the staff they act like prison officers, honestly ... they forget that this is our home and we have to live here. And sometimes you get the impression that they're looking down their nose at you ... it's not a nice feeling 'cos it makes you feel low when you're treated that way ... Some of them are absolutely brilliant — they make you feel better about yourself the minute they walk in the door ... they treat you with respect — it's who you are now and what you're trying to do with your life ... anything you've done, they forget about it."
The young people in our sample had limited experience of other agencies. A few of the older age group had dealt with housing executive staff and advice staff, but gave little information about these encounters. Of the younger interviewees, three spoke of therapy sessions with psychiatrists/psychologists. However, none indicated that this had been especially worthwhile from their perspectives:

"I used to sit there with my feet up on the desk ... they just make you feel as if you're thick and you've been really, really bad. They wind you up the way they talk ... I hate them."

**SUMMARY**

This chapter has presented findings on the context of young people's lives outside their home environment, and how this context links with running away. In terms of personal issues, there is a strong association between running away and self-reported problems with depression, low self-esteem, drug and alcohol use, and offending. To some extent, running away appears to be clustered, with young people who run away also more likely to have friends with this experience. Finally, running away is strongly associated with a range of problems at school, including truancy, exclusion, bullying and difficulties with learning. Thus, in summary, young people who run away will often have one or more significant problems in their lives relating to personal or school issues, in addition to the likelihood of difficulties within the family as outlined in the previous chapter.

In terms of wider community issues, there are indications from the interview sample of informal support networks within communities in Northern Ireland which can often act as a safety net for young people at risk of running away. On the other hand, the high degree of social control in some communities, sometimes linked with paramilitary activities, could also form a context which left young people feeling that they were forced to leave their communities.

Finally, in terms of professional interventions with young people who run away, it seems from young people's accounts that there is often little or no agency intervention in young people's lives before they run away, even though the problems that lead to running away are commonly long-standing ones. Once young people had begun to run away the likelihood of agency involvement, particularly by social services, increased. This points to a potentially positive consequence of running away for young people – drawing attention to issues – but it also suggests that more emphasis could be given to early interventions which might prevent problems reaching the stage where young people feel they have to run away.

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**Case study 4 — Andrew**

Andrew was living in a children's home some distance from his hometown. At 15 he had been there a year because he was under threat from paramilitaries if he tried to return home.

Andrew said that he has always had severe problems with his anger. This had led to frequent conflict at home — often he would "completely lose it" and punch walls and smash ornaments — and to difficulties at school. He went to a psychologist to attempt to deal with it, but felt this did not really help much.

The first time Andrew ran away was during a confrontation with a teacher. He said he had to get away to avoid a situation where he knew he might do something he would regret. He fled from the school and went for a long walk to cool down, returning home late in the evening. He was 10 at the time.

Andrew's mother and father had separated when he was very young. Andrew lived with his mother and never saw his father. As he got older he found it difficult to get on
with his mother and the increasing problems with his temper led to her deciding to try a different approach. At 12, Andrew moved away to live with his grandparents in Wales. He stayed there for over a year but there was little change in his behaviour and his grandparents could no longer cope.

He returned to Northern Ireland and said he pretty much stopped going to school at this point. He became involved in drinking, gambling and offending – including acts of criminal damage. He spent some time in a secure unit as a result of this. It also led to threats from the local paramilitaries and eventually to an exclusion from his estate:

"Cos I wasn't allowed on my estate, really, 'cos it's all (paramilitary group name) run and I wasn't getting on with anybody ... so they phoned my ma and told her I had to get out."

This precipitated his move into the children's home. Since he has lived there he has sometimes run away overnight to spend time with friends and relatives at home. He says that the residential staff worry about him when he is away because of the paramilitary threats against him.

Andrew is convinced that he is safe, but recognises that other runaways are putting themselves in danger:

"I'm safe when I'm on the run ... The way I see it is it depends on what age you run at. If I run at the age I am now I wouldn't expect people to bother just so long as I kept in touch, like, but wee Stevie, (another resident of the home), he's only 12, and he was on the run last night, like, and I don't think they should go 'cos they've nowhere to stay. Sometime they might just walk down the wrong alley."
EXPERIENCES OF BEING AWAY

In this chapter we attempt to paint a picture of young people's experiences of running away. In doing so, we will illustrate the diversity of experiences which fall under the general heading of running away or being on the streets.

It is plausible to imagine that running away is a pattern of behaviour which intensifies over time (e.g. more extended periods of being away from home, more risky patterns of survival, and so on). Whilst this is certainly true for some young people, the research evidence indicates that this there is no stereotypical running away career. Some young people's first running away experiences involve high risks and lengthy periods away from home. Some young people who go on to run away many times gradually develop safer means of survival whilst away from home. Across the UK, Still Running found no evidence of a developing pattern of running away: although repeat runaways sometimes faced higher risks than one-off runaways, these risks were often present from the very first running away episode.

Viewed as a whole, the evidence we have gathered in Northern Ireland illustrates the wide range of feelings and experiences which being away from home can encompass. Running away can be simultaneously a frightening, liberating and confusing experience for young people:

"You can't really describe what feelings go through you whenever you do run away because you're hit from all directions with feelings – one minute you're scared, next minute you're fine, you're happy 'cos you're free ... they just like all hit you at once. It's very confusing."

Young people who run away need to be viewed as more than passive victims of their situation. Whilst their age and the options open to them mean that they will often be in highly vulnerable situations, it also true that by choosing to leave home they are taking active control of their lives and often making a stand against abuse and mistreatment by adults.

We hope that the evidence presented in this chapter will do justice to this complexity and to the young people who contributed to the research. We will organise young people's accounts under four general headings: making the decision to leave; survival strategies; thoughts and feelings whilst away; and returning home.

MAKING THE DECISION TO LEAVE

"I just got so angry ... I kept on getting angrier and angrier and I just says to myself, 'Right, I'm not going home tonight!' ... then, because I knew I could do it, I kept doing it more and more."

As the quote above indicates, the first experience of running away can represent a major watershed for young people who go on to run away repeatedly. For this reason it is interesting to explore young people's accounts of making the decision to first run away. Although every story is slightly different, there appear to be four different patterns of decision-making. First, there are those young people who literally run away, usually following a major row in the family home:
“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. It was a cry for help, really … I wasn’t getting the attention that I needed and wanted.”

Usually these young people left on the spur of the moment, but a few planned their departure, packing a bag before they left:

“I planned it … I went that night when everyone was in bed … I opened my window, took two bags with me … snuck into the kitchen and took food and that as well and off I went.”

Second, there were young people who went out of the house following an argument and then decided not to return. This could happen with the intervention and support of friends.

Third, there were young people who did not so much leave, as choose not to return home. This included two young people who stayed away rather than returning from school, due to getting into trouble at school.

Finally, there were young people who were forced to leave home:

“My daddy used to beat me and he threatened one time to kill me. He said, ‘You get out of my house and don’t ever come back!’”

Interestingly, in the interview sample, none of the young people who had been forced to leave ended up sleeping rough on this occasion, a pattern which was also observed in the UK survey.

This brief analysis illustrates the diversity of circumstances in which young people under 16 may first leave home, and particularly points to the inadequacy of the term “running away” in describing these circumstances.

Ongoing patterns of running away

There is relatively little data from the interviews about young people’s decision-making on subsequent occasions when they ran away. However, one quote illustrates the way in which running away can become a coping strategy for young people:

“I always thought to myself if I went out and I was on the run things cleared up and when I came home I didn’t have to deal with them … so it was a kind of a way of pushing everything away because I didn’t want to know about it.”

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Where young people slept

We saw in Chapter 2 that information from the survey suggested that most commonly young people went to friends when they ran away, followed by those who slept rough, and then those who went to relatives. There is a danger, however, in taking this information at face value: it represents an oversimplification of the chaotic reality of running away episodes, since it implies that there is a consistency of sleeping place for each incident. In fact many of the young people who had run for extended periods of more than a few nights ended up mixing their sleeping venues according to availability and opportunity. One young man, for example, as part of a three week episode, secretly stayed at a friend’s,

“I asked Jason if I could stay at his house and I was staying underneath his bed for two weeks … he’s got a lock on his (bedroom) door and when someone knocks at the door I jumps under the bed …”

until the friend’s sister noticed:

“She dropped something and went under and seen my feet. She shit herself … it was funny!”
This meant that he had to leave:

"She didn't mind for a few days until she needed money to go out ... she wants to go out to bars 'n' all so then she was blackmailing him for money, so here's me, 'Jason, that's not fair on you so I'm going on' – that's when I went out."

This led to a week of sleeping rough before he returned home.

There were also a number of young people who, despite being away overnight, did not sleep at all:

"I was too scared (to sleep) ... we just sat in the (derelict) houses."

**How young people coped and survived whilst away**

Young people under 16 have no legitimate means of survival whilst they are away from home. For many young people who run away and have support from relatives and friends, staying away for perhaps only a few nights, this does not necessarily present a huge problem.

Of those young people who had the more extreme experiences of being away – travelling long distances, sleeping rough, staying away for extended periods – there were a variety of survival strategies employed. Many turned to drugs or drink to pass the time, take them out of themselves, or just to stave off the cold:

"It's not good – except when you're 'topped up' (stoned) ... you didn't really think about it then – you were seeing things 'n' all."

"It was how I was keeping warm at night sometimes."

Often the young people had to steal food:

"(In the day) I went down to Tony's house and Robert's house and I went out stealing with them ... we went down Tesco's and stuff."

One young person became part of a group who were begging to survive and felt a need to disguise herself to preserve her anonymity:

"We were out every night. We were always down the Underground begging."

"The day I got there I stole hair dye so I could dye my hair so nobody would know it was me."

Although none of the young people we interviewed said that they themselves had been involved in survival sex there was some indication that they were aware of others who employed this strategy:

"There was a lot of other kids ... they were doing all sorts just to get money – there was prostitutes, 15-year-old prostitutes, they'd be stealing out of the shops – they'd be doing anything."

**THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS WHILST AWAY**

The survey questionnaire included ten questions about young people's feelings and experiences whilst away, five relating to positive aspects and five to negative aspects. The interviews with young people enabled us to explore in much more depth the thoughts and feelings that young people remembered from the times they were away from home.

**Positive aspects**

Looking at the positive aspects first, the responses to the five questions are summarised in the Table 9:
Table 9: Positive aspects of running away

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% who said yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did being away give you time to think?</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did it give you relief from pressure?</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did being away help you sort out your problems?</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you happier than before?</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you make friends?</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the survey, then, indicate some fairly common positive aspects of running away. To some extent these are backed up by information from the interviews with young people, although the positive evaluation comes over much less strongly here.

The main positive aspect of being away mentioned by young people in the interviews was the sense of freedom that it provided:

"I got away - I felt like I was in control."

"The first day I ran away I felt ... I got, like a 'buzz' out of it ... it was strange really. At the time I felt like I was doing my own thing and nobody could stop what I was doing - nobody could tell me what to do anymore."

"You felt free ... you felt like you could do your own thing."

For one young person interviewed, the experience of running away was generally very positive:

"It was fun - you've no worries when you're out there, except for the police ... I made a lot of new friends ... 'Cos I was away I could settle my head more - I had time to think about things ... It was generally just fun ... and you get a buzz out of it ... I used to get butterflies in my stomach just before I went ... It ends up with you wanting to do it - you just have to get away from everything for a while."

However, this kind of description was relatively rare, and the positive views which most young people expressed were usually counterbalanced or outweighed by negative aspects, to which we now turn.

**Negative aspects**

Again we begin with results from the survey. Three questions relating to negative feelings or experiences were included on the survey questionnaire (as well as the two relating to physical and sexual assault already discussed). The responses to these questions are shown below:

Table 10: Negative aspects of running away

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% who said yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were you frightened?</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you feel lonely?</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you hungry/thirsty?</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While you were away were you physically hurt?</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While you were away were you sexually assaulted?</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In contrast to the positive checklist, only a minority of young people identified with the negative aspects of being away. However, it is these negative aspects which come over much more strongly from the interviews with young people:

"Really bad - I wished I had a time machine or something. I wished I hadn't done it."

This difference is perhaps partly to do with the fact that the young people we interviewed had on average much more extensive experience of running away than the young runaways in the survey.

The primary negative aspects emphasised by the young people interviewed were an awareness of their vulnerability and the fear that this often engendered:

"I was dead scared and I wanted to go home - I kept saying to myself 'I want to go home but I can't.'" (This young person says he hid in bushes in a park for two days).

"Anything could happen to you. People take advantage of you and hurt you. You think they're friendly but they're not ... you're very vulnerable."

"When you're sleeping out on your own there's a lot of things go through your head."

"Sitting on the streets - I would sit outside the library and there's still people walking about at 4 o'clock in the morning. You get very, very scared, but you think, 'Well, I can't turn back now.'"

"At that time of night there's no-one about, only drunks coming out of nightclubs, and you're dodging about, going down subways, so that you don't have to go near them."

Another strong negative aspect was the physical discomfort associated with being away from home, particularly for those young people who did not have friends to rely on for support:

"FOOD! ... I was starving the first time I ran away."

"It was cold; trying to find somewhere I could make something to eat - I was starving most of the time; I was dirty - I had nowhere to get washed. It was terrible."

"Sometimes you wished you'd never done it and then there's times you just, like, think you're dreaming 'n' all ... what could you say? I dunno ... you just feel like all funny 'n' all, and cold and hungry and you're tired, really tired 'n' all, and then you feel bad about what you're doing to your parents and your family."

Finally, young people also felt a sense of isolation and regret at having cut themselves off from family:

"Knowing that you can't trust your family, 'cos if you phone them you know they're gonna have the police straight out after you and that's something you don't want, the police sniffing everywhere."

"I was cold and I was missing my mum, and I was worried about what would happen when I come back and I was worried that my family wouldn't want to talk to me again - which they didn't."

Other thoughts and feelings

The interviews also reveal other emotional aspects to being away from home which do not fall neatly into a positive/negative classification.

Some young people describe feelings of not being able to go back home:

"The hard thing about running away is, after a few days, you don't think you can go back."

Others tried to ensure that they were not found and returned home:

"If I go back he's only going to start shouting at me again ... and all that."
"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."

Finally, some young people recalled feelings of being confused or out of control whilst away from home:

"Nothing—felt out of control—I felt like I was going crazy"

"All I did was think... but it was one thought on top of the other— you didn't have time to think about anything in particular, it was just, er... you wanted to know where you were getting your head down next... I just wanted somewhere warm. That was what I was mostly thinking of, survival, I suppose."

"I suppose whenever I went away what's always going through my head is what my mum and dad's going to say or do... What am I going to say whenever I go back? or, 'Should I go back?' or, 'What happens if I'm found?'—I think there's more thoughts than you can say going through your head."

RETURNING HOME

The reasons why the young people whom we interviewed said they went home could basically be categorised into two types: running out of motivation/stamina or being caught. Of the seventeen young people who had been away for one night or less on their first episode, ten were caught either by the police or a relative and seven returned home of their own accord, mostly because they wanted food or shelter from the elements:

"We only stayed out for one night... (we were) hungry, cold... so we decided to go back, 'cos there was nowhere else to go."

Interviewees reported a wide variation in receptions when they returned home.

"My mum just didn't want to know me. She says, 'You can get in the house but we'll not be as close as we were'... and she just started crying and all with my dad... I felt guilty. I went up to my room and just cried all night."

For some young people the reception was warm enough the first time they ran,

"My mum just put her arms around me and started crying. She said she was very worried, 'n'all."

but by the second time this had altered radically:

"My mum said she didn't want me back to the house... she said (to girlfriend's mum) 'If you're so worried about him why don't you keep him?'"

The reception seemed to be rather different if the young person was returning to substitute care. One young woman said that her foster mother was a little cool towards her, simply remarking, "Oh, you're back", but not being either angry or upset and not giving her any punishments. A young man who ran with a group from a children's home said:

"We got a serious lecture and a curfew imposed on us."

SUMMARY

Young people's experiences of being away are diverse and multi-faceted. Young people's accounts suggest that running away tends to be an action taken on the spur of the moment in response to a specific event even though, as we have seen, there are usually major underlying issues. Looking at the period which young people spent away from home, around two-thirds of young people stayed with relatives or friends and obtained some degree of support from
them whilst away. The other third of young people principally slept rough and these young people had few legitimate ways of supporting themselves whilst away and were therefore particularly vulnerable.

All in all, it is clear from the survey that there are both positive and negative aspects to running away for young people. Certainly it offered young people a respite from problems, time to think, and at least in the short term could trigger a resolution to some of the problems that had caused running away. On the negative side there was some evidence of young people being vulnerable to physical and sexual assault, as well as more common practical and emotional issues such as hunger, fear and loneliness.

**Case study 5 — Kathy**

From a young age Kathy heard and watched her parents frequent arguments at home. She became increasingly troubled and, at 8, she ran away from home, taking just a bag of toys, soap, a face cloth and a few clothes. She only stayed away a few hours because she got hungry. Her parents never knew it had happened.

The parental conflict continued and her father’s temper became worse. Once, when he hit and kicked her, she ran away again. This time she stayed out overnight sleeping under a bush near to the house. She was found the next day. Soon afterwards her parents separated.

After the separation her father moved away to Scotland and she had little contact with him. As a young adolescent she began to mix with a group of older young people who drank and took drugs. She started to run away often to be with them, staying out overnight and missing school.

Her relationship with her mother deteriorated;

> "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."

All the time Kathy was plotting to escape to her father’s (whom she had idolised in his absence). When she was thirteen she embarked on the long trip to his home, but had to telephone him when she ran out of money, a day into the journey. Her father was shocked when she called, but agreed that she could stay with him.

At first things went fine, but gradually a tension developed between Kathy and her father’s wife. Eventually she felt like the “odd one out” with her father and step-mother always “ganging up” on her. After one particularly bad argument, when her father teased her and pulled her hair, she ran away again, this time having no idea what to do.

She caught a train to the nearest big city and contacted her uncle who lived there. He negotiated with her mother and she returned home. She felt depressed at the prospect of having to build her life again, but at 14 she went back to her old school and began to establish herself with a different group of friends.

With hindsight she can see that she put herself at risk, but at the time Kathy enjoyed her running away:

> "It was generally just fun ... and you get a buzz out of it. You do get a buzz out of running away ... I used to get butterflies in my stomach just before I went. I used to scare myself into doing it. It ends up with you wanting to do it, you just have to get away from everything for a while."

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