Solutions? The views of young people and professionals

A primary concern of this research was to make useful suggestions as to how to develop a better informed response to the problem of running away.

In piecing together these suggestions a key element was to canvass the thoughts of potential users and providers of such responsive services. Therefore, in all our interviews we gave interviewees the opportunity to say not just how the current situation might be improved, but also to put forward their own ideas as to how more innovative future developments might be shaped.

The young people and professionals we spoke to gave useful indicators of the main priorities in developing sensitive services to address the needs of potential and actual runaways. Their views are presented as a broad discussion in this chapter and then amalgamated with some of our own thoughts to give a more focussed description of possible types of service provision in the conclusion which follows.

Young people’s views

Towards the end of each young person’s interview we asked a number of questions on what might have helped. Although we sought to define a range of areas – the specifics of how the young person thought they themselves might have been helped not to run in the first place, or not to continue running, plus their ideas as to how young people generally might be helped not to have to run and how those who did could be helped – there was in fact significant blurring of the themes in the responses to the different questions. Hence, we have grouped them into the two sections which follow.

What might help prevent young people running away/continuing to run away?

Across the age range and despite the variation in experiences, the young people spoke with a remarkable degree of unanimity on this issue. The fundamental need which they highlighted was simple and straightforward: they wanted someone to talk to:

“Just talk, just share, get your problems out, tell somebody. Get the help you need.”

“If I bad’ve had the courage to go and talk to somebody - I suppose that would’ve helped.”

and they wanted to feel that they were really being paid attention to and believed, whether by parents or professionals:

“If me mum and dad was to sit and talk to me, if they were, probably, to believe me more often, like.”

“They need to talk about things without people laughing at them. You’re worried ... I’m worried that you might laugh at me now, the way I’m talking ’n’ all. I dunno.
being taken serious, because people think kids just don't know what they're talking about, don't know what they're doing, because they're just kids, like. Being taken serious that would help an awful lot."

"More people to listen and actually take in what young people are saying ... not just turn around and say 'That's a teenage thing', but actually help you with stuff."

In addition to the feeling that there was no-one to talk to, a number of the young people felt barriers to talking about their problems. For some the failures of known adults had led to a fear of seeking support from all but their peers:

"The only people I talked to usually were people the same age as me — I didn't really trust any adults 'cos I thought they were all the same as my parents ... so I wouldn't talk to them."

Others felt extremely inhibited about talking to anyone:

"I was too ashamed to talk to any of my mates about it. I didn't want to tell any of my schoolteachers 'cos they maybe would've went to somebody else about it and I didn't want that — I wanted as few people to know as possible."

Overall, then, the young people wanted a listener who was readily available, dedicated and active in their listening and completely trustworthy. This person could not be linked to home or family since for the vast majority of young people who run away the problem is located at home. This would suggest that there is a need for independent, non-threatening listeners, who can give non-judgemental support to enable young people to relax and reflect in a safe environment. Clearly this may lead to other subsequent roles – counsellor, information-giver, advocate, mediator – but also it may just give a brief opportunity to take time out to think, if that was all the young person wanted.

It was particularly emphasised by some young people that this role could not be fulfilled by their social worker. One young woman indicated that she had given up seeking such support from her social worker,

"I've just found now that there's no point in telling him ... it's not going to help."

another that social workers were tainted by their divided loyalties:

"She doesn't do nothing for me, it's always for my Mam."

In addition, although the majority of those in substitute care reported that they were adequately supported by residential staff or foster carers, others felt isolated and unable to talk:

"I thought it was none of their business ... It was just a job for them."

What help should there be for young people who run away or have to be away from home?

Over three quarters of those who talked about it said that there should be a specific place (or places) for young people to go when on the run. How much detail they gave as to the nature of this place often depended on their age and amount of previous running experience. The younger interviewees tended to say that all that was necessary was a place to stay for a night (maybe with parental consultation the next day):

"I always said to myself, 'I wish there was somewhere people could go, just for one night when they're on the run, to sort their head out and talk to someone'."

"Just like a hostel ... somewhere for kids to stay and then the next day the counsellors would ring up the parents, or even they could ring up their parents and tell them they were there ... and then they would bring them over and have a talk with them the next day — talking through it 'n all, and then they would get them back home."
"I think a big place where they can go, as long as their parents knew about it – somewhere they could go and just settle their heads 'cos that's all they need, time away."

Those who were older and/or had had a more extensive running career, sometimes added more detail as to how such a place should be set up. They indicated that it should not have links to social services and that for some runaways it might have to be a stopgap measure, without a demand that the young person enter into negotiations with home:

"Like a drop-in centre for younger people where they can go, get a feed, get a wash, put their head down for a night – something like that."

There were particular concerns that the staff should be carefully selected and empathic towards the young people in their care:

"People who have been through most of the stuff 'cos that's what I don't like about social workers – half of them haven't been through half of the stuff ... they don't know what you're going through."

"Just normal people who have their own kids and all that ... just (doing it) voluntarily, I'd say – they could help young people ... they've probably been through it when they were younger and they realised how bad it was and they want to help people that's doing it now – they want to tell them what it's like, you know, when you're out on the street and on all sorts of drugs."

To underline his concern that the service should be solely for young runaways, one young man reflected at some length on his experience of hostel life as a 16 year old. He said that he had been exposed to frightening situations:

"It was pretty weird – when I first came it was full of alcoholics, drug addicts, you name it, they were in here. You had to watch your back at night, walking around the project. It was bad, like ... I found a fella in his bedroom up there. He'd cut his wrists and he was just lying, bleeding to death – I'd never come across anything like this before."

He added that the regime was too strict and impersonal and that the hostel was not at all "homely":

"You feel like you're constantly being watched ... you can't relax for a minute 'cos they're constantly watching you to see what you're up to. You're not allowed to eat in the living rooms, you have to do that in the kitchen – you're not even allowed to eat in your bedroom. You want to bring your own TV in you have to go through the authorities to get that electronically checked ... and my bed sheets are pink (laughs), which isn't much good ... and the decoration of the place, it's very official."

Overall, then the young people's responses suggest a need for dedicated, short term, intensively (and suitably) staffed, crisis units/hostels for under 16s.

There was one additional important issue that some of the interviewees related to both the categories described above: that of the dearth of information-giving services about what help was available to potential or actual runners.  

"It would've been good if there was actually somewhere you could go and somebody you could talk to ... I suppose that would've helped – if you knew where to go."

As a coda to this section it seems appropriate to add that although the majority of young people responded during the interview in a relatively pragmatic manner to these questions, there were others who were aware that they had been at such a point of crisis in their lives when they decided to run, that there may have been little opportunity or merit in any attempt at intervention:

"I needed to do it to clear my head."
"I don't think I would've listened to anybody or tried to get help from anybody at the time ... I don't think I would've done it."

One young man offered a vivid recollection of the confusion and despair that many feel either when on the verge of running or when they have removed themselves from home:

"(I wanted) someone to guide me ... someone to pull my strings and I'll do what they say ... but nobody'd done that ... I had to do everything for myself."

**PROFESSIONALS' VIEWS**

In this section we will consider the views expressed by professionals under two headings: preventative work and work with runaways. We can only give an overview of the issues here—the ideas on service development are more fully discussed in the next chapter.

**Preventative work**

A broad spectrum of ideas on preventative work were put forward by interviewees, ranging from relatively low-key, general, issue-based education initiatives in schools to intensive support for vulnerable families or individuals.

On a basic level it was suggested that there was a need for all young people to be more fully informed about the issues around youth homelessness. A number of those who worked with agencies (especially The Simon Community and the Council for the Homeless) indicated that there were education programmes being developed involving visits to schools to talk to groups of students directly and encourage them to think around the subject. However, it was apparent that such presentations needed to be tailored for and targeted at a younger age group if they were to deal effectively with the problem of running away.

In the sense that school might be the primary forum for initial low level preventative work, some professionals suggested that young people should be given general information on services, rights, etc. in school:

"There is a lack of awareness amongst young people — for example, social services are not much discussed in school."

Many professionals acknowledged that communication with young people in school could be a problem and suggested 'peer education' as a possible solution:

"It's all very well for social services or the Executive, or even the voluntary sector to go around saying, 'Oh, we know what's right for young people and we'll tell them what we think they need', but at the end of the day, young people, in my experience, will listen to other young people who've been through experiences and who have 'street cred' ... Sometimes, if they have to, they will listen to adults, but they're more likely to take into account what someone from a similar age or background is saying to them."

A number of professionals spoke about education in a wider sense. They felt that there was a general need for consciousness raising across the community on the problems that young people face:

"The public needs to be educated about how tough it is for children."

"Parents need to be educated along with young people, possibly the whole community. Awareness ... needs to be raised with everyone so that issues can be tackled effectively."

Others talked about the educational needs of more detached and vulnerable young people. They said that often schools had damaged some groups of young people by prejudging them at an early age on the basis of questionable preconceptions:

"Education is failing them. Some of them desperately want to get on at school but the system has failed them ... You are labelled at school by where you come from — it's assumed you'll end up in the factory or be a failure."
For these young people therefore, who had become marginalised from the school setting, it might be necessary to undertake work to re-educate them over their life choices and enhance their self-esteem, as well as doing specific work on issues such as running away:

"Every young person has potential and they should be supported to enable them to maximise that potential both physically and emotionally."

Many interviewees felt that one measure which could be effective was to develop youth work provision. At one level this might mean having youth 'clubs' more widely available and run on a more flexible basis – open to those who are 14 and over on a daily basis and with sessions lasting later into the evening to offer a safe environment:

"Somewhere for youngsters to hang out at night time that's gonna take them off the street corners, particularly from 9 o'clock onwards. The youth centres really only cater for kids up to age 14 and they all close at 10 o'clock, plus they're not open seven days a week. Somewhere particularly on a Friday or a Saturday night, a disco aimed at their age group … just somewhere to go … (and) socialise with their mates – these are the type of things that the youngsters have been asking us (for) when we have gone to Youth Days."

[Consultation events involving young people, the youth service and local councils]

Workers reported that for young people there was a 'twilight age' in the mid-teens – too old to go to the youth club, too young to go to the pub/club. One youth worker reported the statement of a young person during an exchange with a councillor at a consultation event:

"Excuse me … I am not 13 years of age, I am 15 years of age – I don't want to go into a bar to drink but I do want to go somewhere where I can have music, I can disco, I can dance, without having the threat of drink, without having the threat of drugs pushed down my throat … (somewhere) that I can have a good time."

For other more detached or vulnerable young people there might be a need for somewhere accessible during the day – a drop-in type facility maybe with pool table, a canteen, etc. – which would take them off the streets and possibly enable a route into talking about issues relevant to their lives.

It was proposed that this type of service could include detached youth workers to engage with young people on the streets in a bid to build constructive and protective relationships which might draw them into other preventative services.

The need for more counselling services aimed at young people was also highlighted. One project manager indicated that it was equally important to educate young people as to the possible benefits:

"Obviously counselling services need to be supported more but also the whole information and communication with young people, even on what counselling is all about. I've even found young people who you know could benefit from a counselling process yet they don't see it as a need, it's 'not their problem', there's no way they're going to engage in that process – so I think that interventions prior to that, to engage with them in a positive way so that they know what supports are there, they know what they're about and it demystifies them."

Another worker talked of the need to develop mediation services to operate in family disputes. They underlined that this would often mean challenging the young person as well as the parents:

"That isn't to say all the time that the young person is always right – a lot of our work in the immediate term is mediation and family mediation … negotiating with families and with the young person in terms of having some type of compromise on the situation."

In the case of families where more intensive intervention is required one manager suggested a need for respite schemes for families in difficulty. He spoke about a scheme currently in its infancy in Belfast whereby host families are recruited who will offer temporary stays to young people on a regular basis. This allows intensive work to be done with both the young person
and the parents whilst giving breaks for both parties to try to avoid a troubled situation becoming a crisis. The scheme is currently aimed at preventing reception into care but might equally offer assistance to those at risk of running.

All of these suggestions came with a common rider — that such services must be seen to be free of links to the statutory sector. If they were stigmatised by being associated with social services, the police, etc., there was little hope that they could be successful in gaining the necessary trust from the community to do effective preventative work. One social services manager expressed the concern felt by many interviewees when she stated:

“I don’t think we’re very good at meeting the needs of these young people in terms of knowing what to do with them. I really don’t. If you’re looking at preventative work I think a statutory agency is probably not the best bet because I don’t think parents approach statutory agencies very easily or very well. If there were other resources out there that were ‘normalised’ agencies, if you like, rather than seen as, ‘that agency’s for troubled kids’, parents or young people are more likely to approach at those early, preventative stages.”

**Services for runaways**

Almost all the agency professionals who talked about provision for runaways who were under 16 spoke of the need for crisis units. They portrayed this type of provision in a number of different ways. The main element would be a place to go:

“It’s almost too obvious to say somewhere for them to stay. Some of the young people chose not to have a place to go ... but others would’ve wanted a bed for the night, somewhere safe to be.”

There was some variation of opinion as to the how the unit should be used. Most workers felt that parents should immediately be informed of the young person’s whereabouts. They said that this would be necessary to allay parental fears (and also, if it was widely known that this was the policy, to encourage them to be generally supportive of such schemes).

“If the parents know they’re safe, if the parents know ‘Okay, well I know he’s not coming home tonight and I know that that place is there and that’s where he’ll go to, I’m not worried too much.’”

This would also logically lead to a negotiation with the parents the next day over how the young person could be re-integrated back at home.

In contrast some professionals, particularly those who worked with older young people, proposed that young people should be able to access the unit immediately with no expectation of extended contact:

“Just a place to crash as opposed to something that was going to offer them long term support ... That was a feature of the young people we came across generally — their lives were often in chaos and it was about moving from one crisis to the next ... any expression of what they needed was in terms of a bed for tonight and ‘I need money for food now’.”

They felt that the best approach would be to allow young people to stay for a night with no questions asked (at least initially), with a hope that once some trust had been built then the young person would volunteer information and a productive relationship with staff could evolve:

“I think that something has to happen on a number of levels. I think that their immediate needs have to be met; that might be about a crash unit where young people can go into and nothing is demanded of them. It’s just a basic provision. It’s securing their immediate health and safety. And that might be also a mechanism whereby you’re able to introduce them to other services — not necessarily say this is a condition of you coming here and getting access to this service but you’re able at least to enlighten them and make them aware of something.”
Interestingly, one project worker framed his response in terms of respite rather than refuge:

"I would love to see a respite area for potential runaways. If they needed somewhere to go, to have a chat with confidence to a person, to actually talk through their agonies, and if they wanted to actually stay the night there instead of being a risk outside… the centre would be able to phone up the parents. I really think that sometimes the kids cry out for a person to sit there with a listening ear… just to be there for them."

Many of the professionals stated that crisis units would have to be small and with strict entry criteria – only young people admitted:

"Small units are necessary; for a lot of young people running away they are already in the cycle of institutions, going from children’s homes to young offenders centres, etc and then to a hostel."

"Places that are specifically designed for young people that age, not hostels that are also bringing in adult males and females who… it would be inappropriate to place young people with, because they then are being exposed to a level of contamination (sic) that they probably shouldn’t be exposed to."

A number specified that the units should have a 24 hour helpline, with a freephone number, as first point of contact.

As with suggestions on preventative services many of the professionals felt that the basic scheme could be expanded to encompass additional linked elements. Some said that the crisis unit should also develop outreach work with young people:

"Places like that can build their programme to do outreach work on drink, on drugs, on sexual issues… particularly teenage pregnancies, the figures are absolutely sky high, the kids who we know are sexually active at 13 and 14… We could be doing outreach work from that type of a centre on all the issues that are affecting young people – it would be just great."

"For us a big, big part of any kind of facility would be that kind of provision alongside a detached or streetwork element, certainly in the city centres… One of the things we’ve consistently said is that a lot of young people will not access services, the services will have to come to them – even a ‘crash unit’ – workers on the street will have to go out and actually tap into where these young people are and make them aware of what’s available and re-direct them."

Others suggested that additional services should be accessible at the same venue - especially social services and health:

"I think in terms of another level of provision there has to be something that is like a one-stop-shop whereby all the agencies that can offer services do so in a way that is not just co-ordinated but is done so fairly quickly… one place with a multi-disciplinary team, operating together in one room and taking a case study approach… and delivering services as they are needed."

Another worker, speaking on the same theme, proposed that a one-stop-shop could be enhanced by having a café facility, which would encourage informal peer education as well as peer participation:

"Maybe a one-stop-shop is what I’m talking about – a safe place, a young person-friendly one-stop-shop… where they can just go in for a cup of tea, a cheap meal and… a lot of user-participation within it, maybe peer education within it, and access to all elements of life, all types of service, so that it’s not labelled – they’re not going to social services, they’re not going to Probation – they’re going to their place."

It was a clear underpinning of this proposal that agencies would be forced to respond in a more integrated way, not something that was happening with any consistency at the present time, according to a project manager in Belfast:
"It's all bitty – everyone seems to be doing their own wee bit and it's not very well co-ordinated in my experience. It's about how experienced you are and how well you know the network... it's to do with the personal experience of the workers... it shouldn't really matter. If it takes me twenty-odd years to get to know what I know in the system then that's not fair if you're a young person coming into it... in fact, I think under the Children Order we have the responsibility to deliver that... the information that the young people need to know."

Finally, as with the young people who were interviewed, there was a degree of realism expressed by some professionals who were willing to acknowledge that some young people were unreachable:

"There has to be an acceptance by all parties that some young people will not access services and do not want to tap into them and basically choose to do certain things and choose their own road... That's gonna happen sometimes... and you accept that you can't do anything, you accept that no matter what you offer, it isn't going to work."

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**Case study 6 — Jane**

Jane was 18 and living in a hostel. Before she was 16 she had run away four or five times, whilst living at home with her mother, step-father and younger step-sisters.

She said that the pattern was always the same – she would have a blazing row with her step-father and leave the house.

"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."

Her best friend would offer her a place to stay for the night and listen to her while she moaned about things at home. Then, when she had cooled down, she would return to the house and try to talk to her mother and avoid her step-father.

Jane was very unhappy during this period and began sniffing solvents to "get off her face":

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

She also often truanted from school and was suspended for consistently failing to do homework and missing lessons. Jane increasingly felt that she was coming a poor second to the rest of the family:

"I thought that nobody had the time for me and that nobody would want to listen to me so I kept it all to myself."

This became even more clear to her once she had turned 16. Her mother then forced her to leave a number of times saying that she could not cope with the conflict between Jane and her step-father.

Fortunately she could go and stay with the same friend who had helped her before and eventually her mother would relent and let her return home. Each time she left it became more difficult to go there because her friend's parents were beginning to show some reticence at having her to stay.
Things became even worse when she found out she had got pregnant by a man she had only been out with a few times. (She had not seen him since she told him about the pregnancy). When her parents found out they were angry and upset. Within days her mother had asked her to leave again and she felt it was not worth attempting to go back this time.

She travelled to the nearest city and found a bed in an emergency hostel, after a night of wandering the streets. When she told the staff that she was pregnant they negotiated with the council to provide her with a flat. She is now excited at the prospect of moving into her own place but realises that it will not be easy when the baby is born.
CONCLUSION

KEY FINDINGS

Prevalence and characteristics

- Almost one in ten young people in Northern Ireland will run away or be forced to leave home overnight before they are sixteen.
- One in five of overnight runaways had first run when under the age of eleven (and this group are more likely to run away repeatedly after the first incident).
- Over 2,000 young people under 16 run away from home each year in Northern Ireland.
- Prevalence rates are similar for different areas of the province – urban, suburban and rural.
- There is no difference in running away rates between males and females, in contrast to the UK as a whole where young women are more likely to run.
- One in seven of those away for at least one night said that they had been forced to leave home.

Contexts/triggers

- The main reason for running away is problems at home – mostly arguments and conflict (27%) – often aggravated by personal problems or problems at school.
- More than a quarter of young runaways said they left because of physical abuse (or the threat of it), emotional abuse or neglect.
- Young people who do not live in the traditional family form are more likely to run away – 13% of those who lived with a single parent had run away and 20% who lived in a family with a step-parent, as compared to 7% from two birth-parent families.
- The survey found no clear evidence of a direct link between economic factors and running away.
- The young people who had run away viewed the quality of their relationship with their parent(s) as being significantly worse than those who had never run.
- Young people who run away repeatedly have particularly high levels of family disruption and problems.
- Running away from substitute care is a significant and complex phenomenon. Most young people who go missing from care are continuing to run within care rather than starting to run from care.

Experiences of being away

- Being away could be both positive and negative. Young people reported that they had time to think (85%), and relief from pressure (67%) – however many also felt frightened (43%), lonely (38%) and hungry/thirsty (24%). Around one in twelve said that they had been sexually assaulted while they were away from home.
• Most young people only run away once but one in five go on to run three times or more.
• The majority of young people stay away for just one night but around a quarter had spent a week or more away from home.
• Most young people had a place to stay whilst away from home — either with friends (33%) or relatives (25%). But 36% said that they slept rough. This figure is significantly higher than that found for the UK as a whole (25%).
• There is an identifiable high-risk group of young people who run away more frequently, for longer periods and are more likely to sleep rough than average runaways.
• Most young people remain in their local area when they run away.
• Across the UK there was no discernible ‘career’ for those who ran more than once: no coherent, consistent or developing pattern of experiences. Young people who run away repeatedly do face more risks, but this was apparent in their experiences from the first time they ran.

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

We would identify two main strands of practice which should be developed in response to the findings of the research:
• Preventative work
• Responsive work

Most of the recommendations made in this section relate to the findings of the research but some are informed by a wider consideration of running away. Many of the recommendations are already beginning to take shape with pilot projects in England and Wales. However, it is not possible to say conclusively for all these ideas that they are the final say on the matter: proper piloting and evaluation would be required to test, adapt and fine-tune a fully formed practice response to the problem.

PREVENTATIVE WORK

Clearly, in the ideal situation, running away from home would not happen. The inherent risks are such that it would (almost) always be better for young people to seek an alternative means of coping with their problems.

The findings in this report on the sheer scale of the problem must engender a wide debate about how to develop a co-ordinated educative programme to reach all children. Our evidence of the prevalence of running across the spectrum of socio-economic class and by children as young as seven should underline the need to make all young people aware of the issue and promote informed discussion of risks, consequences and alternatives.

The development of local or national initiatives, with project workers visiting schools to deliver presentations, would seem to be the most logical approach to reaching a broad audience. Clearly the content and style would need to be appropriate to the targeted age group. At primary school level the use of fictional accounts and/or video to facilitate debate and allow transmission of important messages about safety (in the same way as previous initiatives on ‘Stranger Danger’ or road safety) would perhaps be most appropriate. For secondary school students there are two options: inclusion of running away as a topic within the Personal and Social Education curriculum, or a ‘presentations model’ similar to the one used for primary school children. (Clearly the additional benefit of inclusion within PSE would be that the issues would be consistently covered over time rather than perhaps becoming neglected after a one-off campaign).

There is debate about the overall efficacy of schools-based programmes (for example, see Gough (1993) for a consideration of this approach in relation to prevention of sexual abuse) but it is not immediately apparent what feasible alternatives exist to deliver a message to all young people. The work for this report has highlighted an idea to enhance the productiveness of attempts to convey information to young people – the use of peer education. Both young
people and professionals indicated that this could be an effective method to make programmes meaningful, particularly to an adolescent audience. Initial indications from work in Canada are that 'speaks' (presentations where young people who have been on the street tell their stories directly to the school audience) are particularly effective in conveying a message that is understood and retained (Caputo, Weiler and Green, 1996).

Given what we have found about the causes of running away – physical abuse, neglect, irresolvable conflicts with parents, emotional abuse – it would seem apparent that discussion around running away in schools may have some foreseeable consequences. The major side effect for some young people might be upset and, potentially, a need or desire to disclose about problems at home. This would mean that schools would have to be confident in creating an atmosphere which was conducive to, and appropriately responsive towards, the outing of pupils’ problems.

For primary school children this might necessitate additional training for teachers as the likely ‘first absorbers’ of any upset. At secondary level, we would suggest that a possible additional arm of this could be the development of peer support and counselling schemes. Such schemes are currently being piloted by The Children’s Society but it is difficult to say conclusively at this stage how effective they are.

The need highlighted for a safety net within schools to support all pupils is reinforced by the responses of the young people we interviewed. They made it quite apparent that the one thing they felt might have helped prevent them from running in the first place was having someone to talk to about their problems.

Clearly in more serious situations – when a young person has made a disclosure which requires further action – the school would have to make a referral to social services. The statutory response might entail temporary family support work (perhaps with an onus on reinforcing a message to the children within the family about alternatives to running away) or child protection intervention as appropriate. For those young people who already had a social worker, their self-referral could prompt additional focused work on coping strategies (as alternatives to running away), based on the social worker’s existing knowledge of the young person’s circumstances and resources.

The practice recommendations made so far relate solely to specific programmes of issue-based work with school pupils and the necessity of being equipped to deal with any potential consequences of such programmes. However, given our finding that running away is frequently located within a context of the additional stresses for young people experiencing changes at home, we should add that there is an overall need for a better reflection of this in the messages conveyed to young people about the family. The culture within schools and the curriculum should more openly and positively acknowledge that a significant proportion of young people do not reside within the traditional two birth-parent family unit. Only by fostering a non-judgemental attitude towards all family forms, and allowing for the pressures experienced by those whose personal circumstances might be in transition, can schools truly promote the emotional wellbeing of all the young people in their care. Perhaps by facilitating more open and frank discussion on the variety of the modern family within the classroom, the stigma borne by many could be lifted and their ability to cope be enhanced. This would certainly aid the bid to ensure that less young people put themselves at risk by fleeing a difficult home situation.

A further recommendation for preventative measures that flows from the findings is the need to undertake targeted work with groups who seem particularly vulnerable to running away. Indicators of an increased propensity to run were especially apparent for young people who were having problems at school and/or showing signs of becoming detached from school – those who were victims of bullying, those who truanted regularly, those who were suspended. This should prompt the development of focused initiatives, which could be delivered to these specific groups, providing suitable information on the potential dangers of running away and allowing the young people (whether in groups or individually) to discuss the issues for themselves. Again peer education would seem to be appropriate in these situations.
Perhaps the most vulnerable group of all is those who are ostensibly detached from mainstream schooling – those who rarely attend or who have been excluded. Since this group is not the same captive audience that a school situation allows and, since they have already indicated their reticence about formalised settings for learning, perhaps the best way to reach this group with messages about running away and its dangers (and potentially other important issues such as substance abuse and offending) would be for youth workers to do outreach work complemented by readily available information and advice within community/youth centres.

In the course of doing the fieldwork for the report we came across some model examples of how this might be undertaken. In each case there was a unit within a community where individual workers had actively cultivated positive relationships with the more socially excluded young people in the area (usually via activities arranged for evenings and weekends). There had also been the natural development of good relationships with parents since the workers encouraged them to become involved in the administration of the activities and have contact with the centre. These workers were then in an ideal position to filter appropriate information in understandable and relevant ways to individual young people at pertinent times in their lives. In fact the young people often came to the centre themselves to seek help and advice from the workers. Clearly, the ideal is for those who are vulnerable to identify with a trustworthy and suitable adult who can give guidance, assistance and perhaps even mediate for the young person if a difficult situation develops at home.

Additionally, for those who already have a social worker, evidence of increasing detachment from school during adolescence could be regarded as a trigger to undertaking specific work on the potential dangers of running away from home.

Finally, in terms of prevention there is a need to do targeted work with those in substitute care, although, as detailed in Chapter 3, it is likely that many of this group will have run before being admitted to care, there is clearly merit in preventing further episodes. It would perhaps be especially powerful in this setting to recruit, train and employ (even if only on a limited sessional basis) young people who themselves have run from care. This would enable extremely direct peer education, enhanced by live storytelling on real experiences and expert contributions to discussions.

**RESPONSIVE WORK**

The issue of responses to actual incidents of running away is a complex one. When one considers the potential range of causes and the range of intensity of factors within these, one cannot help but feel the keyword for any response must be *flexibility*. We have suggested a number of potential elements of responsive services here – it may be that these functions could be undertaken by a variety of workers in either statutory or voluntary sector settings and this may vary according to local conditions.

**Independent interviews**

To deal with the majority of situations – those where a young person is reported missing but returns home of their own volition – the first point of intervention should be a lighthanded one. Since all the indicators are that running away is premised on a ‘something’ with which most runners would benefit from some assistance, there ought to be the offer of an independent interview to all young people who run away, to find out their reason for running.

In order to preserve the credibility and integrity of a service offering independent interviews, the tasks of contact and then interviewing would have to be done by workers outside the statutory sector, although in most cases the referral information would have to come via the police MISPER system.

As well as being administered and conducted by an independent organisation, the interviews would need to be carefully planned, in terms of procedures and content, to work effectively in this context:
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- Careful thought would need to be given as to an appropriate venue. In some cases, for example, this might be at home, with a supportive adult or friend, or perhaps at the home of a member of the extended family. However, in other situations a neutral venue would need to be identified in order to guard against the potential for interference or contamination, possibly from those who are the cause of the problem. In all cases the decision as to where and when to conduct the interview should be led by the young person.

- There would need to be a strict policy on confidentiality, with a rigorous definition of circumstances in which this might be broken, and with an undertaking that all interviewees have this fully explained to them at the outset of the interview. The clarity of this would be vital in establishing a conducive atmosphere of trust and respect within which the interview could flourish.

- The interviewer would also need to clearly define their role (and the potential limits inherent in this role) in terms which are easily understandable to the young person. Again, this would have to be part of the lead-in to the full interview.

- The interview content should be primarily dictated by the young person with the worker making appropriate probes to elicit information when necessary.

- Given that interviews are only likely to take place where a young person is highly motivated to obtain a tangible outcome, the worker would have to focus on either identifying and conveying suitable alternative coping strategies for the young person (i.e. within their own resources) or on quick service responses to the young person’s problems.

- The interview should also include an element which illustrates to the young person the potential dangers of continuing to run away.

The interview would effectively then become a two-way assessment tool. From the young person’s perspective, it may enable them to reappraise their situation, perhaps focusing on how they might better utilise existing internal or external support mechanisms that they already have access to. For the worker, the interview would allow a proper insight into the circumstances around the running away episode and hence inform a second tier of response where necessary (which we go on to consider below).

An independent interview system could set in motion a varied and appropriate response for those who were receptive to help. However, in more complex situations, where the young person is not initially willing to engage with this process (perhaps due to parental pressure), there would need to be a procedure to trigger a statutory response after a specified number of MISPER incidents where follow-up is resisted. In one area of Scotland, Dunfermline (Fife), such a system is already being piloted. An ‘Alarm Bell’ procedure operates whereby, after the third episode, an automatic response is triggered by a dedicated police/social services child protection team. (In fact, in many instances, a social worker is already working with the family, in which case the information is passed on to them. However, the system does provide a safety net for the situations where young people have not previously had any involvement with social services).

This proposed system for responding to those who are reported missing is laid out in Figure 4 (on page 65).

Independent interview schemes linked to MISPER reports are currently being developed by The Children’s Society and Barnardos across England and Wales, and by the ASTRA project in Gloucester, but have not yet been evaluated.

Response to those who are harder to reach

In terms of a basic response to the majority of running away incidents an independent interview system with, where necessary, some follow-on services (as discussed below) would be sufficient.

However, our research suggests that there is a significant group of young people who may be in greater danger and not reachable via a MISPER-based scheme. This group consists
mainly of young people who are in crisis situations—staying temporarily in unsafe, inappropriate accommodation, sleeping rough, unable or unwilling to return home.

There is clearly a need to establish a service response to this extremely vulnerable group. There may be a number of possible ways to construct such a service, but it would need to perform three core functions:

- Crisis assessment
- Refuge
- Gateway to follow-on services

However, young people arrive at this service (we discuss referral routes overleaf) it would need to have an initially highly responsive role—to be in a position to consider and act quickly. Hence, there would be a need for a duty system with ready availability of workers to do an initial, crisis assessment. Often, the young person will require rapid access to crisis accommodation so this service would have to incorporate, or have close links with, some type of refuge resource (the potential form this might take are further discussed below). And, to deal with the aftermath of crisis response, the service would have to foster and maintain relationships with follow-on services.

![Diagram](Figure 4: Suggested protocol and potential outcomes of initial intervention for young people who are reported missing)
Referral routes

- Frontline agency protocols
- Via outreach work
- Self-referral

There are two potential methods to draw in those young people who would be the target of this service. The first would be to develop agreed protocols with frontline agencies who come into direct contact with young runaways on a regular basis – principally the police but also social services or sometimes other agencies. In essence a first contact by a frontline agency with a young person should trigger a referral to the duty crisis assessment workers in the runaway response service. (Our research has highlighted the fact that currently, the usual first choice of taking a young person home at the earliest opportunity often merely serves to re-expose them to the danger from which they had fled – perhaps further exacerbated in the light of their having run away).

The second approach would be to develop outreach work. There would clearly need to be extensive thought as to the feasibility and usefulness of this in individual areas, but in theory it would entail streetworkers identifying popular locations for young runaways, where they would regularly patrol to make contact and seek to engage with the young people that they came across. This might provide a route to greater contact and the possibility of making a positive intervention (elements of this approach are currently used by Children’s Society projects in England and Wales – for a consideration of their work see Stein et al (1994)).

These proposals about how to engage with more detached young runaways are a response to the situation as we perceive it now. In the longer term a fundamental aim of developing services for young runaways and more ‘global’ work to raise the profile of the issues, would be to seek to change the culture of runaways, towards a more proactive seeking of assistance – to re-attach those young people who currently become detached.

Clearly, this would require widespread knowledge of the existence and nature of a dedicated runaway response service amongst all young people. Additionally, to promote self-referral, contactability and flexibility of response would be vital ingredients of a runaway response service. Hence, there would need to be a widely publicised freephone number for contacting the duty crisis workers and a capability for them to travel to wherever the young person was, whether on the street or at a location to suit the young person, to undertake an initial assessment. This would perhaps need to be complemented by a drop-in facility where young people might present themselves for advice, information and help (possibly incorporating practical assistance such as hot food/kitchen, clothes dispensary and washing and laundry provision).

Thus far we have essentially focused on routes to opening professional communication with young runaways and acknowledged the variety of these, but only alluded to the service responses which would flow from this. We have also referred only to responses to runaways, rather than those forced to leave their home; however, we feel that these measures could, with certain re-emphasises, be equally well used to help young people in this situation.

The key to what happens next (if anything) is the outcome of the interview or crisis assessment. In some cases the young person, with some advice and information, may be in a position to cope with the situation her/himself. In more extreme situations, where a young person is clearly in significant danger, the next stage would be to offer refuge to the young person. We discuss the issue of the lack of any refuge provision in Northern Ireland in the policy section which follows this one, but it seems appropriate here to consider what a refuge might look like.

Refuge

Currently there is a wide-ranging debate about what works best, what is feasible, what is affordable and what different approaches could be adopted to fulfil this function.
Previous and existing service provision has been based primarily on a dedicated hostel model. This has worked successfully for a number of years in two locations in England (as mentioned in the Introduction). However, the high cost of such a model has caused some difficulties – the Leeds refuge has recently closed and the London refuge has also recently undergone radical changes in its funding structure (moving from voluntary sector funding to statutory funding via Department of Health grants, allocated with the agreement of the Greater London Association of Directors of Social Services).

This has led to some rethinking and actual or planned piloting of alternative models by Children's Society projects: 'refuge foster placements' and the 'invisible/flexible hostel' (where the workers are the refuge and the physical venue could be pre-vented bed and breakfast hotels or even a crash pad at the office premises of the project, according to circumstances) are currently being investigated. However, it is impossible to say at this time whether these alternative models are able to safely, consistently and effectively meet the need for refuge for under-16s.

It should perhaps be borne in mind when debating the possible structure for a refuge service that young people clearly identified a desire for a "place to go" in their interviews – this might mean that they envisaged a hostel-type model. However, it might be equally valid to provide some sort of live presence (shopfront in a city centre) as the place to go where a drop-in facility allows access to information and advice and, after due assessment, access to a refuge elsewhere. If necessary, in rural areas for example, this could focus around a mobile drop-in (already in use in North Yorkshire in a project run by Craven YMCA: Franks, 2000) as the first point of contact and potential avenue to a centralised refuge.

A slightly different approach to refuge might include the instigation of negotiations within larger, extended families for an intermediate/crisis/respite stay with another safe relative, or perhaps a friend. The role of a worker within this might extend to an advocacy or mediation task in easing the young person back into their own home via a planned and staged re-integration with their immediate family (hopefully with the assistance of an ally or allies within the extended family – both to aid this process and provide ongoing support to the young person once home). Given that we found extensive evidence of this already happening to some extent within the communities studied in Northern Ireland, it would seem logical to try to tap into it and, with the necessary tact, exploit a pre-existing resource.

This formalised system of encouraging intra-familial self support has its roots in family group conferencing as discussed by Burford and Pennel (1994) and Marsh and Crow (1997).

**Follow-on services**

Some young runaways who come through the independent interview system, and many who experience a crisis intervention and/or refuge, will need ongoing input to resolve their problems. The possible follow-on services required may include:

- Counselling
- Befriending
- Advocacy
- Issue-based group or individual work
- Mediation
- Family group conference facilitation
- Health services – physical and mental

Local availability of such services may dictate what form a follow-on package might take. A number of agency professionals interviewed for this study put forward a new service model, which could be appropriate in large conurbations. It was suggested that a holistic, multidisciplinary team could be established in one venue, consisting of a health worker, social services worker, youth worker, and possibly substance misuse specialist, counsellors, probation
worker, etc. These individual specialists could then effectively combine their services to work together as a generic young person’s team – a “one stop shop” as one worker put it.

The main benefit for young people would be easy access to all the services they might need without having to venue-hop. The main benefit to professionals would be the facilitation of integrated working relationships. In theory this should lead to more rounded and consistent outcomes for service users.

Despite its obvious merits, we would like to sound one note of caution over this idea. A clear message that came across from both young people and some agency workers was the fundamental need to de-stigmatise services which aspired to reach the most disaffected. Overt links to social services and perhaps also to probation may have a strong deterrent effect on those whom the service might most wish to help. (It may also be that such close ties to the statutory sector would undermine a flexible, child-centred approach in initial assessments of runaways – there could be too much pressure over adopting a more child protection-focused agenda which social services might wish to institute). Should such a venture be tried, it would have to pay particular attention to public relations work to establish and maintain a reputation which disassociated it from the statutory sector; this could foreseeably lead to tensions both within the team and amongst its funders.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research findings raise a number of issues which need to be addressed at the level of national and local social policy.

**Family policy**

Our main finding in relation to family form was that young people who live in non-traditional family forms (i.e. where both birth parents are not resident in the household) have a significantly higher propensity to run away from home. This is most pronounced where the family has undergone a reconstitution – the introduction of a new (step) parent – when it was almost three times more likely that young people would have run away.

The picture is somewhat complicated by the finding that these young people did not report being any less happy (in terms of the indicators that we offered for selection in the questionnaire) than their counterparts in traditional families.

It is not possible to say conclusively from this research why this might be. Whether young people are less attached to reconstituted families, feel that they have less of a stake in them, are driven by the more pragmatic consideration that they have the facility (in some cases) to run to their other birth parent, or feel some sort of stigma as a result of not being a member of an ‘ideal’ family – all are potentially part of the reason as are any number of other factors. There is clearly a need for further research on this subject.

In terms of a policy response by local/national government this is perhaps not helpful. What our findings do suggest, however, is that we should strive to better understand the problems which young people might be encountering during the transition from a two birth parent family to a different form. A recognition of this should be accompanied by a full acknowledgement of the dynamic nature of ‘family’ and of the plurality of family forms as they now exist. This implies an acceptance of the burgeoning and irreversible trend of family change and a proper allowance for this in the formation of future policy.

There is some indication that this is already beginning to happen. The bid to prioritise the needs of children and young people when parents separate, via the introduction of mediation services, should be welcomed. However, given our findings, perhaps this should be augmented by a new onus on listening to the views of the young people in the family – making concerted efforts to consult with them, include them and offer support and advice to them during the process of separation and transition to a new family form. Hopefully, the sensitive involvement of young people, alongside an acceptance of their upset and fears at an extremely difficult time in their lives, would lessen the fallout of family transitions for them and thereby prevent extreme reactions such as running away.
Whatever the family context we found that the major cause of running away was problems at home – often focused around family conflict, relationship difficulties, parenting issues (differential treatment, neglect, scapegoating) and physical abuse. For those cases where abuse is an issue, the current child protection system could be enhanced to could include focused work to prevent running away.

In families where the problems are less serious issues, a lower level of intervention may be effective in enabling families to become better equipped to deal with their differences. Government policy in terms of legislative intent for those identified as being in need has already moved in the direction of increasing preventative family support work – the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 has introduced a new spirit of equality between prevention and protection in terms of practice priorities for Health and Social Services Trusts. The effect of the Order is currently being studied across Northern Ireland (see McCrystal, 2000). Initial indications are that the message is getting across but it is as yet unclear whether a proper balance between family support and child protection can be achieved in the long term.

We would endorse the need for increased emphasis on family support and urge that an element of focused preventative work on the risks of running be included to reduce the numbers of vulnerable young people running away from home.

**Undermining the detachment process for under-16s**

We have written at various times in this report of the issue of detachment, a process whereby a young person both consciously and subconsciously severs their links with normal primary sources of support – parents, extended family, school, community. As with the fieldwork for the UK-wide study, in Northern Ireland we came across a small, but highly significant number of young people who had spent extended periods (of weeks or months) missing from home and without any safe help.

Given their ages, these young people were completely isolated from the system, with no rights to services, income or accommodation. This ‘zero status’ necessarily led them into potentially extremely risky strategies to obtain food, shelter and human contact.

Although heightened attentiveness to streetwork provision would seem to be the most obvious response to dealing with this problem (a proposal which we would support for certain areas), it is perhaps more crucial to consider the failure of earlier attempts at intervention in these young people’s lives. This is partly because young people on the streets tend to be elusive (by definition they are avoiding being caught), but also because this is a painful example of a situation where prevention is better than cure.

The experiences of these young people testified to the need to enhance our facility to really listen to, and give equal weight to, the voices of children and young people in all the fora in which they may become involved through problems at home. Most of these young people simply felt that they were not listened to when it had mattered.

Perhaps what is needed is a culture shift to a more child-centred atmosphere for all important decisions about the lives and welfare of young people. This could include a revision of the current legal situation which makes no requirement for parents in Northern Ireland (or England or Wales) to consider children’s views in coming to decisions which affect them – in contrast to the situation in Scotland (see the Children (Scotland) Act, 1995 - section 6). Such a positive change – to legislate that parents should give due thought to their children’s wishes (taking account of their age and maturity) – would also comply more fully with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Schools also have a clear part to play in reducing the risk of detachment. We have already discussed this to some extent in the ‘Preventative work’ section above. We could add that current guidance on promoting the full participation and involvement of all pupils at school is a positive move: see Social Inclusion: Pupil Support (Department for Education and Employment, 1999) and The 1996/97 Northern Ireland Suspension and Expulsion Study (Kilpatrick et al., 1997). Some of the recommendations include the recruitment of pupils to school councils, and facilitating their participation in the preparation and development of
anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies. Early intervention when there are problems such as truancy and/or behaviour difficulties is also advocated, as is a call to work with parents to address these issues.

**Inter-agency working**

The clarion call for better co-operation between caring agencies when working with service users of every type is one that appears frequently in research recommendations.

We hope that the reader will indulge us in repeating this message as it applies to young runaways. Police, social services, education, the youth service, voluntary sector projects, probation, health – the number of agencies who might come into contact to varying degrees with a young runaway during their career is complex and often “bitty” (to quote a project manager in Belfast). A number of agency professionals made a plea for more effective inter-agency co-ordination and this is a request that we would echo. Because of the high vulnerability of young runaways, particularly those who spend time on the streets, and because of the need for early, preventative intervention whenever possible, we would underline this message – productive sharing of information and working constructively together is vital.

This co-operation should manifest itself in the development of joint strategies between police, social services and voluntary agencies to respond when young people run away from home or care, as prescribed in England in the joint guidance from the Local Government Association and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, 1997) and in the forthcoming Safeguarding Children And Young People Who Go Missing From Home And Substitute Care (Department of Health). It should also be facilitated by universally agreed systematic recording and monitoring of running away.

**Refuge provision**

We have spoken already about the need to develop refuge provision as a basic response to running away by under-16s in Northern Ireland. We would conclude that this is an urgent need, since we found very little evidence of anything available currently which could be described as a refuge. At the level of national policy the legislation is already in place, in Article 70 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order (1995).

In addition the Government has given clear indications that it is supportive of such ventures:

> “The Government also recognises the importance of refuges which cater for young people. It will work constructively with local government and voluntary bodies to strengthen their role and financial basis.” (The Government’s Response to the Children’s Safeguards Review, Department of Health, 1998).

It would seem that the will of decision-makers, in both local government and the voluntary sector, needs to catch up with the law (and the publicly voiced sentiments of our political masters/mistresses) in this respect. There can be no effective response to running away until such provision is in place.

**Substitute care**

A consistent finding from previous research has been that young people who are looked after by local authorities are over-represented among young runaways, in particular those from residential care (Newman, 1989; Abrahams and Mungall, 1992; Rees, 1993; Stein *et al*, 1994; Barter, 1996).

Whilst we did not aspire to make this study a comprehensive exploration of running from care (particularly with the limited numbers present in the survey sample), we did hope that our methodology would allow some further exposition of the complexity of running from care, particularly by cross-referencing with the data from the UK study.

In the wake of residential care scandals – such as the Kincora Boys’ Home case in Northern Ireland, the Beck case and the ‘pindown’ regime in England and, most recently, the institutionalised abuse uncovered in North Wales leading to the Waterhouse Inquiry – it is
worth always considering the possibility that running from care may be partly predicated on problems within a residential unit. Episodes of running, perhaps especially if they are continual, should always be regarded as significant and seen as a potential indicator of the need for full investigation.

However, it would be wrong to offer this as a complete and representative picture and thereby see running from care as an indictment of the system. Although our sample was limited, one benefit of exploring the long term context of our interviewees’ running behaviour, was that we were able to confidently say that for the majority running away was already a pattern of reactive or proactive behaviour before entry into care. In this sense, young people are continuing to run within care rather than running from care. We would also add (as detailed in Chapter 3) that we found in many cases that running away behaviour was ameliorated by young people’s experiences within the care system.

We would not regard this, however, as cause for complacency. In order to continue to refine the knowledge of this problem, and unify the agency response to it, there needs to be development at a strategic level.

Firstly, better national and local monitoring of running incidents to identify placements or areas with significantly higher rates of running (a considerable variation in numbers for different areas has already been identified in previous research – Wade et al., 1998). This would allow for both a re-appraisal of practice in individual areas and for different types of placement. This would be particularly pertinent since there is relatively little information on running away from foster care.

New statutory guidance on this has been promised in _The Government’s Response to the Children’s Safeguards Review_ (Department of Health, 1998). This publication states:

> "It is particularly important that, whenever a child returns, or is returned by others, a full assessment should be made of the reasons why the incident occurred and whether the child’s current placement remains suitable. Accurate records must be maintained of every incident, and senior managers should examine the reasons why children have gone missing and any variations in the rate at which they run away from different children’s homes and foster care."

In addition, improvements in monitoring should be complemented by clear guidance and advice to staff (and foster carers) and work towards improved inter-agency co-ordination over running from care.

Allied to this strategic response, there also needs to be changes on the ground. Firstly, and specifically, a targeted preventative programme with this group (see ‘Preventative work’ section above), possibly underlined by the creation of a statutory responsibility for local authorities to ensure this happens.

Secondly, and more generally, there is a need to improve the overall experience of substitute care. The obligation to seek to provide security, consistency and stability of care placements for all young people in care cannot be understated as the only logical means to improving the quality of outcomes for young people who traverse the care system. Hopefully the proposed initiative in Northern Ireland which will replicate the _Quality Protects Programme_ (Department of Health, 1998) in England will institute positive developments in this direction.

One additional point that we wish to raise briefly here (which results from our earlier suggestions on practice responses to running away) is the specific need to carefully consider the case for the professionalisation of foster care, most particularly as it relates to the potential need to provide refuge foster placements. Clearly those foster parents who wish to put themselves forward to undertake this work will need extra training and it is open to debate as to whether this (and other degrees of specialisation for different caring situations within the fostering role) should merit a formalised, salaried career as a foster carer.
Sectarianism

We wrote at some length in Chapter 4 about the issue of sectarianism and how the activities of paramilitary groups affect the lives of many young people in Northern Ireland. It was apparent that this was a two-edged sword, in some ways inhibiting running away behaviour (at some psychological cost to the young people concerned) by restricting geographical mobility and in other ways causing it by making young people flee because of the fear of reprisals (after behaving "in an anti-social manner"). In addition, paramilitary exclusion orders, where young people are ordered to leave an area, overtly and deliberately contribute to the numbers of young people in Northern Ireland being forced out of their homes.

We cannot hope to offer a solution to these problems here. The increasing normalisation of young people's lives through the ongoing peace process should have a positive effect but quite how this might manifest itself in terms of running away is difficult to predict.

16 plus

We readily acknowledge the artificiality of a cut-off point at 16 for recommendations for young people who run away from their home. There is clear evidence of an association between running away or being forced out of home under 16 and youth homelessness from 16 onwards. We found this amongst the older interviewees in our sample and it has been highlighted elsewhere (not least in Still Running and by Craig et al (1996) in the UK and by Simons and Whitbeck (1991) in the USA).

We hesitate at offering an exposition of all the issues for older young people but, at a basic and unrefined level, would propose the need for the following:

- Improvements in dedicated crisis accommodation for the under 18 age group.
- A re-thinking on the longer term accommodation options available to under 18s who cannot remain at home.
- An urgent review of the system of welfare benefits for this age group.
- The development of better support services and systems to prevent young people under 18 drifting into homelessness and becoming detached and unreachable.

We have restricted our thoughts here to those under 18 – in many ways, once a person reaches 18, and young adulthood, their situation improves markedly in terms of ability to find accommodation, access the benefits system, etc. This is not to preclude the fact of some young adults experiencing difficulties if unable to live at home after 18, perhaps most particularly those who need ongoing support to establish independence – e.g. those leaving substitute care.
CODA

Perhaps the most fundamental finding which should be drawn from the report is that running away is a symptom of a greater problem. Young people always run for a reason and that reason is almost always, at its most basic level, rooted in the home.

Inevitably, in a full discussion of running away and its causes and putative cures, some of society’s rawest nerves will be exposed – physical and sexual abuse, neglect and emotional abuse, domestic violence, the psychological hardships that traumatisé and stunt the development of many young lives. It must therefore follow that, in attempting to properly construct a response to the problem of running away, one will be grappling with some of our most difficult taboos.

This is not to overdramatize the situation – to deny that for some young people there will be relatively straightforward remedies to their problems – but it is to acknowledge that any response that aims to deal comprehensively with the realities of running away must be forewarned and forearmed to cope with all that it provokes. A significant proportion of young people will bring difficult issues.

The primary message of this report must be that we should not shirk our responsibility to fully engage in listening, understanding and then responding to the voices of children and young people. This responsibility remains no matter how troubling the message.

Encouragingly, since the writing of this report, there have been indicators that there is the political will to begin to address the issue of young runaways.

The Social Exclusion Unit, based within the Cabinet Office, is undertaking a far-reaching consultation exercise with a view to developing “a national service framework for young runaways” (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). The findings of this consultation are due to be reported in the autumn.

It is to be hoped that these machinations will ultimately result in concrete service developments which are effective in alleviating the situation in England – and that the rumblings in England will have an impact on politicians and policymakers in Northern Ireland and the other countries of the United Kingdom.
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Lost Youth

Lost Youth is the first large-scale study of young people who run away from home in Northern Ireland. The research provides evidence that is unique to Northern Ireland but forms part of a UK-wide survey that was carried out in collaboration with The Children’s Society (England and Wales) and the Aberlour Childcare Trust (Scotland).

The report presents important findings. More than 2000 young people under 16 run away or are forced to leave home each year in Northern Ireland. Of these, over a third sleep rough – a figure significantly higher than in the rest of the UK – and around one in twelve young runaways are sexually assaulted while away from home.

The report examines many aspects of running away, including the home and society contexts that lie behind young people’s decisions to run away, their experiences of being away from home and the views of professionals and young people themselves on possible solutions to the problems.

Lost Youth also looks at issues which are unique to Northern Ireland, such as the impact of paramilitary activities on young runaways and the especially strong community and family networks.

Most importantly, the report presents the experience of running away in the words of young people themselves. It illustrates graphically the violence and conflict in their families that force them to leave, and the extreme challenges that they face when they become detached from their families, schools and communities.