

# MAKE RUNAWAYS SAFE

LAUNCH REPORT



The  
Children's  
Society



MAKE  
RUNAWAYS  
SAFE

Help us build a safety net for  
children who run away from home

[makerunawayssafe.org.uk](http://makerunawayssafe.org.uk)

A better childhood. For every child.

# Foreword

Every five minutes in this country a child runs away from home or care. Even more shocking is that a quarter of these children, that's 70 children each day, are forced out of their homes by their parents or carers. They have no choice but to go it alone. Many more flee conflict, neglect or abuse in the home.

Often they will take great risks alone on the streets. Many of them will be so desperate they will rob or steal to survive. Others will seek solace in drugs or alcohol. Many will be harmed or abused by adults who groom them. This is the reality for many of the 100,000 children who run away each year.

Tragically in most cases, children who run away do not get the help they need. Two thirds are not reported to the police. Eight out of ten don't seek help from anybody because they don't know where to turn, they don't feel there is anyone they can trust or they fear the consequences.

The Children's Society has been working with these children for more than 25 years. We have led the research, policy and practice agenda to ensure that young runaways are not left to cope on their own. But despite our best efforts, children who run away continue to remain hidden from view in too many of our communities.

Pockets of good practice exist but overall there is an alarming lack of awareness and a noticeable failure to prioritise running away as a key child protection issue. Action is urgently needed to address this, which is why The Children's Society is publishing this report and launching a major campaign calling for a national safety net for young runaways.

We recognise that there is a cost attached to this. But at a time when the need to make savings is paramount, there is also a compelling case for return on investment. The report clearly shows how stepping in the first time a child runs away can lead to substantial financial savings for a number of agencies - and society as a whole.

The government and local authorities cannot ignore the powerful evidence for reform. We are calling on the public to take immediate action to create a change in practice once and for all. It must happen for the sake of every one of the tens of thousands of children who run away each year, who need - and deserve - our help. Together we can provide a safety net for these children.



**Bob Reitemeier**  
**Chief Executive, The Children's Society**  
12 July 2011

# Summary of recommendations

This report calls on central government to take the lead and set out an action plan that focuses on (see page 25 for detailed recommendations):

## 1. Raising awareness

Every professional working with children must be aware of the risk factors associated with running away. Children and their parents and carers also need to know how to access timely advice, guidance and support.

## 2. Improving support

Universal services have a vital role to play as they can respond when a child starts running away, but there also needs to be specialist provision in place and clear pathways to that provision.

## 3. Improving statutory responses and ensuring clear systems of accountability and performance management

When children run away it must be recognised as an early indication that a child is at risk. This should be seen explicitly as a child protection issue by all Local Safeguarding Children Boards with protocols and procedures in place backed up by clear systems of accountability and performance management.

## 4. Improving police responses

Every police force needs to prioritise the importance of responding effectively to a child who runs away by conducting regular assessments in their area to determine the nature and scale of the problem, and by making sure that there are effective links with other agencies.

The recommendations set out in this report are focused on England and Wales, but the report does draw on research that applies to the whole of the UK. This is a UK-wide issue that requires action by governments in all four nations.



# Introduction

The Children's Society opened its first service for children who ran away over 25 years ago. At that time there was very little provision across the country to support young runaways and, as an issue, it received little public or professional attention.

Ever since, The Children's Society has been at the forefront of shaping policy and practice. We currently operate nine projects across England that work closely with local authorities, the police and schools to provide a vital safety net for children who run away from home or care. We have also conducted the most authoritative research in the UK to understand the nature and scale of the issue.

As a result, there has been an improvement in how professionals respond to children who run away. Detailed statutory guidance sets out procedures and protocols for the police, local authorities and other agencies. Yet despite this, all too often children are not protected because agencies are not identifying them and meeting their needs.

Awareness of the issue and the long-term consequences remains far too low among teachers, police officers, social workers, health professionals and others who work with children. Older children in particular are often not seen as children in need, but as young people who are more resilient and better able to cope.<sup>1</sup> So despite the fact that many recent high profile cases of sexual exploitation have been linked to children running away from home or care,<sup>2</sup> the issue is still not being recognised by every local area as a high priority child protection issue.

1. Rees, G., Gorin, S., Jobe, A., Stein, M., Medforth, R & Goswami, H. (2010) *Safeguarding Young People: Responding to young people aged 11 to 17 who are maltreated*. London, The Children's Society. Maltreatment refers to the neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse of young people.

2. Derby Safeguarding Children Board (2010) *Serious Case Review BD09 Executive Summary*. Available at: [www.derbyscb.org.uk/docs/BD09SCRExecutiveSummary.pdf](http://www.derbyscb.org.uk/docs/BD09SCRExecutiveSummary.pdf)

# Running away – the scale and nature of the problem

The term 'runaway' refers to a child under the age of 16 who has spent one night or more away from their home without parental permission. They may have decided to leave home or have been forced to leave, and they will face a range of potential harm and risks from having to find a place to stay and a way to survive.

A child aged 16 or over can leave home and live independently so is not considered to have run away. But all children under 18 are subject to statutory safeguards as set out in the Children Act 1989. Consequently the definition used by the government in its guidance states:

'The terms 'young runaway' and 'missing' in this context refer to children and young people up to the age of 18 who have run away from their home or care placement, have been forced to leave, or whose whereabouts is unknown.'<sup>3</sup>

It is important to recognise that a child running away is not necessarily the same as a child going missing. This is because when a child goes missing it could be anything from getting lost while on a day trip to the most extreme cases of child abduction.

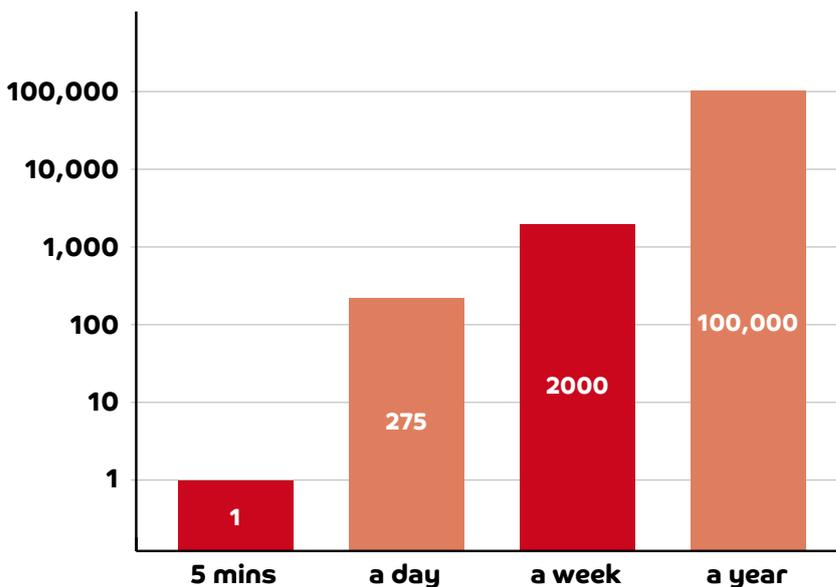
The key distinction is that a child who has gone missing will have been reported to the police who will record it as a missing incident. This is simply not the case for most runaways.



3. Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care*. London: HM Government.

## How many children run away?

The Children’s Society has carried out the only authoritative studies to determine the numbers of children who run away (See Figure 1). The most recent, *Still Running II*, was published in 2005 and provides the most accurate source of data, which we use in this report.<sup>4</sup> It found that every five minutes a young person runs away from home or care – that’s over 100,000 each year. We are currently carrying out a follow up study that will be published later this year.



**Figure 1:** Number of runaways in the UK (from *Still Running II*, 2005)

Overall, one in nine children runs away overnight at least once before the age of 16. The Children’s Society has established that four specific facts provide a clear understanding of the issue.

<b>1</b> Many children run away repeatedly	Just under a third of children who run away do so at least three times. <b>Nearly one in 10 run away up to nine times. Just over one in 20 run away 10 times or more.</b> These children are at greater risk.
<b>2</b> A significant proportion run away for long periods	The majority run away overnight but a quarter run away for between two to six nights. <b>One in five run away for more than a week</b> and half of those will be away for more than four weeks.
<b>3</b> Children are often forced to run away	<b>A quarter of children say they ran away because they were told to leave or were physically forced to go.</b> This is the equivalent of almost 70 children every day or three children every hour.
<b>4</b> The vast majority are not reported missing	<b>Two-thirds of children who run from their homes are never reported to the police as missing.</b> Their parents or carers do not inform the police and the children themselves remain suspicious of the authorities and so do not seek help.

4. Rees, G & Lee, J (2005) *Still Running II: Findings from the Second National Survey of Young Runaways*. London: The Children’s Society.

## Who runs away and why?

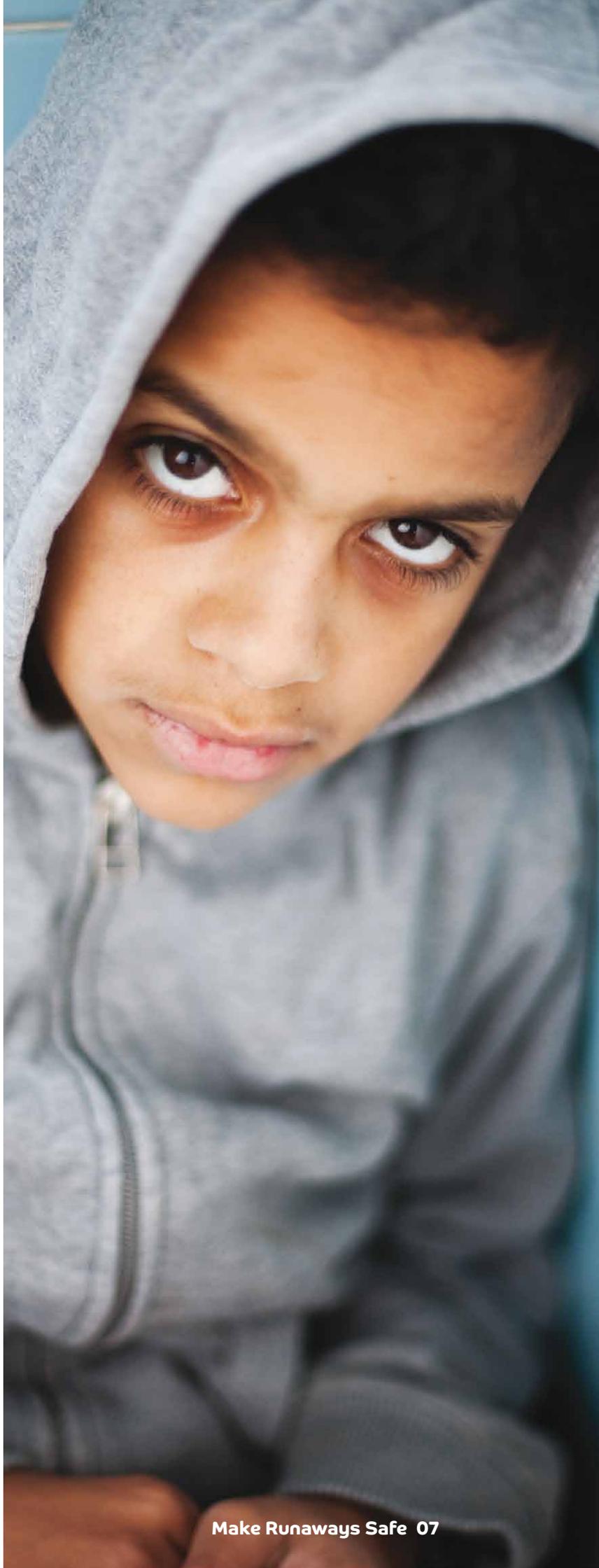
The reality is that any child could decide to run away but we know from our research that some are more likely to do so than others. We have found that girls are more likely to run away than boys and that most children run away when they are between the age of 13 and 15. However, a quarter will run away before they are 13 and one in 10 before the age of 10.

We also know that some specific groups of children are more likely to run away than others:

- **Children in care** – they are three times more likely to run away although they only make up two per cent of the total number of runaways.
- **Children who are facing difficulties in school** – a third of young people who said that they had problems attending school had run away.
- **Children who use drugs and alcohol or are in trouble with the police** – over a third of young people who have problems in these areas run away.
- **Children who consider themselves as disabled or having difficulties with learning** – around one in five young people who define themselves in this way had run away.
- **Children whose parents' relationships have broken down** – young people living in step-families are three times as likely to have run away as those living with both parents. Children living with one birth parent are twice as likely to have run away at some point in their lives. However, we know that many of these young people will have run away earlier in their lives – for example during the period when they still lived with both their birth parents.<sup>5</sup>

Emotional and physical neglect or abuse, parental drug or alcohol misuse and parental mental health problems can also be contributory factors. Unsurprisingly, we found that runaways are less likely to say their life is worth living or to have a sense of purpose, and are more likely to feel depressed with nobody to talk to.

5. Rees G & Rutherford C (2001) *Home Run – Families and Young Runaways*. London: The Children's Society.



## What happens when a child runs away?

When children run away from home or care they will be in great danger of being physically or sexually abused or exploited. This is a common finding from all voluntary sector organisations. For example, Barnardo's services which work with children at risk of, or involved in, sexual exploitation say that more than half the children they support run away on a regular basis.

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre's recently published thematic assessment emphasised the clear links between children who run away from home and child sexual exploitation.<sup>6</sup> The involvement of children in exploitation takes place over weeks and months and if a child is often running away, potential abusers can easily target them.

Our research shows that a quarter of the 100,000 children who run away each year will be at serious risk of harm while away from home. We found that one in six said they slept rough, one in eight said they resorted to begging or stealing to survive and one in 12 said they were actually hurt or harmed. It is not unusual for children to also become involved in substance misuse.

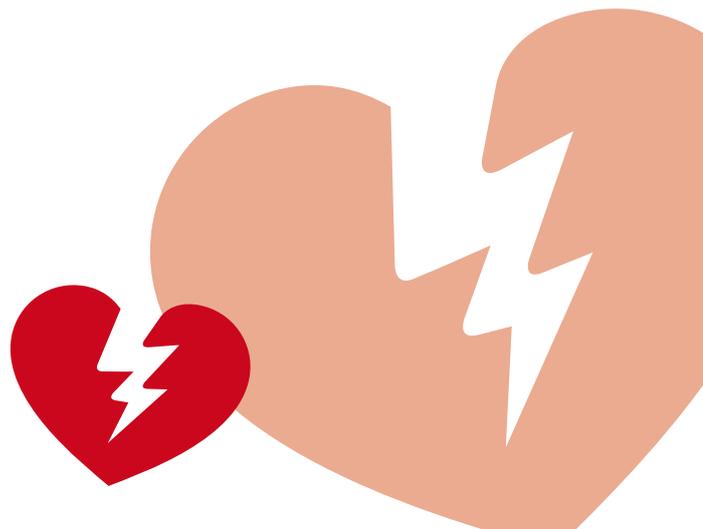
Our practitioners find that mainstream services like schools and the police are not sufficiently aware of all of the risks facing children who run away. Instead, if a child runs away regularly there is a tendency for agencies to become complacent about the child's ability to take care of themselves.

We are particularly concerned that children are not referred on to the support they need. A recent study conducted jointly by The Children's Society, NSPCC and the University of York found that professionals perceived older children to be more competent and resilient in dealing with maltreatment than younger children. This included being able to escape abusive situations and seek help.<sup>7</sup> Disclosing maltreatment was found to be particularly difficult for older children. They are far more reluctant to develop trusting relationships with professionals and are fearful of the consequences. Also, they do not always have sufficient knowledge or information about how to get help.

The reality is that most children who run away will not look for help from professional agencies. Our research found that eight out of 10 do not seek any help and those that do will usually ask friends or relatives. This indicates that running away remains largely hidden from all agencies – the police, children's social care, schools, youth services and health services.

6. Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (2011) *Out of Mind, Out of Sight: Breaking down the barriers to understanding child sexual exploitation* CEOP Thematic Assessment, London: CEOP

7. Rees, G., Gorin, S., Jobe, A., Stein, M., Medforth, R & Goswami, H. (2010) *Safeguarding Young People: Responding to young people aged 11 to 17 who are maltreated*. London, The Children's Society. Maltreatment refers to the neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse of young people.



# Jake's story

'I was 11 when I first ran away. Everyone in our house was always arguing and fighting, and after one really bad argument I ran away. It became a bit of a habit. I just kept running away, the police would find me and bring me back home.'

Jake would travel on the underground or stay out overnight in parks.

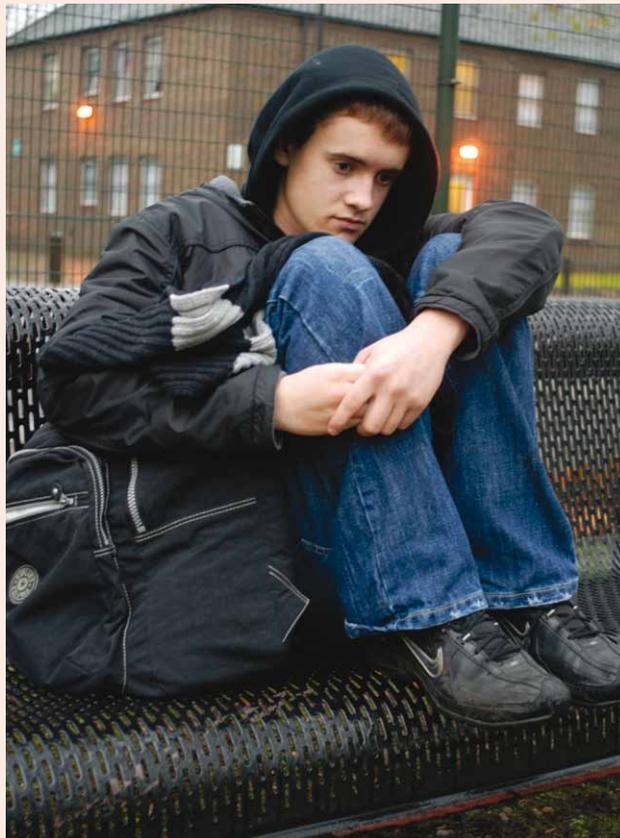
'One time I went to the seaside and slept there. I was woken up by the police and taken home.'

With his older sister in care, Jake was the eldest child in his household and felt lonely and under pressure. Family fights were common – on one occasion his sister broke his door down. Angry and upset, Jake would run away to calm down, even though he knew it would worry his family.

'I came back one night after saying I was going to kill myself and my little sister was so upset, but sometimes I just had to get away.'

Running away only made Jake's situation worse and before long he was getting into trouble with the police.

'When the police picked me up I'd get angry with them and they'd put me in a cell. I've been in cells about seven or eight times. I also started stealing and I ended up in court when I was 12. I don't ever want to do that again, it's scary in a cell, and very lonely.'



Photograph posed by model

'The staff have helped me a lot with my anger issues. They've given me a way to calm down, to stop being naughty and given me everything I need to stop running away. Now if I'm upset or I need advice I can ring them or send them an email.'

Jake no longer feels the need to run away when things get too much.

'I've found ways to calm myself down. I play with my friends, or I go to my bedroom watch some telly or play on my X-Box. I talk to my dad, and let out my feelings. I used to be moody but now I'm happy and cheerful.'

The project has also helped Jake get back into school and raised his expectations.

'I've just got a B in my ICT exam. I've learned that if you stick at school you can get good grades. Before I was thinking about killing myself, but now I want to get a good job and have a better life.'

## Findings from our services – the latest trends revealed

To establish the latest trends, The Children's Society conducted interviews with each of our nine projects across England that work with children who run away. We identified four significant trends.

### 1. Working with younger children

Nearly all our projects said that overall they are working with younger children. Previously the average age of children they supported was 13 to 15. However, they now say they are supporting increasing numbers of children aged 11 and 12 and even some as young as eight.

Our staff said while there could be a number of reasons for the apparent change in the age profile, their main concern was that younger children are more trusting of adults and particularly vulnerable to getting themselves into unsafe situations and inappropriate relationships.

Emma, a project worker in the North West of England, said:

'The younger children do not sense danger, they like spending time out on the streets and taking risks. They are unaware of the risks they might be exposing themselves to.'

### 2. Working with boys

Since The Children's Society first set up projects working with runaways, we have always worked more with girls. However, our projects are now reporting that they are working with increasing numbers of boys, which poses particular challenges. Our staff have found that boys are far harder to engage because they respond very differently to girls and are more likely to get involved in substance misuse or be victims of crime. They are also less likely to speak out when something is going wrong and this means that schools and other agencies often do not realise there is a problem.

Steve, a project worker in the North of England, said:

'Girls are usually very verbal and more likely to tell you straight away what is happening. They will display aggressive behaviour, scream, shout get into fights, act out problems. Boys are more reserved emotionally, less likely to talk about such things, appear to mull over problems, and so generally seem more introverted. Schools are much more likely to respond to the girls who are acting out, rather than to boys who are being quiet and not displaying outwardly that there are problems.'

### 3. Child sexual exploitation

Over time the close links between running away and sexual exploitation have been established. Project workers are now finding that for most children they support there is a serious risk of, or involvement in, exploitation.

Amy, a project worker in the Midlands, said:

'It's important to say that for child sexual exploitation work, virtually all those at risk are runaways. Almost by definition, if there is exploitation going on, there are more frequent missing episodes....and they've got somewhere to go, to a flat or a property'

In many cases children who run away are being actively targeted in public places such as parks, bus stations or city centres, not just by adults but increasingly by their peers. Project workers say they are seeing children making connections with their peers from the other side of cities or in different areas altogether, either through spending time on the streets, or because looked after children know each other from various placements.

Peter, a project worker in the Midlands, said:

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

# Shazneen's story

Shazneen was just five years old when she went on the run with her mother, who was trying to escape her violent husband.

Shazneen and her mother would stay in hostels:

*'We'd only last a couple of weeks before my dad or my brothers found us. They used to give our picture to taxi drivers who would spot us and tell them where we were staying,'* says Shazneen.

When she was eight, Shazneen and her mother fled to Belfast. Shazneen's mother remarried and, when the atmosphere at home deteriorated, Shazneen began staying out overnight:

*'I'd go to my friend's house and hide in the loft. When my mum found me I refused to go home. I knew she wanted to send me back to my brother in England, so I was put into emergency foster care.'*

Shazneen began moving back and forth between her home and the care system. Depressed and desperate for someone to talk to, she began hanging out with the wrong crowd, going missing over night and getting into trouble with the police:

*'I knew my mum wanted to send me back to England to live with my brother. I was so scared of him, so I smashed a light bulb and used it to try to kill myself.'*



Photograph posed by model

One day Shazneen came home to find her brother had come over from England:

*'My brother beat me up, I ran away but the police found me and my family told them I'd given myself the black eye. I kicked off with the police so they handcuffed me and took me to the ferry with my brother. They left the handcuffs on me all the way to England.'*

Shazneen stayed with her brother for three months, during which time he hit her regularly. On one occasion she ran away to her aunt's house, only for her brother to find her and threaten to kill her:

*'I had to leave. So I begged my mum to let me come home.'*

Luckily by this point her mother had returned to England and allowed her to return home.

continued >

## Shazneen's story (continued)

Her relief was short lived. Two days later, her step-father checked her Facebook account:

*'He flipped when he saw I had four male friends, even though I'd told him all about them. He went crazy and I got chucked out.'*

The next morning, Shazneen's mother dropped her off in the city centre, and told her she was on her own:

*'I was so scared. It was seven in the morning and I didn't know anyone there. My mum gave me £20, but I didn't even have a jacket.'*

Vulnerable and alone, like many young runaways Shazneen became the victim of child sex exploitation. What advice would she give a young person considering running away from home, or institutional care?

*'Don't let guys groom you. If they give you lots of stuff, or buy you drinks, don't think that means they love you. Or if they take you to a hotel for the night, and they're paying for it, it's because they want something for it. I felt so lonely, I had no one to talk to, and that's how I ended up with bad people, and bad things happened to me.'*

When she was referred to The Children's Society, things finally started to change for Shazneen:

*'Kev, my project worker, has helped me a lot, especially with cutting down my drinking and identifying bad relationships.'*

Shazneen has repeatedly had to run away, in fear of her life, and now, thanks to our Hand in Hand project, she is able to consider a future that doesn't involve running from violence and abuse:

*'I'm at college, doing hair and beauty. I want to be a hairdresser with my own salon, maybe get married and have children, but not until my twenties.'*

#### 4. The use of technology

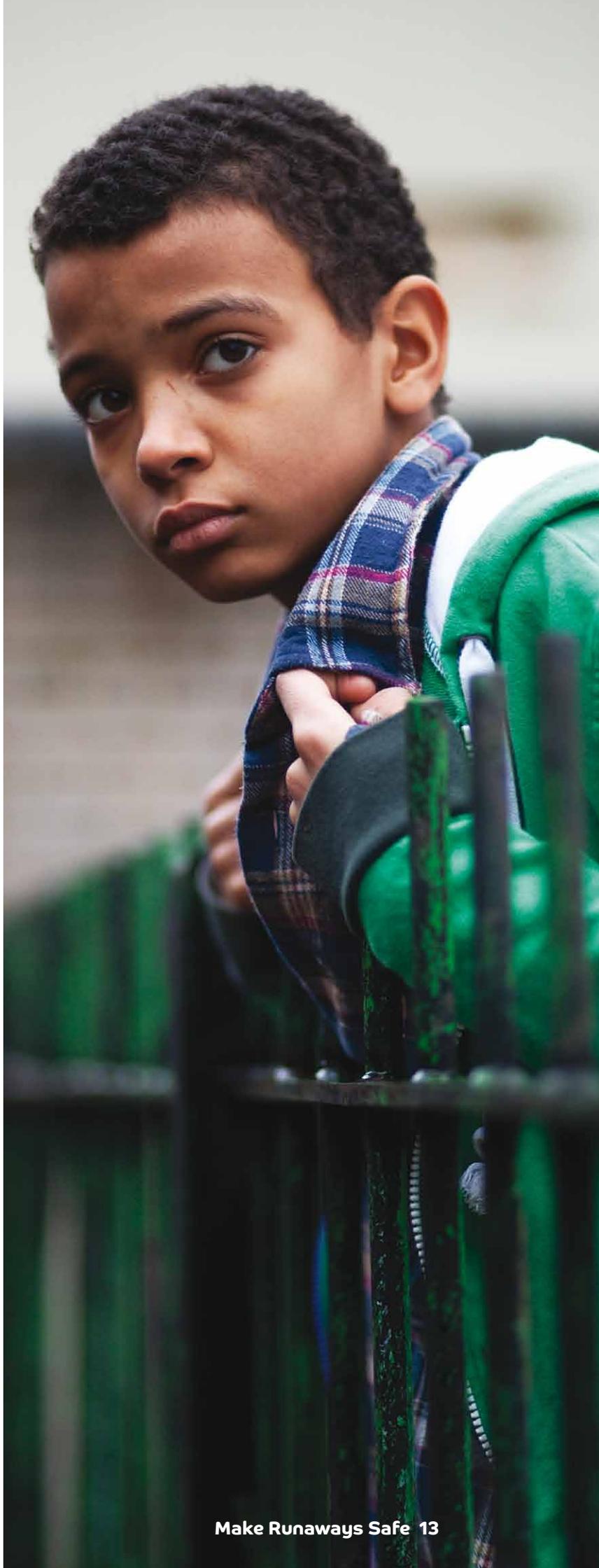
Our projects are particularly concerned that the use of mobile phones and social networking sites has made it easier to target vulnerable children who run away. Having given out their contact details to strangers or 'friends' they can be contacted at any time of the day or night, which can make them run away suddenly.

Children are also using online technology to explore and promote their sexuality. Our staff gave examples of children who have run away posting sexualised information about themselves, and encouraging adults to contact them. Children were also being proactively contacted by older males and coerced into sharing photographs, information, or joining a web camera chat, where they were being asked to undress or act out demands of the adults. Examples were given of many children being threatened and blackmailed by adults into sharing information.

Hannah, a project worker in the North West of England, said:

'The other big thing happening is online cameras, where guys are starting to develop relationships with young people and quite often pretending to be a lot younger than they are. Children start taking photographs or allowing themselves to be seen on online cameras, then recording all that. Initially there may be some financial reward, then what you have more and more is the threat that every time a young person tries to say, 'no I don't want to do this anymore,' there is a certain amount of... 'well imagine what your teachers and friends will say about this.. just two more and then you are free.' We are getting more of this.'

The Children's Society will be carrying out a study later this year to identify new trends and examine in significant detail the issues highlighted by our projects.



# The costs and potential savings

When a child runs away from home there are substantial financial and social costs incurred by public services and wider society. Given what we know from our practice and research, we can provide a snapshot of some of the cost burdens and show the potential savings from stepping in early. If children who run away receive early help, cost savings can be made and harm avoided.

Based on our own analysis of the costs of various services, less severe incidents of children running away from home and care impose costs **of up to £82 million every year** on the police, other public services and society. **That is a quarter of a million pounds every day, and the overall burden could be significantly greater.** In the most severe cases, where young people become involved in serious criminal offending to survive, or are taken into local authority care, the costs will rise substantially.

Investing in early intervention to support young runaways results in net savings<sup>8</sup> to public services ranging from £200 for less severe cases to potentially £300,000 or more. Early intervention will very often lead to support for other problems experienced frequently by children who run away, such as drug use and exclusion from school.

## The burden on public services from running away

Incidents of children running away from home and care can result in a range of costs to agencies and wider society, including:

- **Missing person reports** – between 24,500 and 41,000 young runaways are reported missing each year, at a follow up cost to the police of £1,145 per incident.<sup>9,10</sup> This equates to a total cost to the police of up to £47 million a year.<sup>11</sup>
- **Stealing to survive** – around 12,000 of the incidents of running away each year involve young people stealing in order to survive. Each incident reported to the police results in financial costs across the Criminal Justice System, and in social costs such as emotional distress to the victim. For example, each reported incident of shoplifting imposes an average cost of over £500 to the Criminal Justice System, and it is estimated that burglary incurs social costs of just over £2,000 per incident.<sup>12</sup>
- **Help sought from professional agencies** – in around 6,500 runaway incidents each year, young people seek help from professional agencies, for example, from social services. The support required will vary from case to case; however as an example, two hours of emergency support from a qualified children's social worker costs £144.<sup>13</sup>

8. Net savings are the difference between the cost of early intervention and the costs, which would have been incurred, if the early intervention had not taken place.

9. Lancashire Constabulary (2005) *Mole Hills from Mountains*. Available from - [www.popcenter.org/conference/conferencepapers/2004/MoleHillsfromMountains.pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/conference/conferencepapers/2004/MoleHillsfromMountains.pdf)

10. University of Stirling (2010) *Grampian Police Return Home Welfare Interview Pilot for Young Runaways*.

11. It is important to note that this figure only refers to runaways under 16 years old who are reported as missing and so is far lower than police cost estimates for their work on all missing people.

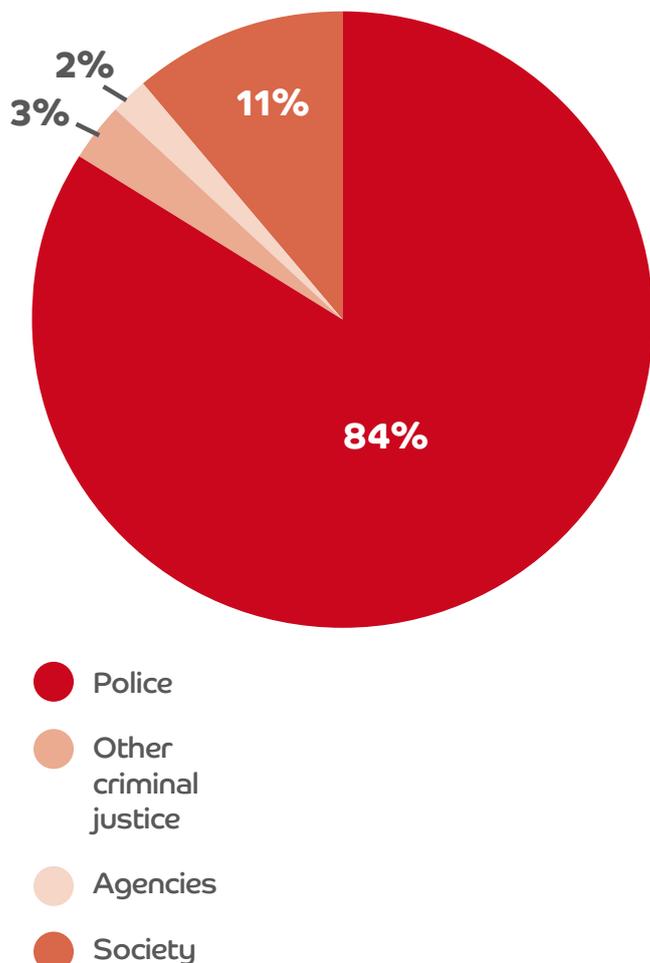
12. Home Office (2010) *British Crime Survey 2009/10*, London: Home Office; Ministry of Justice (2010) *Criminal Justice Statistics 2009*, London: Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Justice (2009) *Cost-Benefit Framework*, London: Ministry of Justice.

13. Personal Social Services Research Unit (2010) *Unit Costs of Health and Social Care 2010*, London: Personal Social Services Research Unit.

Given this evidence, it is estimated that less severe runaway incidents result in costs to the police, other public services and society of between £39m and £82m each year, equivalent to between £305 and £635 per running away incident. Figure 2 shows the extent of these immediate costs for each agency.

However, it is important to stress that these total cost estimates are conservative. They do not include the costs of emotional distress to the families (eg absence from work), or the harm experienced by the young person and associated costs such as health needs or support from other agencies. Nor do they include the more severe cases.

The following two case studies illustrate this variation, although each case of running away is different.



**Figure 2:** Share of cost burdens across public services and society for less severe incidents (the majority)

**Case one: Crystal**

Crystal repeatedly ran away from her foster placement. When she ran away she hid from her family, the police and social services, going hungry each time. On one occasion she collapsed after three weeks of hiding and, when someone called an ambulance, was admitted to hospital for two days. Crystal then ran from hospital, and although she was reported missing to the police, she hid for a further week before returning home. She then ran away again a day later, which was again reported to the police.

**Cost to the police and the NHS = £2,813**

**Case two: Brandon**

Brandon started running away from home at age 10 because his father was beating him. On advice from his primary school he went to social services, but they only took a statement and gave him some food. After this he repeatedly ran away but went hungry on the streets until the police eventually picked him up. After that Brandon was taken into local authority foster care until he turned 18. His mother was a heroin user, and he started using heroin at age 12, an issue he began to receive help with when he was 17 through an NHS specialist dealing with drug misuse.

**Cost to the police, NHS and Local Authority = £285,011**

We have calculated that the average cost of providing support to a young person after they have run away for the first time is just under £800, which covers the costs of getting them off the streets and the time required to address their needs. If successful, this support will prevent an average of around two further runaway incidents<sup>14</sup> and, in less severe cases, save around £1,000 to the police and other public services.

Early intervention in more extreme cases could result in net savings of hundreds of thousands of pounds.

There are also long-term negative effects associated with children running away. The difficulties they experience more frequently than young people who have never run away from home or care include conflict at home, higher rates of school exclusions and misuse of alcohol and drugs, all of which are proven to be linked to negative long term social and economic outcomes. For example, around half of male and female sentenced prisoners, aged 16 and over, ran away from home as a child.<sup>15</sup>

Running away does not in itself cause these later problems, which are rooted in other aspects of young people's lives – in particular within the family. However, incidents of running away can be seen as an indicator of long-term issues. Effective early intervention could prevent the increased risk of later problems and their associated costs. We must reach out to children and young people who run away as early as possible to prevent them running away again. This could clearly result in substantial immediate and longer term savings to public services and society.



14. Rees, G & Lee, J (2005) *Still Running II: Findings from the Second National Survey of Young Runaways*. London: The Children's Society.

15. N Singleton, H Meltzer, R Gatward, J Coid and D Deasy (1998) *Psychiatric Morbidity among Prisoners: Summary Report*. London: Office for National Statistics.

# Learning from practice – The Children’s Society’s work with young runaways

The Children’s Society is a leading provider of specialist services working with children who run away in England. We currently run nine dedicated projects supporting more than 1,000 children under 16. The projects provide a safe haven where children can go for independent and confidential help, advice and support.

## The Children’s Society: how we work

Each project offers direct, intensive one-to-one work, which can be a one-off intervention or for as long as the child needs it. An individual programme of work will be planned around each child based on issues such as family relationships, staying safe whilst away from home and substance misuse. We also run group work with children on issues such as sexual health. Our work operates on eight principles that have been informed by our research and evaluation work:

- **Immediacy** – children can access our services when they need them; they don’t have to wait to be referred. We will assess what is happening in their lives and provide practical support and advice on issues related to why they are running away, such as substance misuse or bullying at school.
- **Frequency** – contact between the project worker and child will be at least weekly and is often more frequent. It will always depend on the child’s needs. Face-to-face meetings can be in school, at the project office or another location, and support in between is provided by email, phone calls or text messages.
- **Accessibility** – many of our projects are centrally located so that children can drop in to get advice and support whenever they need it. They are actively encouraged to contact a project worker whenever they need help.
- **Independence** – we always stress to children that our projects are independent of statutory agencies, to build trust and allay any fears they may have. This independence is also valued by agencies.
- **Confidentiality** – we explain our robust confidentiality policies to children as soon as we start working with them. Information is only disclosed if we have concerns that the child is at serious risk of harm.
- **Advocacy** – we act as an advocate on the child’s behalf to ensure that they get the help they need. Our parenting support workers and family mediation workers also act as advocates for parents, where appropriate.
- **Persistence** – due to the difficult circumstances of these children’s lives, there are times when they miss appointments or do not want contact. Throughout, we are committed to making sure that children get the services they need and we continue to contact them to offer support.
- **Flexibility** – the time and place of our meetings with children will be led by their needs, and fit around their planned activities.

As well as this individual approach, our projects work in three other main areas.

### **1. Family mediation and parenting support**

Any approach that places all the responsibility for change on the shoulders of a child, when home factors are clearly contributing to their behaviour, reduces the chance of success. Our projects have parenting support workers and family mediators working directly with the family to bring together the parent/carer and child in a safe environment. This approach offers support to the parent and child in a way that will complement work that is being carried out individually with the young person.

### **2. Prevention and awareness raising**

All of our projects carry out preventative work with children and young people. We know that it is vital to provide children with information that can help keep them safe if they are thinking about running away. Many of our projects run 'keeping safe' sessions through primary and secondary schools, pupil referrals units, youth clubs and children's homes.

Our preventative work means that children and young people know how to get help and advice. This allows children to seek support before they start running away and alerts those who might have just started running away to the risks involved.

### **3. Other agencies**

We always work together with the police, local authorities, schools, health services and other agencies to make sure that young runaways get a response from statutory agencies. Our staff attend multi-agency meetings for individual children to share information and advocate on their behalf. We also work within multi-agency partnerships to influence at a strategic level how local responses are set up for young runaways. Through our local work we have been the lead agency in setting up local Missing Persons' Forums, regional multi-agency forums and sub-groups of Local Safeguarding Children Boards.

Since many of our referrals come from the police or social services, projects have developed strong inter-agency working relationships. Projects have collaborated to develop joint protocols and staff have also been part of multi-agency police-led teams or worked within children's services.

Many of our projects offer awareness raising sessions or formal training to professionals from a range of backgrounds. Through this work we make sure that all those working with children in a local area are able to identify children who might be running away, or at risk of running away, and provide them with good quality advice and support.

## **An example of how The Children's Society works – the SCARPA (Safeguarding Children At Risk – Prevention and Action) project, Newcastle**

SCARPA opened in November 2007 and is delivered in partnership with Barnardo's.

The project aims to identify and support children and young people who run away, go missing, or who are sexually exploited. It also offers a service to parents/carers where this is appropriate, to help to reduce the risk of children running away in the future.

Children can self-refer but most referrals come from the police, social care and other agencies. Young people are encouraged to drop in so that children can speak to someone immediately if they need to. Since it began, SCARPA has worked intensively with over 100 children, mainly between the ages of 11 and 15, and with 25 families.

Project worker Beth describes how it works:

'The police tell us about young people who have been reported missing and who don't have social care involvement, but show a variety of risk indicators. They rank them as one or two, with one being missing for over 24 hours, and two missing more than once. The young person may be at risk of sexual exploitation or have mental health issues. We then write to the young person and go out and visit them. We want to find out why they went missing and what happened. We regard the missing incident as an indicator and we then assess whether that young person needs help.'

The project offers an independent return interview to the young person, which can be a one-off session of support, or develop into longer-term intensive support if needed. In this way, the project worker can talk to young people and give them advice on how to keep safe, reduce the number of times they run away and help them to understand and reduce the risks they are taking. This can be

through weekly contact (but can be more depending on the young person's needs) and takes place either in school, at the project or another location, either face-to-face, by phone, email or text.

Beth says: 'The quality of the work is maintained through low caseload numbers which allow the workers to engage fully with the families and complete the support required. We are able to build and maintain excellent working relationships with parents, carers and young people.'

The work helps to turn around the lives of children, young people and their families. Young people feel calmer and more settled. They also increase their school attendance and improve their self-esteem and ability to make safe choices. Young people have told us that they feel listened to, not judged or criticised, and like being given advice that makes sense to them. One young person said:

'Since I've started (at SCARPA) I've not gone missing...I'm not having arguments, not wanting my own way anymore... I don't argue, instead of shouting I talk to her (mother) now... I don't run away, I've settled down...it helped speaking to people...since then I've been calm...I stay in the house now and have calmed down, I don't spend time out wandering around the streets...I don't think that's good enough (behaviour) I talk to my mum now...the safety work helped.'

Locally, SCARPA has been instrumental in forming and facilitating 'The M-SET Group' (Missing, Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking), which was established as a sub group of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The project also hosts a meeting every two months with the police and social services in Newcastle, to pinpoint the 10 most vulnerable young people who have been running away, so that all agencies are working together to actively support each child.

# A safety net for all children who run away

In the last five years there has been important progress in recognising and identifying running away as a key issue for children. Policy makers have provided a clear framework for how agencies should respond when a child runs away from home or care.

The key development was the publication of the government's *Young Runaways Action Plan* in 2008.<sup>16</sup> This was followed by new guidance setting out local authorities' statutory responsibilities and also a national target requiring local areas to report for the first time on what measures they had in place to protect and support runaways.<sup>17</sup> The police also published new guidance setting out how forces should manage, record and investigate incidents.<sup>18</sup>

These clearly explain what should happen when a child runs away, providing detail on the protocols that should be in place and the procedures that should be followed. These include:

- Local Safeguarding Children's Boards must clearly define the roles and responsibilities of different agencies to ensure a co-ordinated multi-agency response, and identify a named person within children's services with responsibility for managing the response and monitoring policies and performance.
- Procedures are outlined for recording and sharing information between the police, children's services and the voluntary sector and analysing the information to inform responses.
- Police must conduct a 'safe and well check' every time a child runs away to determine the child's well-being and risk of harm, and to establish if they have been a victim of crime or abuse.

- A 'return interview', should be carried out, ideally by an independent person such as a project worker or someone the young person trusts, to establish why the child ran away and what additional support they require.
- Assessments should be conducted by children's services to establish the level of need, whether or not the child is at risk of significant harm and what type of formal referral is required.
- All local authorities should have access to emergency accommodation, either fixed or flexible refuge, foster care or another form of provision.
- Where a young person persistently goes missing from care, a multi-agency risk management meeting should be organised, to discuss safeguarding issues and care planning for the child.

The overall message is very clear - that effective multi-agency support arrangements should be in place, particularly out of normal hours, to ensure all children are kept safe. Running away should be understood by all agencies not just as an event in itself, but as an indicator of wider problems. Ultimately the intention is that every child who runs away is provided with a safety net.

This new guidance and commitment to deliver an improved response for children who run away drew heavily on The Children's Society's work, particularly our report, *Stepping Up*, which called for a

16. Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) *Young Runaways Action Plan*. London: HM Government

17. Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care*. London: HM Government.

18. Association of Chief Police Officers (2011) *Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons Incidents*. London: HM Government.

national safety net of 'safe people, safe places and safe procedures'.<sup>19</sup> However, we are acutely aware that the guidance is only as effective as its implementation, and over the last year our practitioners have become concerned that it is not resulting in the step change that was intended.

In order to understand the main issues affecting implementation and service provision, we contacted local authorities, independent voluntary providers and our own projects.<sup>20</sup> The information we received highlights the issues which practitioners are particularly concerned about at present and indicates what needs to change.

## Key Findings

### 1. Variation in implementation

There appears to be significant variation in the implementation of the guidance and a lack of consistency across local areas. The responses we received from local authorities suggest that only a quarter have acted on the guidance, establishing inter-agency protocols and procedures for how to respond to a running away incident, collecting and sharing data and appointing a strategic lead. Examples were given of successful inter-agency working. One local authority reported:

'We have a robust inter-agency group, led by the police, which meets monthly to look at all repeat missing episodes. This group looks at patterns and ensures that appropriate plans are in place to safeguard children. There are also processes in place for all return interviews to be picked up across the county.'

This demonstrates that in some areas, having the guidance in place has made a real difference. However, these areas are the exceptions rather than the rule. Our projects report that even neighbouring authorities can have very different approaches.

Similarly some police forces apply the guidance very consistently but far too many do not act in accordance with it. The challenge now is to ensure that all authorities and police forces meet the highest standards of implementation.

### 2. Higher thresholds

In recent months, in some areas of the country, our staff have found that children's services are setting more stringent criteria for working with children in need. Previously they would have accepted a referral from our projects to work with a child who had run away and had particular needs relating to drugs, alcohol or mental health problems. Now they are finding that in some local authorities, children's social care are far less likely to take on these cases because of resource constraints. In effect they have unofficially raised the threshold for referrals.

Hannah, a project worker in the North East, said:

'Basically there is a new level of need that any referral has to reach, otherwise it just bounces back, you don't get through. It seems they are now gatekeeping what goes through.'

19. Evans, K, Rees, G, & Houghton-Brown, M (2007) *Stepping Up: The Future for Runaways Services*. The Children's Society.

20. A simple survey was sent to all local authorities asking them to set out what protocols and procedures are in place in their area for runaways. We received responses from 45 authorities. We also contacted providers of specialist support services for runaways asking them to highlight current issues and their funding situation. We received information from 15 services. In addition we carried out interviews with each of The Children's Society's nine projects.



### **3. The value of a national target**

National Indicator 71, the target which was put in place in 2009, required authorities to self-assess how much progress they were making to protect and support runaways. The indicator was scrapped last year (2010) following the decision by the coalition government to remove the entire indicator set for local areas. However, the response we received from voluntary sector providers and some local authorities suggests that there is widespread concern that removing the target is hindering progress. They feel that it acted as a vital catalyst for strategic development in sharing information and improving performance. One local authority specifically highlighted this:

'It is disappointing that the National Indicator 71 was removed as this encouraged or forced local authorities to act. We still have much work to do, especially in the identification of black and ethnic minority children, as their parents are often fearful of reporting them to police.'

It is now at the discretion of local authorities to decide which (if any) targets to keep in place. We understand that a small number have continued to report on National Indicator 71. Going forward it is vital that local authorities retain a focus on children who run away as part of the performance information on child protection recommended by the Munro Review.<sup>21</sup>

### **4. Shortage of emergency provision**

There are currently only two refuge beds in England. The guidance says that every local authority should have access to some type of emergency accommodation for children who run away, including a refuge, a form of flexible accommodation or foster care. When we surveyed local authorities in 2007,<sup>22</sup> only 20 out of 69 who responded said they had access to emergency accommodation. The latest information we received from local authorities indicates that the situation has not greatly improved with only half of the 45 authorities who responded saying that they had emergency accommodation they could use.

The last government commissioned The Children's Society to conduct a review of emergency accommodation and make recommendations about future commissioning and provision. We highlighted the need for a national network of emergency accommodation as part of crisis response services for children who run away. The findings from the review need to be taken forward. In particular, local authorities should seek to pool resources to commission sufficient emergency accommodation.

21. Munro, E (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A Child Centred System*, London: Department for Education.

22. Evans, K, Rees, G, & Houghton-Brown, M (2007) *Stepping Up: The Future for Runaways Services*. The Children's Society.

## **5. Lack of awareness**

Our projects and other voluntary sector services continue to find that, overall, there is low awareness of the issue of running away among professionals who work with children. Parents also need to be better informed. Jenny, a project worker in the South West of England told us:

'There is a lack of knowledge across the board, including GPs, social workers, teachers and Youth Offending workers. We did a scoping exercise with other professionals about what they thought. They were all telling us that they needed training in early identification of runaways and skills around how to manage risk.'

## **6. Cuts to specialist services**

There are around 50 services in England with some form of specialist support for children who run away, mostly operated by the voluntary sector. A number of services told us that they are either experiencing cuts in funding or that their funding is at risk over the next year. There is also recognition amongst local authorities that as priorities change due to funding constraints, services could close. One local authority reported:

'Clearly the impending financial cuts will affect the ability of agencies to continue to respond to children who go missing. Our service is provided by a multi-agency group involving the voluntary sector, police and local authority but this will be under threat in the immediate future as funding becomes harder to secure and services are forced to contract.'

Universal services, particularly schools, have an important role to play in identifying children who are running away, or are at risk of running away. We know from our practice and research, however, that these children are often vulnerable and hard to reach, so specialist services are best placed to meet their needs. Not every local authority will require a service but where there is a clear local need, authorities should work together with other agencies, and, where appropriate, across geographical boundaries so that there is adequate provision.

As the consequences of the spending cuts become clearer next year, The Children's Society plans to publish a follow-up report to our 2007 report, *Stepping Up: The future of runaway services*. It will look in greater detail at the issues which have been brought to our attention by practitioners. But what is already clear is that there is an urgent need to ensure running away is prioritised as a key child protection issue by all local authorities and police forces.

# What needs to change

There has been progress made in setting out what agencies should do when a child is identified as running away. But this has not brought about a step change on the ground. Too many children who run away remain off the radar of local services, on the fringes of society, out of sight and out of mind. Far more needs to be done to raise awareness of the issue among all those who work with children and to make sure it becomes a priority.

The government has announced that the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre is to provide a national response to children who go missing and it has made a commitment to develop an action plan on child sexual exploitation.<sup>23</sup> These are positive developments but they do not go far enough. We are particularly concerned that child sexual exploitation is being addressed in isolation from the issue of running away. Critically, the government needs to join the dots and make sure that the two issues are not looked at separately. If the government fails to do this, there is a real danger that running away will fall down the priority list and become sidelined by local authorities and the police.

The Children's Society believes that this can be avoided by setting out a clear action plan to address both issues.



23. Tim Loughton speech to Barnardo's event 17 May 2011, [www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a0077355/tim-loughton-to-barnardos-event-on-child-sexual-exploitation](http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a0077355/tim-loughton-to-barnardos-event-on-child-sexual-exploitation)

## Action Plan

We want central government to work with local authorities, the police and other agencies to:

### 1. Raise awareness

Every professional who works with children must be aware of the risk factors associated with running away. Children and their parents and carers also need to be informed so they know how to access timely advice, guidance and support.

- An awareness-raising training programme is required for the police, social care, health, education, foster carers, residential care staff, youth support and youth justice practitioners so they know about the risks associated with children running away from home or care and, critically, how to respond to them and refer them onto relevant services for support.
- Information and education about the risks relating to running away and how children can get help if they are thinking about running away should be included in the school curriculum and made available in health centres, youth facilities and other services.
- All statutory agencies should provide parents and carers with information about how and where to get help if a child is at risk of, or starts running away, and the importance of reporting their child as missing.

### 2. Improve support

Universal services have a vital role to play so they can reach out to children as soon as they start running away. There also needs to be specialist provision and emergency accommodation in place as well as clear pathways to that provision. In some areas there are excellent examples of specialist services which should be replicated in places where there are gaps in provision.

- Agencies should pool resources to provide or commission services that reach out to support young runaways and better meet their needs. This should include a combination of early intervention programmes that target children at risk of running away, including: family support and mediation, youth outreach services, intensive packages of support for those who repeatedly run away and independent return interviews for all children who run away.
- Children and their families should be actively involved in the development of services and their experiences should continually inform how agencies respond.
- The use of independent return interviews needs to be improved so that clear methods are in place for making sure the information gathered informs children's services assessment frameworks as they are revised by local areas following the Munro Review.
- Local authorities should join together to commission emergency accommodation. This should include the use of either fixed or flexible refuge, as defined by Section 51 of The Children Act 1989,<sup>24</sup> foster care or other types of emergency provision.
- Best practice should be shared widely by all local authorities to support the development of local responses to young runaways, and channels for multi-agency sector-led learning should be developed.

24. [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/51](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/51)

### 3. Improve statutory responses and ensure clear systems of accountability and performance management

Running away must be recognised as an early indication that a child is at risk. This should be seen explicitly as a child protection issue by all Local Safeguarding Children Boards with protocols and procedures in place as set out in the current statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care.<sup>25</sup> This should be backed up by clear systems of accountability and performance management.

- The guidance on children who run away or go missing from home and care (2009)<sup>26</sup> should be reviewed so that it aligns with the planned revision of the *Working Together* guidance<sup>27</sup> and clearly sets out key principles, essential requirements of local areas and best practice.
- Local authorities should develop more effective means for establishing the scale of running away in their area through improved data collection, based on surveys of children and police missing person's reports, to determine the patterns and prevalence of running away incidents and to inform local responses.
- Local authorities should retain a focus on children who run away as part of the performance information on child protection recommended by the Munro Review.
- New inspection and accountability mechanisms for local authorities must ensure compliance with statutory duties for children who run away.

### 4. Improve the police response

Every police force needs to prioritise the importance of responding effectively to a child who runs away by conducting regular strategic assessments and making sure there are effective links with other agencies.

- All police officers and community support officers, regardless of their specialism or location, should be trained to have a good understanding of running away and the risks associated with it.
- Police forces should regularly conduct their own strategic assessments that identify trends and themes to determine the nature and scale of running away and child sexual exploitation incidents.
- The Home Office needs to ensure that every police force implements the Police Code of Practice on the Collection of Missing Persons Data (2009)<sup>28</sup> and the Association of Chief Police Officers' Guidance on Managing, Recording and Investigating Missing Persons (2010), and ensure that a strategic lead is in place to oversee implementation. Inspection and accountability frameworks should include assessing compliance with the guidance.
- Mechanisms need to be developed for sharing good practice and using the best performing forces to provide peer support to other forces.

25. Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care*. London: HM Government.

26. Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care (2009) Supporting local authorities to meet the requirements of National Indicator 71 – Missing from Home and Care. DCSF

27. *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2010) A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. DCSF.

28. National Police Improvement Agenda (2009) *Collection of Missing Persons data: A code of practice for the Police Service on collecting and sharing data on missing persons within public authorities*.

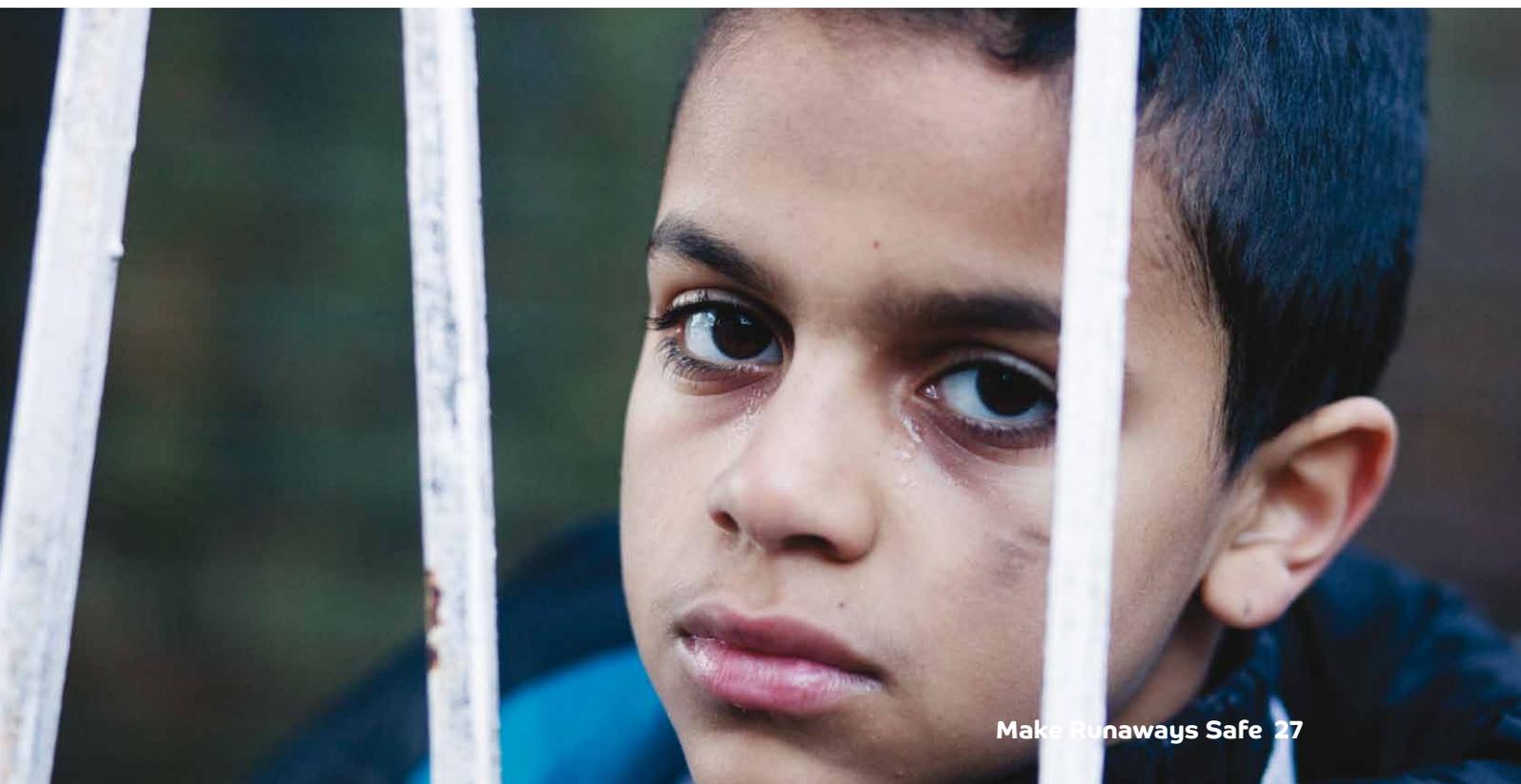
# Conclusion

**Every day, in every part of the country, children are running away or being thrown out of their homes. Having worked to improve support for runaways for more than a quarter of a century, The Children's Society is concerned that we are now at a critical crossroads in determining how we respond to this very vulnerable group of children.**

Both the police and local authorities have to manage with reduced budgets - yet the demands on their services are not reducing. There is a real risk that they will not prioritise children who run away. Yet these children need to know that there are people who can help them, and support that they can rely on, when things go wrong at home.

Providing a robust and effective response the first time a child runs from home is an effective form of early intervention. It can protect a child from further abuse and neglect. It can make sure that wider issues of substance misuse or offending are pinpointed and addressed. And, as we have shown, this can lead to significant long-term financial savings.

We have failed these children. This is inexcusable in modern-day Britain and unlikely to change unless central government, local authorities and all agencies who work with children make a concerted effort to deliver a step change in practice. If this does not happen we will be leaving tens of thousands of children at great risk of serious harm in our communities.





The  
Children's  
Society

The Children's Society wants to create a world where all children and young people are respected, valued and heard. We believe that childhood should be happy and that young people deserve to reach their full potential.

That's why we work hard to transform the lives of over 44,000 children and young people in England each year.

Our priority is children who have nowhere else to turn. We protect young runaways from the dangers of life on the street. We give disabled children a voice and more control over their lives. Our work helps young refugees start afresh in new communities, and gives young carers time and energy to enjoy their childhood.

With over 75 programmes and children's centres throughout England, we offer care, respite, legal support and mentoring schemes that help turn lives around.

Through our campaigns and research, we seek to influence policy and perceptions at all levels so young people have a better chance in life.

To find out more about what we do visit  
[www.childrensociety.org.uk](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk)