Living on the edge: the experiences of detached young runaways - Executive Summary
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Previous research has identified a group of young runaways who stay away for a significant period of time and who become detached from familial and formal support after running away or being forced to leave home while under the age of 16 (Stein et al, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). The research has shown that the majority of these young people became detached on the first or second incident that they had been away, rather than following numerous incidents of being away. Little is known about the experiences of young people or how their needs can be met.

ABOUT THE STUDY

This study aimed to explore the experiences of detached young people. It focused on exploring: the events leading up to the young person becoming detached; young people’s experiences while detached; the outcomes and repercussions of spending time detached; and young people’s perspectives on ways to assist those who are at risk of becoming detached and those who have become detained.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 young people who had run away or been forced to leave and who had stayed away for four weeks or more before they reached the age of 16. The young people were aged 13 to 21 at the time of interview, were predominantly white although four young people were from mixed heritage, and lived in 6 geographically dispersed urban areas of England.

KEY FINDINGS

Young people's backgrounds and histories

Among the 23 young people interviewed, six had no experience of running away or being forced to leave home before becoming detached, six had only run away or been thrown out once before becoming detached and most of remaining 11 had run away more than 3 times before becoming detached. Most of the young people had experienced family change and disruption (e.g. the separation of birth parents or parental bereavement), negative experiences of parenting (e.g. high levels of conflict with parents, abuse and neglect by parents) and parents who were facing problems of their own (e.g. domestic violence, parental substance misuse). Many of the young people had experienced disruption to their education: nearly half stopped attending before reaching the age of 16 and nine had done so permanently.

Events leading to become detached

Eleven of the young people ran away, ten had been forced to leave, and two had been abandoned by parents and left alone in the family home prior to becoming detached. Among those that ran away, particular incidents (e.g. experiencing physical abuse) and the culmination of ongoing problems led to them going (e.g. disclosing long-term sexual and physical abuse and being disbelieved). Eighteen young people became detached at the age of 14 or 15. The
remainder became detached aged 13 or under, with the youngest being nine years old at the time he became detached.

Young people’s experiences while away from home

All of young people had stayed away at least once for a minimum of four weeks to be included in the sample. Some had experienced being detached for a shorter period of time (e.g. four had been detached for a month) while others were away longer periods of time (e.g. eight were detached for over a year and one was continuously detached for five years).

Twenty-one of the young people had stayed with friends (both peers and adults) while they were away. Some stayed with friends for longer periods of time while others stayed for short periods and moved around from friend to friend. Some young people described being well-supported (e.g. being assisted to find permanent accommodation and independent support), while others said that they felt that they had over stayed their welcome and were conscious of being reliant on others. Young people also reported being uncertain about where they were going to stay on particular nights, and feeling stressed and worried as a result.

Several young people slept rough at some point. For some it was occasional and a last resort when they were unable to stay with a friend; others spent the majority of their time living on the streets and sleeping rough.

A majority of young people resorted to illegal activities to support themselves while away as they had limited opportunities to access legitimate financial support. Stealing was the most common survival strategy reported, with young people stealing food to eat or goods to sell to get money. Five young people were involved in street robbery, stealing cars and burglary, and four of them got into trouble with the police while away. Two girls exchanged sex for money while they were away, both to survive and to pay for drugs that they were using. Four young people earned money by working.

Substance use was very common: 17 out of the 23 young people in the sample had used drugs or alcohol while away. Some had used substances or alcohol prior to becoming detached, while others had not. For some, their use of substances changed: some used different substances to any they had used before and some increased their usage of a particular substance while away. Young people used heroin, amphetamines, ecstasy, cannabis and alcohol. Their substance use represented a coping strategy, with young people referring to how it helped to take their mind off things, keep calm or feel less vulnerable.

Young people received support from others while they were away. In the main, this was informal and from friends, friends’ parents and other adults. Friends assisted with providing somewhere to stay but they also provided food, money, emotional support and company. For those young people who spent time detached living on the streets, older homeless adults sometimes helped them by sharing whatever they had (e.g. a roofed sleeping place, food, cigarettes) or by attempting to ensure that young people did not become involved in further risks (e.g. using crack).
Only five young people accessed formal support while away, and did not provide agencies with the full details about their situations. The reasons that the remaining 18 young people did not use formal support agencies varied. Some did not know of where they could go for help, others felt fearful of what might happen if they did (e.g. lead to the break-up of the family or to having to return to the family home). Others were influenced by past negative experiences of social services and decided not to approach formal agencies for support as a result.

Young people experienced conflicting feelings about being away. They reported positive aspects, such as: having the freedom to do what they wanted to do; being away from the control of strict parents; enjoying the company and comradeship of friends and other young people on the streets; being independent and self-reliant, and having their own space. They reported the following as negative aspects: having to be reliant on friends; being away from family members; being worried about what was happening to family members while they were away; feeling lonely, cold, anxious, depressed and frightened; having sex with lots of different men; and not coping well with what was happening with them.

Young people encountered a number of risks while away, some of which are noted above. A total of 8 young people experienced being physically assaulted, and this included both those staying with friends and sleeping rough. Five young people stayed with adult friends who were not parents of peers, and some experienced being abused or placed at risk. As mentioned above young people engaged in drug taking voluntarily, but three were forced to take drugs (including crack and heroin). Many experienced periods of time where they had little to eat, and some described losing weight. A few young people reported having extreme experiences – including witnessing someone else being shot, being abused by a group of adults and attempting suicide as a result, and being abducted and locked up for four months.

**What happened to young people after the period they had spent away from home**

Some young people returned to live with their parents. In four of these cases, young people either run away or were thrown out again. Other young people were able to access formal support – a few aged under 16 returned to live in alternative arrangements such as with friends or in foster care. Some young people remained or went on to become homeless and continued to rely upon risky survival strategies. After the age of 16, 14 young people became formally homeless and spent time either living on the streets or staying in bed and breakfast accommodation or hostels or supported-housing projects.

Young people continued to experience problems and to be involved in risky behaviours beyond their period of detachment. Some identified themselves as being depressed or experiencing other emotional difficulties. Substance misuse and criminal activity continued to be a feature of many young people’s experiences.

Some young people accessed support in relation to running away, being at risk of sexual exploitation and counselling after being detached. Some also returned to education or engaged in training.
Detached young people’s perspectives on how to assist

Young people’s ideas to prevent young people from having to be away:
- Having access to someone to talk at their own pace who they feel comfortable with and who is independent of social services.
- Having a professional who can mediate with family members to resolve conflict.
- Having someone who can help support parents with their problems and can provide opportunities for young people and parents to have a break from each other.
- Having somewhere to drop-in to access advice and information, and support if wanted.
- Having access to education about drugs to help understand the realities of taking drugs.

Young people’s ideas to help young people who become detached:
- Having somewhere to go so that they don’t have to sleep on the streets: a bed, hot water, food and someone to talk to if young people want to. Additionally, they suggested that blankets and food be given to those who are sleeping rough.
- Having drop-in facilities that young people can go to for information and advice, for a shower, for support with housing or drug treatments.
- That young people have access to a social worker that they like and trust.

Key challenges for supporting detached young people

The research highlighted that there is diversity in young people’s characteristics and backgrounds and that there is a lack of intervention in young people’s lives prior to becoming detached despite significant problems in their family lives and a withdrawal from compulsory education. While away, young people relied upon personal and informal networks and encountered risky situations as a result of where they slept and the activities that they became involved in. Young people’s perceptions of risk and of their own maturity led, at times, to situations and strategies that placed them at further risk.

The findings present two key challenges for policy and practice that aims to safeguard and support children and young people:
- The first relates to prevention. By and large, the young people who participated in this research slipped through the net – they had little or no previous ‘running away’ behaviour, had experienced significant problems in their family lives and become disengaged from compulsory schooling but had not come to the notice of formal support agencies. Previous research has highlighted the importance of school-based preventative work and a young person’s withdrawal from school should signal the need to alert an appropriate agency in order for early interventions, such as family mediation, to be established.
- The second relates to responses for young people who have become detached. Young people’s experiences prior to becoming detached may mean that they are less likely to be predisposed to more conventional approaches to intervention. There is a need for interventions to prioritise the need to establish trust and credibility with detached young people, which may mean that they need to work with high thresholds of confidentiality, in order for them to be able to work with young people in the long-term and to be a viable option for young people when their survival strategies breakdown.
References


Further information
This report is published in full as Emilie Smeaton, Living on the Edge: the experiences of detached young runaways. London: The Children’s Society.