



# SAFE & SOUND?

Making England safe for young runaways

**Still Running II: findings from the second national survey of young runaways**

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Findings from the Second  
National Survey of Young Runaways

Gwyther Rees & Jenny Lee

# Contents

- Contents..... ii
- Acknowledgements..... iii
- About the authors ..... iii
- Funding ..... iii
- List of tables and figures..... iv
- Introduction..... 1**
  - Background and context..... 1
  - Methodology ..... 3
- Research findings ..... 6**
  - Numbers of young people running away ..... 6
  - Characteristics of young people running away..... 8
  - Links with the broader context of young people’s lives ..... 11
  - Reasons for running away..... 15
  - Experiences of running away..... 18
- Summary and conclusions..... 23**
  - Summary of key findings ..... 23
  - Discussion..... 24
  - Implications..... 25
- References ..... 27**
- Appendix 1: Areas covered by the survey..... 28**
- Appendix 2: Characteristics of the mainstream school sample ..... 29**

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# List of tables and figures

**Table 1:** Running away rates in areas of different population density..... 7

**Table 2:** Running away rates in areas of different economic prosperity..... 8

**Table 3:** Age young people first ran away ..... 9

**Table 4:** Ethnic origin and running away ..... 10

**Table 5:** Family form and running away ..... 11

**Figure 1:** Views on relationship with parents/carers (% who agreed with each statement)..... 12

**Figure 2:** Views on school (% who agreed with each statement) ..... 14

**Figure 3:** Other issues and problems (% who self identified with each problem) ..... 14

**Figure 4:** Views on personal well-being (% who agreed with each statement)..... 15

**Table 6:** Length of time away from home on most recent occasion ..... 18

**Table 7:** Where young people slept whilst away on most recent occasion ..... 18

**Table 8:** Survival strategies for overnight runners whilst away on most recent occasion ..... 19

**Table 9:** Sources of help for young people on the most recent occasion that they were away . 21

**Table 10:** Whether young people were, to their knowledge, reported as missing to the police . 21

**Table 11:** Number of times young person ran away..... 22

**Table A1:** Gender ..... 29

**Table A2:** Age at survey date ..... 29

**Table A3:** Ethnic origin ..... 29

**Table A4:** Current accommodation..... 29

**Table A5:** Family form ..... 29

# 1

## Introduction

This report is the first product of a new national survey of young people, undertaken by The Children's Society in partnership with the University of York in the first half of 2005.

The survey involved over 11,000 young people, mostly aged 14 to 16, in mainstream schools, special schools and pupil referral units, in 25 areas of England.

The survey questionnaire was designed to focus on four social policy areas which are currently the main focus of The Children's Society's work: children at risk on the streets; young refugees; disabled children; and children in trouble with the law. It also focused on more general issues related to young people's well-being.

This report looks specifically at the issue of young runaways. It follows up on the *Still Running* research project undertaken in 1999 by The Children's Society and the University of York, in partnership with children's charities in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). *Still Running* provided the first UK-wide analysis of the numbers, characteristics and needs of young runaways. It showed that large numbers of young people run away from home each year in the UK, and highlighted some of the issues and risks faced by these young people.

The current report presents a set of initial findings from the new survey in relation to running away. The aim is to present some broad overview statistics which offer a comparison with key findings from the *Still Running* survey, and provide an update on some of the key issues. Some of the detailed statistical work on the survey data set is still in process and, when this is complete, a more detailed report will be published in electronic format on The Children's Society's website ([www.childrensociety.org.uk](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk)) during 2006.

## Background and context

### What is running away?

The term 'running away' has come to encapsulate a variety of different motivations and experiences and some brief discussion about the way in which we use the term in this report is necessary for clarity.

An early distinction was made in the UK research between young people who made a decision to run away from home, and those who felt forced to leave by parents (Rees, 1993). More recently, feedback from young runaways during an evaluation study suggested that some do not see themselves as 'running away' so much as 'staying away from home' (Rees, Franks, Raws & Medforth, 2005). The findings of that evaluation suggested that there may be important differences between young people who run away and those who are staying away from home without parental permission.

There is also an important distinction to be made between running away and young people being reported missing to the police by their carers. As shown later in this report, by no means all young runaways are reported as missing. Equally, many young people reported as missing to the police are not runaways in the sense that the term has come to be used. For example, missing person reports include incidents relating to very young children who may have gone to

a neighbour's house without informing their parents and are only missing for a very short period of time.

There are also issues in relation to the upper age limit for running away. In practical terms in the UK, young people are generally not restricted from leaving home and seeking independent accommodation once they have reached the age of 16, and so the UK research has tended to focus on young runaways aged 15 and under.

For the purposes of this report, we use the terms 'running away' and 'young runaways' to refer to young people who have defined themselves as either having run away from home or having been forced to leave home, on at least one occasion at some point before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. In addition, unless otherwise stated in the text, we restrict our definition to young people who have been away from home for at least one night on the most recent occasion they ran away. The reason for this restriction is to avoid overestimation of the scale of the problem by including relatively short incidents of running away during the day.

### **Previous UK research on running away**

There have been a number of previous research reports published on running away in the UK, stretching back to the late 1980s. Two early studies (Newman, 1989; Abrahams & Mungall, 1992) collated and analysed information from missing person reports and estimate that there were somewhere in the region of 100,000 incidents of young people under the age of 18 being reported missing in the UK annually. During the 1990s three research studies gathered information directly from young people in Leeds (Rees, 1993) and in several projects working with young runaways (Stein, Rees & Frost, 1994; Barter, 1996). Later in the decade a major study was published on young people going missing from residential and foster care (Wade & Biehal, 1998).

The first nationally representative UK research about running away was published in 1999 (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). This research estimated that around one in nine young people ran away overnight on at least one occasion before the age of 16. The findings from this research are referred to in detail in Chapter 2 of this report.

Several further reports were published on some of the detailed findings from this research project in relation to running away from different types of families (Rees & Rutherford, 2001); very young runaways (Rees & Smeaton, 2001); and young people who are forced to leave home (Rees & Siakeu, 2004). Members of the research team also published individual country reports for Scotland (Wade, 2002); Northern Ireland (Raws, 2001); and Wales (Wade, Mitchell & Rees, 2002). More recently, Smeaton (2005) reported on new research into the issues faced by 'detached' young people – young runaways who spend a month or more away from home. Finally, attention has also begun to focus on evaluating interventions with young runaways, and earlier this year the DfES published an evaluation of 19 pilot runaways projects which it had funded on a short-term basis (Rees, Franks, Raws & Medforth, 2005).

Key findings from this body of research are referred to where relevant throughout the report.

### **The policy and practice context in the UK**

The recent history of policy and practice developments in relation to young runaways began with the setting up of the UK's first refuge for young people in London in 1985, followed by further refuges in Bournemouth, Leeds, and Newport (South Wales); all of which were established by The Children's Society. Initially refuges of this kind were working outside the law by accommodating young people without parental permission. An early policy watershed was Section 51 of the Children Act 1989, which came into force in 1991, and made provision for registered refuges to provide confidential, emergency accommodation for up to 14 days without the consent of parents.

During the late 1980s, The Children's Society also developed two outreach projects working with young people on the streets in the city centres of Birmingham and Manchester.

The 1990s saw the development of projects which responded to young people reported as missing to the police, and these have since become perhaps the most common form of service provision for young runaways.

All of the above practice developments took place within the voluntary sector. Evidence from this practice base, together with the publication of the *Still Running* research report in 1999, sparked Government interest in the issue of young runaways. An initial consequence of this interest was the publication of a consultation document and later a guidance document by the Social Exclusion Unit (2001 and 2002). The latter document recommended six key areas for attention – putting someone in charge; preventing running away; ensuring the immediate safety of runaways; reducing repeat running and improving longer-term safety; improving longer term outcomes for runaways who return home; making the transition to independent living for 16 and 17 year olds; and making change happen. At the same time the Department of Health published statutory guidance for local authorities on work with young people who go missing from home or care (Biehal and Wade, 2002; Department of Health, 2002).

Following this work, the Government announced funding for 27 pilot initiatives, including 20 which involved direct practice with young runaways. The direct practice initiatives consisted of a large number of schemes which responded to police missing person reports, along with a range of other models (direct access through drop-in centres, family work, out-of-hours telephone support, and one emergency accommodation project). The Department for Education and Skills published an evaluation report on these initiatives earlier this year (Rees, Franks, Raws & Medforth, 2005). The evaluation found that in many cases projects were able to make significant progress in addressing the issues which led to young people running away. Positive outcomes were achieved, in particular, with first-time runaways. However, the report also identified gaps in provision for some key sub-groups of the runaway population, including young people who were forced to leave home or were staying away, rather than having run away. It also raised questions about the extent to which the emphasis on police missing person reports as the key referral route might mean that young runaways who were not reported as missing would miss out on help and support (63% of young people were referred to projects as a result of a police missing person report).

This funding initiative ended in 2004. More recently, the DfES has introduced a further initiative to pilot alternative models of refuge and other forms of emergency accommodation including provision through foster carers, residential care placements, and a crash pad facility.

There has also been a considerable amount of activity at a local level, partly in response to the Social Exclusion Unit and Department of Health recommendations, especially in relation to the development of joint protocols between police and social services to deal with young people reported missing.

Thus, there has been a substantial amount of investment in research, practice and policy in relation to young runaways over the last two decades in the UK. Nevertheless, substantial gaps still remain, especially in terms of service provision. Currently there are only 10 registered refuge bed spaces for young runaways in the UK (6 in London, 3 in Glasgow and 1 in Torquay). Other forms of service provision remain patchy, with some examples of sustained local projects contrasted with other geographical areas where there is no dedicated service provision.

Moreover, there still remains work to be done in terms of integrating the messages and learning from this work into mainstream agendas in relation to children and young people, as we discuss further in the concluding chapter of this report.

## Methodology

### Sampling

In designing the current survey, it was decided to replicate, as far as possible, the sample obtained for the *Still Running* survey of young people in England. The reasoning behind this decision was to produce up-to-date statistics on running away which were closely comparable with those from 1999. The *Still Running* research used stratified cluster sampling to survey 16 areas representing a range in terms of ethnic diversity, population density and economic prosperity (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999: 15). Where it was not possible to ensure a sufficient sample from one of these 16 areas, a supplementary area with similar characteristics was selected. Further details of the original sample and the current one are provided in Appendix 1.



## **The survey**

In order to reach a large and reasonably representative sample of young people aged 14 to 16, data on running away was gathered using self completed questionnaires issued through educational establishments within the selected areas. The target was to survey either a complete year 10 or complete year 11 in four or five secondary schools in each of the 16 areas, thus generating a total sample of over 10,000 completed questionnaires. In order to ensure that the sample included young people who did not regularly attend mainstream school, and young people with learning difficulties, the survey also included a sample of pupil referral units and special schools for young people with moderate learning difficulties.

## **Access**

The Directors of Education with responsibility for the sample areas were informed about the research. Several offered support for the research and none raised concerns about the proposed survey. Initially the secondary schools that participated in *Still Running* were approached to see if they would like to take part in the 2005 survey. These were boosted by the selection of additional schools within the area or matched area. They were chosen randomly, with the exception of single-sex schools and selective schools where a balanced sample was required. Fifty percent of the secondary schools and a third of the special schools and pupil referral units approached declined to take part, mainly due to being very busy – having been approached by a number of research projects or being involved with inspections. Negotiation with schools and the administration of the survey took place from January to July 2005 inclusive.

## **Piloting and content of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire was developed and piloted with year 10 and 11 groups in three schools and one pupil referral unit in Bradford and York during the winter of 2004-5. Valuable face-to-face feedback was provided by the students and by schools staff, and many improvements were made to the final questionnaire as a result. It was recognised that the majority of questions in the running away section had been extensively piloted and effectively used in the *Still Running* survey and subsequent studies.

The questionnaire consisted of six sections covering demographic characteristics; The Children's Society's four key areas of focus; and general questions about well-being. Questions were primarily in tick-box format with room for additional comments where appropriate. There were also a number of open ended questions.

## **Methods**

The research team liaised with each participating school and provided the necessary information and materials in order that teaching staff would be able to present and self administer the survey as efficiently and inclusively as possible on the agreed date(s). The survey was conducted in registration periods, tutor time or in Personal, Social and Health Education classes. The questionnaire was translated into other languages when this was requested by the school and was also produced in large print for partially sighted students. Participating staff were asked to complete a feedback sheet on the administration and conduct of the survey in their school.

## **Ethics**

Each school was provided with an ethics statement. In brief, the following principles were adopted:

- The local education authority, participating schools and students would be briefed about the survey
- Students would participate in the survey on the basis of informed and voluntary consent
- The survey would be anonymous and confidential
- No identities of individuals or schools would be revealed.

## Outcomes

In total, 10,772 young people were surveyed in 70 mainstream secondary schools (including 38 of the schools participating in *Still Running*), this represents a return rate of 73%. The main reason for the non-participation of students was non-attendance at school or involvement in 'out of school' activities on the survey date. A small number of questionnaires were spoiled or appeared not to have been completed seriously<sup>1</sup> and the final data set from mainstream schools consists of 10,716 questionnaires.

In addition, supplementary samples were gained from 145 young people in 11 pupil referral units (final data set 144 questionnaires) and 293 in 13 special schools for young people with moderate learning difficulties (including one for young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties). At least one special school and one pupil referral unit participated in each of the eight area types, as described in Appendix 1, with the exception of the area type defined as 'high percentage of young people of African-Caribbean origin', where a pupil referral unit was not represented.

Partially or fully completed feedback sheets were received from 62% of the lead contacts at each school and approximately 54% of the participating teachers. The most common comments were that the survey was easy to administer, the guidance was clear and that students found the questions easy to understand. Some comments were made that the questionnaire was too long and too personal.

## Data processing, analysis and presentation of results

The data from the questionnaires was entered in full onto an Access database. Quality control was conducted on nine percent of the questionnaires inputted from secondary schools (randomly selected) and on a larger proportion of the questionnaires from other educational establishments. Inputting errors were found to be relatively rare and ranged across the questionnaire, rather than being connected to a particular question.

Quantitative data was transferred to SPSS – a statistical software package – for cleaning and statistical analysis. The statistical analysis made use of robust non-parametric tests, primarily chi-square tests for bivariate nominal data. For the whole sample, where a result is reported as statistically significant the p-value of the test was less than 0.01 (99% confidence). For the smaller sample of overnight young runaways, significant differences relate to tests with a p-value less than 0.05 (95% confidence).

Because of the sampling strategy adopted, young people living in some types of areas were over-represented in the final sample compared to the overall population of young people in England, whilst others were under-represented. In order to present reasonably accurate estimates, weighting was used to correct for these variations, and all proportions presented in Chapter 2 were based on a weighted sample, unless otherwise stated.

We recognise that this procedure, together with the sampling strategy itself, is likely to increase the margins of error on estimates. We have not yet had the opportunity to calculate detailed confidence intervals for all the estimates presented in this report. However we note, for example, that even with a simple random sample of a similar size, a 99% confidence interval for the margin of error on the key finding on running away rates would be 0.5% in either direction. Given the sampling method and the use of weighting, the margin of error in our analysis is likely to be substantially higher and may be as much as double that for a simple random sample. A full calculation of design effects will be undertaken and detailed results on this issue will be presented in a future report on the survey.

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<sup>1</sup> These judgements were made independently by two members of the research team who then compared views and resolved differences of opinion. Where it was not possible to agree, questionnaires were removed.

# 2

## Research findings

In this central chapter of the report we present findings from the survey of young people described in Chapter 1, comparing them with other previous research findings on young runaways in the UK. As stated in the introductory chapter, the intention in this report is to present some initial headline findings from the research. We will be undertaking and publishing more detailed analysis of a number of issues covered in this chapter.

The findings are presented in the following order:

- Estimates of the prevalence and incidence of running away in England
- Characteristics of young runaways
- Links between running away and other issues in young people's lives
- Reasons for running away
- Experiences of being away

Unless otherwise stated, all statistics on running away refer to young people who had been away for at least one night on the most recent occasion they ran away or were forced to leave home, and first ran away before their sixteenth birthday.

### Numbers of young people running away

#### Rates of running away

The *Still Running* research published in 1999, found that around 10% of a weighted sample of young people surveyed in the UK had run away overnight at some point in their lives (before the age of 16). Within this sample, the running away rate for young people in England was 10.1%. When issues related to the age profile of the sample and school non-attendance were taken into consideration, it was estimated that around 11% of young people ran away overnight on at least one occasion before their sixteenth birthday.

In the new survey, young people were asked the same questions regarding whether they had run away as were asked in the *Still Running* survey. Nineteen per cent of the sample said that they had run away or been forced to leave, including 10.2%<sup>2</sup> of the sample who had run away overnight on the most recent occasion. Thus the running away rate within the sample is almost identical (0.1% higher) to that in the sample in England in 1999.

As in the *Still Running* research, there are good reasons to believe that this is an underestimate of the total proportion of young people who run away overnight before their sixteenth birthday. First, many of the young people were only 14 years old, or had recently become 15, at the time of the survey. Given that these are the peak ages for running away (see later) it is inevitable that some young people who had not run away at the time of the survey would go on

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<sup>2</sup> We have excluded from this proportion a small number of young people who were 16 years of age and said that they had first run away at the age of 16.

to do so before the age of 16. Second, we do not know the impact of school non-attendance on the day of the survey. However, we note that current and previous research has shown a strong link between truancy and running away. So it is likely that the survey missed out on a substantial number of young runaways. Third, we have adopted quite restrictive criteria – some repeat runaways who had not stayed away overnight on the most recent occasion may have done so on previous occasions. These have not been included in the above figure of 10.2%.

Overall therefore we see no reason to revise the 1999 estimate that the true proportion of young people running away overnight on at least one occasion before the age of 16 is likely to be closer to 11% - or one in nine of the youth population.

### Numbers of young people running away

It is not possible from a snapshot survey to calculate precisely the total number of young people running away in any given year. This is because information is not available on the exact timing of repeat incidents for young people who have run away more than once.

However, it is possible to estimate the number of young people per year who are running away *for the first time*. The *Still Running* research estimated that there were around 77,000 first-time runaways each year in the UK. This estimate included around 65,000 young people in England. Taking into account the marginally higher rate of running away in the new survey, and also given the fact that the total population of England under the age of 16 has grown since 1999 (ONS), the best current estimate from the new survey is at least 66,000 first-time runaways per year in England. However, given the margins of error on estimates of this kind this is not substantially different from the 1999 estimate.

The current survey questionnaire introduced a new question regarding whether young people had run away in the last 12 months. A total of 9.3% of young people said that they had done so, including 6.5% who had run away overnight on the most recent occasion. There was no significant difference between 14- and 15-year-olds in terms of this latter proportion. Allowing a margin of error of 1% in either direction (see discussion in Chapter 1), it can be roughly estimated that the total proportion of young people aged 14- and 15-years-old who run away overnight each year in England is between 5.5% and 7.5%. The total population of young people aged 14 and 15 in England is estimated at just over 1.3 million (ONS, 2005). Using these estimates there are between 71,500 and 97,500 runaways in the 14- and 15-year-old age group each year in England. This includes repeat runaways as well as first-time runaways.

### Variations by area

The *Still Running* survey sample in 1999 was designed to explore differences in running away rates between areas on the basis of population density and economic prosperity. A surprising finding from that survey was that there was no evidence of significant variation in running away rates between different geographical areas on the basis of these factors.

Whilst a basic analysis of the current survey reaches the same general conclusion, this analysis also suggests some potentially interesting patterns.

First, looking at population density, Table 1 shows running away rates amongst young people banded in three broad types of areas – rural, suburban and city – see sampling information in Appendix 1 for further details.

**Table 1:** Running away rates in areas of different population density<sup>3</sup>

Type of area	%
Rural	10.2%
Suburban	10.9%
City	11.4%

N = 8,238. Missing cases = 0. Excludes four areas, see footnote.

<sup>3</sup> This table excludes young people surveyed in four areas with high minority ethnic populations because these areas were not sampled on the basis of population density, see Appendix 1.

Statistical tests do not indicate significant variation between the three area types. However, visual inspection of the table suggests a pattern of higher running away rates in areas of higher population density.

A similar pattern is evident in Table 2, which shows running away rates in areas of high and low economic prosperity. Whilst the variation here is quite substantial it still does not reach the level of statistical significance.

**Table 2:** Running away rates in areas of different economic prosperity<sup>4</sup>

<i>Type of area</i>	<i>%</i>
Low prosperity	11.5%
High prosperity	10.2%

N = 8,238. Missing cases = 0. Excludes four areas, see footnote.

The above tables exclude young people surveyed in four areas with high Black and minority ethnic populations. The reason for this is that these areas were not selected on the basis of population density and economic prosperity, so it would not be appropriate to include them in the above analysis. Running away rates in these four areas were significantly lower than the survey average and some exploratory analysis suggests that this pattern may be an indication of lower than average rates of running away in London (three of the four areas in question were London boroughs). This indicates another aspect of area variation for further exploration.

### Summary

In summary, the rate of running away in this survey is almost identical to that found in 1999 and this suggests that there has been no significant change in running away rates in the intervening six years.

Additionally, new evidence from the current survey tends to support previous estimates of the numbers of young people running away.

The analysis presented in this section provides early indications of some potentially significant variation in running away rates between different geographical areas. Further detailed analysis of these patterns, making use of more precise and updated information on population density, economic prosperity and the ethnic make-up of the population, will be published in the near future.

## Characteristics of young people running away

In this section we explore the extent to which running away rates vary for young people in different sub-groups of the youth population.

### Sex

In keeping with the 1999 study and with a more recent survey of running away in South Yorkshire (Smeaton and Rees, 2004), females were more likely to run away than males. Just over 12% of females in the sample had run away overnight compared to 8% of males.

### Age

The rates of running away within the last 12 months amongst 14- and 15-year-olds have already been discussed above. The survey also asked a question about the age at which young people had first run away. The responses from the survey are shown in Table 3 for those young people who had runaway overnight. The peak age of first running away within the sample is 14 years of age, but it should be noted that, as many young people in the sample were only 14

<sup>4</sup> This table excludes young people surveyed in four areas with high minority ethnic populations because these areas were not sampled on the basis of economic prosperity, see Appendix 1.

years old, or had recently become 15, the actual distribution for all young people under the age of 16 is likely to be more skewed towards the 15-year-old age group than the pattern shown in the table.

**Table 3: Age young people first ran away**

<i>Age first ran</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 11	10.6%
11 years old	7.0%
12 years old	12.4%
13 years old	24.6%
14 years old	29.6%
15 years old	15.8%

N = 971. Missing cases = 83.

Over a quarter (30%) of overnight young runaways had first run away before the age of 13, and more than one in ten had done so before the age of 11.

This age pattern is substantially different from that found in the *Still Running* research, in which a quarter of young runaways said that they had first run away before the age of 11. However, the results are not directly comparable because the question took a different format in the two surveys. In the 1999 survey the question was in an open response format where young people were asked to write in the age when they first ran away. In the 2005 survey the question was in a tick box format, with categories listed in descending order from '16 years old' to 'Under 11', and including a 'Can't remember' category. It is not clear how much of the difference in findings might be attributable to this change of format. During 2006, The Children's Society plans to undertake a survey of younger secondary school children and this will provide an opportunity to gain a more accurate picture of the age distribution of younger runaways.

Twelve per cent of males running away overnight had first run away under the age of 11 compared to 9% of females. This difference was not significant. The 1999 study found that males were twice as likely as females to run away before the age of eleven on the first occasion.

### **Disability**

The issue of running away amongst disabled children and young people is an under-explored area. The original *Still Running* survey did not ask a question specifically about disability. However, it found that young people in mainstream schools who regarded themselves as having difficulties with learning were significantly more likely to run away than average; and a supplementary sample of young people in special schools for young people with moderate learning difficulties also found higher than average running away rates.

The current survey questionnaire asked young people whether they would categorise themselves as having 'difficulties with learning' and/or as 'disabled'. We are thus entirely dependent on self-definition by young people. Around 4.5% of the sample identified themselves within the former category, and around 1% within the latter category. Running away rates amongst young people who categorised themselves in these ways appear significantly higher than average – around 20% in both cases.

The current survey also included a sample of young people in special schools for young people with moderate learning difficulties, as outlined in Chapter 1. Of the sample of 293 young people surveyed in special schools, 16% said they had run away or had been forced to leave home, although it should be noted that this sample included a higher proportion of young people aged 16 than the mainstream sample.

Thus our initial analysis suggests, as in 1999, that young people who categorise themselves as having learning difficulties and/or as 'disabled' are more likely than average to run away; as are young people in the smaller sample of special schools. This is an important under-explored

area within the running away literature, and we plan to undertake further research and analysis on running away amongst disabled young people.

### Sexuality

The issue of running away amongst young people of different sexualities is also a neglected area in the UK research. In the current survey questionnaire we asked young people to indicate whether they felt they belonged to a number of categories on the basis of identity, one of which was 'gay or lesbian'. We are still working on this section of the data set. However, there are early indications that running away rates amongst those young people identifying as gay or lesbian were considerably higher than the proportion for the sample as a whole (in the region of 25% to 30%). This is a tentative finding and details of more conclusive analysis will be published in due course.

### Ethnicity

The question on ethnicity in the survey questionnaire used categories based on those in the 2001 Census. In order to present key findings on ethnicity in the current report, some of these categories have been merged. Rates of running away within these merged categories are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Ethnic origin and running away

<i>Ethnic origin</i>	<i>% running away overnight</i>
Black – African / Caribbean	9.3%
Indian / Pakistani / Bangladeshi	4.5%
White	10.7%
Mixed origin	10.6%
Other	6.4%

N = 10,598. Missing cases = 118.

Rates of running away overnight were highest amongst white young people and young people of mixed origin; and lowest amongst young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin. As noted earlier, the majority of Black and minority ethnic young people in the survey sample lived in London and further analysis is needed to explore whether some of the above differences are attributable to lower than average running away rates in the capital. However, the above patterns are similar to those in the 1999 study which found that 10.5% of white young people in the sample had run away overnight, compared to 7.5% of young people of African-Caribbean origin and 5.5% of young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin.

### Country of origin

Young people were also asked whether they were born in the United Kingdom or in another country. There were no differences in running away rates between those born within or outside the UK.

### Summary

The analysis presented in this section indicates substantial variation in running away rates for different sub-groups of young people on the basis of characteristics and identity. In summary:

- Females are more likely to run away than males.
- The peak age range for running away is 14- to 15-years old.
- There is evidence of higher than average running away rates amongst young people who defined themselves as disabled and/or as having learning difficulties.
- There are also early indications of higher running away rates amongst lesbian and gay young people.

- There are some variations in running away rates according to ethnicity.

Most of these findings are broadly similar to those in earlier research. The key exception is that estimates of the prevalence of running away amongst younger children are lower than in previous research studies.

## Links with the broader context of young people's lives

### Family form

Previous research has shown a strong link between the structure of the family within which young people live as teenagers, and the likelihood of them having run away at some point in their lives (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

Table 5 shows the percentage of overnight runaways for each family form in the current survey sample. 'Looked after' young people are not included in the above analysis and are discussed separately below.

**Table 5:** Family form and running away

<i>Family Form</i>	<i>% running away overnight</i>
Both birth parents	6.7%
Single birth parent	13.0%
Step family	18.0%
Other family form	30.8%

N = 10,586. Excludes 60 young people living in residential or foster care, and 17 other young people not living with family. Missing cases = 53.

Young people living in lone parent families were around twice as likely to have run away as those living with both birth parents, and young people living in stepfamilies were almost three times as likely. These differences were statistically significant and are broadly in line with previous findings.

As earlier research (Rees & Rutherford, 2001) has made clear, this does not necessarily mean that young people have run away from the family form in which they are currently living at 14 or 15, nor that the problems which led to them running away were located within their current family or household. Often the events prior to, during and immediately following the break-up of the young person's family of origin can play a significant part in running away.

The high rate of running away amongst the relatively small group of young people who lived in 'other family forms' (137 of the unweighted sample) is also noteworthy. These young people were cared for by grandparents, relatives or other people. Again, we do not know if these young people ran away from or were forced to leave a birth family member prior to living with their current carer, rather than running away from the home in which they were currently living.

Finally, young people who did not live with siblings were also more likely to runaway overnight. More than one in eight (13.1%) of the young people who did not live with any siblings had run away overnight compared to less than one in ten (9.4%) of those that did live with at least one sibling.

### 'Looked after' young people

The issue of young people running away from residential and foster care has been the focus of substantial previous research. A major Department of Health funded research project on young people going missing from children's homes and foster care (Wade & Biehal, 1998) found high rates of going missing in four different areas, but also substantial variation between areas. *Still Running* also found significantly higher than average rates of running away amongst young people currently living in residential and foster care, and amongst the larger group of young people who had lived in care at some point in their lives. These research studies have made it



clear that many of these young people had started running away from their family of origin before becoming 'looked after'; and that the high rates of running away amongst 'looked after' young people are not necessarily a negative reflection on the care system.

The current survey sample included 60 young people who were living in foster care or a children's home at the time of the survey. These young people were around three times as likely to have run away overnight (30.5%) as young people living with their family. The sample is relatively small but this finding is consistent with earlier research.

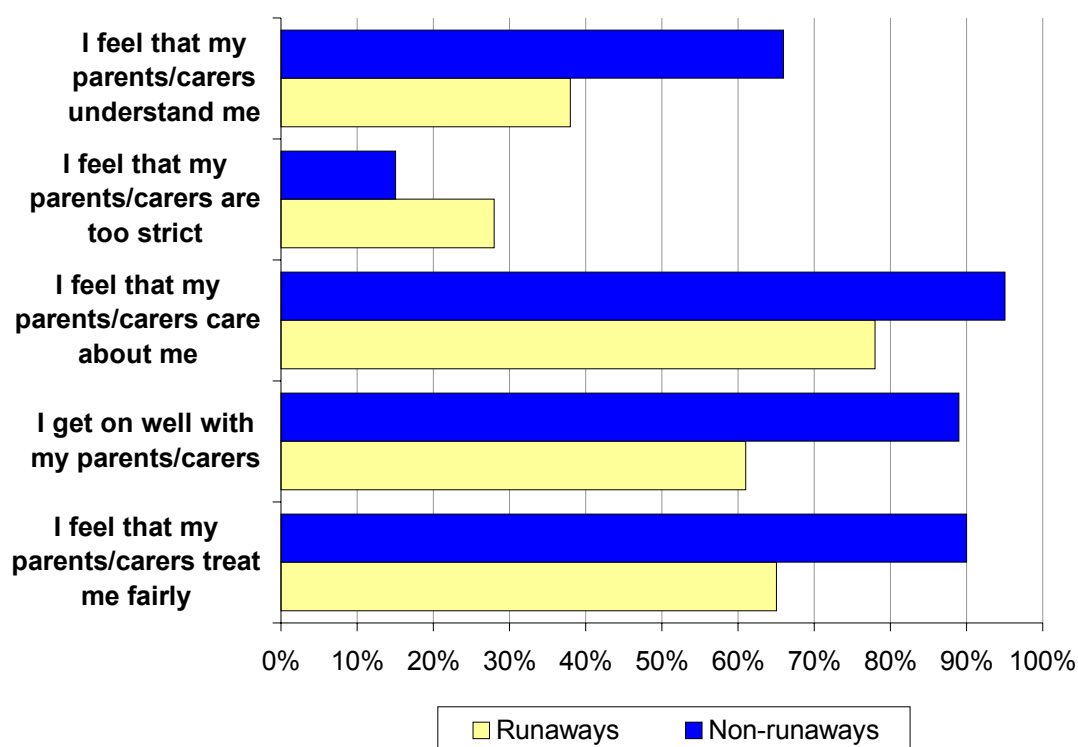
It should be noted that young people running from care on the most recent occasion account for only 2.1% of the overnight runaways in the sample and this supports previous findings that, whilst running away rates amongst 'looked after' young people are high, runaways from the 'looked after' system make up a relatively small proportion of all young people who run away.

### The quality of relationships with parents or carers

Young people were asked on the survey questionnaire to offer their views on a number of aspects of their lives by responding to statements using a five point scale<sup>5</sup>.

Five of these statements referred to relationships with parents or carers, and the responses to these statements for runaways and non-runaways are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Views on relationship with parents/carers (% who agreed with each statement)



In all cases young people who had run away overnight were more likely to have a negative view of their relationship with their parents/carers. This is in keeping with findings from the 1999 study where young people running away also expressed unhappiness at home. These findings relate to young people's current feelings at the time of the survey which are not necessarily the same as when they ran away (this is also true for the remainder of findings in this section).

<sup>5</sup> The possible responses were 'Strongly Agree', 'Agree', 'Not Sure', 'Disagree', 'Strongly Disagree'. These categories were collapsed into 'Agree', 'Not sure' and 'Disagree' for the purposes of the analysis presented here.

However, this tends to support the view that young people who run away are also young people who have ongoing problems and issues in other areas of their lives.

### **Economic factors**

Two measures in the survey were designed to identify young people living in low income families – the number of adults in the household with a paid job; and whether the young person was entitled to free school meals. These were considered to be appropriate measures for inclusion in a self-completed questionnaire for young people.

Of the young people who indicated that they were entitled to free school meals, 13.4% had run away overnight compared to 9.6% of those that said they were not entitled. The proportion of young people who had run away overnight living in families with no adults in paid employment was 15.6%, compared with 9.9% for those young people in households with at least one adult in employment. Both these differences were statistically significant and are broadly in line with the 1999 findings, although the magnitude of the difference is slightly smaller in the current survey in both cases.

The *Still Running* report presented analysis of the links between family form, economic factors, and running away rates. This analysis suggested that family form was the more important determinant of running away and that economic factors had a relatively weak influence when this factor was taken into account. Similar analysis of the current survey data set will be undertaken and published in the future.

### **School**

*Still Running* showed a strong link between problems at school and running away and the current survey also finds this link.

A third (34%) of young people who said that they had problems with attending school also said that they had run away overnight, compared to less than 9% of those who said they did not have attendance problems.

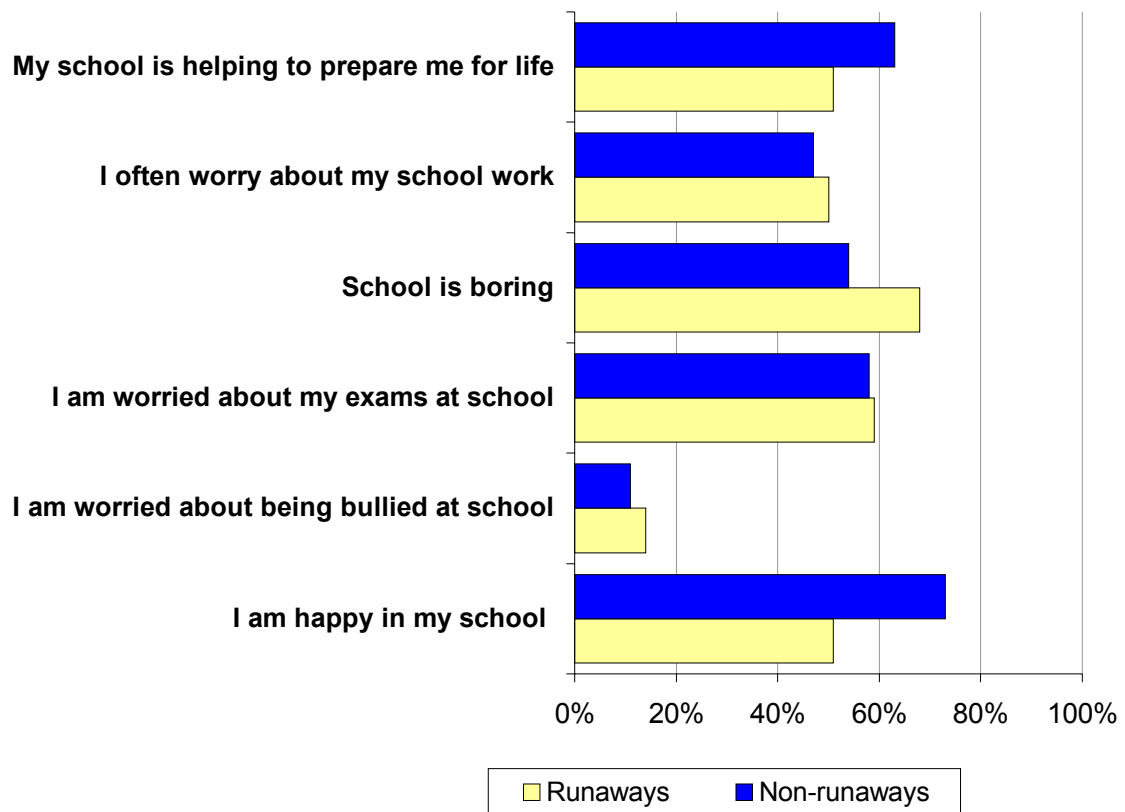
Similarly, young people who said they had problems with getting excluded from school were three times more likely to have run away overnight compared to young people who did not have a problem (29% compared to 10%).

Young people were also asked to offer their views on school on a five point scale as described earlier. In general young people who had run away overnight expressed more negative views about school (see Figure 2). The findings show that they were less likely to feel happy at school or to feel it was preparing them for life. However, there were no significant differences in the extent to which they were worried about exams or school work.

The 2005 survey included a sample of young people who received their education in pupil referral units, as outlined in Chapter 1. These young people will have experienced exclusion from mainstream school and/or would have difficulties in attendance for a variety of reasons. Of the sample of 144 young people surveyed in pupil referral units, 37% said they had run away or been forced to leave home, considerably higher than the proportion of young people in mainstream schools, although the age profile was older than in the mainstream school sample. Again this finding is in keeping with the 1999 study.

These findings provide further confirmation of the strong links between school problems and running away and, of the extent to which young people not in mainstream schooling are at increased likelihood of having run away.

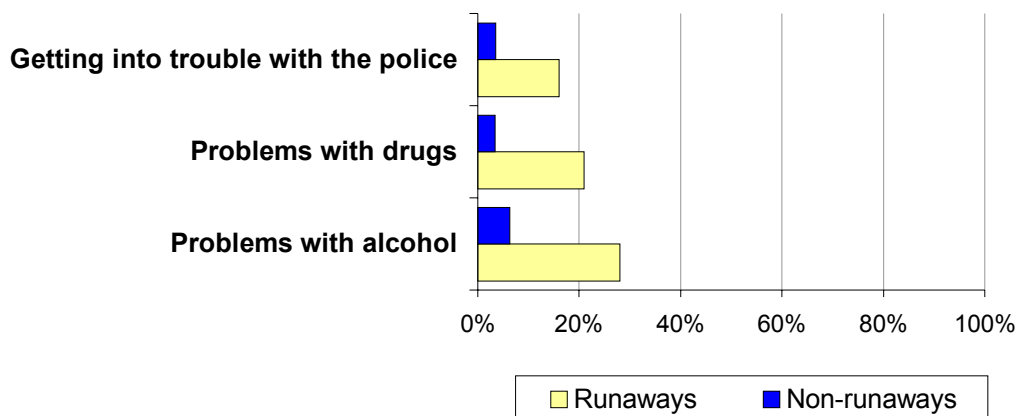
**Figure 2:** Views on school (% who agreed with each statement)



**Other issues and problems**

Alongside school difficulties, young people were asked if they felt they had problems with drinking, drugs or being in trouble with the police. Once again the results are very similar to those from the *Still Running* study – young people who identified problems with these issues were much more likely to be overnight runaways. More than a third of young people who identified as having problems with each of these issues had runaway overnight. They were at least four times as likely to run away as those that did not say they had these problems.

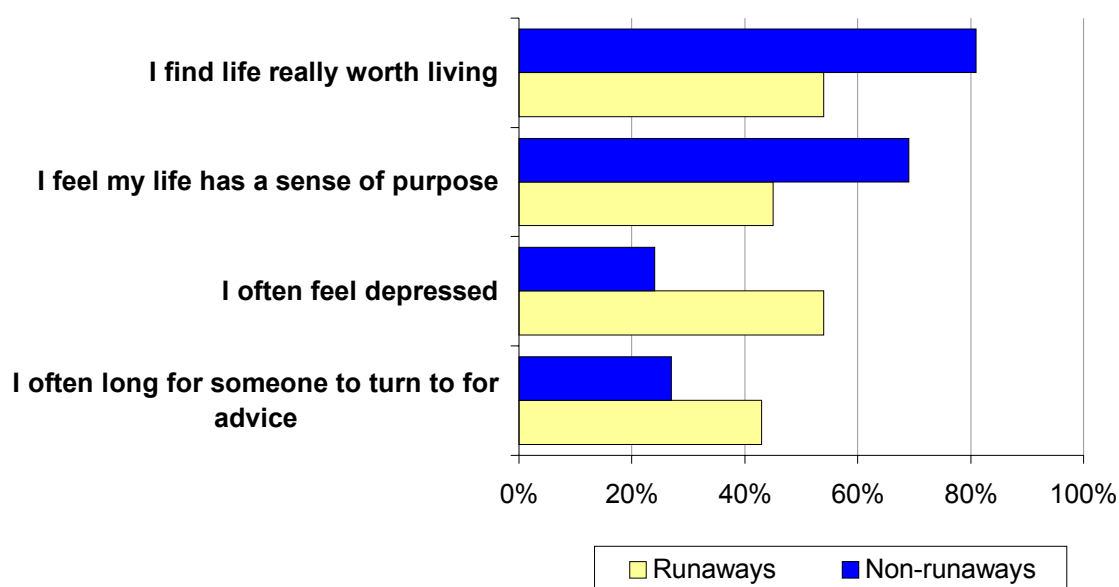
**Figure 3:** Other issues and problems (% who self identified with each problem)



## Personal well-being

Finally, in this section on the broader context of young runaways' lives, we look at general issues of well-being. Young people were asked to express their views on four statements about their current well-being. Young people who had run away overnight were less likely to feel purposeful or happy in their lives than non-runaways. They were also more likely to feel depressed and/or to wish they had someone in their life to turn to for advice. The relationship between poor well-being and running away reflects the outcomes of the 1999 study.

**Figure 4:** Views on personal well-being (% who agreed with each statement)



## Summary

The findings in this section are very closely in line with earlier research findings about the broader context of young runaways' lives. It is clear that young people who run away also tend to experience a range of ongoing difficulties in their lives at home and at school; and that they are significantly more likely than average to have problems with drugs, alcohol and offending. New evidence presented in this report also suggests that they may have poorer personal well-being than young people who have not run away.

## Reasons for running away

*Still Running* presented the first reliable national information about young people's reasons for running away or being forced to leave home. Most young people reported problems at home as being the primary reason for running away – in particular, conflict with parents and other family members; physical abuse; emotional abuse; and neglect.

In this study young people were again asked why they had run away or been forced to leave on the last occasion. Here we examine the reasons for running for the 1,054 young people who ran away overnight on their last occasion. Nineteen percent of these young people did not answer the question or stated they did not remember or did not wish to answer the question. The remainder gave a range of responses which sometimes included more than one reason for running away. Each reason was categorised and a tally taken of the number of times this reason was reported. It is noted that this process can be subjective and as such it was undertaken by two researchers independently, and differences in categorisation were discussed and resolved.

## Problems at home

The vast majority of young people reported reasons that fall under the umbrella of 'problems at home', including:

- Poor family relationships and general unhappiness at home
- Arguments and family conflict
- Maltreatment

There was considerable overlap between these categories.

Looking first at the smallest of these three categories – approximately 12% of young people reported reasons for running that fall into the broad category of 'maltreatment'. This includes young people who said they had experienced physical abuse or violence, emotional abuse or neglect (e.g. feeling continually blamed or put down, uncared for or rejected), domestic violence, sexual abuse or said that they were scared.

*Unhappy, dad beats me up!*

*My mum slapped me.*

*Parents kept blaming things on me , treating me badly.*

*Mainly because I felt I wasn't wanted and I wanted to see if there was anywhere else that was reassuring and safe where I could be happy.*

*My dad kept hitting my sisters, me + my mum.*

Half of these young people specifically reported that they had experienced or had feared physical, domestic or sexual violence and that this had been the trigger to their most recent running away incident. In the majority of cases where a perpetrator was mentioned specifically, the violence was reported as being perpetrated by a parent or step-parent, but in some cases it was another family member or a family friend. *Still Running* reported that 12% of young people had run away because of physical abuse or a fear/threat of physical abuse. We are unable to say why the incidence has halved in this survey.

A larger group of young runaways mentioned arguments with their parents and family conflict. Often (12% of cases) this was of a general nature:

*Because I had a big argument with my parents.*

*I fell out with my mum and we were arguing a lot.*

Sometimes more specific reasons for the conflict were given including issues about boundaries and control; and disagreements relating to friends, relationships, alcohol, etc:

*My dad wouldn't let me stay out round my mates.*

*We had an argument about a boy older than me and I was not doing well in anything apart from causing trouble.*

In other cases young people mentioned conflict and disharmony between parents, including arguments and parents splitting up, as reasons for running away:

*Because my parents were arguing and I got upset and involved. Became very unhappy.*

Six percent of overnight runaways described being forced or told to leave home by a parent or step-parent or feeling that they had to leave. This included a small number of young people who said they had to leave because there was nobody to care for them, e.g. their parent/carer was ill.

*My dad threw me out, disagreement.*

*My mum screamed abuse at me and told me to leave.*

*My mum was angry and wanted me out of her way.*

We will discuss the issue of being forced to leave separately in a later section, but would just note that most of these cases fell into the broad category of conflict, and in some cases might also be regarded as representing neglect.

Beyond these cases of maltreatment and family conflict, a large proportion of young people mentioned general family relationship problems and unhappiness at home as reasons for their running away.

Twelve percent stated that they had run away because they were unhappy with a parent or parents or they were not getting on with them. They expressed negative feelings about their relationship with their parent(s), but did not mention conflict.

*Because I had enough of my mum.*

*My dad annoyed me.*

*Hate my parents.*

A further 11% of young people described their family or home-life as being a problem and were not specific that their difficulties were with their parent(s). They wrote general comments about not getting on with the family:

*Because I fell out with my family.*

*Because my home life was so upsetting I couldn't handle it.*

Finally, within this third broad category, some young people specifically mentioned poor relationships with step parents:

*I hated living at home with my mum's boyfriend.*

### **Personal problems**

A further set of reasons for running away fall into the category of 'personal problems'. Five percent of young people gave a general response that indicated that they were not happy, had had enough for some reason or had had an experience they did not wish to elaborate on.

*Because I was fed up.*

*Not happy with the situation I was in.*

*Going through a hard time.*

Five percent of young people were clearly very unhappy and described being depressed, having suicidal thoughts or hating themselves.

*Couldn't handle my problems and got really depressed.*

*Depression – family too much. I would have killed myself if I could.*

A further set of reasons were related to feeling stressed, worried or angry, and needing space.

*Felt too much pressure and no one to talk to.*

*Because I felt I needed to think things through.*

*Got pissed off and needed to cool down.*

### **Problems at school**

Problems at school (e.g. truancy, bullying or feeling under pressure), were reported as a reason for running by 2% of young people only, compared to approximately 9% of young people in 1999. It is not possible to examine whether this is as a result of changes to school policy and pastoral care, changes in parental awareness and responses to their children's difficulties at school or a chance finding.

### **Running away or forced to leave?**

The issue of whether, and to what extent, young runaways feel forced to leave home has been a subject of focus in previous research. The *Still Running* research in 1999 suggested that somewhere in the region of one-fifth of runaways see themselves as forced to leave home and a follow-up report looked at this issue in some detail (Rees & Siakeu, 2004). The large majority of incidents of being forced to leave occur amongst young people in the 14- to 15-year-old age group. Evaluation has suggested that projects working with young runaways find it particularly

difficult to find solutions to the issues faced by this group of young people (Rees, Franks, Raws & Medforth, 2005).

In this survey, around a quarter (26%) of overnight runaways said that they had been forced to leave their home on the most recent occasion that they were away. There were no differences in terms of whether the young person had been forced to leave by gender or ethnic origin. There were, however, differences in relation to family form, with overnight runners from both birth parents being less likely to have been forced to leave than those from other family forms. These differences are in keeping with the findings from the 1999 study as reported in Rees and Rutherford (2001).

## Experiences of running away

In the final section of this chapter we look at findings on the experiences of young runaways whilst away from home. As with previous sections we focus on those young people who had run away for at least one night on the most recent occasion that they were away.

### Length of time away

Table 6 shows the length of time that overnight runaways were away on the most recent occasion they were away from home.

Just over half the young people had only spent one night away whilst, at the other end of the range, one in ten had spent more than four weeks away from home (see Table 6). These patterns are broadly in line with those found in earlier research.

**Table 6:** Length of time away from home on most recent occasion

<i>Length of time</i>	<i>%</i>
One night	52%
Two to six nights	27%
One to four weeks	11%
More than four weeks	10%

N = 979. Missing cases = 75.

There were no differences in the length of time away between males and females, or ethnic groups. Young people who had been forced to leave tended to spend longer away than young people who had run away – the 1999 study reported similar findings.

### Where slept

Table 7 shows the responses of overnight runaways to the question '*If you were away overnight, where did you sleep?*'. More than one response was possible and so the percentages in the table add up to more than 100%. Repeat runaways were asked to answer this question in relation to the most recent occasion that they had been away, but it is possible that some young people answered in relation to more than one separate incident.

**Table 7:** Where young people slept whilst away on most recent occasion

<i>Where slept</i>	<i>%</i>
Friends	51%
Relatives	35%
Rough	16%

N = 1,007. Missing cases = 47.

As can be seen, the most common place to stay overnight was with friends (half of overnight runaways), followed by relatives (over a third of overnight runaways).

Around one in six of the young people had slept rough whilst they were away. This figure is substantially lower than the 24% figure reported in 1999, and also the 25% figure found in the more recent South Yorkshire survey in 2003/4 (Smeaton and Rees, 2004). An earlier survey in Leeds (Rees, 1993) found an even higher rate of 42%. The reasons for this sizeable variation are not entirely clear. Even allowing for some margin of error on each estimate it is possible that the new lower figure is indicative of a trend towards less sleeping rough amongst young runaways. Nevertheless it is still clear that a substantial minority of young runaways are without anywhere to stay while they are away from home.

Males (23%) were more likely to sleep rough than females (11%) and less likely to stay with relatives, in keeping with the 1999 study. There were no differences in where young people of different ethnic origins slept.

Those overnight runners that had been forced to leave were more likely to stay with relatives, whilst those that reported running away were more likely to stay with friends or sleep rough. Again, these findings are in keeping with the 1999 study.

### Survival strategies

Young people were asked whether they had stolen, begged or done other things to survive whilst away on their most recent occasion. One in eight overnight runners said that they had employed at least one of these survival strategies on the most recent occasion they were away – see Table 8.

**Table 8:** Survival strategies for overnight runners whilst away on most recent occasion

<i>Survival strategy</i>	<i>%</i>
Stealing	9%
Begging	3%
Other things	4%

N = 1,040. Missing cases = 14.

Young people were less likely to have stolen or begged to survive if they had slept at a relative's or friend's house whilst they were away, but much more likely to if they had slept rough. For example, over a quarter of those who reported sleeping rough said they had stolen to survive compared to 3% of those who slept at relative's houses.

Young people who were away for a week or more were more than twice as likely to employ survival strategies such as stealing or begging than those that were away for one night only. For example, 6% of those who were away for one night only reported stealing to survive compared to 14% of those who were away for a week or more. These findings are based on a small sample but are in keeping with qualitative findings from the 1999 study.

Males were three times more likely to have stolen or begged, on the most recent running away occasion, than females. This is probably accounted for by the fact that males are less likely to stay with relatives than females and more likely to sleep rough.

### Experiences of being hurt whilst away

Young people were asked whether they had been hurt or harmed on the most recent occasion that they had run away from home. Just over 8% of overnight runaways answered 'yes' to this question. Young people were least likely to be hurt if they had slept at relatives and more likely when sleeping rough or in other situations such as staying with somebody they had just met.

The risk of being hurt or harmed rose with time away. Young people who were away for a week or more were twice as likely to have been hurt or harmed as young people who had been away for a night only. These findings reflect those found by the 1999 national survey and the 2004 South Yorkshire study.



Males were more likely to have been harmed than females. This is likely to be linked to the fact that males were more likely to sleep rough and less likely to sleep at relatives' houses, as previously discussed.

### **Evidence of risk**

One of the key issues of debate in relation to young runaways relates to the extent to which young people are at risk whilst they are away from home. The Social Exclusion Unit expressed particular concerns about the risks faced by some young runaways, based on the *Still Running* research, and also citing research in the US which suggested that 20% to 40% of runaways become involved in 'high-risk behaviour' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002: 21). One of the intentions of the programme of pilot projects funded by the DfES (see Chapter 1) was to target those young runaways who are most 'at risk'. However, the evaluation of that programme noted that many of the projects had targeted groups of young people on the basis of characteristics, rather than on the basis of direct evidence of risk (Rees, Franks, Raws & Medforth, 2005: 50-51). It concluded that there was still a need to explore the conceptualisation of risk in relation to running away in the UK.

As reviewed above, the current survey covered a number of aspects of running away experiences which relate to the risks faced by young runaways. Previous studies (e.g. Wade, 2002) have calculated composite risk estimates based on experience of one or more of a range of risk factors. Applying this idea to the current survey data set:

- A total of 17% of overnight runaways either slept rough and / or with someone they'd just met.
- 21% slept in one of these places and / or said they were hurt or harmed.
- If begging in order to survive is also added, the figure rises to 22%.
- If stealing in order to survive is also added the total proportion of young runaways with one or more of these experiences is just over 25%.

Evidently, the exact definition of risk whilst away is very much a matter of judgement and interpretation. Some people may not view stealing in order to survive as a risky behaviour. However, even taking the more restrictive criteria in the first bullet point above, the survey suggests that around one in five young runaways are at risk whilst away from home.

### **Sources of help**

A fifth of overnight runners answered 'yes' to the question '*Did you go anywhere for help?*'. There were no differences in terms of gender, ethnic origin, family form or the length of time a young person had run away for.

Young people who answered 'yes' to the above question were asked '*Where did you go?*' and estimates of the different sources of help were calculated from their responses (see Table 9). More than one response was possible and so the percentages in the table add up to more than 100%. Young people were most likely to seek help from their friends and then from their relatives (grandparents, siblings, a parent they may not live with on a full-time basis, etc.). A relatively small proportion of young runaways reported seeking help from an agency or professional, e.g. social services, counsellors or Connexions staff. Because of the sample size, the percentages in the table have a substantial margin of error. However, a similar pattern was found by in the South Yorkshire study (Smeaton and Rees, 2004), where young people were most likely to seek informal support from their friends and family.

**Table 9:** Sources of help for young people on the most recent occasion that they were away

<i>Sources of help</i>	<i>% of runaways</i>
None	80%
Friends	9%
Family and relatives	7%
Agencies, e.g. social services, Connexions, school, police	4%
Other, e.g. leisure facilities, shops	1%
Adult friends, e.g. neighbours	1%

N = 1,037. Missing cases = 17. Percentages add up to more than 100% because some young people identified more than one source of help.

### Missing person reports

A new question in this survey questionnaire related to whether the young person had been reported as missing to the police by their parents or carers. This is an important issue because, as outlined in Chapter 1, many of the projects developed to provide support to young runaways have targeted missing person reports as their sole or primary source of referrals.

The majority of young people running away overnight in this survey said their parents or carers did not report them missing to the police on the most recent occasion (68%). Nineteen per cent said that the incident was reported to the police, whilst 13% were not sure.

**Table 10:** Whether young people were, to their knowledge, reported as missing to the police

<i>Reported missing</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	19%
Not sure	13%
No	68%

N = 1,041. Missing cases = 13.

These figures may not be a true estimate as the young people may be uncertain of their parents' or carers' actions whilst they were away. However, the findings are in keeping with the South Yorkshire study.

Young people who slept rough on the last occasion were three times more likely to have been reported missing than young people who slept at relatives' houses. It is likely that if they were with relatives, parents or carers knew where they were and did not consider them to be at risk of harm. Young men were more likely to be reported missing than females. This may be attributable the higher proportion of young men sleeping rough.

### Repetitive running away

Table 11 shows the number of times away for those young people who had runaway overnight on the most recent occasion. In keeping with the 1999 study 15% of young people had run away more than three times.

**Table 11:** Number of times young person ran away

<i>Number of times</i>	<i>%</i>
Once	43%
Twice	28%
Three times	14%
Four to nine times	9%
Ten times or more	6%

N = 1,042. Missing cases = 12.

As one might expect, there was a significant correlation between the age the young person had first started to run away and the number of times away for overnight runners. Young people who first started to run away under 11 had run away more often. Nearly a half of all those who began to run under 11 had run away on three or more occasions, compared to a quarter of those who began to run aged 11 to 15 inclusive. The 1999 study found that 53% of overnight runaways who had first run before the age of eleven were repeat runners (i.e. more than three running away incidents).

There were no differences in the number of times a young person had run away and their sex or family form; and no clear significant differences in relation to ethnicity.

### Summary

This section has provided a broad overview of survey findings on the experiences of overnight runaways whilst away from home, which can broadly be divided into three groups of findings.

The findings on length of time away from home, and repetitive running away, are very close to previous UK research findings. A sizeable minority of young runaways (more than a fifth) spent at least a week away from home; whilst over a quarter had run away three times or more.

The second set of findings relate to the risks that young people face whilst they are away. Around one in six young runaways sleep rough (this is a lower proportion than in earlier research); and there is also evidence of risky survival strategies (more than one in ten runaways); and being hurt or harmed (around one in 12 runaways). Putting these experiences together, it can be estimated that more than a fifth of young people who run away overnight might be regarded as at tangible risk whilst they are away from home.

Finally, we have presented new findings on two topics not covered fully in previous research. First, more than two-thirds of overnight runaways in the survey said that they had not been reported by their parents or carers as missing to the police. Whilst we can not be certain that all young people knew this information, we also note that a further 13% of young people weren't sure whether they had been reported, and only a fifth (19%) were able to respond that they definitely had been reported. Second, it would seem that a relatively small minority of young runaways seek help from agencies whilst away from home, whilst a much larger proportion seek support from friends and relatives. These two findings, when put together, suggest that running away is often a phenomenon which is hidden from professional agencies but is more visible within the communities in which young people live.

# 3

## Summary and conclusions

In this final chapter of the report we summarise the key findings from the research; discuss some of the key themes highlighted by the findings; and draw out some implications for practice, policy and research.

### Summary of key findings

Key findings from the survey were as follows:

- Just over 10% of the young people surveyed had run away overnight on at least one occasion. This finding is almost identical to the 1999 research, and there is no reason to revise the earlier estimate that around one in nine (11%) of young people run away overnight before the age of 16.
- Around 6.5% of 14- and 15-year-olds had run away overnight in the last year, and this suggests that at least 71,500 young people in this two-year age band run away annually in England.
- There are some indications that there may be some variation in running away rates between geographical areas on the basis of population density and economic prosperity. There may also be lower running away rates in London. More analysis will be done on these issues.
- Females (12%) are significantly more likely to run away than males (8%).
- The large majority of young runaways are in the 13- to 15-year-old age group
- There is some evidence of variation in running away rates according to young people's ethnicity and sexuality; and according to whether young people defined themselves as disabled and/or as having difficulties with learning.
- There are wide variations in running away rates within different family forms – with young people currently living in stepfamilies and lone parent families being much more likely to have run away at some point in their lives.
- The likelihood of running away is strongly linked to young people's perceptions of the quality of their relationships with their parents and carers.
- There is also some evidence of family economic disadvantage being associated with a higher likelihood of running away.
- The inter-relationships between family form, family relationships, economic factors and running away need further exploration.
- The research confirms earlier research findings of strong links between running away and problems in other areas of young people's lives – in terms of school, drug and alcohol use, offending, and generally poorer personal well-being.
- Findings on reasons for running away are generally in line with previous research, problems at home such as conflict, poor relationships and maltreatment were the key

reasons for running away but there was less evidence in the current study of links with physical abuse and with school-related problems

- A quarter (26%) of young runaways felt that they were forced to leave home.
- Around one in six (16%) of young runaways slept rough on the most recent occasion they were away. Half (51%) stayed with friends.
- One in eight runaways said that they had to resort to survival strategies such as stealing and begging whilst away from home.
- Around one in 12 (8%) of runaways said that they had been hurt or harmed on the most recent occasion that they ran away.
- Relatively few young runaways (4%) sought help from agencies whilst they were away from home. The sample size for this statistic means that it is not a very precise estimate but we would suggest that the proportion is highly likely to be less than one in ten young runaways.
- Over two-thirds (68%) of runaways said that their parents or carers did not report them missing to the police on the most recent occasion that they were away. A further 13% were not sure, and only a fifth (19%) said that they had been reported.

## Discussion

In broad terms, the above findings can be summarised into five key themes, which we summarise below, before going on to discuss the implications of the research.

### **No evidence of change in the overall rate of running away**

The current research suggests that there has been no substantial change in the overall rate of running away amongst young people under the age of 16 in the last six years. There are, of course, margins of error on current and previous estimates. However the very close similarity of the headline findings – 10.2% of young runaways in the current sample compared to 10.1% in 1999 – does not provide any reason to believe that the situation has changed. Whilst we are not in a position to calculate UK estimates from the current survey, which was only undertaken in England, our findings also do not raise any doubts about the accuracy of earlier estimates of prevalence, which have suggested that around 100,000 young people run away in the UK each year.

### **The diversity of young runaways**

The findings presented in this report illustrate the diversity of the issue of running away in two senses. First, young people who run away are a highly diverse group. Whilst there are some significant differences in running away rates amongst different sub-groups of the youth population, running away is a phenomenon which can affect young people from all backgrounds. Second, the research has again illustrated the diversity of experiences which fall under the broad heading of 'running away'. Some young people only run away on a single occasion for one night, and stay with a friend or relative. Others run away repeatedly, sometimes for periods of a month or more, and are at considerable risk whilst away from home.

### **Continued evidence of the risks faced by young runaways**

Our current research provides a lower estimate of the prevalence of sleeping rough amongst young runaways (one in six) than earlier research. We can not be sure at this stage whether this is indicative of a trend or is the result of the relatively large margins of error that may be present in estimates of this kind. If there has been a reduction in risky behaviour amongst young runaways then that would be extremely positive. However we would note that, overall, the current research suggests that there is still a substantial proportion of young runaways who are at significant risk whilst away from home through sleeping rough, staying with someone they have just met, or employing strategies such as begging in order to survive. These risks,

together with the fact that some young runaways report being actually hurt or harmed, provides continued cause for concern about the issue of running away amongst young people in the UK.

### **Links between running away and other issues**

This report confirms previous research findings of the very strong links between running away and other problems and issues in young people's lives. Young runaways are much more likely than average to feel that they have poor quality family relationships; problems at school; problems with drugs, alcohol and offending; and low personal well-being in general. This set of findings reinforces the view that young people who run away are often amongst the most marginalised young people in our society. It suggests that attention to the issue of running away and the factors that lead young people to run away could contribute to efforts to improve school inclusion, to reduce offending, to reduce drugs use, and to improve the general welfare of disadvantaged and excluded young people.

### **Lack of contact between young runaways and helping agencies**

Two of the new findings from the current research relate to the extent to which young runaways have contact with agencies who might help or support them whilst away from home. The high proportion of runaways who say that they were not reported as missing to the police, and the low proportion who say that they went to agencies for help whilst away, are both indications that running away is still largely a phenomenon which is hidden from agencies who might be in a position to provide support to young people and their families.

## **Implications**

We conclude the report with some suggested implications of the research findings in three key areas – practice, policy and research.

### **Implications for practice**

We briefly reviewed the current state of practice development in the UK in Chapter 1, and further details are available in a recent report published by the DfES (Rees, Franks & Raws, 2005). There are a number of detailed implications to be drawn from the current research which would warrant further attention. Three key areas are the implications for provision of refuge, referral routes for targeted runaways projects, and the response of generic services to the needs of young runaways.

In terms of refuge, as noted in the introductory chapter there are currently only ten registered refuge bed spaces for young runaways in the whole of the UK. The DfES has made a valuable contribution recently by funding a pilot initiative to test out different models of emergency accommodation provision. It is hoped that the evaluation of these pilot schemes will be helpful in the long term. However, the current research indicates that one in six young runaways sleep rough, and hence that there are more than 10,000 sleeping rough incidents amongst young people in the 14- to 15-year-old age group in England alone. There is therefore still an urgent need to consider expanding the current network of provision.

In relation to referral routes for targeted runaways projects, the small number of specific projects that do exist in the UK tend to rely heavily on police missing person referrals as a key referral source. The findings on the potentially low levels of reporting of runaway incidents by parents and carers would suggest that this referral route may miss out on the majority of incidents currently occurring. There is a need to broaden the range of referral routes to all specialist runaways projects to include self-referral by young people and referral by relatives and friends who young runaways tend to go to for help.

Finally, in relation to the response of generic services for children and young people (including statutory services) the research suggests that few young runaways see these as places to go to for help or support. Given that most young runaways are teenagers, there is clearly potential for agencies to promote their services and accessibility directly to young people in order to encourage self-referral.

### **Implications for policy**

As noted in the introductory chapter there have been some notable policy developments in relation to young runaways in the UK over the last two decades. Section 51 of the Children Act 1989 made provision for refuges. More recently reports and guidance in relation to young runaways and young people going missing have been published both by the Social Exclusion Unit and the Department of Health, and central Government has funded the piloting and evaluation of a range of services for young runaways.

However, there is still a need for greater integration of the issue of running away within the 'mainstream' children and young people's agenda. The needs of young runaways range from child protection to health, from accommodation to counselling, and their distressing and often risky circumstances (whether in the home they have fled or while away from home) can give rise to particular considerations if the services being developed and commissioned for children are to respond effectively to their needs. Recent policy developments such as *Every Child Matters* and *Youth Matters* present real opportunities to reshape services around the needs and circumstances of each child and young person, but without specific attention to the issue of running away, a vital link in improving outcomes may be missed.

The current research again indicates the importance of running away as a social issue and suggests the need for it to be taken into account more fully in future policy developments relating to children and young people. The findings presented in this report have illustrated the relevance of running away to several of the key *Every Child Matters* outcomes. There are particularly strong links with the 'stay safe' outcome; but also with other outcomes – 'be healthy', 'enjoy and achieve' and 'make a positive contribution' – through the strong relationships which are evident between running away, drug and alcohol use; school problems; and offending. The research suggests that young runaways are a group of young people who tend not to fare well in relation to these outcomes.

The research also raises issues regarding two other key strands of policy development in relation to children and young people – the importance of agencies working together to provide a comprehensive network of services, and the active involvement of children and young people. There are indications in this report, and in other recent published research (Rees, Franks, Raws & Medforth, 2005) that young people who run away are an important 'in need' group who are sometimes missing out on services. The findings also highlight the importance of seeing young people as actively shaping their own lives, and of providing opportunities for them to access services directly, which has important policy implications.

### **Implications for research**

There is now a substantial body of research and evaluation evidence in relation to young runaways in the UK. There is still a need for more research on specific issues, such as parental perspectives on running away, and the longer-term impacts of running away behaviour.

There is also a need for the issue of running away to be taken into account by social researchers in general. The remarks made about policy development above apply equally here in terms of mainstream research about young people. Significant research has been undertaken on young people's welfare over the past few years which has paid no attention to the way in which running away may be a key factor in the lives of troubled young people. We would hope that the current research would provide further stimulus for other social researchers to incorporate the issue of running away into their research projects.

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## Appendix 1: Areas covered by the survey

The table below shows the areas included in the survey. The first two areas within each group are those areas used in the original *Still Running* survey sample (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Additional booster areas selected for the new survey, where it was not possible to gain a sufficient sample from the original survey areas, are shown in italics.

Area type	Areas surveyed
High percentage of young people of African-Caribbean origin	Hackney
	Lambeth
	<i>Haringey</i>
	<i>Islington</i>
	<i>Lewisham</i>
High percentage of young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin	<i>Southwark</i>
	Blackburn
	Hounslow
Economically prosperous city	Plymouth
	Trafford
Economically deprived city	Doncaster
	Salford
	<i>Manchester</i>
Economically prosperous suburban	Bromsgrove
	Chelmsford
	<i>Wyre Forest</i>
Economically deprived suburban	Ashfield
	Blackpool
	<i>Mansfield</i>
Economically prosperous rural	Kennet
	Mid-Sussex
	<i>West Wiltshire</i>
Economically deprived rural	Chichester
	Sedgemoor
	<i>South Somerset</i>

## Appendix 2: Characteristics of the mainstream school sample

The following tables show the characteristics of the total unweighted sample of 10,716 young people in England.

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**Table A1: Gender**

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Female	48.1%
Male	51.9%

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**Table A2: Age at survey date**

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14 years old	24.7%
15 years old	62.8%
16 years old	12.5%

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**Table A3: Ethnic origin**

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Black	5.1%
Asian	7.4%
White	80.3%
Mixed origin	4.7%
Other	2.7%

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**Table A4: Current accommodation**

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Lives with family	99.3%
Residential or foster care	0.6% <sup>6</sup>
Other	0.2%

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**Table A5: Family form**

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Both birth parents	63.0%
Step family	15.6%
Lone parent	20.1%
Other	1.3%

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<sup>6</sup> In keeping with national figures for children looked after - 0.55% of children and young people under the age of 18 are looked after by the local authority (Children looked after by local authorities on year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2004, DfES).