Running the Risk: Young people on the streets of Britain today Summary Report

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This is a summary report on the main findings from a two-year research study carried out in 1994 on young runaways on the streets of Britain.

**Introduction**
The Children’s Society’s work with children and young people living on the streets dates back to its earliest origins in 1881. One hundred years later young runaways were still to be found on the streets of Britain. In the 1990’s The Children’s Society ‘streetwork initiative’ was its second largest stream of work. Research carried out by The Children’s Society in 1989 indicated that there were at least 98,000 reported incidents involving missing young people during that year (Newman, 1989). An estimated 10,000 young people were believed to have run away ten times or more before their sixteenth birthday.

This study commissioned by The Children’s Society was carried out by the Child Care Research and Development Unit at the Department of Adult Continuing Education, University of Leeds. Four projects working with young runaways and run by The Children’s Society were included in the study: Leeds Safe House, Porth Project in South Wales; Safe in the City in Manchester and Youth Link in Birmingham. The research examined and evaluated the work of the four projects each of which represented different models of service delivery. It also explored the situations and experiences of the young people including their views and needs, and offered a model of prevention and early support for these vulnerable young people.

**Research aims**
The aims of the research were:
1. to clarify the various definitions of ‘running away’ and, where applicable, the obverse ‘keeping in touch’
2. to investigate the processes and systems leading to young people running away including, families and local networks/communities, local authority accommodation, homelessness, income, discrimination on any grounds.
3. to explore the needs of young people who are in contact with The Children’s Society projects
4. to explore the responses of the projects including the experiences of project workers in providing a response to young people; outreach work, crisis work; the different methods, settings and philosophies involved and current or proposed changes in the work.

**Methodology**
The research was carried out using the following methods:
1) A survey of young people using the four projects
Questionnaires were completed by 102 young people
2) In depth interviews with young people
Interviews were carried out with 36 young people who used the projects (with a second follow up where possible)
3) Interviews with project staff
Interviews were conducted with 49 Children’s Society staff
4) Information gathering from other key people (e.g. social workers)
28 professionals in other agencies were interviewed.

Key Findings
The following presents the key findings from the research

Section 1: The young people with whom the projects worked

The young people had generally had a high level of disruption in their lives:
- within the family there was a high incidence of relationship breakdown, conflict and violence
- most of the young people had spent periods in substitute care and often had had a number of different placements
- a significant minority of the young people had spent extended continuous periods away from both family and substitute care before the age of 16
- amongst the over 16 year olds, frequent changes of accommodation and periods of homelessness were common.

Most of the young people lacked support networks (apart from the street work projects)
- there was a high level of detachment from family and where relevant social services
- there was also a high level of detachment from the education system
- Many of the young people had a distrust of adults and relied on peers for support.

There were significant levels of substance use, self harm, depression and criminal offending amongst the young people interviewed
- The large majority of the young people had run away before the age of 16
- Most of the young people had first run away from family, usually remaining in their local area, and only staying away for a short time
- Many of the young people who had run away from family were subsequently placed in substitute care
• Most of the young people had run away many times and later running away incidents were on the whole more extensive and wide ranging than first incidents
• Young people identified a number of positives to being away from where they lived, including relief from pressure and making new friends, but the majority felt that being away had not helped to sort out their problems
• There were also a number of negative experiences including fear, loneliness, and physical and sexual assaults
• A majority of the young people had resorted to strategies such as stealing, begging, or providing sex for money in order to survive.

Young people’s experiences were matched by the perceptions of professionals who worked with them, who identified:
• Abuse as a key factor in running away from the family
• Feelings of not being listened to or cared about and bullying as key factors in running from care
• Economic stresses on parents and resource constraints on local authorities as important contextual factors in understanding running away.

The report presented the following tentative conclusions regarding sub-groups of young runaways:

• It seemed that in many cases there was a link between running away patterns and experiences of living in substitute care
• Young people who had spent extended continuous periods away from family or care had not always run away many times and often had little or no experience of living in substitute care prior to their periods of detachment
• There was a group of young people who were in contact with the streetwork projects but who had never ‘run away’. (But they had become homeless post 16).

The research also identified a number of pathways in relation to running away from family and substitute care, in some case leading to detachment from these and other support systems:

• Pathway 1: Most young people (around 70%) had only run away once or twice, and then had ceased to run away. They had never lived in substitute care
• Pathway 2: Less than 10% of running away started in care. Most young people (90% or more) had begun running away from the family
Pathway 3: Some young people ran away repeatedly (10 times or more) while living in care. A significant proportion that had run away three times or more from home subsequently lived in substitute care. Some stopped running away once in care, others ran away repeatedly from care, while others became detached from care often very quickly.

Pathway 4: Some young people became detached from care, with limited experience of living in care

Pathway 5: Some young people became detached from the family, and had no experience of living in care.

Section 2: The work of the Projects
The street based and refuge based projects all tended to concentrate on working with young people who had already run away a number of times. However, the refuge based projects often worked with young people at an earlier stage of running away experience, while the street based projects more often worked with ‘detached’ young people.

The projects aimed for four broad outcomes with young people and there was evidence of considerable success in at least three of these areas:

- The projects were highly successful at meeting young people’s immediate needs. There were some differences in the range of needs being met by each of the models: the refuge based services offered alternatives to being on the streets, while the street based projects supported young people while on the streets.
- The projects had all had significant success in establishing positive relationships with this marginalised group of young people.
- There was also significant evidence of projects facilitating change in young people’s lives. There were some differences in the kinds of change achieved by the different models: the refuge based services were able to achieve major life changes through their short term intensive work, while the drop in service was also able to assist young people in significant changes through the range of facilities it offered.
- The projects aimed to work with young people in the short term and to engage other agencies in meeting young people’s longer term needs. Although this was sometimes evident, it was not always easy to achieve, and there was considerable evidence that the projects were involved with some young people on a long term basis.

There were some negative side effects of the work: young people could be introduced to negative forms of behaviour by peers, or
they could develop an over dependency on the support provided. Staff could become drained by the stress involved in the work, and external professionals and parents could view the intervention as an unwelcome intrusion.

The work reflected many of the dilemmas faced by those working with young people: issues of accessibility, ensuring they cater for the needs of all young people whatever their race, culture, gender, sexuality or disability; and the working policies and practices that needed to be developed to work most effectively and fairly with young people.

Section 3: Implications of the findings
From the research findings a model of intervention was presented. This suggested that future work with young people could develop along broader lines to incorporate:

- Primary prevention (e.g. education in schools)
- Secondary prevention (e.g. mediation between parents and young people)
- Tertiary prevention (e.g. street based outreach work and refuge based work).

There were a number of areas for consideration by other agencies:

- The need for a coordinated response to working with young people who run away
- The need for a response to the issue of young people running from residential care, and in particular to the issue of bullying
- Educational support for this group of young people.

The research also highlighted a number of social policy issues:

- Young people’s legal position under the age of 16
- Support for young people leaving care
- The impact of family breakdown on young people.

References
Newman, C. Young runaways: findings from Britain’s first safe house. The Children’s Society, 1989
Summary report produced by Ros Hunwicks. The full research study is reported in Stein M, Rees G and Frost N (1994) Running the Risk: Young people on the streets of Britain today. London: The Children’s Society