PART 2

Running away or being forced to leave under the age of 16
CHAPTER 3

Numbers and characteristics of young people who run away under the age of 16

In this chapter, we attempt to answer the question of how many young people under the age of 16 run away or are forced to leave home. There are considerable difficulties in attempting to estimate a phenomenon of this kind, which may be short-lived and hidden. We were able to overcome many of these potential difficulties by the survey method chosen. The survey was retrospective, thus capturing experiences over a period of time; it gathered information directly from young people and therefore overcame some of the difficulties involved in quantifying a hidden population; and it accessed a large-scale representative sample designed to smooth out local variations. We have therefore been able to arrive at good estimates of the scale and prevalence of being away from home amongst this age group, both overall and for various sub-groupings, which we present below. This is the first research which has been able authoritatively to make such estimates and to cover all four countries of the UK.

Prevalence estimates

As stated in Chapter 1, for the purposes of the research we have defined ‘running away’ as relating to young people under the age of 16 who either spend time away from home without parental permission, or are forced to leave home by their parents.

Overall, 16.5% of the young people surveyed had run away or been forced to leave at least once. Around three-fifths of these young people spent at least one night away from home on one of the occasions when they left – amounting to 10% of the young people surveyed.
However, these figures are likely to be under-estimates for two reasons. First, the fact that the survey was carried out in mainstream secondary schools means that young people who regularly do not attend school or who are excluded will be under-represented. We gathered additional information from a sample of such young people and, as will be discussed later, in Chapter 6, their running-away rate was much higher than average. Second, we surveyed young people aged 14 to 15. At the time when the survey was carried out, the ages of these young people was between 14 years, 4 months and 15 years, 9 months, with a median age of around 15 years, 1 month. As we will see later in this chapter, not surprisingly, the likelihood of running away increases steadily with age. Thus, the above figures will be under-estimates because many young people will run away for the first time after the survey but before their sixteenth birthday.

The 15-year-olds (with an estimated median age of 15 years, 5 months) in the survey were significantly more likely (10.4%) to have run away than the 14-year-olds (8.7%) (with an estimated median age of 14 years, 9 months). It is possible to project from this that, by their sixteenth birthday, around 11% of the sample would have run away. We would therefore estimate that at least one in nine young people run away overnight one or more times before the age of 16. On the basis of this projection it is estimated that around 77,000 young people under 16 run away for the first time each year.

These estimates are projections taking into account the factors discussed above. However, throughout the rest of the report the running away rates quoted for various groups are those occurring in the survey sample.

The main survey also did not adequately cover young people with special needs, and we will present some findings from a supplementary sample of these young people later. However, the fact that only a small minority of the population of young people attend special needs schools means that this gap in the main sample will not affect the overall estimates.

Prevalence estimates for individual countries
We have already described the sampling strategy in Chapter 2. Given the much larger population of England, we sampled 16 areas, using
stratified random sampling and are able to arrive at fairly accurate estimates of the prevalence of running away. In the other three countries, we were able to sample only three areas, and thus the estimates for these countries are less conclusive.

The prevalence estimates for each country are shown in Table 3.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of young people surveyed</th>
<th>% running away overnight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>8164</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>1310</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>1802</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in the table, there is some variation in prevalence rates between the countries. However, statistical tests suggest that these differences are not large enough to be significant. Our evidence suggests, therefore, that there is no evidence of a significant difference in rates of running away between the four countries.

Variations in running away between areas
A central aim of the research was to fill the gap in knowledge about the experiences of young people who do not live in large cities and conurbations. The sampling strategy was designed with this aim in mind. We ensured that the survey was carried out in a range of areas according to population density and economic prosperity.

The most reliable estimates we have here are for England, due to the size of the sample. Twelve of the 16 areas were selected specifically on the basis of population density (city, suburban and rural) and economic prosperity.

A comparison of areas according to population density is shown in Table 3.2.
Table 3.2 Percentage of runaways according to population density of area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of area</th>
<th>Number of young people surveyed</th>
<th>% running away overnight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City (excluding London)</td>
<td>3049</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>2291</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1275</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, there are small variations here, with the rates looking a little higher in city areas, but these are not statistically significant.

Comparisons of the three types of areas in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales also show no evidence of a difference in running-away rates.

Amongst the English sample, we surveyed three London areas (not included in the above ‘city’ category). Interestingly, comparing these areas with the categories in Table 3.2, we found that the running away rates were significantly lower in London than elsewhere both in terms of running away overall and running away overnight (7.5%). This finding is not conclusive because we did not specifically select a sample which is representative of London as a whole. However, it seems highly unlikely that running-away rates in London are higher than anywhere else in the UK.

We are also able to make some comparisons between the above 12 England areas on the basis of economic prosperity. We found that running-away rates were marginally higher in less prosperous areas, but again this difference was not statistically significant. We discuss this issue further in Chapter 6, Structural Context.

Rates of running away for different groups

As previous research has indicated, the rates of running away are not uniform amongst all groups of young people. Here, we look at
variations in rates according to gender, ethnicity and age. Variations in rate according to other factors, e.g. different family forms, or experience of substitute care, are dealt with in Chapters 5 and 6. In this section, and throughout the rest of the report, all statistics relate to running away or being forced to leave home over night, unless we explicitly state otherwise.

**Gender**

As with previous research, e.g. Rees (1993), the survey indicates that females (11.5%) are more likely to experience at least one incident of being away than males (8.5%). However, as we will see below and later in the report, there are other notable differences in patterns of being away between the sexes which show a more complex picture.

**Ethnicity**

Previous research by Abrahams and Mungall (1992) and Rees (1993) found significantly higher rates of running away amongst African-Caribbean young people than amongst white young people, and significantly lower rates of running away amongst young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin.

However, the current survey shows a different picture. The rates of being away overnight are highest amongst white young people (10.5%), followed by young people of African-Caribbean origin (7.5%) and then young people of Indian/Pakistani/ Bangladeshi origin (around 5.5%). This variation between young people of different origins was statistically significant.

These findings warrant a slightly more detailed presentation of the data. Looking first at the young people of African-Caribbean origin, not only were the national figures comparable to those of white young people but, in addition, those in the two areas selected for the sample with a particularly high proportion of young people of this origin (Lambeth and Hackney) were fairly close to those for white young people.

For young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin, the picture is more mixed. In London, the rate of being away amongst this group (4.5%) is lower than for white young people (8.5%), but not significantly so. However, in Blackburn, the difference is significant, with only 3% of young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi
origin having been away, compared to 12% of white young people in the area.

The above analysis suggests that there may be a difference between London and other areas here. It seems possible that running away rates are more similar for young people of different ethnic groups in London than outside London.

Nevertheless, the rates of being away amongst Asian young people appear to be higher than previously thought, even outside London.

**Age at Which Young People First Ran Away**

Around a quarter of the young people had first run away or been forced to leave before the age of 11.

Males had first run away at a younger age than females. Thirty percent of males had first run away under the age of 11 compared to 19% of the females. There were more than twice as many females as males in the group who had first run away from the age of 14 upwards.

There were no significant differences in the age of first running away for young people from different ethnic groups, or for young people living in different types of areas.

**Number of Times Young People Run Away**

Over half (54%) of the young people who had run away had done so once and a further quarter had run away twice. Around one in eight (12%) had run away more than three times.

Looking only at those who had run away overnight, the proportion of repeat (more than three times) incidence is higher (around 15%).

On the basis of these findings we project that there are around 129,000 incidents of young people running away over night each year in the UK.

As one might expect, there was a significant correlation between age of first running away and number of times away. Young people who had started running away at a younger age tended to have run away more often. More than half (53%) of the young people who had run away more than three times had first run away before the age of 11. (Some caution is needed here because the survey was carried out with 14- to 15-year-olds and so some of the young people who had recently started to run away may run away on further occasions after
the survey was administered. This would mean that the 53% figure above might be a slight over-estimate.)

This is an important finding as it suggests the need for some preventative interventions to be aimed at young people before they reach secondary school. Forty-five per cent of those young people who had first run away before the age of eight, and a quarter (27%) of those who had first run away between the ages of eight and ten went on to run away more than three times. These figures compare with only 9% of those who had first run away from the age of 11 onwards.

Males had run away more times on average than females. Thus, there were more females than males amongst those who had run away one to three times, but more males than females who had run away more than three times. Nineteen per cent of males were in this latter group compared to 12% of females.

There were no significant differences in the number of times that young people in different ethnic groups had run away.

There were no significant differences by type of area (rural, suburban, city).

**RUN AWAY OR FORCED TO LEAVE?**

The large majority of young people classified themselves as having run away, but almost a fifth (19%) of those who had run away overnight said that they had been forced to leave home.

There were no differences between males and females in this respect.

There was a marginally significant difference between young people of different ethnic groups regarding being forced to leave. Young people of African-Caribbean origin and Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin were more likely to be forced to leave than young people of white origin. However, there is a slightly more significant difference between type of area and being forced to leave. Those young people living in London were significantly more likely to have been forced to leave, or less likely to have run away than young people outside London. A three-way analysis of ethnicity, area and running away/being forced to leave suggests that it is living in London which is the significant factor here, rather than ethnicity.

This piece of information must be considered in conjunction with
the difference in overall rates of running away between areas, as
described above. Young people in London were less likely to run away
than young people in other areas. In fact, the rates of being forced
to leave home overnight are almost identical in all four types of areas.
What we can conclude from this, then, is not that young people in
London are more likely to be forced to leave home but that they are
significantly less likely to run away or choose to leave home.

Looking at the overall picture, we would estimate that around one in
fifty young people are forced to leave home and are away overnight
before the age of 16. This amounts to around 14,000 young people in
each school year cohort.

SUMMARY

We have presented the evidence on the prevalence of running away
both overall and for the different countries and different types of areas
which make up the UK. Overall, we estimate that 11% of young
people run away for one night or more on one or more occasions
before the age of 16, amounting to around 77,000 young people
running away for the first time each year. This prevalence rate is
remarkably stable across the different countries and also between
different types of areas, categorised by population density and eco-
nomic prosperity. At first glance, these findings may seem rather
bland. However, they are of considerable importance in that they
represent, for the first time, firm and reliable evidence that there is a
significant prevalence of running away in all parts of the UK. The
implication of this is clearly that services must be developed in all
kinds of areas and in all four countries if there is to be an effective
and inclusive response to the needs of young people who run away.
Whilst many young people only run away once, others go on to run
away repeatedly. We estimate that there are a total of around 129,000
incidents of running away over night per year in the UK.

There are differences in running away for different groups. The
likelihood of running away increases with age, and females are
more likely to run away than males. There are also differences
according to ethnicity, with some evidence that young people of
Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin are somewhat less likely to run
away. However, the rates of running away across different ethnic
groups are much more similar than previous research has suggested.

The survey also illustrated a significant prevalence of young people feeling that they are forced to leave home. Almost a fifth of young people who had ‘run away’ classified themselves as having been forced to leave home. We estimate that around 14,000 young people in each school year cohort are forced to leave home before the age of 16.
Why young people run away

Earlier research (Rees, 1993; Wade et al., 1998) made the distinction between two ways of answering the question of why young people run away: triggers and contexts. Triggers for running away are the reasons for making the decision to run away on a specific occasion. Contexts refer to the background and historical factors which contributed to the situation in which running away took place. Whilst triggers and contexts may to a certain extent be the same, e.g. being hit as a trigger and a history of physical abuse as a context, it is often the case that there may be a wide range of contextual factors whilst there is a quite specific trigger. For this reason, the distinction between triggers and context seems to be a helpful one and we will employ it in this report. In this chapter, we will focus on triggers for running away or being forced to leave. The two following chapters, Chapters 5 and 6, will consider context.

We will only consider information from the survey in this chapter; information on triggers from the interviews will be incorporated later in the report (Chapter 8). As the current research is the first in the UK to have gathered information on reasons for running away from a large representative sample of young people, the findings in this chapter are of considerable significance in developing an understanding of why young people run away.

We do not consider evidence from the survey on triggers for running away from substitute care because our sample of these young people is relatively small and a recent research report (Wade et al., 1998) provides much more reliable information than we could offer on this issue.

In the survey questionnaire, young people were asked two questions about triggers for running away. First, they were asked an open-ended question about why they had run away. Second, they were
asked to select from a list of general descriptions for running away: problems at home, problems at school, personal problems, and other reasons.

Looking at the second question first, young people's responses are shown in Table 4.1. It should be noted that some young people selected more than one option.

**Table 4.1 Broad reasons for running away from home**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems at home</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal problems</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems at school</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The responses substantiated the view that it is primarily issues within the family which lead to young people running away. Four-fifths of the young people identified problems within the family as one of the reasons for running away. For the 20% of young people who did not identify a family problem, around half (48%) had a personal problem, over a third (38%) indicated 'other reasons', and a quarter (25%) had problems at school. (Again more than one response was given in some cases here.)

We will now go on to consider each of these four areas in order of prevalence.

**Problems at Home**

In order to look systematically at the various problems at home that can trigger running away, it was necessary to categorise the open-ended responses that young people gave. Some responses were quite general whilst others focused on one specific issue or a number of related issues, e.g. arguments and being hit. Any categorisation of these responses necessarily implies a level of interpretation and we have provided numerous quotes in order to give some indication of the kinds of responses which led to each categorisation.

For just over a quarter of the sample (27%), it was not possible to
identify any specific issue, but there were general problems at home, often including arguments.

For the remainder of young people who were having problems at home, it was possible to identify at least one issue that triggered the most recent running away incident. We will deal with these issues in order of their incidence, discussing all reasons mentioned by at least 1% of the young people.

**Physical Violence or Threat of Violence**

This was the most common specific reason for running away, mentioned by 12% of young people. We include in this category young people who either reported being physically hit by a parent (10%) or reported fearing that this would happen (2%).

We are not able to generalise about the level of physical abuse that this entails, but it is clear that for some of the young people this was repeated and/or ongoing:

- [I ran away] because my father beat me with a bat because I dropped my mum’s photo and it smashed. He bruised my whole body and cut my face.
- I was sick of being used as punch bag.
- I ran away because my mum kept shouting at me, she got drunk and strangled me.

In some cases, this was linked to domestic violence:

- I caught my mum and dad arguing. My dad hit my mum and I went and tried to talk to him but he hit me instead.

Mothers and fathers were mentioned equally often as abusers. This is a difficult finding to interpret as mothers tend to spend more time with their children and also single parents are more likely to be women. However, the idea that physical abuse by mothers as well as fathers is commonplace is consistent with a review of findings from the USA on adolescent abuse (Rees and Stein, 1999, forthcoming).

**Emotional Abuse**

Definitions of emotional abuse are difficult to draw up. Here, we include young people who reported being seaedgeated or regularly
maligned by their parents and those who were treated differently to siblings. In all, 9% of young people (excluding those who had been physically abused) mentioned one of these factors, with the large majority mentioning scapegoating:

"I ran away because I had a problem in my family and I was the one who would always get blamed for something that I never did."

In some cases, there was evidence of other forms of systematic abuse:

"I was being shouted at and my father kept breaking my things. He threw my Walkman at the wall and it broke."

**Emotional Neglect**

Here, we include feelings of rejection and neglect by family that have not already been covered in the above categories. This category accounted for 6% of the young people, many of whom felt unloved in their families:

"I ran away because my mum, dad and brother they all hated me and I thought I outstayed my welcome and thought they didn’t want me no more."

"I felt unloved and unwanted."

**Parental Disharmony**

For young people in this category (6%), the main trigger was wanting to get away from conflict between their parents. Often, this conflict was related to the parents splitting up:

"Because my parents divorced. The first time I ran away was because of this."

In some cases, this had repercussions for the young person:

"I ran away because my parents were splitting up and all the anger and blame was pointed at me."

**Step-parent Issues**

Some of the above categories, e.g. physical violence and emotional abuse, have included issues relating to step-parents as well as birth parents. As we will show in Chapter 5, issues relating to step-families are
an important factor in understanding running away. Here, we consider
triggers for young people which were connected with a poor relation-
ship with a step-parent, but where there was no mention of abuse. This
was the case for 4% of the young people who had run away overnight:

'Cause my step-dad did my head in and I was going through a bad
stage.

I ran away because we had just moved to a new area due to
trouble with my step-dad. My mum started dating a new boyfriend
and he moved in. I felt that he was intruding and that me and my
brothers didn't want him there.

BOUNDARIES AND CONTROL
For a further 4% of the young people, the main trigger for running
away was a disagreement with parents relating to boundaries, disci-
pline and control. Sometimes, this was just a general unhappiness at
being 'grounded', whilst in other cases the young person felt that they
were not being treated appropriately for their age:

Because I didn't like my dad because he is strict and he used to
tell me to be in at 9 p.m. and my friends were out longer and I
was grounded for dodging school.

PRESSURE FROM PARENTS
Around 3% of young people mentioned pressure from parents as the
main trigger for running away, often linked to school issues:

Because my family were pressuring me and it got too much for
me. They made me tidy after them when I was in the middle of
my exams and once I found out I had failed they got really mad at
me and I'm not saying any more.

POOR QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS
A further 3% of young people cited poor quality relationships at home
as the reason for running away. This included young people who did
not feel trusted and those who did not feel listened to.

BEING IN TROUBLE WITH PARENTS
Some young people (3%) who cited problems at home ran away primar-
ily because of being in trouble with the police, or with drugs or alcohol. We will discuss the role of these issues further later in this chapter.

**Problems with siblings**

Although relatively uncommon, problems with siblings were the primary factor for some young people (3%):

_Because me and my brother was always fighting and he always put me down. I felt bad._

**Parental problems**

Finally, 1% of young people said they ran away to get away from problems that their parents were having. In most cases, this was to do with a parent’s alcohol use:

_Because I couldn’t handle my mum’s drinking any more. I couldn’t cope with the bullying._

**Being forced to leave**

We have used the term ‘run away’ for brevity in the above discussion, but in fact about a fifth of the young people who had been away overnight said that they had been forced to leave home rather than running away. In some cases, this was an overt action on the part of parents:

_I left because me and my mum don’t get on. We always argue and she was really depressed and told me I had to go as I was making her unhappy._

_Because my step-father was hitting me and I told my dad and I told him about sexually abusing me and my mum found out and didn’t believe me. Most of my family fell out with me and my mum decided she didn’t want anything to do with me any more._

In other cases, it seems to be more that the young person felt they had to leave for their own emotional or physical well-being:

_My mum and step-dad went through a rough patch and got violent so I had to go and stay with my friends and then dad._

We will go on to discuss some of the specific characteristics of this group of young people in Chapter 8.
PERSONAL PROBLEMS

After problems at home, personal problems were the next most common mentioned by young people in the survey.

Many of these young people were unwilling to give details of why they ran away:

No comment. My business.

or were unspecific:

I had just gone through a very bad experience in my life a couple of months beforehand and it all got too much trying to cope with it on my own. I couldn’t tell anyone about it as it would only hurt them too much.

Others mentioned issues such as needing a break or problems at school that are discussed elsewhere.

The most common issues specifically mentioned are listed below.

DEPRESSION AND ANGER

Depression was mentioned as a reason for running away by 4% of those who had run away overnight, three-quarters of whom were female:

I was depressed. My family had split up and I felt lonely.

Anger management was only mentioned by two young people – one female, one male.

RELATIONSHIPS

Around 3% of the young people mentioned issues connected to relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends as a reason for running away. All but one of these young people were female and the issue was commonly that their parent(s) did not approve of their relationship and attempted to place boundaries on it which the young person resented:

My dad said I am not allowed out, I’m not allowed to see my boyfriend and I should finish with him.

With one exception, these young people said that they ran away rather than were forced to leave home.
PEER ISSUES
The reasons given by young people for running away include a variety of references to peers. Around 3.5% (mostly female) mentioned bullying by peers as a sole or contributory factor to running away:

I got fed up and was really upset about being bullied for being fat.

In addition, a small number mentioned problems with friends as a factor. A handful of young people (1%) said that they ran away to accompany a friend who was unhappy.

A few young people also mentioned 'getting in with the wrong crowd' as a factor in their conflict with parents which led to them running away.

Clearly, some of the above issues are only relevant for a small number of young people. However, around one in twelve of the young people who ran away mentioned one of the above peer or relationship issues as a reason for running away, so the influence of peer relationships on running away is not negligible.

TROUBLE WITH THE POLICE
Around 3% of young people (three-quarters male) mentioned this as a reason for running away overnight, either to avoid the police or due to parental reactions:

I had to leave one night because I'd got into trouble with the police and my dad didn't want me in the house until he had calmed down.

ALCOHOL USE
Around 2% mentioned problems with or use of alcohol as one of the reasons that they ran away (fearing parents' reactions) or were forced to leave.

DRUGS USE
Only a small minority (around 1%) mentioned drugs use as a reason for running away or being forced to leave home.

PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL
Whilst nearly a quarter of young people indicated that problems at school had contributed to them running away from home, this was
usually in conjunction with problems at home and specific school issues were often not mentioned in answer to the open-ended question about reasons for running away.

Problems related to truancy and parents’ reactions (or feared reactions) to this were mentioned by about 2% of young people as a contributory factor to their running away:

*I missed school and got caught. My parents were telling me what an embarrassment I was and how they were ashamed of me so I thought it would be better if I left.*

Other school-related problems were mentioned by slightly more young people (about 4%). Some of these problems were not explained by the young people, but specific comments included not wanting to go to school, feeling lonely at school, being shouted at by teachers, and being teased or bullied:

*I was scared because I kept having panic attacks because people were getting to me bullying, picking on me, calling me, and I was getting shouted at by my teachers and the headmaster.*

There was also the issue of pressure from parents to achieve at school, covered earlier under problems at home, which accounted for around 3% of young people.

In all then, around 8% to 10% of young people mentioned specific school-related issues as contributing to their running away.

**Other Reasons**

Whilst 13% of young people ticked the ‘Other reasons’ box, many of these had also indicated that they had problems at home, personal problems or problems at school, and their reasons for running away have already been categorised. So, in fact, only 7% of young people ticked ‘Other reasons’ solely.

Half of these young people did not give a response to the open-ended question about reasons for running away so we have no further information on what led them to leave home. For those who did respond, three reasons predominated. These were: being in trouble, needing freedom, and needing a break. To some extent, the first and third categories have already been covered above. The distinctive cate-
gory is needing freedom. However, in total, those who run away to have freedom or to have fun accounted for less than 1% of those who had run away overnight.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have spent some time examining the reasons for running away given by young people on the survey questionnaire. This information is of considerable importance because it is the first reliable data on reasons for running away gathered from a representative sample of young people.

The findings indicate that problems at home strongly predominate amongst the reasons for young people running away. Four out of every five young people cited these problems as one of the reasons why they ran away, and it is clear from an analysis of young people’s responses that in most cases problems at home are the primary reason. This finding is hardly surprising but is important in conclusively disproving the idea that young people commonly run away for fun or for trivial reasons.

Amongst those who run away due to problems at home, general conflict appears to be the most common factor. However, the next most common reasons are physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, which together accounted for over a quarter (27%) of those who ran away due to problems at home. The large number of other family problems which can trigger running away indicate that running away is potentially a response by the young person to a wide range of difficulties in their lives.

Other reasons for running away are of much less significance, but problems with peers and problems at school appear to be important factors for a substantial minority of young people.
Chapter 5

The home context

In this first of two chapters on the context in which running away takes place, we consider factors related to the place the young person was living before running away. Previous UK and US research (Rees, 1993; Brennan et al., 1978) has indicated that the home context is a primary influence on young people running away. In this chapter, we make use of the survey, the interviews with young people, and the interviews with professionals to look at some of the factors associated with running away and also at protective factors which militate against the likelihood of young people running away.

We will first consider the family context and later go on to consider substitute care. The term 'family' here relates to the household unit in which the young person lives. Where we refer to other family members, we will use the term 'extended family'. However, we need to be aware that the meaning and concept of the family differs in different cultural contexts.

The family context

We will first look at information from the survey about young people's family context and then go on to consider the information from the interviews with the professionals and young people.

Information from the survey

In the survey, we gathered information both about the family forms within which young people lived, and about young people's feelings about their parents or carers. This information relates to young people's situation at the time they filled in the questionnaire, which is not necessarily the same as their situation at the time they ran away.
However, it is useful in order to explore the broad relationship between family context and running away. When we consider the information from the interviews with young people later in this chapter, we will look more closely at the chronology of family events and how they interact with the incidence of running away.

**Family Forms**

Around seven in ten young people lived with both birth parents, two in ten with a lone parent, and one in ten with a parent and step-parent.

The rate of running away differed significantly for these three main family forms, as shown in Table 5.1.

*Table 5.1 Rates of running away according to different family forms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family form</th>
<th>% running away overnight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two birth parents</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone parent</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and step-parent</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The differences here are large. Looked at a different way, young people in step-parent households made up almost 20% of those who had run away, although they made up only 10% of the total sample of young people.

This finding mirrors earlier research (Rees, 1993). The Rees study suggested that the effect of economic disadvantage could explain some of the differences in rates of running away by family form. However, in the current survey, this is not the case. The differences in rates of running away by family form remain just as significant when economic factors are taken into account (see Chapter 6 for further discussion of this issue).

The clear link between family forms and running away leads to the question of what it is about these forms which is more or less likely to give rise to running away. We will look at this evidence shortly. Before we do so, we will look at young people’s overall experience of living in families.
The quality of relationships with parents or carers

Brennan et al. (1978) in the USA found that running away was linked to a number of aspects of parent–child relationships. These conclusions were drawn from the employment of an extensive range of scales. We were not able to replicate this detailed data gathering, but included six questions concerning young people’s relationships with their parents or carers:

1. Are your parent(s) too strict?
2. Do you get on well with your parent(s)?
3. Do your parent(s) treat you fairly compared to your brothers and sisters?
4. Do you feel your parent(s) understand you?
5. Do your parent(s) ever hit you?
6. Do you feel your parent(s) care about you?

Young people who did not live with a parent were asked to answer the questions about whichever adults they did live with.

In making use of this information, we are not suggesting that young people’s responses represent the reality about their relationships with parents. Clearly, parents and other people may have very different perspectives to those of the young people.

Table 5.2 Young people’s views of relationships with parents: those who had run away compared with those who had not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>% of young people who had not run away</th>
<th>% of young people who had run away</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents too strict</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t get on with parents</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t feel treated fairly</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t feel understood</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents hit a lot</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t feel cared about</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of these questions proved a significant discriminator between young people who run away and those who do not. Table 5.2 shows the proportion of young people who had a negative view of relationships with parents on each of the six questions, broken down according to whether the young person had run away or not.

Not surprisingly, a combination of all six factors also proves a significant discriminator, as shown in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 Relation between the quality of family relationships and running away

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality of family relationships</th>
<th>% who had run away overnight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good (0 negative responses)</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate (1 to 2 negative responses)</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor (3 to 4 negative responses)</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very poor (5 to 6 negative responses)</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, over half of those who gave five or six negative responses to the list of items had run away, and over a third of those who gave three or four negative responses, had run away.

It is possible to analyse the relative importance of the above six items in terms of explaining running away. A combined analysis of the influence of all six items suggests that the items for parental strictness and feeling cared about are not significant when considered in conjunction with the other four items.

The above analysis clearly indicates that there is a relationship between young people's feelings about relationships with their parent(s) or care(\(s)\) and the likelihood of them having run away.

The link between family forms and quality of family relationships

Returning to the discussion on family forms, we looked at young people's feelings about relationships with parents for the different family forms. There were significant differences for five of the six items used on the questionnaire.

For four of these items (getting on with parents, feeling treated fairly, feeling understood and feeling cared about) young people living
with both birth parents expressed the most positive feelings, followed by young people living with a lone parent, and then young people living with a parent and step-parent. In terms of parental strictness, young people living with a parent and step-parent were more likely to feel that their parents were too strict, compared with the other two family forms which were roughly equal on this item. The only item which did not show a significant difference by family form was young people being hit.

So, given these differences, can the different rates of running away amongst the different family forms be explained by young people’s responses to the six questions about relationships with parents? The answer to this question is a qualified ‘no’. An initial combined analysis of the influence of family form and the six relationship items suggests that both have a discernible influence on running away. That is to say that, even looking at young people who have similar feelings about their relationships with their parents, young people living in step- or lone-parent families are still more likely to run away than young people living with both birth parents. For example, the overall running-away rate amongst young people who felt that they got on poorly with their parent(s) or carer(s) was 36%. However, this varied according to family form, being 28% for young people who lived with both birth parents, 39% for those who lived with a lone parent, and 48% for those who lived with a parent and step-parent.

The above findings suggest that, whilst disharmony in the relationship between young people and parents is a significant factor influencing running away, young people in lone-parent and step-parent families are more likely to run away when disharmony does occur. However, more detailed analysis suggests that, for the minority of young people who responded negatively to most of the family relationship items, tests failed to show a statistically significant difference in running-away rates for young people living in different family forms.

In summary then, where there is little or moderate disharmony, young people living with both birth parents are less likely to run away than young people living in other family forms. That is, where a young person is dissatisfied primarily about one aspect of family relationships (e.g., being treated differently to siblings) young people living with a single parent or in a step-family are more likely to run away than young people living with both birth parents. However, where
there is more serious disharmony, that is where young people are dissatisfied about a number of aspects of relationships with parents, there is probably little or no difference between young people's likelihood of running away in different family forms.

**INFORMATION FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH PROFESSIONALS**

We now turn to the interviewing of professionals to explore their perspectives on the above issues.

It is notable that less than half (48%) of the professionals interviewed for the research came into contact with young people under the age of 16 running away, compared to almost all (93%) in relation to the 16- to 17-year-old age group. Consequently, the comments on the context in which this happens are more limited than those we will consider later for the over-16 age group.

In terms of family context, professionals identified two key overlapping areas — issues arising out of family forms and changes to family forms, and issues regarding the quality of relationships between young people and their parents. So there was a view that, whilst for many young people it was specific aspects of their relationships with parents which formed the background context to their running away, for other young people it was also the simple fact of the disruption of changing family forms which was important.

In the second context, professionals mentioned the effect of parental separation and divorce, general issues of family breakdown, and the introduction of step-parents as contributing factors in themselves, irrespective of the quality of family relationships. For example:

*People not knowing how to approach their new step-mother or step-father or the new step-mother or new step-father not knowing how to approach the other children. We come across that one a lot.*

In the first context, they cited physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect, rejection, arguments and conflict as important contextual factors for young people running away. These issues were often of a long-standing nature:

*By the time we see them at 12 or 13, they've had a huge amount of history there that we never get close to understanding.*
In connection with this general pattern of conflictual and abusive relationships, a number of workers pointed to a lack of parenting skills in managing and resolving conflict:

The way that they resolve a dispute ... is usually a shout, a scream, a violent argument and very often a thump.

These views seem to concur with the findings from the survey in the sense that poor relationships between young people and parents make running away more likely irrespective of family form, but there are additional stresses of living in families where changes in form have taken place which also make running away more likely.

In addition to these two key areas, two other themes came over from the interviews with professionals. First, for a minority of young people, there was a feeling that parents were unable to cope with their behaviour. This included young people with 'uncontrollable' behaviour as well as those who had problems with drugs or alcohol. The tensions created by these issues could lead to young people running away or being forced to leave:

They can't cope with what their children are getting involved with and that basically they have no control, that they're truanting from school and all the other things that go with that.

Second, some professionals identified parents' drug or alcohol problems as a contextual factor in the lives of some young people who run away:

Young people leave home if their parent(s) drink heavily because they do not want to stay at home because of the risk of violence and the emotional distress of the situation.

Information from the Interviews with Young People

The interviews with young people gave us the opportunity to explore some of the above issues in more detail. One of the strengths of the interview data is that we were usually able to establish a chronology of family events, which provides information not available in the survey data. We will focus first in this section on young people's accounts of their family context before running away began; then we will go on to look at the developing family context for those who run away repeatedly.
The family context before running away

We divided the young people who had run away under the age of 16 into two groups on the basis of whether they had first run away before the age of 11. This enabled us to examine whether there were differences amongst the two groups and to draw out any key messages for the younger age group. This seemed important, as the survey identified that a substantial proportion of young people who start running away before secondary school age subsequently run away more than three times.

A comparison of the two groups suggests that, whilst they had quite a lot in common, there were some interesting differences. The issues experienced by young people in both groups fall into three broad areas – changes in family form, parenting, and parental problems.

The majority of young people had experienced a change in family form due to parents separating or divorcing, bereavement or being moved into care. Additionally, in around a third of the families, a step-parent had been introduced at some point before the young person started running away. A comparison by age of first running away suggests that those young people who had run away younger were more likely to have experienced one or more of the above events before running away, even though there would have been less time in which this could happen.

Parenting issues were important contextual factors for more than half the young people. Physical abuse was the most common of these issues, but there were also a number of young people who had experienced each of the following: sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and rejection. We use the term ‘physical abuse’ where young people’s accounts suggest that this was usually of a serious and/or repetitive nature:

My daddy used to abuse me physically. I’ve been to hospital loads of times, bruised ribs, black eyes, broken wrists and arms.

Mum used to slap my head really hard, punch me whilst sitting on me, her various men also did it. One of them pushed me on the nettles, another pushed me against the window.

Where the issue of sexual abuse was part of the family context, the emotional and relationship issues raised by the abuse were often as significant as the abuse itself:
When I was about 11, my dad used to sexually abuse me but I didn’t want to upset my mum. Basically, I knew that if my mum and dad split up, my dad would have gone to prison and my brother would have had nowhere to live, he would have ended up in care. It was a bit scary. I didn’t tell my mum; my brother knows but I haven’t told anybody else. It’s really hard to know what to do.

In some cases, the experience of being sexually abused was exacerbated by the reactions of others when the young person disclosed the abuse. Some of the young people interviewed encountered disbelief and rejection by the other parent (usually female) when they did disclose the abuse.

In addition, a number of young people interviewed perceived differential treatment of siblings as an important issue for them before they started running away. In all of these cases, the young person felt less favoured than her/his siblings.

Again, there were indications of differences between the two age groups here, with a suggestion that young people who first ran away before the age of 11 were more likely to have experienced abuse prior to running away. Again, it is notable that there would have been less time in which this could have taken place for these young people.

The third broad area of family context was problems which parents themselves were experiencing. Around a third of the young people lived in families with one or more of the following issues: domestic violence by a male partner towards a female partner, parental alcohol problems, parental drug addiction, and parental mental health problems. These issues seemed to be more prevalent before running away for the older age group, although of course it may be that those young people who ran away younger were less aware of these issues before they ran away.

In general then, there are some indications that the family contexts of young people who run away before the age of 11 are more disrupted and abusive than for young people who start to run away at older ages.

An additional issue which was not present for those young people who first ran away before the age of 11 related to young people’s behaviours and parental reactions to these. A few of the young people were violent towards other family members, and some spoke of arguments with parents stemming from their (the young person’s) use of
alcohol or drugs. This echoes the professionals’ views about parents having difficulty in coping with young people’s behaviour.

The developing family context

We will now briefly consider the developing family context for those young people in the interview sample who ran away repeatedly.

To a great extent, these issues were the same as before young people started running away. Only three of the young people started to experience physical abuse after they first ran away. Given the high incidence of physical abuse before running away began, this is a notable finding. There were some new instances of bereavement, conflict, issues around boundaries, family breakdown, and geographical instability after running away had begun, although there is nothing particular to note in these cases. It seems that in the majority of cases these issues are present before young people start running away, if they are going to be present at all. Similarly, differential treatment of siblings and parental problems were not mentioned as fresh issues by young people after they started running away.

Thus, our analysis suggests that most of the problematic issues in the family context that form the backdrop to young people running away are present before running away starts. Relatively few additional problems arise at a later point.

Only one new issue was identified in the family context of young people after running away began. Four young people mentioned making contact with an absent parent. These young people were all disappointed with the outcomes of their contact:

> When I was 15, my natural mother rang me. We met… I met my natural dad and brother and sister. Things went bad.

One young person had turned to his father when he was forced to leave by his mother and had been rejected:

> My dad didn’t really want anything to do with me at the time and I didn’t really want anything to do with him.

Issues relating specifically to African-Caribbean and Asian young people

Information from the interviews carried out with African-Caribbean young people and with professionals suggests that the family contexts
which contribute to running away are broadly similar for these young people as for white young people.

To a certain extent, this is also true with respect to the information we have gathered on young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin. The stereotype of young people fleeing arranged marriages is not a prominent issue. One professional commented:

I get a lot of that when I go out and talk about my project. People say, 'What's the main reason, is it arranged marriage?' and I say, 'There is a difference between arranged marriage and forced'. At the end of the day, that reason for leaving is right at the bottom.

Some specific contextual factors relating to Asian young people which were more commonly mentioned for the 16- to 17-year-old age group are discussed in Chapter 10.

THE SUBSTITUTE CARE CONTEXT

All of the previous UK research on running away has highlighted young people running away from substitute care as an important issue. A number of studies (see Chapter 1) have found that young people who live in substitute care are more likely to run away than young people living with their family and our survey confirmed this. Young people currently living in foster or residential care were much more likely than average to have run away, with around 45% of both groups having run away overnight, compared to the rate for young people living with families of around 9.5%. Similarly, of the larger group (including the above) who had ever been in care, 30% had run away overnight. Young people who had spent time in substitute care were more likely to have run away more times (not necessarily from care). Almost a third (32%) of this small group had run away more than three times, compared to 13% of the remainder of the sample.

At the same time, running away from care probably accounts for a relatively small proportion of all running away. The vast majority (96%) of young people in the survey had run away from the family on the most recent occasion, and only 3.4% had run away from substitute care – foster care (2.1%) and children's homes (1.3%).

This issue is clearly rather a complex one, and it is easy to draw
inappropriate conclusions from the data. For example, it is incorrect to equate the proportion who have been in care with the proportion who have run away from care. In the running-away sample from the survey, over half of those young people who had been in care at some point nevertheless ran away from their family on the most recent occasion, and over a third of these had only run away once. Similarly, only around half of those young people currently living in care who had experience of running away had run away from substitute care on the most recent occasion.

It is also important to recognise that young people living in care are not a randomly selected group. The majority will already have experienced the kind of family contexts described earlier in this chapter which make running away more likely. Therefore, it is inappropriate to see the high rate of running away from substitute care as necessarily being a negative reflection on the care system. Previous research has suggested that a substantial proportion of those young people who do run away from substitute care have started running away from their family before ever being looked after by the local authority.

Running away from substitute care was the subject of a large Department of Health funded research project (Wade et al., 1998), the findings of which we have already outlined in Chapter 1. Prior to the current research project, it was probably the most extensively researched aspect of running away. It seemed therefore that we would be able to add relatively little to the knowledge on this particular area. However, one limitation of the above study was that it focused on young people who are currently living in substitute care. Since many young people move in and out of care, often spending only relatively short periods there, we are able to offer a fresh perspective on how the experience of being in care interacts with other aspects of these young people’s lives in terms of running away.

In our purposive interview sample, the majority of young people (31 out of 52) who had first run away before the age of 16 had some experience of living in care. However, in over half of these cases the young person had run away before ever being placed in care.

**Being in Care Before Running Away Began**

For those young people who had been in care before starting to run away there were two groups:
young people who had first run away whilst in care;

young people who had first run away after returning home from care.

Most of the young people in the first group were in foster care at the time they first ran away and had been in care from a young age. Although there is a general tendency to view running away from care as to do with peers (this was the most common issue mentioned in interviews with professionals), for these particular young people there were often more fundamental issues. Some wanted to return home to live with their family and ran away in order to do this; others were unhappy about the decisions that were being made about them in care (including decisions about adoption or changes of placement). As we have already suggested, these were also usually young people with very troubled family backgrounds. All of these young people had experience of one or more of the following before being 'looked after': sexual abuse, bereavement of a parent, parents with serious alcohol or drug problems, and abandonment by a parent. Their running away needs to be viewed in this context rather than simply as a product of being in care. Young people in this group tended not to have positive feelings about either the process of being taken into care or their experiences of living there:

I didn't understand. Ran up to attic and locked myself in. I was thinking, 'Where am I? Where's my mum?' At that age, I was too young to understand anything. All I wanted to do was to get away.

Horrible, very violent. I witnessed a lot of adults being put in hospital, one even losing her eye. At the age of four, I didn't really understand it. I do now have a very violent temper. Being a kid, you do mimic what other people do.

Amongst the second group of young people who had been in care but first ran away after returning home, some had only been in care for a short while at a very young age or for a respite stay:

It was only really just to give my mum a rest and stuff.

Others ran away at the point when they returned home from care, and subsequently went back into care. For these young people also, the
family context was highly problematic and was the main contributory factor to running away.

**BEING IN CARE AFTER RUNNING AWAY BEGAN**

Most of the young people who lived in substitute care after running away began only did so for a year or two, either because they were approaching 16 when they started living in care or because they returned home to their family at some point. Again, some young people only lived in care for brief respite:

*Because my mam and dad couldn’t cope with me and needed a break.*

For these young people who moved into care after their first experience of running away, there were generally more positive experiences than for the group who had been looked after from a young age:

*They [foster carers] were the best thing that ever happened to me.*

I got used to being there. I was a right bitch for the first four months and then they said I could go home if I was good for the next five months, so I was good for the next five months and I felt great when I got to go home. But I did miss my friends and some of the staff I liked because they were really supportive. I missed my mum, but I liked it in there in a way because I was safe. I wasn’t getting lashed out at all the time.

The comparison between family and care, and the respite from abuse mentioned in the last quote, was a theme for a number of the young people:

*Well my dad is a divvy. He’s always been in prison, so it might have been worse if I hadn’t been in care. And he would probably still have been hitting me and that ... I never used to get hit and that whilst I was in care. I think there should be more foster parents so they don’t get put into children’s homes until they are 12 or 13.*

**SUMMARY**

A key finding in this chapter is that young people who live in step-families or with a lone parent are significantly more likely to run away
than those living with both birth parents. This remains true even when economic factors are taken into account.

Additionally, and independently of the above, young people who ran away had significantly more negative views of the quality of their relationship with their parents.

Thus, the research suggests that poor family relationships make running away more likely irrespective of family form, but that there are additional stresses of living in families where changes in form have taken place which also make running away more likely. This conclusion was supported by the views of professionals interviewed for the research.

For young people who run away repeatedly, there is evidence of particularly high levels of family disruption and problems.

We have also looked at young people's experience of substitute care in this chapter. Young people who are currently living in substitute care are much more likely to have run away than young people living with family. Young people's reasons for running away from care included wanting to return home and unhappiness about the decisions being made about them. However, this is a complex area and, for most young people who run away and spend time in substitute care, their experience of substitute care is only one aspect of the context which contributes to their running away. It is inappropriate simply to view these young people as running away from care.
The wider context

In this chapter, we consider the way in which issues such as offending, problems with drugs and alcohol, unhappiness and depression, and relationships with peers contribute to the overall context of running away.

We also consider some of the wider issues which may be relevant to or related to running away under the age of 16. These include the school context, the community or cultural context within which young people live, and structural factors which may have an influence on the likelihood of young people running away.

Finally, we consider the evidence on interventions by agencies in young people’s lives before running away began.

The personal context

The survey contained a checklist of ten questions about young people’s lives which give some insights into personal contextual factors. Young people were asked to tick any items which they felt were problems for them at the moment.

All ten items proved to be significant discriminators between those who had run away overnight and those who had not (i.e. had either never run away or had only run away during the day). Table 6.1 compares the proportion of each group who ticked each item.

As can be seen from Table 6.1, problems with drugs, problems with alcohol, and getting in trouble with the police were particularly strong discriminators. Around a third of the young people with each of these issues had run away overnight.

There were significant gender differences in the survey sample as a whole in the answers to all of the questions (except for ‘other problems’). Females were much more likely than males to tick the first six
categories and males were much more likely than females to tick categories seven to nine. This could be due to gender differences in willingness to admit to vulnerable feelings such as feeling lonely or feeling bad about oneself. Despite these gender differences, each of the items was significantly associated with running away for both genders with the exception of 'feeling under pressure' for females. Females who identified themselves as having problems with alcohol, drugs or offending were the group most highly likely to run away (with running away rates of 43%, 36% and 37% for the three issues respectively).

**Table 6.1 Relation between young people’s problems and whether or not they had run away overnight**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>Had not run away overnight</th>
<th>Had run away overnight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling fed up/depressed</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling under pressure</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling lonely</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not feeling good about yourself</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about the future</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with boy/girlfriends</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with drugs</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with alcohol</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting in trouble with the police</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other problems</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, the above findings suggest that young people with troubled lives are more likely to run away overnight. However, these findings must be viewed as indicative rather than conclusive because it was not possible in the survey to establish the chronology of different
events. We do not know whether the above were issues before the young people started running away. It is equally possible that the problems started after running away began, and even that they could be a result of running away.

The detailed analysis of the purposive sample of interviews with young people enabled us to explore the chronology of different issues with a reasonable amount of accuracy (although there are inevitably doubts here about the extent to which the research participants were able to remember the timing of specific events).

In the remainder of this section, we explore the evidence from this analysis and also summarise relevant comments from the interviews with professionals.

**Alcohol Issues**

The evidence we have been able to gather suggests that alcohol use by young people under 16 is a small but noteworthy contextual factor linked to running away. Some professionals cited problems with alcohol as contextual factors linked to young people under 16 running away.

In the purposive interview sample, around a sixth of the young people talked about alcohol use as a serious problem for them. Usually, this had begun before they started running away and therefore can be regarded as contextual. It also led to other issues, including stealing in order to obtain the money to buy alcohol, being thrown out of home due to the alcohol use, and having a disrupted education. One interviewee explained how serious involvement with alcohol from the age of 12 had led him into violent behaviour and theft to support his drinking and described how:

> When I drink, I think I'm Tarzan only a little bit harder!

**Drugs Issues**

The issue of drugs use came over as an important contextual factor related to running away in the interviews with professionals and young people. As we have seen, a high proportion of young people in the survey who said they had drugs problems also had experience of running away. However, it is less clear to what extent the drugs use preceded the onset of running away.
A small number of professionals were aware of drugs use as an issue which led to young people running away, either due to the resulting problems at home or due to drug-related debts. One professional gave the example of how parents, confronted with the drug use of their child, feel:

They can't cope with what their children are getting involved with and that basically they have no control.

In the purposive interview, a large minority of young people had experienced drug-related problems. The most common drugs used were cannabis and amphetamines, but a small number had taken heroin. A few of the young people interviewed mentioned issues around drugs as a reason for them being forced to leave home.

One interviewee who was using crack cocaine at the age of 12 described how she would run away to engage in housebreaking to pay for drugs. The drugs made her feel indestructible:

I always felt safe and, I mean, most of the time I was off my face I couldn't have been harmed by anyone. It's like a power trip when you're on drugs.

However, in general, it was very difficult to establish the timing of events with respect to this issue and so it is not possible to identify the extent to which drugs usage preceded running away. There was substantial evidence of young people stealing in order to obtain the money to buy drugs and some evidence of drug-related issues contributing to detachment from the education system through truanting, suspension or exclusion.

Offending

Offending is another factor mentioned by some professionals as a potential reason for young people running away under the age of 16, either due to the reaction of parents or in order to avoid the consequences:

When it comes to court to be remanded or bailed, parents refuse to have them home.

Amongst the purposive interview sample of young people, offending arose as an issue in about a third of cases. One instance where the
consequences of offending led to an interviewee running away was.

related as follows:

When I was 14/15, I used to get into trouble a lot, I got in with the
wrong crowd and me and me dad had a big argument and started
fist fighting. I were really badly beaten up and I left that night and I
didn’t come back for two week.

However, not all of this incidence preceded running away, and more
regularly it was linked either to drug or alcohol use or as a means of
survival once the young person had run away.

Mental health issues

Young people’s mental health is a difficult area to explore in research
terms, not least due to difficulties of definition.

Only a small number of professionals mentioned young people’s
mental health issues as a contextual factor for running away under the
age of 16. Most comments were focused on the over-16 age group.
Nevertheless, one residential child care officer suggested the impor-
tance of recognising that some children under 16 suffer from depres-
sion and that this may contribute to their running away:

There should be more recognition that children suffer from
depression...These young people who are depressed tend to run
but they don’t tend to go for as long an amount of time, more
wandering around more than with any purpose.

For the purposive sample of young people, around one in six young
people who had first run away under 16 mentioned mental-health
related issues. Young people spoke of mental health issues in two main
ways. First, a number of young people interviewed, predominantly
female, spoke of depression or said that they had had a ‘nervous break-
down’. Other young people, predominantly male, spoke of difficulties
in managing their anger, some of which spilled over into violence.
Both of these issues were often contextual factors which seemed to
have contributed to young people running away. An interviewee who
described himself as having a problem of ‘anger management’ recalled
his feelings at the age of nine:

They’re [the family are] all arguing and I don’t want to get
involved. So I would sit in my room and cry. There would be rows.
I would go to school the next day and someone would say something I didn't like and I would run round and hit 'em and then run off.

SEXUALITY

In the interviews with professionals, four workers mentioned sexuality as an issue for young people under 16 running away.

Amongst the interview sample, one young person who had run away under the age of 16 discussed his homosexuality as an issue and this was one of a complex set of factors, including violent behaviour and mental health issues, which led to the young person being forced to leave home at the age of 15.

This data is not particularly conclusive but does not suggest that issues around gay, lesbian or bisexuality are a major contextual factor for large numbers of young people under 16 running away. However, more specific research with gay, lesbian and bisexual young people may be a more productive way of exploring the links between their sexuality and any experience of running away.

SPECIAL NEEDS

In the survey sample, we explored special needs in two ways. First, young people in the mainstream school sample were asked if they felt they had any difficulties in learning. Around 10% of the total sample said they did have difficulties in learning, and the rate of running away was significantly higher for this group of young people than for the remainder of the sample. Almost one in six (16%) of these young people had run away overnight.

In view of the fact that many young people with special needs are not in mainstream schooling, the second way in which we explored running away for this group was to undertake a survey of special needs schools for young people with mild to moderate disabilities. Ultimately, we only achieved a sample size of 67 young people in six schools. This is too small a sample to enable us to draw definitive conclusions. However, the rate of running away was around 33% amongst this group of young people, which again suggests that young people with special needs are more likely than average to run away.

The small number of professionals who mentioned special needs as a contextual factor in terms of running away tended to focus on behav-
journal difficulties as the main issue. For instance, a social services after-care worker suggested that, in the case of behavioural difficulties:

*Maybe parents become less tolerant or maybe the difficulties become increased... of course, young people are getting bigger at 15/16 as well. So their physical size - the behaviours that were exhibited at 7, 8 and 9 become a little less acceptable in the house at 14, 15, 16.*

A few of the interview sample mentioned that they had been diagnosed as having special needs. In most cases, this was related to dyslexia, although it does not appear that this was diagnosed until the young people had left school. An interviewee related how they regretted that this was the case:

*It's only about two months ago I found out that I'm dyslexic. In school, I just couldn't get my head into the books, that's why it didn't get any further. At school they didn't know anything about it.*

Although we have been unable to explore the relationship between special needs and running away in great detail, our findings suggest a probable link between the two issues which would warrant further more specific investigation.

**Relationships with Peers**

Young people's relationships with peers become an increasingly important sphere of their life as young people mature. It is natural, then, to examine the influence that peer relationships have on the incidence of running away. In the USA, research has suggested that the nature and quality of peer relationships can be an important contextual factor in terms of running away (Brennan et al., 1978).

There are a number of possible ways in which peer relationships might influence the likelihood of running away. First, there may be peer pressure to run away; it may be an accepted or valued behaviour amongst certain peer groups. Second, young people may run away to accompany friends who do so. Third, strong positive relationships with peers may lead to problems between the young person and parents which may in turn lead to the young person choosing to leave or being forced to leave. Fourth, negative relationships with peers may contribute to
young people wanting to escape their current context. We found some
evidence of all four of these links within the data gathered.

Only a small number of the professionals focused on peer relation-
ships as a context for running away. There were suggestions here that
peer pressure and finding a space to share with peers may both some-
times contribute to young people running away.

Despite the low profile of this issue amongst professionals, the data
gathered from young people suggests that the peer context may be
quite significant.

The survey included a question about whether the young person's
friends had ever run away. The answers to this question confirm the
widespread nature of running away, and the fact that it is not an in-
visible issue amongst young people. Overall, over two-fifths (42%) of the
young people surveyed said that they had a friend who had run away.
Young people who had themselves run away were much more likely to
have a friend who had run away (80%) than those who had not run
away (38%).

We have also already seen (in Chapter 4) that around one in 12
young people in the survey mentioned peer factors amongst their rea-
sons for running away.

The interviews with young people enabled us to explore relation-
ships with peers in more detail. It seems from these interviews that
peer relationships are not an important contextual factor for those
young people who start running away before secondary school age.
However, for those who started running away between the ages of 11
and 15, they are more significant. Around one in five of our purposive
interview sample mentioned peer factors as contextual to their running
away. Commonly, these young people became involved in drugs or
alcohol use around the ages of 11 to 12. In some cases, this had led to
the young person becoming involved in offending. These issues had
then led to the young person running away or to a deterioration of rela-
tionships with parents which led to their being forced to leave. For
instance, one interviewee related:

I was 14 at the time. I was going in drunk and arguing with
everybody all the time. I was kicked out of the house. My pals
were older than me and I wanted to be with them. I wouldn’t go
to school 'cause my friends had all left.
THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

Previous research has suggested that there is a link between detachment from school and running away. In the UK, Rees (1993) found that young people who said that they regularly truanted from school were significantly more likely than other young people to run away. Stein et al. (1994) found that young people who were 'on the streets' had often become detached from school at a relatively young age. In the USA, Brennan et al. (1978) found that loose attachment to school and negative experiences of school were both linked to increased likelihood of running away.

The professionals interviewed as part of the current research project suggested that, for the under-16 age group, school factors may relate to running away in a number of ways. The link between non-attendance or exclusion and running away was mentioned; bullying at school and parental pressure in relation to school achievement were both cited as factors which could lead to young people running away; and, for young people approaching 16 years of age, the possibility of decisions about leaving school contributing to arguments at home was raised.

The survey showed a strong link between problems at school and running away. Young people who said they truanted from school were much more likely than other young people to have run away. Nearly a third (31%) of those who often truanted and more than two-fifths (22%) of those who sometimes truanted had run away overnight, compared to 6% of those who had never truanted. Similarly, young people who had been excluded from school were significantly more likely to have run away than other young people. A quarter of this group had run away overnight on at least one occasion.

In general, young people who had run away overnight expressed more negative views of school than other young people. Thirty-six per cent of these young people said that they did not like school, compared to 17% of young people who had not run away overnight.

There was also a significant link between persistent bullying at school and running away. Twenty-three per cent of those who said they had often been bullied at school had run away.

Finally, in our small sub-sample of 60 young people attending pupil referral units around two-fifths of these young people had run away from home.
The interviews with young people confirm the above findings for those who have run away regularly. Around half of the purposive sample had spent time away from school through truancy, suspension, or exclusion or had left school early. As one interviewee succinctly put it:

I never really got into trouble at school because I was never there.

As with other contextual factors, it is difficult to establish the exact chronology of events and it is likely that running away and problems at school are intertwined rather than one factor causing the other. However, in a number of cases, it seems that running away and being away from school (through truancy or exclusion) went hand-in-hand. In two cases, young people who had run away before the age of 11 had also been permanently excluded from primary school.

Surprisingly, given this overall context, some young people expressed strong positive feelings about their school experience, including one young person who saw it as a refuge from home. However, the majority expressed a strong antipathy to school, and there were also regular mentions of being bullied. One young person described how her difficulties were exacerbated by a sense of victimisation:

In school, all the teachers knew I had been abused. All the other kids knew also and boys shouted at me. I used to get tripped up at school. So I left in the third year.

Finally, the young people who took part in interviews were asked whether they had obtained any qualifications at school. The information here is incomplete, but at least two-fifths had left school without any GCSEs.

**The Community/Cultural Context**

In most of the areas where we contacted agencies, the professionals we spoke to touched on specific community or cultural issues which they felt had a bearing on running away in their areas. Most often these linked relationships within families to the wider social systems of which they were a part.

In relation to African-Caribbean and Asian young people, a
number of viewpoints were expressed. Most professionals who had involvement with young people from minority ethnic communities felt that running away was not uncommon, although it might be more hidden, and that the reasons for running away were broadly similar to those for white young people. Amongst the under-16s, physical and emotional abuse and conflict with parents or step-parents figured prominently. For older Asian teenagers, an additional ingredient centred on perceived over-restrictive parenting, parental rejection of boyfriends or girlfriends and, in a minority of cases, the threat of forced marriage.

A common professional view was that, while the reasons for running were broadly similar across all ethnic groups, their experiences once missing could be divergent. As one professional put it:

_The situation is very similar and the reasons for leaving home are very similar to their white counterparts. But then it's the difficulties they face afterwards, because of the colour of their skin, because of their culture, because of how they dress or whatever. That's where the main problems arise._

It was generally felt that African-Caribbean and Asian young people tended to avoid city centres and the streets in general (and the mainstream agencies that are based there) because they are too hostile. It was suggested that African-Caribbean young people tend to rely more heavily on extended family members and friends for help at these times. Asian young people, in contrast, fearful of the loss of community respect (‘izzat’) that may accrue to themselves and their families as a consequence of running away, may be less likely to turn to wider kin, and either continue coping with a difficult home situation in private or make a more premeditated escape, often further away from home. One professional said:

_From my experience of working with [Asian] young people who have been involved in homelessness, they have had to move... to the other end of the city or to a different city altogether. That’s what I mean by it being planned in terms of it being quite a clear decision._

Evidence from both Asian young people and professionals also suggested that running away, especially for females seeking relationships
of their choosing, risked a more final separation from family and community. The loss of face experienced by their family within the community could inhibit the possibilities of a negotiated return.

African-Caribbean and Asian young people were also considered less likely to access those mainstream services that exist. Factors inhibiting them from approaching such services included concerns about the predominantly ‘white’ nature of these services and the racism that might result, a perceived lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity amongst agency workers, and perhaps also a failure of agencies to provide the right kinds of services or to publicise them amongst minority ethnic communities in an appropriate way. As one professional suggested:

*I believe that a lot of people might not fit in with the existing services. For example, they might go to a rehab centre or a refuge, they may go to any of these existing services and they will not fit in because their identity is different. So the existing services might not be able to cater for them completely and, if we have nothing else as back-up, what else is there for these young people?*

Some of these issues were also mentioned in relation to other cultural groups – the Welsh-speaking community in Gwynedd, the Chinese community in Plymouth, the Orthodox Jewish and Yemeni communities in Salford, the Somali community in Cardiff, and the divided communities in Strabane. For all of these groups, there was a view that young people were more likely to attempt to resolve problems within their community and less likely to access generic services.

Linked to the above point, there was a view that young people in some or all of these communities were less likely to sleep rough when they ran away. We did not find any evidence to support such an argument in the survey data. There was no significant difference between the rates of sleeping rough for young people of different ethnic origins.

In the interviews with young people, there were some mentions of a feeling of safety or of extensive support networks in rural and suburban areas, although there were also comments about the restrictions and lack of anonymity in these areas. For instance, an interviewee who at 15 went to live with an older man now no longer feels able to return to her small village:
My friends disowned me because I was living with an older man. And like now I won’t go back to [my village] because of what all the people I knew said about me with that man so... They all know everything.

There appears to be both a negative and a positive side to close-knit communities as far as young people are concerned.

THE STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

The link between structural issues, such as economic disadvantage and poor housing conditions, is worthy of exploration because these factors may form part of the backdrop to the issues which lead to young people running away. Earlier research (Rees, 1993) found a link between economic disadvantage and running away in a sample of young people in Leeds.

The sampling strategy for our survey ensured that we achieved a good mix of areas on the basis of economic indicators. The task of obtaining information about family economic status from young people through a self-completed questionnaire is a difficult one. It is not possible, for example, to gather information about parents’ occupation or income with any degree of accuracy. We utilised two measures in the survey designed to identify young people living in low income families – the number of adults in the household in paid employment, and whether the young person received free school meals. These two measures have been used previously and have proved reliable indicators as far as they go, although clearly they do not provide any element of gradation amongst families above a certain economic level.

Both of the above measures were related to the incidence of young people running away. Amongst the relatively small proportion (one in 14) of young people who lived in a household where no-one had a paid job, the rate of running away overnight was 17%. Rather more young people (one in eight) received free school meals and around 15% of this group had run away. There is evidence here, then, of a significant link between economic disadvantage and running away, at least in families at the lower end of the income distribution.

We went on to analyse the links between economic disadvantage, family form and running away. This seemed pertinent because Rees...
(1993) found that, in Leeds, when economic factors were taken into account, the rate of running away in lone-parent families was no higher than in families with two birth parents, although the higher rate in step-families was statistically significant.

However, our analysis with this much larger and more wide-reaching sample gives different conclusions. We found that, when economic status was taken into account, the differences in rates of running away for different family forms changed little and remained significant. However, when family form was taken into account, the link between economic disadvantage and running away was weakened and was no longer at a level which could be regarded as statistically significant. Whilst this finding may seem rather obscure, it carries important messages. What it suggests is that, whilst lone-parent families and step-families are likely to be poorer than families with both birth parents, and are likely to evidence higher rates of running away, there is no direct link between economic disadvantage and running away.

This suggests that running away may be more closely linked to the emotional and relationship issues experienced by young people in families than by the level of prosperity or poverty within the family. It also suggests that running away cannot be seen as an issue which is predominantly about low-income households. There is clearly a considerable incidence of running away in wealthier families and, where there are difficulties in relation to family form or family relationships, these are equally likely to lead to young people running away. Another way of looking at the findings is that the link between economic disadvantage and disrupted family forms means that poverty indirectly contributes towards the incidence of running away by contributing to family forms where running away is more likely. This is a plausible explanation, but it implies a causal link which it is beyond this research project to establish. Does poverty cause changes in family form, do changes in family form lead to poverty, or do the two go hand in hand in certain contexts?

Interestingly, the professionals interviewed for the research did not focus greatly on economic factors when explaining the contexts which they felt influence young people running away under the age of 16 (although the picture for 16- to 17-year-olds is very different as we shall see in Chapter 10).

However, there were two other structural issues which were men-
tioned by a small number of professionals. First, some workers were aware of households where overcrowding had created tensions which ultimately led to young people running away either by choice or out of necessity. Second, a few workers highlighted the fact that the laws relating to young people under the age of 16 who are away from home (as outlined in Chapter 1) could be a barrier to agencies providing services for this group, thus exacerbating any problems which the young people were facing.

**AGENCY INTERVENTIONS**

Finally, in terms of context, we examine young people’s involvement with helping agencies before and after they first ran away.

Due to space considerations and difficulties in formulating and piloting appropriate questions, we did not gather information on this topic through the survey questionnaire. So we are reliant here on the information from interviews with young people.

**INTERVENTIONS BEFORE RUNNING AWAY STARTED**

Nine of the purposive sample of 52 young people who had run away before the age of 16 had started running away from substitute care and a further five ran away after returning home from care. Clearly, these 14 young people had all had social work intervention prior to running away.

Of the remaining 38 young people, there is evidence of at least 11 who had involvement with a social worker before running away, and a further five who may have had some involvement. Thus, less than half of the young people who had not been in care had had involvement with social services.

There is very little evidence of any involvement with other services before running away, although two young people had had involvement with the police – one due to being sexually abused and the case going to court, and one due to offending which went to court (presumably, the probation service was also involved here, although this was not mentioned by the young person). Finally, two young people had involvement with mental health services.

In terms of young people’s views of these interventions, there were mixed feelings about social workers, with some young people
expressing strong dislike and others being very positive. The two young people who had had mental health service involvement were negative about it, although this is hardly conclusive evidence.

Whilst we need to bear in mind that this was not a representative sample in any way, the above clearly illustrates the possibility that young people who run away have had no agency interventions before being away. It seems that this was the case for slightly more than half of the young people interviewed who had not lived in substitute care prior to running away.

**Interventions after running away started**

There was much more evidence of agencies becoming involved in young people’s lives after running away had started. Forty-six out of the 52 young people in the purposive sample had had involvement with at least one agency in relation to problems they were facing, and some had been in touch with as many as five or six different agencies.

**Social workers**

Social workers were by far the most common professionals for young people to mention. Most (36) of the young people in the purposive sample had some contact with social services under the age of 16.

Not surprisingly, given the role and responsibilities of social workers, young people had mixed feelings about their involvement with them:

*Some were real canny but some were real divvies.*

Young people particularly valued social workers who were accessible to them:

*Since I was three, I’ve had loads of social workers – too many to remember. I can normally pick up when I first meet them whether I’m gonna like them or not – the one I have now, I like her – she’s brilliant. Whenever I have the need, I can contact her any time during office hours and my foster mum has a number that I can use any time if needed.*

Two problems commented upon by several young people were the often temporary nature of social workers’ involvement and a feeling of not being able to relate to them:
I've had loads of social workers and key workers and leaving care scheme workers and what have you, but they eventually leave you alone as well... you know what I mean. They're all enthusiastic in the beginning: 'Oh, I'll help you out with this and that', and then they slowly fade away, lose contact with you.

No offence, but she's English and well, well posh... And everything's always got to go the way she wants it.

Despite some of these difficulties, there were a number of examples of social workers' interventions being valued by young people and effective in helping them with the problems they were facing:

They've helped me find somewhere to stay and given me money when I've needed it. In fact, I'd recommend Social Services to anyone.

The police
The police were the next most commonly mentioned professionals. Nine young people had had contact with them in connection with having run away. Again, there were both positive and negative views, at least partly stemming from the role and responsibility of the police in terms of young people who run away:

The police were really nice to me at first and then they got annoyed. They had so many forms to fill in. I know every policeman where I was, that's how bad it got. I'm not proud of that.

An important issue in connection with the police was young people's desire to be listened to and believed:

I never wanted to live with my mum because my step-dad used to beat me up. I told my auntie who's a police officer but nothing happened about it. She believed me. I was interviewed by the police but I guess they believed my mum and step-dad over me.

Other interventions
Interventions by other professionals appear to have been relatively rare for this sample of young people.
One young person mentioned a youth worker:

I like my key worker, he listens to me.

Five young people mentioned seeing a counsellor, psychiatrist or psychologist in connection with their problems. In some cases, the young person valued this involvement. One young person, who had seen a counsellor from the age of 13, commented as follows:

I was with her for at least three years and she was brilliant, and you know she helped me through my boyfriend situation where at 16 I got in with him and he was a bit... I was looking for the love that I never had at home basically, the love that I wanted I didn’t have, so I looked for it somewhere else, which was with him... I wanted the comfort love, you know the owches [hugs] and the kisses and stuff like that ..., and it’s still not right now between my mother and myself.

The work of a psychologist was also found helpful by one young person:

I went from being really fat and not looking after myself to something looking more human and looking after myself.

However, not all young people found these kinds of ‘talking’ interventions useful. One young person who had been referred to a psychiatrist described her experience as follows:

All I did was sit there and look at the clock, because basically the way he was trying to get things out of me wasn’t the right way of doing it, because I was very young and I think you’ve got to understand what they are feeling really, whereas I think he got it out of a book.

Finally, the potential value of educational initiatives was illustrated by one young person’s recollection of an NSPCC education worker visiting her school. This young person had been regularly physically abused by her mother, who had a serious drink problem, from the age of five:

I remember seeing all this stuff about a little girl. I didn’t know where to put myself. Everybody had tears in their eyes because
the stories were so horrible, like the ones the NSPCC have got now; that triggers me off a lot.... I walked up to this woman, she had this picture, 'I want to talk to you a minute', then I said, 'It doesn't matter' and walked off. I walked away with tears in my eyes, all these pictures everywhere, and we had to collect money for them, so it was like 'Oh well'.

Whilst this young person was unable immediately to talk about her feelings, it is easy to see how these kinds of initiatives can raise young people’s awareness and give them encouragement to seek help with problems they are facing.

**Summary**

In this chapter, we have examined the links between running away and a number of issues in young people’s lives: offending, alcohol and drug use, mental health issues, relationships with peers, and problems at school. In most cases, there are significant links between the issues, with young people who run away being more likely to experience problems in all of the above mentioned areas. What is less clear is the extent to which the occurrence of these issues either precedes or post-dates the first time when young people run away, and to what extent a problem or issue in one area causes a problem or issue in another. It seems unlikely that there is any clear progression of events, and it is more plausible that these issues represent a matrix where any one issue can spark off others. The research has provided illustrations of examples where offending or drugs use precedes running away and is to some extent a causal factor. On the other hand, there are examples of running away leading to drugs use or offending in order to survive. There are also more complex links. For example, peers may introduce a young person to drugs, using drugs may lead to offending in order to obtain money, and then parental reactions to the young person’s offending may lead to them running away or being forced to leave.

The links between these problematic issues that young people face suggest the need for links to be made at the policy and practice level. There may be a danger of young people becoming ‘locked in’ to one or more of the specific agency systems such as youth justice or mental health and becoming labelled as having a specific problem.
We have also looked at several other aspects of young people's lives. First, considering the cultural context within which young people grow up, it seems that for certain groups, notably including young people of African-Caribbean and Asian origin, there are specific cultural factors which may have an impact both on the likelihood of running away and its significance to the young person.

Second, we found that there appears not to be a direct link between economic factors and running away. Young people living in a particular family form are roughly equally likely to run away, irrespective of the economic status of that family.

Finally, we have looked at agency interventions in young people's lives both before and after they start to run away. It is probably true to say that a majority of young people who run away have no specific interventions relating to problems they are facing before they start running away. There is evidence of a more extensive level of intervention once running away has started, primarily involving social workers and police.
CHAPTER 7

Experiences and patterns of being away

In this chapter, we will look at two aspects of young people being away from home under the age of 16. First, we will look overall at young people’s experience of being away. Then, we will look at patterns of running away and whether the research provides evidence of a developing pattern as young people run away more often.

EXPERIENCES OF BEING AWAY

LENGTH OF TIME AWAY

Just under a third of the young people did not spend a night away from home on the most recent occasion when they ran away. A further third only spent one night away. Approximately one in seven spent a week or more away.

There was no difference by sex or type of area either in terms of the proportion of young people who were away overnight or the lengths of times that young people spent away.

There was no significant difference in the proportion of young people from different ethnic groups who ran away overnight. However, there were significant differences in terms of lengths of being away. Young people of African-Caribbean and Asian origins were more likely than young white people to run away for a longer period. Forty-one per cent of young people of African-Caribbean origin and 34% of young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin had run away for a week or more on the most recent occasion, compared to 18% of white young people.

Finally, young people who had been forced to leave spent longer away than young people who had run away. Around two-fifths (41%) of young people who had been forced to leave spent a week or more away, compared to 8% of those who had run away.