WHERE THE YOUNG PEOPLE SLEPT

Two-fifths of the young people slept at a friend’s on the most recent occasion that they ran away. A quarter slept with relatives, and a further quarter slept rough.

Males (33%) were more likely than females (20%) to sleep rough and somewhat less likely to stay with relatives.

There were no significant differences in where young people of different ethnic groups slept.

Neither were there any significant differences for types of area, although there was a marginal difference here, with young people in rural areas appearing to be the most likely to sleep rough and young people in London the least likely.

Perhaps surprisingly, those who had been forced to leave were significantly less likely to sleep rough and much more likely to go to relatives.

A multivariate analysis of gender, where slept and run away/being forced to leave suggests that both gender and whether forced to leave are significant influences on whether a young person sleeps rough. Thus, males who had run away were the most likely to sleep rough (36%), followed by females who had run away (22%), males who had been forced to leave (21%) and finally females who had been forced to leave (10%).

WHERE THE YOUNG PEOPLE WENT

Around a third of young people said they had gone out of their local area whilst they were away, with the proportion being higher for those who had been away overnight (40%). However, most of this travelling was quite local. Where the young person specified where they went, over three-fifths (62%) had remained within the same general area (e.g. county, city) and a further fifth (22%) outside cities had gone to a neighbouring city. This left only 16% — around 2.5% of the total runaway sample — who had gone further afield. Under half of these young people had gone to a large city (mainly London, Dublin, Glasgow and Birmingham). The majority had gone to coastal or smaller regional towns.

Males (45%) were significantly more likely to go outside the local area than females (35%).

There were no significant differences on the basis of ethnicity.
running from family or care, whether run away or forced to leave, or type of area.

**Means of Survival**

The questionnaire asked young people how they had survived whilst they were away on the most recent occasion that they ran away. For the majority of young people in the survey who ran away (those who returned the same day or stayed away for one night only), survival is not a big issue. The large majority of these young people either did not see the question as relevant or said that they managed fine with money or food they had taken with them or with the help of friends or relatives.

For the young people who stayed away two nights or more, the situation is more mixed. Over a third of the young people (35%) relied solely on relatives whilst away, a slightly lower proportion (28%) relied solely on friends, and 2% relied on both relatives and friends. A further 19% relied solely on food and money they had taken with them when they ran away or on money they received from part-time work.

Thus, the large majority of young people (84%) relied on informal support networks or their own means in order to survive whilst away. Of the remaining young people, the large majority (9% of those who had run away for two nights or more) survived by stealing. Less common strategies were begging (seven young people), rummaging in dustbins (five young people), using sex as a means of survival (five young people) and selling drugs (two young people).

In summary, then, over two-thirds of the young people who stayed away for two nights or more were supported by people, a sixth supported themselves in a relatively safe way, and around one in seven supported themselves in more unsafe ways.

Not surprisingly, the young people who were away longer were significantly more likely to resort to more risky means of survival, with a fifth of those who were away for a week or more having done so.

Additionally, those young people who slept rough were much more likely to resort to risky survival strategies. Over a third of these young people had used one of the strategies listed above, and the large majority of the remainder had survived solely on their own means (money they had taken with them). Only a fifth had support from relatives or friends whilst away.
Males (26%) were far more likely to use risky survival strategies than females (5%), although some of this difference is accounted for by males being more likely to sleep rough and stay away longer. Males were also more likely to rely on their own resources. Half of males (51%) got support from relatives or friends compared to 82% of the females.

**GOOD AND BAD THINGS ABOUT BEING AWAY**
Young people were asked a number of things about the most recent time when they were away. These questions were derived from earlier research (see Stein et al., 1994). Table 7.1 shows the number of young people who ticked the ‘Yes’ box in response to each question.

**Table 7.1 Young people’s views on being away**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question about being away</th>
<th>% who said ‘Yes’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Did being away give you time to think?</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Did it give you relief from pressure?</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Did you feel lonely?</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Were you hungry/thirsty?</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Were you frightened?</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Did you make friends?</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Were you happier than before?</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. While you were away, were you physically hurt?</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. While you were away, were you sexually assaulted?</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Did being away help you to sort out your problems?</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A minority of young people were physically hurt or sexually assaulted whilst they were away. The combined incidence for at least one of these two categories is 15% (around one in seven) of those who had run away overnight. For a larger proportion of young people, the experience was still a distressing one, with a quarter of the young people being hungry or thirsty and a third being frightened and feeling lonely.
On the other hand, there were clearly some positive aspects of running away for many of the young people. Five out of six young people felt that it had given them time to think, and over half had had relief from pressure and felt that it had helped them to sort out their problems.

Males were significantly more likely to have been hungry/thirsty, to have been physically hurt or to have been sexually assaulted. Females were significantly more likely to have felt frightened.

Young people who were away for longer were more likely to make friends, more likely to feel happier than before, and more likely to have been physically hurt or to have been sexually assaulted.

Young people who slept rough were more likely to have felt lonely, to have been hungry/thirsty, less likely to have made friends, more likely to have been physically hurt or sexually assaulted, and less likely to feel that running away had helped to sort out their problems.

Thus, there is a tendency for more negative experiences amongst males, those who were away longer and those who slept rough.

A multivariate analysis suggests that, although males were more likely to be hurt (physically or sexually) than females, gender is not directly related to whether a young person is physically hurt or sexually assaulted. Whether a young person sleeps rough and how long they are away are both linked to each other and to the likelihood of being hurt. It is the fact that males are more likely to sleep rough that makes them more vulnerable to being hurt, rather than their gender per se.

Young people who slept rough and spent a week or more away on the last occasion that they ran away had a 44% chance of being hurt. The next highest risk groups were those who slept rough and spent two to six nights away (29% were hurt) and those who did not sleep rough but spent a week or more away (16%).

Young people who did not sleep rough but slept with someone they had just met were also at a high risk of being hurt - 47% of this whole sub-group and 67% of those who spent more than a week away had been hurt.

Finally, in general, young people who stayed with relatives were the least likely to be hurt (8% overall) but those who only stayed one night were more likely to be hurt (12%) than those who stayed longer.
OUTCOMES OF RUNNING AWAY

The survey questionnaire included an open-ended question in relation to the most recent running away incident, 'What happened in the end?'. Two-thirds of the young people wrote responses to this question.

In terms of returning home or alternative resolutions of the incident, around two-thirds said that they had decided to go home. Quite often, young people gave reasons why they had chosen to go home and these broadly divided into two categories – the unpleasant nature of being away (cold, hungry, scared, and so on), and feelings about family (missing people, worrying about them, and so on).

I had a dream that my mother died of sadness and that made me realise how selfish I was being.

From the data we have, it is not possible to estimate the prevalence of each of these categories, but they are both clearly common.

Amongst the young people who did not choose to return home voluntarily, most were found and returned home by family (16% of those who responded), police (9%), or unspecified (3%).

This leaves a small proportion who were either persuaded or forced to go home by other people who intervened (for example the parents of friends who a young person was staying with), found a place to live elsewhere (usually with a relative), or were still currently away from home.

Young people’s responses also touch on two other issues. First, regarding the reactions of parents, there is insufficient data for a detailed analysis but positive (relief, apologies, etc.) and negative reactions (punishment, violence, shouting) were both common.

Second, a number of young people commented on what happened regarding the problems that had caused them to run away, after they returned. Some young people noted that the problems had subsequently been resolved and they now felt better about things.

My mum and I sat down and talked and sorted some of the problems out.

In the end, my mum found me and made me feel a lot better.
Four years later my mother left him [step-father].
Others commented that nothing had changed in the situation or that it had deteriorated further:

Nothing changed, it just got worse. So I took an overdose, unfortunately it didn’t work.

I went home and I’m still struggling now.

**Patterns of Being Away**

We now go on to examine the evidence regarding whether the above experiences change as young people are away more often. We begin by examining in some detail the first experience of being away, and then go on to compare these experiences with those of young people who run away on more than one occasion.

**First Incidents**

**Evidence from the survey**

In the survey questionnaire, the questions about running-away behaviour related to the most recent incident of running away. Thus, for young people who had run away a number of times, we do not have any information about the first time they ran away apart from their age at the time. The data on age at first incident has already been presented in Chapter 3 – around 25% of the running away sample first ran away before the age of 11.

However, the survey does enable us to compare running-away behaviour for those young people who only ran away once, by the age at which they ran away.

Surprisingly, this analysis yields very few significant differences. Young people who first ran away before the age of 11 were less likely to stay away overnight (62% returned within the day, compared to 37% of older young people). However, for those young people who did stay away overnight, we found no significant difference between those who had run away before the age of 11 and older young people in terms of the length of time they spent away, where they slept, whether they went alone or with someone, whether they ran away or were forced to leave, or whether they were physically hurt or sexually assaulted whilst away. Whilst these differences were not significant, it is notable, for instance, that a higher (rather than lower) proportion of
the younger group said they were physically hurt and/or sexually assaulted, and there was a marginally significant difference with more of the younger group sleeping rough.

Evidence from the interviews
As with the survey, it seems that a higher proportion of the younger age group did not stay out overnight on the first occasion. However, for those young people who did spend at least one night away, there were no particularly noticeable patterns in terms of length of time away, with a fairly even distribution over a wide range from one night to a week or more.

Around half of the young people slept rough on this first occasion. This is considerably higher than for the survey sample. For most of the young people sleeping rough was a very unpleasant experience. One of the interviewees described his experience of sleeping rough as follows:

When it was raining and I was sleeping on the streets, I would get up and be really cold, shivering and I couldn't move sometimes, my feet would be stuck.

Places where young people slept included derelict houses, bus and train stations, parks, back alleys and fields. This suggests that most of these young people would have been relatively invisible whilst away. The young people who did not sleep rough stayed mostly with friends and in lesser numbers with relatives. Three young people slept in nightshelters or hostels (presumably lying about their age) but two of these felt so threatened in these places that they returned home. It is notable that, where a young person under the age of 11 spent at least one night away, they almost always slept rough. There are some tentative indications here of an age difference in terms of the likelihood of sleeping rough, which are consonant with the marginal differences in the survey findings presented above.

In order to survive, a number of young people resorted to stealing, begging or selling drugs to get the money and food to survive. For instance, one research participant who slept rough described how they would go 'shedding' (stealing from sheds) during the day and another admitted to:

Stealing cars, stealing anything to survive, I had nothing at all like.
I stole anything to sell on to make money, anything and everything.

Only a few had taken any money with them when they had left home. Around a third of the sample had received support from friends or family members and a slightly lower number received any professional support whilst away, although a few mentioned what they perceived as helpful interventions by social workers or police, including some who were placed in care as an alternative to returning home.

Most young people returned home of their own accord, whilst around one in five were found and returned by the police. From the young people's accounts, there were some concerning examples of young people being returned to physically abusive family environments without any substantial intervention.

Responses of parents varied considerably, but there were some indications that young people who had run away due to physical abuse were beaten again on returning home.

All in all, there were few age-related differences evident in the analysis of the interviews. Perhaps the only noticeable difference is some tentative support for the differences in triggers for running away highlighted in the survey sample.

Summary
In summary, the analysis presented above suggests that there is little or no difference in young people's first running away experience, according to the age when this occurs. However, for young people who subsequently run away on a number of occasions, there may well be some differences in both the triggers for running away (with higher rates of family conflict and physical abuse) and the risk levels whilst away (as evidenced by the proportion who slept rough). We will now build on these conclusions in going on to analyse the patterns of running away for those young people who run away on more than one occasion.

Subsequent Incidents
We now address a key issue in understanding the phenomenon of young people running away or being forced to leave home under the age of 16—whether there is evidence of a developing pattern of being away.
Evidence from the survey

In the survey, we gathered information only about the most recent occasion that each young person had run away. Thus, it is not possible to compare different running-away incidents for the same young person as it is for the interviews. However, we can examine some evidence of patterns of running away.

First, we compared the information about the most recent running-away incident according to the number of times young people had run away. This enables us to go some way towards examining the proposition that running-away patterns develop and change. If we found no difference between the behaviour of young people who had run away once or twice and those who had run away more often, it would undermine the idea of a developing running-away pattern.

However, a simple statistical analysis of running-away behaviour showed that there are many significant differences between young people’s experiences of being away.

Young people who had run away more often were, on the most recent occasion:

- more likely to be forced to leave (29% of those who had run away more than three times);
- more likely to cite school, personal and other problems as reasons for running away;
- likely to spend more time away (34% of those who had run away more than three times had spent a week or more away on the most recent occasion);
- more likely to sleep rough (38%) or with a stranger (8%);
- more likely to use risky survival strategies such as stealing, begging or survival sex (29% of those who had run away more than three times adopted at least one of the risky strategies identified in Chapter 6);
- more likely to go out of the area (55%);
- more likely to be hungry/thirsty, physically hurt, and/or sexually assaulted whilst they were away;
- less likely to feel that being away had given them time to think.
There were other ways in which young people’s behaviour or experience did not differ. In particular, there was no difference in terms of whether they ran away alone or with someone and no difference in terms of the proportion who cited problems at home as a reason for running away.

Of course, as we already indicated in the overview, some of the above tendencies will be related. The fact that young people who have run away more often tend to be away for longer and are more likely to sleep rough means that they are more at risk of being hurt whilst away.

**Is there a developing pattern of running away?**

Whilst the above findings do not undermine the notion of a developing pattern of running away, they do not prove it either. There are at least two other plausible explanations for the findings.

First, it is possible that there is an age-related effect in that patterns change as young people get older. If this was the case, since young people who have run away more times may be more likely to have run away recently, whereas the young people who have run away only once will have been a range of ages when they ran away, the above link could be spurious. This possibility was examined by comparing those young people who had run away a number of times with those young people who had run away once after the age of 12. This served to exclude those young people who only ran away once at a fairly young age. However, this comparison failed to find significant differences.

Earlier in this chapter we referred to analysis of experiences of running away for those young people who had only run away once according to the age when they had run away, and also found little evidence of an age-related effect. We can therefore be reasonably confident in discounting the possibility of an age-related effect. This in itself is a very interesting and somewhat surprising finding, as it would seem natural to assume that there would be considerable evidence of differences in running-away experiences and behaviour according to the age at which young people ran away. Our survey suggests that, by and large, this is not the case.

The second possible alternative explanation is that, rather than there
being a developing pattern of running away whereby, for example, the
more often the young person has run away the longer they stay away.
In fact young people who run away often have always had the same
behaviour, although this behaviour differs from those who do not run
away often. Whilst this explanation may seem a little odd, it cannot be
discounted entirely because it may be the severity of young people’s
problems at home which leads them to run away often, and this same
severity may also lead to a consistently risky pattern of running away
from the outset.

The survey data cannot assist in examining this alternative hypothe-
sis as we only have details about one running-away incident for each
young person. However, we have gone some way towards examining
it through a careful analysis of the interviews with young people, as
with this data it was possible often to identify details of a number of
running-away incidents in chronological order.

Analysis of interviews with young people

Number of times young people had run away

Around half of the purposive sample had run away on ten or more
occasions. Of the remainder, a third had run away on at least five occa-
sions and a third had run away only once or twice. The sample, there-
fore, is fairly heavily concentrated at the more serious end of the
running away continuum, although this is helpful rather than a prob-
lem, given the broad overview provided by the survey data, which
focuses more on young people who have run away once or twice. The
majority (around two-thirds) of those young people who started run-
ning away under the age of 11 ran away on ten or more occasions and
most of the remainder ran away on at least five occasions.

Sleeping rough

Just over half of the purposive sample had slept rough, and almost all
of these young people had done so on the first occasion that they ran
away (see above). In fact, to some extent, the likelihood of sleeping
rough seems to diminish after the first running-away incident, with
young people tending to stay with friends or acquaintances, although
young people who had initially slept rough often resorted to it on other
occasions that they ran away. Thus, there is little evidence of a de-
veloping pattern of sleeping rough.
Risky survival strategies

Whilst all of the young people who were away were at risk to a certain extent, we look here specifically at those who resorted to stealing, begging, drug-dealing or survival sex whilst away. Around a third of the purposive sample mentioned using such survival strategies whilst away. By far the most common strategy was stealing, including shoplifting, burglary and car theft. A participant described how he spent his nights ‘taking drugs to stay awake for the burglaries’ and another described how she survived through:

*Handouts and going begging [and how you] had to watch with the handouts – day centres, if they click on you’re under 16 they’re quick to call up social services.*

The other three strategies were only mentioned by one or two young people. One interviewee described how she managed to avoid selling sex:

*Eventually we got picked up by two blokes and we stayed with them. She [friend] got involved with one of them. The other tried it on with me. I couldn’t handle it so I left there and slept on the beach all night under the pier.*

There was a strong association between these strategies and sleeping rough. All but one of the young people who used risky survival strategies had definitely slept rough. As for sleeping rough, these strategies were usually utilised on the first occasion of running away or very soon after. So, there is little evidence of a developing pattern here either.

Length of time away

As outlined in the previous chapter, there was a wide range of lengths of time for the first running away incident. Young people under the age of 11 seemed more likely to return home without spending a night away. Looking at subsequent running-away incidents, there are some tentative indications here that some young people may develop a pattern of staying away longer, the more times they run away. However, this only seemed to be conclusively the case for around a fifth of the sample. For a larger proportion of young people, the average length of time away seemed to vary or remain much the same as running away progressed.
We identified four young people amongst this sample who had become completely detached from family or substitute care for lengthy periods under the age of 16. Two of these young people had run away regularly, but the other two had only run away a few times and very quickly became detached. All four had had social worker involvement before running away began, and two had been in substitute care. We describe this small group in more detail in Chapter 8.

*Travelling outside the local area*
Relatively few of the young people (around a fifth) had travelled outside their local area whilst away under the age of 16. Some of these young people had developed this pattern over time, but others had begun from the first time they went away.

*Peer associations*
There are some notable patterns here, with young people tending to mention more associations with peers at later stages in their running-away experience. However, to a certain extent, this appears to be due to an age effect – i.e. peer associations are more important for teenagers who run away than for younger people, as we saw earlier in the report. Therefore this cannot necessarily be seen as a developing pattern. It does, however, partly explain the fact that older young people seem less likely to sleep rough. More of these young people stayed with friends and acquaintances whilst away, although not necessarily in safe or stable environments (see below).

*Dangers whilst away*
There was clear evidence of dangers whilst away for around a quarter of the young people. This included being threatened or assaulted on the street, and being involved in drugs or survival sex. However, it was not only those young people who were literally on the street who were at risk. Some young people were sexually or physically assaulted whilst staying with friends, acquaintances or relatives. We have already presented similar evidence from the survey. Thus, whilst the likelihood of such risks seems to increase for those sleeping rough, it must not be assumed that young people who stay with people whilst away are necessarily safe.

Again, there was no evidence that young people were less at
risk on the first occasion when they ran away than on subsequent occasions.

**Summary**

The evidence presented in this chapter provides a comprehensive and representative picture of young people’s experiences of being away. The survey indicates that being away can have some positive aspects for young people. Many young people felt that they had had time to think and relief from pressure whilst away. However, there are also many negative aspects to the experience. Many young people reported feeling lonely, hungry or frightened, and a large minority had faced risks such as sleeping rough and being physically or sexually assaulted whilst away. The majority of young people rely on friends and relatives for support whilst away, but around one in seven relied solely on more risky strategies including stealing, begging and survival sex.

We have also been able to look at the question of whether there is a coherent, consistent or developing pattern in young people's experiences whilst away from home. The research suggest that there is not. There is also no evidence of a difference in running-away experiences according to the age when they happen. However, young people who run away repeatedly do appear to have different experiences (i.e. face more risks) than young people who only run away once or twice. These tendencies are often in evidence from the first time young people run away.
CHAPTER 8

Sub-groups and individual narratives

In this final chapter on running away under the age of 16, we draw together the data discussed in previous chapters and present a number of case studies depicting some identifiable sub-groups of young people who run away or are forced to leave home. These case studies are based on information from one or more young people, but have been modified in some cases where this was necessary in order to preserve individuals’ anonymity.

We base our analysis here on both the survey and the interviews with young people. In order to explore the existence of distinct sub-groups, we made use of information on a range of issues, including reasons for running away, background context, behaviour whilst away (including number of episodes, length of time away, where slept, how survived, and so on), involvement with social workers and other agencies, and experience of substitute care.

Patterns of running away

Stein et al. (1994) identified a number of common running-away pathways:

- young people who run away once or twice, usually from the family home, and then stop running away;
- young people who run away from the family, are placed in substitute care and stop running away;
- young people who run away repeatedly, including spending time in substitute care, but who remain relatively attached to the care system;
- young people who become detached, either directly from the family or after going into substitute care.
This model was based on previous research (Newman, 1989; Abrahams and Mungall, 1992; Rees, 1993) and on interviews with a small number of young people who were in contact with projects working with runaways in four cities.

We have been able to develop this model much further with the data collected through the current research project. We will look at four broad running-away patterns and distinguish some common subgroups within each pattern:

1. Young people who run away once or twice, but who have not spent a night away from home. From the survey, we would estimate that around 6% of the total population of young people have this experience before the age of 16. This amounts to around 43,000 young people per school year.

2. Young people who run away once or twice, including spending one or more nights away from home. From the survey, we would estimate that around 9% of young people fit into this category, amounting to 63,000 young people per school year.

3. Young people who run away repeatedly (three times or more), but do not become detached. From the survey, we would estimate that around 2% of all young people have this experience before the age of 16, numbering around 14,000 young people per school year.

4. Young people who become detached from home and substitute care for six months or more. We are not able to estimate the size of this group of young people as many of them would not have appeared in the survey due to detachment from school. However, the fact that we interviewed 12 young people with this experience out of an interview sample of 200 indicates that their presence is not negligible amongst the population of young people who have run away overnight.

For the first three groups, for whom we do have survey data, we start by briefly comparing a number of aspects of the young people’s lives and the nature of their being away (see Table 8.1).

We will refer to specific findings from Table 8.1 throughout this chapter. However, some general points are noteworthy here.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not run away</th>
<th>Run away but not overnight</th>
<th>Run away overnight once or twice</th>
<th>Run away overnight three times or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships at home</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed one or more negative feelings about relationship with parents</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not get on with parents</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt treated differently to siblings</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did not feel understood</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did not feel cared about</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt parents were too strict</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said parents hit her/him a lot</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Experience of substitute care</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently living in substitute care</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever lived in substitute care</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family form</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both birth parents</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and step-parent</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School experience</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often truant</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Have been excluded from school  9%  19%  27%  41%
Often bullied at school     4%  11%  10%  19%

**Personal issues**

Feeling fed up/ depressed  31%  51%  51%  62%
Problems with boy/ girlfriends  16%  30%  32%  39%
Problems with drugs  3%  8%  14%  32%
Problems with alcohol  6%  15%  20%  38%
Getting in trouble with the police  5%  11%  17%  35%
Have friends who have run away  36%  65%  77%  85%

First, there is a substantial difference between young people who have never run away and those who have run away but not spent a night away. The differences between these two groups were statistically significant for all of the indicators presented in the table. Thus, the issue of running away during the day should not be taken lightly. We have not focused on this group of young people in the preceding chapters but will look at some of the issues relevant to them in this chapter.

Second, in most respects, there is also a significant difference between those who have run away overnight and those who have only run away during the day. The exceptions relate to the statistics on parental strictness, depression, problems with boyfriends or girlfriends, and the proportion who currently live in substitute care. For these four indicators, although a visual inspection suggests a difference, the difference is not large enough to be significant. However, note that there was a statistically significant difference according to whether young people had ever lived in substitute care.

Third, in comparing those who have run away once or twice
overnight with those who have run away more often, most of the differences are significant. One notable exception to this is the data on family forms. There was no difference between the two groups in this respect. Further analysis concluded that, whilst young people living in single-parent and step-parent families are more likely to run away, there was no link between family form and the number of times run away. There was also no evidence of differences on parental strictness and problems with boyfriends or girlfriends between those who had run once or twice and those who had done so more often.

We will now go on to look in more detail at each of the four groups of young people listed above who had run away or been forced to leave.

**Young people who run away once or twice but had not spent a night away**

Elsewhere in the report, for clarity, we have excluded this group of young people from the analysis. However, as Table 8.1 shows, whilst these young people are less likely to have problems in the home, school and personal spheres than young people who run away and are away overnight, they nevertheless have significantly more problems than those young people who do not run away at all.

In general, the triggers that led to these young people running away predominantly related to problems at home (68%). Personal, school and other problems were each mentioned by around a fifth of the young people (23%, 18%, and 17% respectively).

As one might expect, the problems that led to them running away tended in general to be less serious than for those who had run away overnight. Around 18% cited general family problems as the trigger for running away:

*Because I had been arguing with my parents and just left. I only ran down the street and to the park but it took my mum 20 minutes to get me home.*

The next most common category was young people who needed a break from their situation. Comments such as the following are typical:
Because everything was getting too much, I needed time to clear my head and think.

There was a large number of other reasons for running away, such as problems at school, conflict with siblings, pressure from parents, and being in trouble with parents for something. Many of these appeared to relate to fairly short-lived problems which were subsequently resolved.

However, there were examples in the survey of more serious problems amongst young people who ‘needed a break’ or were being abused at home.

Some of the reasons for needing a break were quite specific:

- Dad recently died and I couldn’t cope at home with all the family, especially my mum and older brother. I didn’t want to believe what had happened.

Others reflected long-standing problems:

- I had been rowing with my parents for ages and it had become unbearable. It is better now.

Not all of the problems had been resolved. One young person aged 15, who had recently run away once, described his situation and experience of being away as follows:

- I hate my life, family and home. Sometimes it’s too much to handle ... I think my life is crap and not worth living ... I was gone for only one hour before I was found but I was fucking scared. My dad found me at my friend’s house and dragged me home.

Issues of abuse were less common than for young people who had run away overnight (see Chapter 4 for statistics) with around 6% reporting some form of emotional abuse and 5% reporting physical abuse.

A lot of the emotional abuse related to scapegoating or constant criticism, from the young person’s perspective:

- I got fed up with my parents always taking their problems out on me.

Because my mum was pure moaning at me for every single little
thing, and I forgot to take the bins out. She was really overreacting so I just went.

Whilst the prevalence of physical abuse and the threat of violence for this group was not that high, there were indications that for some young people it was still quite serious:

Because of being scared of my dad when he gets angry, I think that he will hurt me. It is not often but we have an argument nearly every day. He only gets so angry that I have to leave for a couple of hours once every three months but I feel his temper needs controlling.

Because my real mother was hitting me with the belt and fist so I had enough and just left.

The latter young person was now living in foster care: ‘Well, they are a lot better than my real parents’.

In summary then, whilst most of the young people who had only run away in the day were reacting to relatively minor short-term problems in their lives which were subsequently resolved, this was not always the case. It would be wrong to view incidents of running away for a few hours as necessarily trivial and not worthy of attention. In some cases, this kind of running away is indicative of serious problems in the young person’s life with which they may need support.

**Young people who run away once or twice, including spending at least one night away**

This group accounts for just over half of the survey sample who had run away or been forced to leave home. Very little is known about these young people from previous research and so it is particularly important to explore the reasons for their running away and their current situations.

As we have seen in Table 8.1, this group have more negative experiences of family life than those who had not run away overnight. However, a slight majority expressed no negative feelings about their current family relationships.
TRIGGERS FOR RUNNING AWAY

It is interesting to examine the triggers for running away according to current feelings about family relationships. Those young people who currently had no negative feelings about relationships with parents were significantly less likely to cite family and school problems as reasons for running away, although the proportion who cited family problems is still fairly high (63%).

The family problems cited tended to be less severe than for young people who were currently unhappy with their family. For example, the incidence of physical, sexual or emotional abuse as triggers for running away is lower for this group, and the incidence of parental disharmony and less severe conflict between the young person and parents are more common. Nevertheless, there are still instances of young people running away for quite serious reasons (particularly physical abuse) and yet currently not experiencing difficulties with their parents.

RESOLUTION OF PROBLEMS

There appear to be three different patterns here. First, for the majority of young people who fall into this group the problems that caused them to run away were satisfactorily resolved. For example:

I ran away because it was a time my mother and father was splitting up and I felt I couldn’t handle the pressure of them arguing, and every time they would argue it would make me feel more upset and lonely because I felt I could not talk to either of them about my problems. I talked to my parents and sorted my head out, then after that things were going fine.

My step-dad was a dick-head and he kicked me out but it’s fine now!

I had to leave because I stole my dad’s car and got caught smoking weed in my house. I went home and sorted it out with my dad.

Mum finding out that I’m not her little girl anymore. Reading my diary and finding things out the hard way. I went home, mum and dad sorted things out. I now stay out all weekend at my boyfriend’s house and during the week we spend a lot of time at my house.
Second, for some young people there was a change in home context which led to the problems receding:

I didn’t get on with my dad’s girlfriend. I found it difficult and hard to get on with both her and her children. My dad also changed. I knew my mum would let me stay with her as I am very close to my mum. My dad’s girlfriend moved out and I went back home.

Third, some young people moved home, either from one parent to the other, to other relatives or into substitute care:

I had to leave because I wanted to move in with my dad and she [mother] didn’t like it so she wouldn’t let me in my house. I moved in with my dad into a new house and everything’s fine now.

My mum was pester ing me, blaming me for everything, saying I marked her clothes, she was doing this constantly for two years and she always told lies about me. She used to hit me really hard until one day I hit back in about Form 1. By Form 2 she learnt other ways to get at me. It got to the stage when I had to leave. My grandparent looked after me. [I’m] still there, come home at weekends.

Although for many of these young people the reasons for running away were relatively minor and were quickly resolved, this was not always the case as we will discuss below.

In summary then, many of the young people who had run away once or twice overnight subsequently resolved the problems which had led to them running away. In most cases within families, this seems to have happened without the intervention of social services or other helping agencies. To a certain extent, it appears that the young person’s decision to run away brought matters to a head and facilitated the resolution of the problem.

Young people in this sub-group were relatively unlikely to have ever spent time in substitute care (6%), and almost all were currently living with their family.

However, not all the young people who ran away once or twice had such positive resolutions to their problems. Three groups in particular stand out in the analysis we have carried out.
**Young people who ran away due to physical, sexual or emotional abuse**

Around 20% of those young people in the survey who had only run away once or twice had done so because of physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Whilst most young people who had run away once or twice were currently happy with their home context, this was less likely to be the case for this group. Three-fifths (60%) expressed negative feelings about their current relationships with their parents or carers, including 41% who felt they were treated differently to siblings, and 22% who said they were hit a lot. This group had a higher than average incidence of sleeping rough (30%) and of being hurt whilst away (20%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why the young person ran away</th>
<th>What happened in the end</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because I hate my mum. She always hits me and gives me verbal abuse</td>
<td>Police found me and took me home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad was drunk and wanted to beat me up because I was behaving badly</td>
<td>I went home unfortunately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I had problems with my brother, he used to hit me all the time, he was really violent but he doesn’t live with me anymore, he lives with my dad now</td>
<td>I went up dad’s then I went home. I told my mum how I felt and things got a lot better. I’m happy with my life at the moment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I was sick of my dad and his girlfriend hitting me.</td>
<td>My dad said sorry! But he didn’t mean it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My dad kept on beating me up</td>
<td>I found someone that loved me and went to live with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I didn’t like it at home. My parents were calling me names, e.g. stupid cunt, stupid bastard</td>
<td>My parents told me if I ran away again they’d kill me, not really kill me, just batter me, but I do get on with them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
They were, however, no more likely than average (for runaways) to have problems at school with truancy or exclusion, although they were more likely than average to be bullied (18%). Similarly, the proportion who had problems with drugs (17%), alcohol (22%) and offending (17%) were not particularly high for runaways.

These young people therefore have comparable levels of family problems and risky runaway behaviour to more repetitive runaways, but lower levels of personal and school problems. Despite having run away for fairly serious reasons, it appears that for a majority of this group, the problems that caused them to run away remain unresolved. Some examples are provided in Table 8.2.

**Case Study 1: Anne**

Anne entered care with her siblings at an early age due to her mother’s inability to cope. After several moves she went to live in a foster home with her brother. She was very close to him and felt a sense of responsibility towards him. Both she and her brother were physically abused by their foster parent over a period of time. Fear of further punishment prevented her from running away:

*I couldn’t run away from foster care [as my foster parent] would have whacked me. I sat back once and watched her give my brother two black-eyes. Probably if I’d run away from there she would have broke my legs so I couldn’t run any more.*

Despite telling her social worker what was happening, nothing was done until her foster parent decided she would have to leave. When the placement broke down she was separated from her brother and given a placement in a children’s home. Anger and anxiety at her past abuse, her separation from her brother and the failure of social services to act combined with dislike of her new surroundings. At 14 she ran away for the first and only time:

*The only time they did something was when I ran away from the [children’s home]. I just thought to myself, where’s my life going? I didn’t even like it there so I ran away. Everyone used to run away from there. Nobody likes moving out of places and*
going to new places, not at the age of 14 when you've moved enough.

She stayed out all night with others from the unit until she was picked up by the police and returned the next day. She felt the reaction of staff when she returned was initially unsympathetic; that, because running away was commonplace, they failed to explore the unhappiness that underpinned her absence.

You run away and when you go back they don't sympathise with you. They just say to you, 'oh no you shouldn't'. I got grounded for it as well... just because I was unhappy. It was bad, so I didn't do it again.

However, running away did eventually generate some action. She made a planned move to another children's home where she was to settle. She liked the fact that it felt less institutionalised, each child had their own room, and the staff were friendly and supportive. However, looking back she still felt some anger that she had to run away in order to draw attention to her unhappiness.

You shouldn't have to run away from somewhere just to make a young child happy.

Case Study 2: Carlton

Carlton lived with his mother, father and younger brother up to the age of ten. He had suffered repeated sporadic abuse from his father from a young age, and matters came to a head:

One day when I came in from school he just started shouting at me for no reason at all. Then he started to beat the hell out of me... My mum said that he didn't do it, that I did it myself. How could I do it myself on my back? I had to walk out... I ran away and stayed at a friend's house.

Carlton stayed away for one night. Then he spoke to his mother and she said that she had asked the father to leave
home, so Carlton returned. However, within a year, the father moved back in.

My dad came back. My mum had him back and he was cruel to me. He started drinking and his violence was unbearable. He was violent towards all of us.

Eventually, at the age of 14, Carlton could not cope any more and ran away for the second time:

I couldn't bear his violence, couldn't forgive mum for letting him stay with us. I slept on a park bench with my jacket - no blanket or nothing. I stole food from shops. Sometimes, I went home for food when dad was out.

Carlton was picked up by the police after about a week away and placed in care, where he remained until he was 16.

**Young People Who Ran Away Due To Depression and Unhappiness**

Amongst those young people who had run away once or twice overnight, there was a small group of 40 young people whose sole reason for running away was depression or unhappiness:

- *Because I hated my life and nearly everyone in it. I was so depressed I didn't want to live.*
- *Because I felt very depressed, everything was running back in my mind about the past and I could not handle living in that area where my mother lives.*

This small group of young people (constituting around 3% of all those in the survey who had run away overnight), are notable because of the relatively high risks they appear to face whilst away from home. This sub-group had a higher rate of sleeping rough (40%) and a lower rate of sleeping with relatives (10%) than any other group in the survey discussed in this chapter. They also had the highest rate of surviving by risky means (33%) and the second highest rate of being hurt whilst away:

*I have nightmares now of being hurt by that man.*
This group of young people was more likely (19%) to have spent time in substitute care than other young people who had run once or twice, although relatively few were currently living in care and only one had run away whilst in care.

They were also relatively highly likely to have truanted regularly (26%) and to have been excluded from school (31%).

These young people were less likely than average (amongst the runaway sample) to have problems with drugs, alcohol or offending.

**Case Study 3: Sarah**

Sarah lived with her mother, father and younger sister. Her parents had a lot of arguments, and as a child Sarah suffered from stress-related symptoms. When she was at primary school, she would pretend to be unwell and would be taken to hospital.

*I'm the kind of person who lets the tiniest thing get to me. I bottle things up and then I explode at the end of it. I'm a very sensitive person and my mother and father had a lot of arguments through their relationship and they didn't really understand the way I was being affected by the tension. My sister was too young to understand what was going on. I was in hospital nearly all the time, stress-linked problems... I used to make up problems I had wrong with me when I was in primary school and they used to take me to hospital. I did it for affection, for someone to say I was 'here' kind of thing. It was because I thought people were ignoring me.*

Sarah was sent to a counsellor and then a psychiatrist:

*But because I had bottled so much up over the years, it was difficult for me to express how I felt and sort of where to start. So I just didn't know what to do with myself. I went to see a psychiatrist. I went there for a year and all I did was sit there and look at the clock. The way he was trying to get things out of me was the wrong way of doing it because I was very young.*

By the age of 15, she felt she just had to get out of the house:

*I had to get out of there. There was so much bad atmosphere in*
our house you could cut it with a knife. It was really bad. I felt better on the move as I could sort my head out. I needed space to myself. I didn’t have any money because I was drinking. I was drinking every day because of the depression. I went up to sit on the mountain side and stayed out all night. But another time I took an overdose of Prozac and cut my wrists. That was when I was with my boyfriend.

**Young People who were forced to leave home at ages 14 and 15**

Around 60 of the young people who had only been away from home once or twice had been forced to leave home. They were the least likely group (33%) in the survey to be living with both parents, and the most likely (27%) to be living with a parent and step parent.

The key characteristic of this group is that they are forced to leave home by parents either without having ever gone missing previously or in response to their return from their first running-away incident. There was little evidence of physical abuse amongst this group in the survey (only 7% said that they were hit a lot by their parents), but there was a tendency towards unhappy family relationships. Amongst those young people we interviewed who fell into this category, there was often a history of extreme conflict within the family, and in some cases this was compounded by domestic violence or heavy drinking.

Although the survey indicates that these young people were more likely (11%) to have lived in substitute care than the general population of young people, this proportion was lower than for most of the other groups we examine in this chapter.

This group was likely to be away for significantly more lengthy periods than average; almost half (49%) spent a week or more away from home. However, the rate of sleeping rough was very low (5%) and most stayed with relatives (43%) or friends (41%). Despite this, around 12% of this group said they had been physically or sexually assaulted whilst away, suggesting that not all the places they stayed were that safe.

In the purposive interview sample, none of the young people in this category had lived in substitute care before the first running away incident, although some went on to live in care shortly afterwards and
all subsequently had social work involvement. However, none had had a social worker for more than a few months before the first incident, and, in the majority of cases, the involvement came as a result of their being forced to leave home. They almost all slept rough on the first occasion that they went missing. Only a minority adopted risky survival strategies whilst away, despite the fact they were sleeping rough.

The fact that in the interview sample most young people in this group had slept rough, whilst in the survey this was relatively rare for this group, is not necessarily contradictory. It is possible that most young people who are forced to leave find support structures to turn to, but that those who do not are highly likely to sleep rough and to go on to develop a pattern of being away.

**Case Study 4: Ewan**

Ewan lived with his parents who were always arguing, splitting up and then getting together again.

*The only memories I have of my mother and father are of them arguing and my mother cooking dinner and chucking it at the wall. They’d get back together and then they’d finish again.*

Then Ewan found out his father was beating his mother up.

*You see my father was hitting my mother in places where people couldn’t see the bruises. When I found out about this and tried to stop him hitting her, my father beat me up and told me to go. Trying to help my mum got me nowhere in the end. He told me to leave. I was 15.*

*I slept rough. It’s horrible. I didn’t know what I was going to do, where I was going to stay. You can imagine. You don’t know where your next meal is coming from. Sometimes I slept at a mate’s house but you know how you can outstay your welcome.*

**Young People Who Run Away Three Times or More**

As shown in Table 8.1, young people who run away three times or more have the highest indicators of unhappiness and problems in
various areas of their lives including family, school and personal. Compared to young people who only run away once or twice overnight, this group of young people also have more extreme experiences of being away (see Chapter 7 for details), although, as we have seen above, there are some sub-groups of young people who have only run away once or twice who are particularly at risk whilst away.

Young people who have run away repeatedly have been well represented in previous research, as discussed in Chapter 1. However, the current research gathered data from a far greater number of young people than any earlier study and this has enabled us to explore some issues in more depth than has previously been possible. We have looked in detail at two areas. First, we have examined the initial triggers for running away for this group of young people. Second, we have examined differences in experiences of young people according to the age that they first ran away.

**Initial Triggers for Running Away**

In our purposive interview sample of 69 young people (see Chapter 2 for further details), there were 52 young people who had first run away before the age of 16, and the findings below relate to those in this group who had run away three or more times.

For the young people interviewed, there were two main triggers for the first incident of running away: family conflict or arguments, and physical abuse. Most of the family conflict was between the young person and her/his parents, but there was also evidence of conflict with other family members. For instance, one interviewee complained that:

> I shared a room with my sister and I had to hoover up her mess.

In some cases, where there had already been a history of violence in the family, the immediate trigger for running away was relatively minor, for example, as quoted above, an argument over household chores; and it was the ongoing nature of the abuse and conflict which was the underlying ‘reason’ for running away. Conflict was also linked with other issues, such as a parent’s mental or physical ill-health, the young person’s problems at school, and, for older young people, their widening social networks. For two of the younger children, the trigger for running away on the first occasion was arguments between their
parents. One participant who ran away at the age of six due to conflict between parents said:

If I stayed out, I wouldn’t have to listen to all the arguments; I just like, needed to get out and just clear my mind.

Physical abuse was a trigger for young people running away for at least a third of the interview sample. The perpetrators of violence included birth parents and step-parents. Usually, the violence was associated with conflict within the family, and emotional abuse (including scapegoating and differential treatment), and parental alcohol problems were also present in some cases. Young people’s accounts suggest that this physical abuse was usually ongoing, and there is no evidence of a young person running away due to an isolated incident of violence. Such ongoing abuse as the result of scapegoating was described by an interviewee who lived with mistreatment on a daily basis:

Me mam and dad started beating me up every day... I was hit for everybody because I was the eldest at home.

It seems that young people will endure a considerable amount of violence before running away.

In addition to these two main categories of triggers, two other factors were present for at least five of the young people. First, there was conflict with parents over boundaries. This conflict can be viewed in two ways. In some cases, it appeared that the young people were stretching the boundaries of acceptable and safe behaviour, whilst in others it seems that parents or step-parents were more restrictive than would be considered appropriate for the young person’s age. In some cases, both of these tensions were apparent. One interviewee, forced out of home at the age of 14, appears to have pushed the boundaries to the limit by getting drunk and refusing to attend school, but at the same time the penalty of throwing her out appears extreme:

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.

Another research participant who first ran away at the age of 12 described her parents as having unrealistic expectations of her behaviour:
They [parents] were pressurising me all the time and it hurt me to think why do they want me to be someone else?

Second, there were a number of young people who were unhappy where they were living, and often ran away in order to go somewhere else where they felt they would prefer to be. This included some young people living in substitute care who returned to parents. One young person described how he used to run away from a children's home:

\[I\] used to love running away. I was free and could do what I wanted. But I was the only place where I could meet girls, get food and a roof over my head and it was fun... I did like being in the home, there were things to do and the staff were funny but some of the rules were doing my head in.

Other less common triggers for running away included neglect or rejection, differential treatment, not feeling listened to, and parental ill-health.

**Repeat Runaways Who Began Running Away Aged Under 11**

The analysis of the interviews and survey suggests that there are some important differences in young people’s experiences depending on the age when they first run away, some of which have already been touched upon in earlier chapters.

To recap, young people who first run away before the age of 11 are more likely not to stay out overnight on the first occasion they run away, but, if they do, they seem to be somewhat more likely to sleep rough on this occasion rather than go to friends or relatives. These young people are more likely to experience physical abuse within the family, although not always before the first incident of running away.

In addition, our analysis suggests that they are very likely to run away on a large number of occasions. However, there is not necessarily a developing pattern to the running-away incidents. They may progress to longer more risky episodes of running away, or on the other hand they may develop safer survival strategies over time. They seem perhaps somewhat less likely to adopt risky survival strategies such as offending whilst away than do young people who start running away at an older age.
Compared to older repetitive runaways, this group were more likely to be currently living in a step-family and less likely to be living in a single-parent family.

Our analysis also suggests that this group of young people are highly likely to have social work involvement and that usually this involvement started before they went missing. Presumably, this may be linked to the high incidence of physical abuse amongst this group.

A substantial proportion of this group had lived or currently lived in substitute care. This is backed up by evidence from the survey. Young people who ran away three times or more and first ran away under 11 were the most likely to be currently in residential care (5% compared to 0.3% for all runaways) and the most likely to have lived in care at some point (20% compared to 8% of all runaways).

These young repetitive runaways had a higher incidence of school and personal problems than older repetitive runaways on almost all the indicators listed in Table 8.1. Not all of these differences were statistically significant, but the consistency of the pattern is indicative of a potential difference here.

Thus, young people who start running away before the age of 11 and go on to run away repeatedly represent the biggest challenge in terms of developing effective responses.

The case studies below bring out some of the differences between young people who run away repeatedly according to when they started running away.

**Case Study 5: Wayne**

Wayne lived with his mother, father, and two brothers until he was five years old when his mum and dad split up. His dad left and took Wayne’s two brothers with him. Wayne’s mum remarried and he never got on with his step-dad. Wayne was on his own with his mother and step-dad until a new baby arrived when Wayne was eight.

*We haven’t liked each other since he [step-dad] and mum first met when I was six. He’s too strict. He’d never had kids and he would start a row over nothing and he would beat me up.*

*I told my auntie but she didn’t believe me. I was interviewed by*
the police but nothing came of it. I guess they believed my mum and step-dad over me.

Wayne ran away the first time when he was eight after a beating. He developed a pattern of running away to get away from the arguments and physical abuse. The attention of his mother and step-father were on the new baby. He felt as if they didn’t care that he had run away. He would sleep in the park or down by the canal. He was on his own and often felt frightened.

If I stayed out, I wouldn’t have to listen to all the arguments and I could get away from being hit. When I returned home, I would get a bollocking and get hit again but I felt they were really glad I was out of the way.

At the age of 11, Wayne ran away to Bristol to look for his dad. He still had friends in the area.

I ran away loads of times. One time I took money [from home] and caught a train to Bristol to look for my dad. I stayed there for two weeks. Mostly I stayed with friends. If anyone asked I said I was staying with my auntie. It was my auntie who came and found me in the end.

Altogether, Wayne ran away about 14 times from the age of eight to 11, until he was allowed to move in with his dad. Going to a new school and falling behind with the work, Wayne felt isolated and truanted a great deal. He got in with what he described as ‘the wrong crowd’, the only people who would mix with him, and he started using drugs and alcohol. He was eventually excluded from school for starting a fire in the classroom.

When I was excluded from school and got into trouble for car theft and things like that, my dad threw me out. That was when I was 15. I was put into foster care because my mum wouldn’t have me back. Foster care was alright. They were the best people I’ve had. I got my act straightened out there. It found it easy to talk to them.

Wayne’s case study continues in Chapter 12, p.154.
Case study 6: Sian

Sian lived with her mother, her father and her younger brother. She has an older brother and sister who already lived away from home. She feels she never got on with her parents and that her brother was always favoured over herself as her father had been in the army and expected that his son would follow in his footsteps. Sian described her father as 'a control freak'. There was a lack of communication between herself and her mother to the point where 'it was difficult to sit in the same room'. At 12/13, Sian got into company of which her father didn't approve because they were going out with boys, drinking and taking drugs. There were big arguments.

The first time she left, it was because she had been out drinking with friends when she was 13. Her father grounded her.

I stormed out the house and didn't go back. I went down the industrial estate and slept in a lorry, a big truck it was, at about 11 at night. I felt frightened. There were noises and it was cold.

I went home at three in the afternoon, I'd had nothing to eat. They [parents] just ignored me. After a while we started talking again and started arguing. They just blamed me for everything.

Sian said she had lost count of how many times she had stayed away overnight and that it was 20 or more times between the ages of 13 and 15. Sometimes, she and friends would stay with older lads who had the tenancy of a flat on one of the estates. They would drink cider and use whatever drugs were available. Sometimes, she would just walk around all night. She hated school and truanted 'nearly every day' from the age of 14.

When she was 15, she and a friend stayed away for a week. They stayed with friends and camped out as it was in the summer. She went home after a week and there was a terrible argument and on this occasion her father became violent and threw her out. After that, Sian moved in with her aunt.

I went to live with my auntie. She gave me more freedom than my parents did. It was easier for me.
Sian says that when staying with her auntie, she didn’t need to run away any more. About her parents, she said:

*They blame me for everything and they think that all the things I have done have affected their lives and they think that only they’ve got problems. When I see them out now, they just walk past me and don’t speak.*

Sian’s case study continues in Chapter 12, p. 155.

**young people who become detached**

The final group that we consider consists of young people who became completely detached, i.e. had no contact with family or substitute care for a continuous period of at least six months before the age of 16. Evidence of some young people being in this situation has already appeared in previous research (Stein et al., 1994).

Of the 200 young people interviewed for the current research, 12 fell into this category. A detailed analysis of these interviews confirmed the findings of the earlier research. We found that the majority of these young people did not run away repeatedly (eight became detached on either the first or second running away incident).

The current analysis also broadens our knowledge about this group, although, of course, findings from a sample of 12 young people are not definitive.

Only three of the young people had experience of living in substitute care before becoming detached, and evidence of social work involvement was only present in one additional case. No other agency interventions were noted before these young people became detached. Thus, the majority of these young people had had no specific interventions with problems in their lives before spending an extended period away from home.

The principal trigger for these young people running away was physical violence. Domestic violence, sexual abuse and peer influence were also in evidence for some of the young people. There was usually a wide background of a troubled life prior to the young person starting to run away.

Not surprisingly, in view of the legal situation, most of these young
people adopted risky survival strategies such as offending, drug dealing and survival sex whilst away and most had also slept rough at some point. They also relied heavily on older peers for temporary shelter and support and they also commonly became involved with drugs, often to a serious extent.

Clearly, this is a particularly vulnerable group of young people. The case study on Debbie provides an illustration of some of the features emerging from the above analysis.

**Case Study 7: Debbie**

Debbie was living with her mother, step-father, brother and two step-sisters. Her step-father treated Debbie and her brother differently from the step-sisters, who were his biological children. He was violent towards Debbie and her brother. She says she used to get into trouble just to get her mother's attention.

I didn’t get on with my step-dad. It was because he fetched us up differently from the others. He used to give us real hidings too. I used to be scared to go in the house. And people used to say ‘and he’s not your real dad anyway’ and that would do my head in because my mum would never tell us who our real dad was.

I didn’t get on with my step-father. I ran away at 14 away to stay with friends and wouldn’t go to school. My mum didn’t even bother to look for me. I don’t have any contact with her now.

At first, I slept at friends’ houses and once I had to sleep in a shed for three nights.

Debbie survived through shoplifting, a ‘skill’ she had learned before she left home when she had felt that she wasn’t getting the things she needed. After a period of staying with friends and sleeping rough, she moved in with a heroin dealer whom she didn’t even like. She just had nowhere else to go.

I went and stayed with this lad who was a smack dealer. I didn’t know anything about heroin until then. I didn’t want to stay with him but I had nowhere else to go and the police were after us. I
didn’t even like him. Then I started taking it because he was taking it. I’ve been on it for four years now.

I was away all the time from when I was 14. I’ve lived in seven houses with this lad but we were never settled because he was a dealer.

Debbie phased out her school attendance after she ran away from home at the age of 14.

I used to go to the teachers and they would give me jobs to do like taking notes. I couldn’t do any work. I couldn’t concentrate that’s why. So I stopped going to school at all. I don’t think I was even on the register after a while.

**Summary**

The research has identified four broad groups of young people who run away: young people who do not run away overnight, those who run away overnight once or twice, those who run away overnight repeatedly, and those who become detached for lengthy periods. Generally, young people face greater risks and problems where either running away becomes repetitive and/or where incidents of being away are very lengthy.

We have identified several specific groups of young people who are at particularly high risk both in their home environments and whilst away. These are young people who run away overnight once or twice due to abuse; young people who run away overnight once or twice due to depression; young people who run away three times or more; especially where the running away started before the age of 11; and young people who become detached for lengthy periods.

However, there is sufficient evidence of cause for concern even for those young people who have only run away for a few hours. The issues faced by young people in all of the groups discussed in this chapter point to the need for a range of interventions.