Discussion and conclusion
CHAPTER 13

What could have been different?

In this chapter, we summarise the views of young people and professionals about what could be done to prevent young people from running away or having to leave home, and what could be done to help young people who are away from home.

The views of young people were gathered systematically through the interviews which concluded with a number of questions about how young people felt they could have been helped and what they felt should be done in the future to help young people in similar situations.

The views of professionals were gathered through questions about gaps in services for the young people with whom the research is concerned.

**Young People's Views**

We will look at young people's responses under three categories:

- preventative work;
- help for young people who are away under 16;
- help for young people who are away at 16 or 17.

However, one type of response cuts across this categorisation, that is the need for more accessible information about services that are available to help young people, which was mentioned by over 30 of the interviewees. Many said that they wished they had been more aware of places they could have gone for help:

* I didn't know at first that help existed. You need advertising to let young people know what's available.

It is also important to note that some young people felt that nothing
could have prevented them from running away, and others acknowledged that, even if help had been offered, they would have refused it. This was especially the case where running away was linked to peers and drug/alcohol use, although, in retrospect, some of these young people recognised that ignoring the advice of adults was the wrong thing to have done.

Also, with reference to helping those already on the run, perhaps especially the under-16s, it should be said that there was often a strong feeling of confusion, of an inability to think about anything other than the immediate problem of survival. There was no mental space to consider the underlying problems. For example, one young person said he just wanted:

Someone to guide me, someone to pull my strings, to tell me what to do.

Another explained:

Some people feel more secure running away. I felt as if I was inside a building with four walls, a shut window, a shut door. I felt someone was going to come along and kill me. If I was outside, I had no walls, no doors. I had four ways I could escape and I could run in any direction.

**PREVENTION**

The suggestions listed below about preventing running away and being forced to leave applied to all young people under the age of 18. We consider here, in order of the number of mentions, all ideas suggested by more than one young person.

**Family support/mediation services**

Some sort of counselling – maybe where families can go and sort stuff out and stop arguing.

Over 50 young people felt that family support and mediation services would be helpful to prevent young people from running away or being forced to leave. These services might:

- support parents with mental health, substance abuse or divorce/separation problems, which might reduce tension/arguments;
• help to prevent family break-up and/or entry to care;
• improve communication within families, possibly acting as advocate for young person as/when necessary;
• where problems are not amenable to mediation, at least help to plan next steps in a more coherent way.

Many young people were extremely critical of their parents' ability to look after, love and care for them, which also suggests a potential need for the development of better parenting skills.

Advice/counselling services for young people
Twenty young people felt that advice and counselling services could help prevent young people from running away. They could provide opportunities to talk/be listened to and approaches that could draw young people out. Confidentiality was a key issue here, and some young people recognised they had been very reluctant to disclose their problems:

I didn't really talk to people, so they didn't know what was wrong.
I thought then, it's none of their business. I'll deal with it my own way. But that's the wrong thing to do.

School-based services
School-based services were mentioned by 16 young people. Ideas included:
• awareness-raising on a wide range of issues as part of the school curriculum, including making use of outside speakers, role plays and so on. Some young people suggested that this would be better offered by outsiders, as there might be a reluctance to believe teachers;
• peer support, making use of older young people who had been through experiences, as these young people would have a great deal of credibility;
• a confidential counselling service attached to schools: it was felt that young people would be more likely to open up about abuse, bullying etc., if they were patiently talked to over time;
• the need for teachers to be especially vigilant over and sensitive to emotional difficulties that their students are facing.
Intensive help with substance-misuse issues
Thirteen young people mentioned the need for early help to prevent young people developing serious drinking or drugs habits at a young age.

Trusting/believing young people
A general point mentioned by 13 young people was the need for all adults – parents and professionals – to respect and believe young people when they talk about their problems and to act on what they are told. Many young people felt undermined by experiences of not being believed, especially over allegations of abuse:

If my mum was to sit and talk to me and believe me more often.
They take the teacher’s word over me.

Improved social services response
Twelve young people suggested ways in which they felt social workers could have helped them more effectively. These included social workers:

- being more available, more directly supportive and more sensitive about family situations;
- offering more advice and support to young people about other sources of help;
- being better at planning an ordered move into substitute care if needed.

Improvements to the care system
Eight young people mentioned specific improvements to the care system:

- tackling peer pressure and bullying;
- more stable/settled placements for those in care;
- the need for young people to have time and space to talk and think about their problems and future in a ‘natural’ way;
- talks by groups of young people who have been in care and had running-away experiences, as ‘peer deterrent talks’;
• peer support groups for young people in foster care;
• more help with leaving care.

Day/evening centres and activity centres
A few young people suggested that 18-hour-a-day youth club type provision could alleviate a lot of the boredom, peer pressure, and so on that leads to trouble and danger on the streets.

Anger management
Three of the male interviewees talked about how it would have helped if they had been taught useful strategies for dealing with their tempers, which they readily acknowledged could often get beyond control.

Responding to young people who run away or are forced to leave under the age of 16
Safe houses for under-16s
The most common need identified for under-16s who are away from home was more accessible emergency accommodation, which was mentioned by over 50 young people. It was felt that this provision should be on a small, homely scale. It could provide a safe space to collect thoughts, staff who listen carefully and do not judge, and could possibly have a mediation service attached to negotiate with the family. Many young people suggested that it was important that someone could phone home on their behalf to reassure parents that they were safe.

Young people felt that short-term accommodation of this kind would be a better option than going immediately into substitute care.

Some young people felt that it was very important that staff should have first-hand experience of the types of issues that young people were facing – not just be trained in theory.

Advice/support centres
The next most commonly mentioned (over 25 mentions) need was for advice and support centres, including day centre/drop-in facilities, offering useful information plus the chance to talk with a counsellor if necessary, and practical support. These would be places where people could go during the day, where they could be usefully occupied and
not be in danger. As with the above suggestion, there were mentions again of the need for such services to have staff who have first-hand experience of running away/homelessness.

There was also a suggestion of a Childline-type service, but with the ability to refer directly to usable services for those on the streets.

*Family mediation*

Family mediation services were mentioned by ten people as a potentially useful service for young people who are away from home. They could offer a neutral setting where a young person could perhaps meet with someone they trusted – a friend or a family member – with an advocate present, as a first stage in contact with the family. This kind of service could help to resolve family problems and negotiate a return home.

*A more sensitive approach from the police*

Five young people felt there was a need for police officers to adopt a more caring, supportive response to vulnerable young people they pick up from the streets.

Young people under 16 should not be feeling frightened of police and social services. Running away should not be seen as a crime. Young people should be given a safe space and reassured to contact police and social services for help. They should not be in fear of getting caught and taken back home. The information put out to young people through schools should make it clear that those who run away usually do it through no fault of their own and because they are under stress, and that there are services to help and look after them until they can sort things out for themselves – young people should be given the chance to decide for themselves. At the moment, it is like you have committed a crime and they would be sending out the police to find you.

*Street services*

Four young people mentioned the need for outreach workers on the streets to engage with young people who are living rough and provide 'no strings' advice and information and to offer accommodation as appropriate.
Longer-term accommodation

Four young people felt that there ought to be longer-term semi-supported housing for under-16s to house those who cannot return home from a hostel.

Income

Four young people felt that, in special cases, under-16s should be able to access some sort of welfare benefit.

Responding to young people who are away at age 16 and 17

Some of the most common suggestions presented in this section, e.g., accommodation and advice services, relating to 16- and 17-year-olds were similar to those for the younger age group. However, different needs were also identified for this age group.

Supported hostels

Over thirty young people mentioned the need for more supported hostels. Particular comments were made about the shortage of places in some particular areas, and also the need for these services to provide a period of stability and security and to help young people prepare for independence.

Advice/support services

A similar number of young people pinpointed the need for more advice and support services:

If you are 16 and have lived with your parents all your life, you’ve been wrapped in cotton wool all your life. Your parents are there to protect you. Then, if you’re straight into the big bad world, there should be support, help and advice, for these young people. Help for accommodation, money, help you budget etc. Stuff you’ve never had to do while you’re living with your parents.

The importance of these services being ‘young-person centred’ was emphasised. Young people need to be listened to and believed. There was a suggestion that utilising peer support from ex-users would be effective.
A particular gap was identified in terms of generic counselling services for young adults:

There are things for people with drugs problems, but nothing for young people who just want to talk to someone for help when they are down.

Street services
Ten young people mentioned the need for practical support whilst on the streets, including access to blankets, clothes, food, advice, and support. Some of these young people pointed to others they knew who were condemned to the streets as they were banned from hostels.

Income
Eight young people mentioned issues to do with benefits. There was a call for a restoration of benefits to those who are 16 or 17, which would reduce the pressure to engage in crime and use sex as a means of survival. Delays in calculating and receiving benefits were also mentioned as problems that needed to be resolved.

Housing issues
Three young people suggested that local authority housing could be better utilised:

There are so many empty houses in good areas and lots of homeless people selling the Big Issue – it doesn’t make sense. Why can’t they turn the empty houses into shared houses for young people, with worker support and self-contained flats for those who are ready for independent living.

There was also a suggestion of the need for more bond deposit schemes to enable young people to access private flats.

Professionals’ views
We discuss the ideas put forward by professionals under two headings. First, we look at suggestions of early interventions to prevent or halt the incidence of running away. Then, we look at needs identified for young people who spend time away from home.
**Early Interventions**

Many professionals recognised the need for preventative services and early interventions, even though they were working with young people who had passed the point when these would be effective. As one project worker put it:

*By the time they have got to us, it's not too late but a lot could have been done to stop them running away in the first place.*

Their suggestions included:

- more help for parents who are experiencing difficulties with teenagers;
- recognising that parents who had had a difficult time with their own young people could be recruited to provide 'parent to parent' support;
- mediation services for families;
- the possible extension of family group conferences as a preventative measure. Short breaks from families, as a form of respite care, was also seen as a possible preventative measure.

There was also recognition of the contribution that schools could make through identifying early difficulties and by an exploration of these issues being part of the curriculum.

A recurring theme from many of the respondents was the need for young people to have someone who would listen to them, and who would be 'for them'. Their suggestions included:

- young person counselling services;
- young people's advocacy schemes;
- peer support networks;
- mentoring;
- telephone helplines.

There were specific concerns based on their experiences that social services may not be approached by young people who have had no previous contact. Also, that they were not organised to offer direct
counselling services for young people who were beginning to have difficulties at home. Counselling services for young people under 12 were also suggested by some staff.

RESPONDING TO YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE AWAY FROM HOME

Several of the agency staff commented on the value of a ‘quick response’ facility when young people start running away. This may be a centre, refuge or safe house project with short-stay accommodation that provides an opportunity for ‘independent’ workers to explore the reasons for the young person’s situation, assess the problems and attempt to respond to these. It was clear from our interviews that such facilities were generally in very short supply, resulting in many young people being returned to their families or care, often to similar problematic circumstances, and consequently to running away again.

The majority of professionals we interviewed worked with young people aged 16 and 17 who were ‘on the streets’. It would be difficult to overstate the high degree of vulnerability of the young people and the demanding nature of this work. Our respondents frequently referred to these young people’s physical and mental health needs, their drug and alcohol problems, and their high risk sexual behaviour:

It is extremely difficult for young people to access the mental health service... we have a young people’s unit in Newcastle which is based in the general hospital and young people have to be referred through their GP in order to access that service. The referral takes absolutely ages and for young people who are homeless they just have no concept of registering at the GP and going through that process. There isn’t an open access provision at all for mental health and then it takes very long even if they do know about it.

Suggestions were made in response to gaps in specific geographical localities. These included the need for young people to have information about services, for more ‘drop in’ centres, and for more retreat-night shelters, respite and emergency accommodation. In one city, there was a plea to stop cleansing the streets of homeless young people for festivals and civic occasions!

In a number of areas, the problems faced by young people leaving
care were highlighted, including placement movement and disruption, poor practical preparation and lack of after-care support:

There is a huge gap for those leaving care, most of them have very little in the way of living skills. Perhaps if there was more support at that stage, coming up to leaving care and then afterwards, and more provision for those young people in terms of accommodation they could be supported on an outreach basis.

Views were also expressed on the need for more staff training, particularly in relation to drug awareness, sexuality and sexual health issues.

Most of the workers we interviewed drew attention to the difficulties they had in accessing accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds. Some of the young people they were working with were excluded from hostels because they were not working or because of drug and alcohol problems, and other young people, who had been evicted or had left with rent arrears, were unable to secure mainstream housing association or local authority tenancies.

In addition, many workers identified the low level of discretionary benefits, single room rent restrictions, and discretionary local authority housing and accommodation policies in respect of 16- and 17-year-olds, as major barriers to these young people accessing and securing affordable accommodation.

There are so many rules and hoops that they have to jump through now as well. I mean in terms of their initial contact of making a claim, they now have to prove their identity and not many young people have a driver's licence, a passport or birth certificate, especially if they're homeless and they're that age range. Trying to get a birth certificate means having contact with the family that they don't want to have contact with.

As a consequence, many of these young people were trapped 'on the streets' unable to escape hostels, bed and breakfast, or street culture. Some of the hostels were seen by the staff we interviewed as inadequate, particularly if they contained a wide age range of people with drug, alcohol and mental health problems. There were suggestions for far smaller units.

Many of the workers we interviewed recognised the need for good
quality housing plus support schemes, including 24-hour back-up support, as a way to assist these young people 'out of the streets'. Suggested models of support included direct work by dedicated staff, befriending schemes and mentoring:

There was a need for provision for those who don't want to live independently. Something like a community house where someone goes in and they are supported but can have a longer time there. Like two young people who have been with us for a while but I can't see it's going to work when they move out, they need two or three years more. Last year, a young woman did really well with us and she went out to another organisation, she was eventually evicted from there and went to another area and was evicted from there and is now on remand. She has mild cerebral palsy and she fought hard to achieve things but she wasn't capable of living on her own. There's a growing group of young people like that.

Concerns were voiced by some professionals about the failure to respond to the needs of black and Asian young people in their areas. Suggestions included the need for more ethnically sensitive services, including the appointment of black and Asian staff, targeted services and a greater understanding of cultural differences.

I believe that a lot of young 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?

Workers drew attention to the racism experienced by black and Asian young people in some hostels and their isolation in being offered accommodation in predominantly white areas. A project which worked with Asian young people had succeeded in developing counselling services, mediation, parenting workshops, a telephone helpline and a befriending scheme. It had developed strong links with the local community and most of the referrals were by word of mouth.

Workers in rural areas drew attention to the lack of information and
advice for young people, transport restrictions, and the general shortage of affordable housing. Suggestions included the possibility of floating support and advice, or even a mobile van providing a place to stop overnight.

Finally, there were pleas for more inter-agency co-ordination. In some areas, there were many different types of projects – for drug abuse, young offenders, streetwork, young women, health – but a lack of co-ordination and overall strategic thinking and planning:

*There needs to be a much more holistic view of an individual, particularly when I think they're coming out of care and looking at how you deal with all of their needs and develop a comprehensive service.*
CHAPTER 14

Policy and practice implications

In this final chapter of the report, we will draw together the key findings from the research and discuss the practice and policy challenges they raise. We begin with a summary of the key data from the study, presented in the order of the chapters of the report. We then go on to identify four key issues that emerge from the study in relation to young people who run away or are forced to leave. A range of appropriate practice responses are discussed before we examine the social policy implications of the findings.

SUMMARY

RUNNING AWAY/BEING FORCED TO LEAVE UNDER THE AGE OF 16

Prevalence and characteristics (Chapter 3)

- One in nine (11%) young people in the UK run away from home or are forced to leave and stay away overnight before the age of 16. This amounts to around 77,000 young people under 16 running away for the first time each year.
- Over half (54%) of young runaways only run away once but around one in eight (12%) run away more than three times. We estimate that there are around 129,000 incidents of young people running away overnight each year in the UK.
- Around a fifth (19%) of these young people said they had been forced to leave home rather than run away.
- Prevalence rates are similar for different countries/types of areas.
- More females (11.5%) run away than males (8.5%).
- Rates for different ethnic groups are more similar than previous
research suggested.
• Young people who start running away before the age of 11 are particularly likely to go on to run away repeatedly.

*Triggers and contexts (Chapters 4 to 6)*

• Problems at home are the primary reason for running away (mentioned by 80% of young runaways).
• There is a wide range of problems but family conflict is the most common.
• Over a quarter of young people run away due to physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.
• Other reasons for running away are of less significance, but the most important seem to be problems with peers (8%) and problems at school (8%).
• Young people who live in step-families or with a lone parent are significantly more likely to run away (21% and 13% respectively) than those living with both birth parents (7%).
• Young people who ran away had significantly more negative views of the quality of their relationship with their parents. For example, being hit a lot and not being treated fairly were both much more common amongst runaways (10% and 34% of runaways respectively mentioned these two problems).
• Professionals concurred with the findings from the survey that poor family relationships make running away more likely irrespective of family form. However, there are additional stresses of living in families where changes in form have taken place which also make running away more likely.
• Young people who run away repeatedly have particularly high levels of family disruption and problems.
• Young people who are currently living in substitute care are much more likely to have run away (45%) than young people living with their family (10%).
• Young people’s reasons for running away from care included wanting to return home and unhappiness about the decisions being
made about them.

- In the interview sample, half of the young people who had run away before the age of 16 had spent some time living in substitute care. However, they had generally started running away before living in substitute care, and the period they had spent in care was often a relatively small proportion of their lives.

- Young people who run away are more likely than average to have other problems in their lives, including problems with depression (55%), alcohol (25%), drugs (19%), offending (21%), peer relationships and at school.

- The survey found little evidence of a direct link between economic factors and running away.

- Most of the young people we interviewed who had not lived in substitute care had had no assistance from agencies with the problems they were experiencing before they first ran away.

Experiences and patterns of being away (Chapter 7)

- The majority of young people (84%) remain in their local area when they run away.

- The experience of being away had both negative and positive aspects. Many young people felt that they had had time to think (83%) and relief from pressure (65%) whilst away. However, many felt lonely (39%), hungry (23%) or frightened (32%), and a large minority had faced risks such as sleeping rough (25%) and being physically or sexually assaulted whilst away (15%).

- The majority of young people rely on friends and relatives for support whilst away, but around one in seven (14%) relied solely on more risky strategies, including stealing, begging, and survival sex.

- Most young people (70%) return home of their own accord.

- There is no evidence of a difference in running-away experiences according to the age when they happen.

- For young people who run away more than once, there is little evidence of a coherent, consistent or developing pattern in young
people’s experiences whilst away from home.

- 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.

Sub-groups of young people (Chapter 8)

- 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 running away is more repetitive and/or lengthy.

- However, the issues faced by young people in all four of the above groups point to the need for a range of interventions.

Young people who spend time away at ages 16 and 17

Prevalence and characteristics (Chapter 9)

- The data gathered from professionals indicates that there is a substantial prevalence of young people aged 16 and 17 being away from home in unstable situations.

- This incidence tends to be more hidden in rural areas than in suburban and city areas.

- There is a significant incidence of being away amongst African-Caribbean and Asian young people but this also tends to be mostly hidden due to fears of racism and lack of appropriate services.

Triggers and contexts (Chapter 10)

- The family context of young people who first spent time away at 16 or 17 differed from those who had run away under 16, with less evidence of overt abuse.

- The most common trigger for leaving home amongst this older age group was family conflict, and there was a substantial incidence of this leading to young people being forced to leave home by their
parents.

- Relatively few of the young people who had not run away before the age of 16 had spent any time in substitute care.

- The significance of peer relationships as a contributory factor to leaving home seems much less pronounced for young people over the age of 16 than for younger teenagers.

- Issues relating to mental health, alcohol and drugs were prevalent amongst young people who first left home at 16 or 17, although offending was perhaps less of an issue.

- Experiences of school were more positive for young people who started being away at 16 or 17 than for younger runaways.

- Economic factors within families due to current benefits and housing policies seem to be an important contributory factor leading to some young people in this age group being forced to leave home.

Experiences and patterns of being away (Chapter 11)

- Most of the young people interviewed who had spent time away at 16 or 17, had experience of running away or being forced to leave before the age of 16.

- There seems to be a significant incidence of young people being forced to leave home at the ages of 16 and 17, often due to family conflict.

- There was evidence of risky experiences and survival strategies for this age group.

- Young people who spent time away at this age often turned to agencies for help and support, and there is evidence of positive usage of both statutory and voluntary services.

- There is evidence of several different patterns at 16 and 17, with some young people who spend time away attempting to return home, often only to face the same problems again, others gaining access to emergency and longer-term accommodation, and some remaining detached and living 'on the streets'.

Sub-groups (Chapter 12)
• Young people who had started running away at a younger age had significantly higher levels of detachment at 16 and 17 than those who started older.

**Views on what could be different**
Both the young people and professionals identified a wide range of potential interventions with young people who run away or are forced to leave home.

**Views of young people (Chapter 13)**
• Young people’s suggestions for preventative work included family support and mediation services, advice and counselling services and school-based services.
• In terms of young people under 16 being away from home, the young people identified the need for more emergency accommodation accessible to this age group and also more accessible advice and support.
• Similarly, in terms of 16- and 17-year-olds, young people felt that the key needs were more supported accommodation and better advice and support services.
• Generally, in all of the above contexts, young people also identified the need for improved information about what services are available.

**Views of professionals (Chapter 13)**
• Professionals suggested the need for early interventions involving more support for parents, family mediation services and youth counselling services.
• The need for quick response facilities for young people who had started running away under the age of 16 was identified.
• For the 16 to 17 age group, the main suggestions of professionals were a better range and availability of supported accommodation, changes to the benefits rules, ongoing support for young people, and better inter-agency co-ordination.
• The need for more ethnically sensitive services and improved
services in rural areas were also highlighted by professionals.

**Key issues from the research**

From our summary, we highlight four key issues which we feel are particularly central to an understanding of the needs of young people who run away or are forced to leave home, and the formulation of appropriate practice and social policy responses.

**The scale of the problem**

The research has clearly demonstrated that running away or being forced to leave home is a widespread phenomenon amongst young people under the age of 18. This is true for all four countries of the UK, for rural, suburban and city areas; and for all sub-groups of young people (although there is some variation by gender and ethnicity).

**Family problems**

Young people run away primarily from problems within the family, and the research has highlighted three key issues here:

- the incidence of abuse within families as a factor leading to many young people running away;
- the impact on young people of family breakdown and the reconstitution of families, increasing their likelihood of running away;
- the incidence of young people being forced to leave home during their teenage years.

**Risks and survival**

Young people away from home face risks of hunger, fear, loneliness and are vulnerable to being hurt or exploited by others. These risks are in evidence not only for those who sleep rough but also for those who stay with relatives and strangers.

Young people away from home often lack legitimate means of survival and some resort to strategies such as begging, stealing, and using drugs and alcohol.
DETACHMENT AND EXCLUSION

Some young people who run away become detached and excluded from their families, their schools and their communities. Young people who start running away before the age of 11 are particularly vulnerable in this respect.

PRACTICE RESPONSES

Our schools survey and our interviews with young people carry important messages for policy and practice. To begin with, they point to two guiding principles: first, the need to listen to the young person’s viewpoint – to explore and see the world as they do; second, to understand running away within the context of young people’s lives – their heritage and ethnicity, their experiences of family, community, school, friendships, substitute care, and other agencies and networks that they encounter.

The research has highlighted the high incidence of running away, the diverse characteristics of the young people, the different situations from which they run away, and the variety of pathways and experiences. Such diversity suggests a range of policy and practice interventions. A model which is relevant to the exploration of policy and practice implications arising from our present study identifies primary, secondary and tertiary interventions, and has been developed from earlier research work (Stein et al., 1994).

PRIMARY INTERVENTION (PREVENTATIVE WORK)

Primary interventions are those that focus upon preventative work with all young people and their families within the community. The high incidence of running away and the experiences of young people outlined in this research point to the need for widespread discussion of this issue. Our research found that one in nine (11%) young people run away from home or are forced to leave before the age of 16. This is the same for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; for rural, suburban and city areas; and broadly similar irrespective of gender, ethnicity and economic status.

In schools, the issue of young people ‘running away’ could be a compulsory topic within the personal and social education
curriculum. Perhaps, as our young people suggested, this could be as part of a wider exploration of family relationships and planning for adult life. This would not only increase general awareness of the issue among young people – the next generation of parents – it may also encourage young people who are thinking of running away to seek help.

Also, given the present Government’s commitment to the importance of early prevention for combating social exclusion and marginalisation, the issue could be part of parenting preparation programmes. In this context, the focus could be on positive child-centred parenting – listening, involving and engaging children and young people in families.

Different types of television and radio programmes, articles in young people’s magazines, storylines in ‘soaps’, poster campaigns and leaflets in places that young people use, clearly identifying sources of help, may all, for example, contribute to a greater awareness of the subject.

Secondary intervention

Secondary interventions are directed at young people who start running away during the daytime or have run away overnight once or twice. These interventions aim at preventing an established pattern of running-away behaviour and detachment from family and substitute care.

As our survey has clearly demonstrated, most young people first run away from the family. Our findings also indicate that young people would have welcomed the opportunity to talk to someone at the time, someone who would listen to them and help them. But for most of our young people, this ‘quick response’ accessible service was lacking – they were unaware or felt unable to use existing services, or such services did not exist. There was evidence that young people who had no previous contact with social services were unlikely to approach them, and some of those who had a social worker wanted more time with them.

There is a strong case for every young person who runs away to be offered an interview in order to assess the reasons and risks and agree a response. The initial interview should be with someone who can engage the young person and in whom they feel
they can confide. A confidential school-, further-education or youth-based counselling service, complemented by peer counselling and telephone helplines may all help in identifying initial problems. For many young people, this first response may be enough to resolve the situation.

However, as our research suggests, there may be a significant minority for whom running away is an escape from feeling neglected at home, violent verbal confrontations, or abuse. Over a quarter of the young people surveyed ran away due to physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect. Our survey also showed that young people who ran away had significantly more negative views of the quality of their relationships with their parents – for example being hit a lot and not being treated fairly. They also had high levels of family disruption. This is most likely to be in reconstituted families and involve conflicts with step-parents. Outside the family, young people are most likely to be experiencing difficulties at school or problems with peers and we had clear evidence of bullying.

Against this background, their running away could initially be regarded as a positive action; removing themselves from an abusive situation. The young people also reported that they had time to think and relief from pressure whilst away. However, many felt lonely, hungry or frightened, and a large minority faced risks such as sleeping rough and being physically and/or sexually assaulted whilst away. The majority of these young people relied on friends and relatives for support, but around one in seven used more risky strategies including stealing, begging and survival sex. Most returned home of their own accord.

In these circumstances, it is important that the initial assessment is followed up by some positive action and the young person is not simply returned to the same circumstances which precipitated them running away. This may include direct work with the family and the young person in addressing the issues which led to the young person running away. We would strongly support the view, expressed by both young people and professionals, that there is a need to help families to address their problems. Mediation services, parent-to-parent counselling, family group conferencing and respite care may all contribute to this end. Responding to the needs of under-11s who run away is clearly highlighted by the findings of the research.
There should also be early attempts to solve any problems which have arisen at school. Truancy, exclusion, and difficulties in learning are all warning bells for running away.

Although there is the legislative framework within England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to provide services to young people and their families, our research would suggest that there is a gap in the provision of this direct work and thus a failure to intervene at a stage which may prevent further episodes of running away.

**Tertiary Intervention**

Tertiary interventions focus on work with young people 'on the streets'; those who become detached from family or care after running away. Some of these types of intervention have been established in some major cities by The Children’s Society and other organisations.

Our findings reveal that young people on the streets may include two main groups of young people. First, those young people with an established history of running away. Typically, they are likely to begin running away from violence, abuse or neglect, most often within a reconstituted family. They may return, or be returned, to the family home on many occasions with little or no attempt to address the reasons for running away. They are also likely to have problems such as truanting from school, offending and may have other problems, including depression, and alcohol and drug abuse. They may also spend some time in substitute care. Our survey showed that young people who are currently living in substitute care are much more likely to run away than young people living within the family and, in our interview sample, half of the young people who had run away before the age of 16 had spent some time in substitute care. However, the latter group had generally started running away before living in care, and the period they had spent in care was often a relatively small proportion of their lives.

The second group of young people are those who are thrown out by their families, or who have decided they have had enough and leave before they are evicted, most often at around 16 or 17 years of age. Family conflict, including deteriorating relationships, often with a step-parent, is most likely to precipitate their running away. Some of these young people have not run away before or had experience of substitute care or life 'on the streets'. Mental health, alcohol and drug problems were prevalent among young people who first left home at
16 or 17. However, most of the 16- and 17-year-old young people we interviewed had previously run away or been forced to leave home before the age of 16.

For both of these groups, their experience of life ‘on the streets’ includes sleeping rough, drifting, going hungry, loneliness, fear, verbal abuse and physical and sexual assaults – a continuation of the exploitation and victimisation that began within the family. Their survival strategies include stealing, begging, using drugs and alcohol, and providing sex for money or accommodation. Perhaps not surprisingly, our interviews with both young people and professionals highlighted the instability of their lives and revealed both physical and mental health problems. Our interviews with professionals also suggested that the incidence was more hidden in rural areas than in suburban and city areas, and that there was a significant incidence of being away amongst African-Caribbean and Asian young people, but this also lends to be hidden due to fears of racism and a lack of appropriate services.

Tertiary interventions identified in our research include refuges, drop-in centres, youth work projects and street-based outreach work, such as those piloted by The Children’s Society. What these different approaches have in common is their engagement with young people in a way that was often seen by them as very positive. Young people found them sensitive to the harm they had suffered and responsive to their needs to build on their adult survival strengths – in contrast to more punitive policies which re-victimised them and ineffective attempts to return them to abusive situations.

For young people aged 16 and 17, drop-in centres, refuges, supported hostels and outreach work were able to provide much needed practical support and advice as well as help some of them to develop safer survival strategies. Youth-work projects were able to help some other young people move into their own accommodation; find employment, further education or training, and establish independent lives. Young people voiced the need for more information about services, provision of smaller hostels and more safe places to go at night.

In addition, a small number of very young people, aged 11–15, become detached from their families or care. Refuge work attempts where possible to negotiate a return. However, as suggested earlier, this may prove unsatisfactory if the young person is simply being
returned to the same risks of confrontation, abuse and neglect within the family, or to what they regard as similar problems in their care placement.

Our interviews with professionals suggest there is a need for more ethnically sensitive services to respond to the needs of black and Asian young people. They drew attention to the need for more black and Asian staff, more targeted services and a greater understanding of cultural differences. A project which worked well with Asian young people – offering counselling, befriending, mediation, parenting workshops and telephone helplines – had succeeded by developing strong links with the local community.

Our interviews with professionals in rural areas highlighted the lack of information and advice, transport restrictions, and the general shortage of emergency accommodation.

Social Policy Issues

Our research findings also raise a number of broader social policy issues.

Family Policy

Our survey, consistent with earlier research findings, found that the rate of running away is significantly higher amongst young people living with a lone parent and step-parent than amongst young people living with both parents (Rees, 1993). Our survey findings and interviews with young people reveal that many young people in reconstituted families run away having experienced violence, abuse or having reported feeling neglected within the family.

Currently, one in twelve children live in step-parent families, and increasing numbers of young people are experiencing family breakdown. Parenting support and assisting families are high policy priorities of the present Government as exemplified by the Green Paper Supporting Families (1998), the setting up of the National Family and Parenting Institute, the provision of Parenting Orders under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and the Sure Start under 5 initiative. In addition, many statutory and voluntary agencies are offering Family Support services – under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 in England and Wales, under Section 22 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and
Articles 17 and 18 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

However, much of the focus of existing work is on under-8s, where there are major child protection concerns. **What 'older' young people need is someone who can engage and listen to them, attempt to ensure their needs are met when adults separate, and be available for them and their families to help resolve problems which may arise. In short, this age group of young people need to be more visible in family social policy.** For young people who run away, this could be facilitated by the development of primary, secondary and tertiary services as outlined earlier. It may also be progressed by young people being more involved in decisions which affect their lives, as discussed below (see Young people under 16).

**Substitute care**

Completed research studies have shown that young people ‘looked after’ by local authority social services departments are over-represented among young people who run away. Surveys have found that, while less than 1% of children are looked after, around 30% of young runaways reported to the police are missing from substitute care, the vast majority from residential care. Studies of refuges and street-work projects have also found that young people from substitute care are over-represented among young runaways (see Bichal, 1998, for a summary of research findings). There is considerable variation in numbers missing from residential care. A recent study (Wade et al., 1998) found that the proportion of 11- to 16-year-olds accommodated in children’s homes during one year who went missing overnight, or were reported missing to the police at least once, ranged from around 25% in two local authorities to 65–71% in another two.

Although the main purpose of our schools survey was to investigate young people running away from the family, it did show that young people in care were over-represented amongst young people who run away and that most of these young people had first run away while living at home. The results of our interviews with young people add to this picture. Overall, we as researchers formed the view that care had generally failed to compensate them for their pre-care experiences. It failed to provide secure attachments, stability, educational success, and prepare and support them in their transition to adulthood. The consequence of this is that many found themselves 'on the streets'.
Although a detailed exploration of running away from care was beyond the scope of this research, we would endorse the findings from Wade et al.'s major study. **There is an urgent need to improve the quality of substitute foster and residential care, increase placement choice, particularly the expansion of professional fostering, and generally improve outcomes for children and young people living in and leaving substitute care.** In this context, the Quality Protects programme provides a general framework for developing services (Department of Health, 1998).

There is also a need to develop more strategic responses to running away through central monitoring and the identification of placements with high rates of running away, to provide more guidance and advice to staff, and develop better inter-agency coordination. *The Government's Response to the Children's Safeguards Review* (Department of Health, 1998) and the joint guidance on the action to be taken when a child goes missing from care, drawn up by the Local Government Association and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, 1997), has promised new statutory guidance. *The Government's Response* states:

> It is particularly important that, whenever a child returns, or is returned by others, a full assessment should be made of the reasons why the incident occurred and whether the child's placement remains suitable. Accurate records must be maintained of every incident, and senior managers should examine the reasons why children have gone missing and any variations in the rate at which they run away from different children's homes and foster carers. (p. 16)

*The Response* also states:

> The Government also recognises the importance of refuges which cater for young people. It will work constructively with local government and voluntary bodies to strengthen their role and financial basis. (p. 16)

New arrangements for young people leaving care are also promised and have been detailed in the consultation paper *Me, Survive Out There!* (Department of Health, 1999).
**Young People under 16**

Both our questionnaire and interview sample revealed that there were young people under 16 who had become detached from their families and care, some for more than six months. As a sub-sample, they represent the most vulnerable group of young people. They possess no legal status, as they should be living with someone who has parental responsibility or be looked after by the local authority, and as such they have no service entitlements whilst ‘on the streets’. In effect, they are ‘non-citizens’.

As our research has shown, they become detached from their families, foster carers and children’s homes, as well as their schools and local communities. Their survival strategies involve serious risks to themselves and to others. Some of the young people we interviewed testified to the effectiveness of different forms of tertiary interventions. However, we were generally struck by the failure of earlier interventions to respond effectively to their problems, and, in particular, the views of many young people that they were not listened to or heard.

It is significant to note that there is no legal requirement in England, Wales and Northern Ireland for parents to take into account children’s views in reaching any decisions (except where they are ‘looked after’ or are in dispute proceedings under the Children Act 1989). This is in contrast to Section 6 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

**A change in the law to require parents to consider children and young people’s ‘wishes and feelings’, with regard to a child’s age and maturity, would be consistent with a more child-centred approach and comply more fully with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

Also, given the strong link between truancy and running away, schools have an important contribution to make in both preventing and responding to running away. Primary and secondary preventative measures such as curriculum topics and school-based counselling services have been outlined earlier. In addition, there is a need to reduce the risk of disaffection among young people and, in this context, the Government’s guidance on Social Inclusion: Pupil Support (Department of Education and Employment, 1999) is to be welcomed. It is based on existing examples of good practice and its key principles, particularly early interventions, supporting behaviour management, working with parents, involving pupils (for example, in anti-
bullying and harassment policies, and school councils), commitment to
equal opportunities and identifying underlying causes, all offer con-
structive responses.

YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 16 AND 17

Earlier research has shown that youth homelessness is strongly associ-
ated with past experiences of foster and residential care, child protec-
tion as well as family conflict, step-parenting and violence or abuse
within the family. Research from the USA has also identified a link
between established patterns or careers of running away and later
youth homelessness (Simons and Whitbeck, 1991). Our findings are
consistent with these and thus point to the importance of early inter-
ventions.

There is also research evidence that young single people are over-
represented among the single homeless and are disadvantaged in
systems which determine access to social housing. They are also more
likely than other young people to suffer from psychiatric disorders
and have a high rate of self-reported health problems (Pleace and
Quilgars, 1999).

For young people aged 16 and 17 who are unable to return home,
many of the projects aim to help them to establish independent lives by
assisting them to find accommodation and employment, further educa-
tion or training, or secure financial support. However, as many project
workers reported, their efforts are often frustrated by the present leg-
islative framework, resulting in many young people drifting from hos-
tels and night shelters to sleeping rough 'on the streets'.

As the law currently stands, single homeless young people aged
16–17 are not automatically accepted under the homelessness legisla-
tion in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, despite income support
for this age group being abolished in 1988. The exception to this is
Scotland, where young people under 21 who are 'looked after' by a
local authority at school-leaving age or later, are accepted as being in
priority need.

The 1991 Code of Guidance for England and Wales suggested that
local authorities may accept young people 'at risk', but that 16- and
17-year-olds should not be accepted as being vulnerable on the basis
of their age alone (Section 6. 13, DoE, 1991). Some local authorities
have used their discretionary powers to accept young people, whilst
others have interpreted their duties in a more restrictive way. Recent
research by Anderson and Morgan (1997) showed that over half of local authorities usually or always awarded priority to 16- and 17-year-olds leaving care and young people referred under the Children Act 1989, but less than a quarter accepted young people on the basis of their age alone.

The Children Act 1989 gave social services departments the duty, working alongside housing authorities and other agencies, to provide accommodation for 'any child in need in their area who has reached the age of 16 and whose welfare that authority considers likely to be seriously prejudiced if they do not provide accommodation' (Section 20(3)). However, as with the homelessness legislation, the interpretation of 'in need' has varied and many social services have not regarded homelessness as sufficient reason to trigger their responsibilities.

In response to the Social Exclusion Unit’s report on rough sleeping, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has issued a consultation document as a basis for revising the 1991 Code of Guidance. It is proposed that care leavers and homeless 16- and 17-year-olds without ‘back-up support’ should be accepted as ‘vulnerable’ by housing authorities under the homelessness legislation (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). Our research would point to the urgent need for such a policy response.

Also, many of the workers we interviewed highlighted the problems for young people surviving on the low level of benefits for under 25-year-olds. They also voiced their concerns about the impact of the single-room restrictions on the quality and availability of property to rent.

Our interviews with young people and project workers also highlighted the difficulties experienced by young people ‘on the streets’, without a job or training place, in claiming severe hardship payments. Payments of this allowance is short-term (6 or 8 weeks), discretionary and the Guidance requires confirmation of evidence provided from the young person by a parent or, where abuse is alleged, by a ‘responsible third party’. Many of the young people we interviewed are deterred and resort to begging and other survival strategies. There is a strong case for reviewing access to benefits for estranged 16/17-year-olds.

Financial assistance to care leavers in the four nations is also discretionary, leading to considerable variation in financial support.
INTER-AGENCY RESPONSE

Our survey of 13,000 young people, our interviews with professionals and with young people themselves have clearly highlighted the number of different agencies who may become involved in the lives of young people who run away. Police, social services, education, youth services, voluntary agencies, health, youth justice, drug and alcohol projects, housing associations and authorities, as well as dedicated services for street children and young people who run away, may, at some point, become involved. Perhaps not surprisingly, there were pleas from professionals for more inter-agency co-ordination, and in some areas there were successful examples of multi-agency forums.

We would argue strongly for the need for joint strategies between the police, social services and voluntary agencies when young people run away either from care (as detailed in the procedures issued by the Local Government Association and the Association of Chief Police Officers (1997), or from the family home.

In addition, there is a clear need for more systematic information and recording of running away, and improved co-ordination at a corporate level, so that different types of projects and agencies work together to an agreed local strategy. This process should be enabled by local authorities who are required to include in their Children's Services Plans information about services for young runaways who find themselves homeless and without support.

CHALLENGING SOCIAL EXCLUSION

This research presents a number of challenges. First of all, where appropriate, to prevent young people from becoming detached from their families, schools and communities by persistently running away. Second, to intervene effectively in the lives of young people already 'on the streets'. As this research powerfully demonstrates through the voices of young people themselves, the consequences of failing to meet these challenges include unacceptable risks. Fear, loneliness, hunger, and verbal, physical and sexual assaults combine with begging, stealing, drug use and prostitution to make survival on the streets dangerous and distressing. And this often follows a pattern of exploitation and victimisation within their own families from which they have run away or been thrown out. At just 16 and 17, many of these young people are likely to be homeless, 'status zero' and 'off
register young people - outside education, training or employment - their life chances severely blighted with enormous costs to themselves and society.

To challenge the social exclusion of this small but significant minority of young people, we have proposed a series of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions. We have also recommended social policy changes. However, there is a final, more fundamental challenge, not only to policy makers and those agencies working with young people who run away, but to society as a whole. It became evident to us as researchers, interviewing young people and reading what they had written about their lives, how far as a society we still have to go to listen, to hear, to understand and to respond effectively and sensitively in meeting their needs.
References


Rees G and Stein M (forthcoming) *The Abuse of Adolescents within the Family*. London: NSPCC.


The Children's Society

A POSITIVE FORCE FOR CHANGE

The Children's Society is one of Britain's leading charities for children and young people. Founded in 1881 as a Christian organisation, The Children's Society reaches out unconditionally to children and young people regardless of race, culture or creed.

Over 90 projects throughout England and Wales
We work with over 30,000 children of all ages, focusing on those whose circumstances have made them particularly vulnerable. We aim to help stop the spiral into isolation, anger and lost hope faced by so many young people.

We constantly look for effective, new ways of making a real difference
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We are currently working towards national solutions to social isolation, lack of education and the long-term problems they cause, through focused work in several areas:
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- involving children in the regeneration of poorer communities;
- preventing exclusions from primary and secondary schools;
- providing a safety net for young people who run away from home and care;
- seeking viable alternatives to the damaging effects of prison for young offenders.

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Still Running presents the first large-scale representative survey of young people who run away from home in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Using a sample of almost 13,000 young people in 25 different areas, the research provides the first accurate estimates of the prevalence of young people under 16 running away or being forced to leave home.

The report presents important new findings. Around a fifth of runaways are thrown out of home by their parents. Runaways aged under 11 frequently go on to run away repeatedly in their teens and have multiple personal and social problems. A sizable minority of young people who run away become completely detached from their families, schools and communities.

Above all, it is the voices of the young people themselves that resonate through this report, describing only too graphically the violence and conflict in their families that force them to leave, and their subsequent struggle to survive in circumstances no child should have to face.

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