Still Running
Children on the Streets in the UK
Safe on the Streets Research Team
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SAFE ON THE STREETS RESEARCH TEAM

Research Director
Professor Mike Stein, University of York

Research Coordinator
Gwyther Rees, The Children’s Society

Researchers
Lorraine Wallis
Jim Wade
Myfanwy Franks
Joanne Stevenson

Saira Mumtaz
Dee Lynes
Liz Johnson
Phil Raws

Field Interviewers
Emilie Saturdays
Kay Sayer
Mandana Hendessi
Anne du Chemin
Amanda Durlik

Bolaji Bank-Anthony
Caroline McAuley
Val Williams
David Williams

Administrative Support
Sue Borwell
Andrea Brown

Helen Whiteley
Joyce Watt

The Children's Society

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Foreword

I am pleased to introduce this authoritative new report which presents a vivid picture of the lives of some of the most excluded young people in UK society. Reading the report, and reflecting on the issues it highlights, provoked in me a number of reactions.

First, I was surprised at the extent of the problem of young people running away in the UK. The research estimates that there are at least 129,000 incidents of young people under 16 running away each year, and that the phenomenon affects one in nine young people. These figures are alarmingly high for one of the more prosperous countries of the world, with a well-developed social welfare system.

I was also struck by the disturbing universality of the research findings on the causes and consequences of running away – the abuse, rejection and neglect which lead many young people to run away; the dangers and risks of exploitation which they may face while away; and the poverty, powerlessness and exclusion which young people can experience if they become detached from their carers and communities. These are experiences which resonate with those of street children around the world.

The findings of the research are yet another reminder of the relevance that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people in all countries. The three key themes of the Convention are protection, provision and participation. The young people described in this report are very much in need of both better protection and improved provision. However, they are also both willing and able to participate. This potential comes across powerfully in the many quotes from young people throughout the report. In particular I was impressed by the depth and quality of the comments from young people when asked for their ideas about what should be done to help young runaways, presented in the penultimate
chapter of the report. These comments are further evidence, if any is needed, of the value of actively involving children and young people in the processes and systems which affect their lives.

The scale of the problem, and the evidence on the experiences of young people whilst away, supports the persuasive case which the report makes for the need for an urgent response at both the practice and policy levels. I believe that the research presented in this report is a major step forward in understanding the issue of young people running away. As such, it carries important messages from which we can learn much about improving the lives of children and young people both in the UK and in other countries.

E. M. Q. MOKHUANE
Vice Chairperson,
Committee on the Rights of the Child,
United Nations
Editorial preface

One of The Children's Society's national programmes of work aims to provide a safety net for runaways and young people at risk on the street. This work forms the Society's commitment to the Children's Promise, a nationwide appeal backed by Marks & Spencer and the New Millennium Company. The research in this report forms one element of the Children's Promise programme of work and has been planned jointly by The Children's Society, Aberlour Child Care Trust and the EXTERN Organisation. It is the fourth in a series of research studies which The Children's Society has published over the last decade into the issue of young people running away.

The Children's Society's involvement in this area of work stretches back to 1985 when it set up the first ever refuge in the UK for young people under the age of 18 who had run away from home, the Central London Teenage Project. The work of this project featured in the Young Runaways research report published in 1989.

The Society was subsequently at the forefront of a successful campaign to incorporate provision for such refuges in the Children Act 1989. At around the same time, the Society set up a number of refuge and streetwork projects for runaways. More recently some of these projects have begun to pilot and develop strategies aimed at preventing young people from having to run away or live on the streets. The Society then went on to publish two further research reports about young runaways – Hidden Truths in 1993 and Running – the Risk in 1994 – both of which added significantly to our knowledge about young people in this situation.

The Children's Society's work in this area led to the Game's Up campaign. The campaign was successful in initiating government guidelines with regard to young people sexually abused through prostitution, ensuring that child prostitution is seen as a child protection
issue in the first instance. The Society recently commissioned a retrospective study of people involved in prostitution as children, *One Way Street?*, to develop our understanding of routes into and out of prostitution.

The Children’s Society remains at the forefront of innovative work with this vulnerable group of young people, in terms of both practice and research. It is hoped that the current research will point the way forward for the further development of such work within all organisations, both statutory and voluntary, concerned with young people who run away from home or care.

The current research is a joint venture between four organisations. Funding and resources for the research have been provided jointly by The Children’s Society (in England and Wales), Aberlour Child Care Trust (in Scotland) and the EXTERN Organisation (in Northern Ireland). The research has been planned and undertaken in partnership with the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York.

**Penny Dean**
Programme Manager.
The Children’s Society
Part 1

The background to the study
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This report focuses on the issue of young people under 18 running away from or being forced to leave where they live. It presents the results of a national needs analysis, carried out in early 1999, which gathered information from over 13,000 young people and over 400 agencies in 27 different areas of the UK. Whilst there have been several important research studies into young people running away over the last decade in the UK, this is the first report which can claim to portray an overall picture of the issue. The scale of the research has made it possible for the first time to arrive at reasonable estimates of the incidence of running away amongst young people under 16, and has provided substantial new insights into the phenomenon.

The research shows that there are large numbers of young people in the UK who run away or are forced to leave home before the age of 18. In some cases, this is a short-term situation; in other cases it becomes a semi-permanent way of life. Whilst there is considerable diversity amongst these young people, the research illustrates that there are a number of recurring themes in their experiences which are similar. These include: family instability, conflict, violence, abuse, neglect, rejection, drug problems, and problems at school. Many of these issues link to a central theme of the report, that of social exclusion.

Through gathering together the experiences and views of thousands of young people and hundreds of professionals who work with them, we have been able to trace some of the causes of young people running away as well as some of the consequences. The evidence presented in this report represents a challenge to all those involved with children and young people, whether as parents, practitioners, or policy makers. As we will conclude, there is a range of actions which can be taken by
people in all these roles to prevent young people from running away and to support young people who do spend time away from home. These young people are amongst the most marginalised and excluded members of our society.

DEFINITIONS

One challenge faced by this research relates to definitions: what do we mean by young people ‘running away’? This is an issue that previous research has also dealt with and a variety of other terms are also in common usage, e.g. ‘going missing’, ‘on the streets’, ‘absconding’, ‘thrown out’, ‘homeless’, ‘travellers’, ‘sofa surfing’, and so on. It is clear from previous research that, whilst ‘running away’ is perhaps the most commonly used phrase, some young people are literally forced to leave home rather than choosing to leave.

For this research, we are concerned with two groups of young people:

1. Young people who are:
   - under 16;
   - aged 16 to 17 and ‘looked after’ by the local authority;

   and who spend time away from home or substitute care either without permission (‘running away’) or having been forced to leave by their parents or carers.

2. Young people aged 16 or 17 who are not in one of the above groups and spend time away from a stable place to live (whether this is with parents, in a hostel, or independent accommodation).

The reason for drawing a distinction between the two groups stems from the differing legal position of the two groups, as we discuss later in this introduction. This also accounts for the sub-groups within the first group.

We will use the term ‘running away’ to encapsulate the act of leaving home for young people in the above situations. Where there is a need for greater precision, we may make a distinction between those who run away and those who are forced to leave. We will use the term
'being away' to describe young people's situation whilst they are away from stable accommodation in any of the above contexts.

We have kept our area of interest as broad as possible in a conscious attempt to explore the meaning of 'running away' from young people’s and professionals’ perspectives, rather than to predefine it. In this report we will attempt to reflect the diversity of meanings which running away can have for different young people in different contexts.

The above definition does not stipulate a minimum duration for a running away incident. Our main focus in the report will be on young people who have spent at least one night away from home whilst in one of the above situations. Unless otherwise stated, all statistics in the report relate to young people with this experience. However, as we will see in Chapter 8, the incidence and significance of young people running away during the day should not be underestimated.

Throughout the report we use the term 'young people' to refer to all those under the age of 18.

**Previous Research**

In the UK in the last two decades there has been much research activity regarding young people running away. As we refer regularly to this research during the report, a brief overview is provided here.

Table 1.1 summarises the main studies, the research methods and sampling strategies used. Each of the studies focused on a specific sub-sample of the total population of young people running away (e.g. young people reported as missing, young people using a service for runaways, young people in a certain location or environment). Thus, none of the studies can claim to present an overall picture of the issue. Nevertheless, this body of research has produced a range of findings, some conclusive and others more tentative, which have informed the debate about young people running away and have guided the development of services.

It should also be noted that there is a substantial amount of research literature on running away in the USA, going back more than two decades. We do not review this literature here, but refer at various points in the report to a key study by Brennan *et al.* (1978) which, despite its age, provides a valuable overview of the phenomenon.
### Table 1.1 Previous UK research into young people who run away or are forced to leave home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author, year, title and publisher</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Newman (1989) <strong>Young Runaways: Findings from Britain’s First Safe House.</strong> The Children’s Society</td>
<td>Secondary data analysis of missing persons reports</td>
<td>Police authorities in England and Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Abrahams and Mungall (1992) <strong>Young Runaways: Exploding the Myths.</strong> NCH Action for Children</td>
<td>Secondary data analysis of missing persons reports</td>
<td>Five selected police authorities in England and Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Rees (1993) <strong>Hidden Truths: Young People’s Experiences of Running Away.</strong> The Children’s Society</td>
<td>Questionnaire survey of young people</td>
<td>Sample of young people aged 14 to 16 in Leeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Stein <em>et al.</em> (1994) <strong>Running – the Risk: Young People on the Streets of Britain Today.</strong> The Children’s Society</td>
<td>Questionnaires and interviews with young people and professionals</td>
<td>Young people under 18 using four projects aimed at young runaways in Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Newport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Barter (1996) <strong>Nowhere to Hide: Giving Young Runaways a Voice.</strong> Centrepoint/NSPCC</td>
<td>Interviews with young people</td>
<td>Young people staying in refuge in London</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6 Wade et al. (1998) Questionnaire and Young people
Going Missing: interviews with running away from
Young People Absent young people and care in four local
from Care. Wiley professionals authority areas

Some of the key findings from the previous research are given below. Numbers in brackets refer to the numbered references in Table 1.1.

**Prevalence and Characteristics**

- In 1990, an estimated 43,000 young people under the age of 18 were reported missing in England and Scotland. [2]
- An estimated one in seven young people in Leeds run away overnight at least once before the age of 16. [3]
- Females are more likely to run away than males. [1], [3]
- Young people of African-Caribbean origin are more likely than average to run away. Those of Asian origin are less likely than average to run away. [2], [3]

**Context and Triggers**

- Problematic family backgrounds, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, are the most common contexts in which running away takes place, and most young people run away because of these problems. [1], [3], [4], [5]
- Young people who live in substitute care are particularly likely to be reported missing. [1], [2] They also seem to be more likely to run away. [3] Young people's histories, including both family factors and substitute care experiences, combine to contribute to this incidence of running away.[6]
- There are links between running away and non-attendance at school. [3], [6]
- There is some evidence that young people who repeatedly run away have higher than average problems with depression, alcohol, drugs and offending. [4], [6]
EXPERIENCES OF BEING AWAY

- Most young people who run away do so only once or twice. [3]
- Many young people sleep rough whilst away from home. [3]
- Very few young people approach agencies for help or advice whilst they are away, although friends and relatives are often used as means of support. [3]
- Few young people go outside their local area whilst away. [2]
- Young people who run away repeatedly often report being frightened and lonely whilst away, and some are physically or sexually assaulted. [4]
- There are also often some positive aspects to being away for young people, including respite from problems and making new friends. [4]
- Most young people return home of their own accord. [3], [6]

KEY GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE FROM THE PREVIOUS RESEARCH

As already discussed, one of the drawbacks with all of the previous research has been its focus on specific sub-groups of young people. In addition, despite the knowledge that has been accumulated, there are some major gaps in the knowledge base from this research:

- There are no reliable estimates of the prevalence of running away throughout the UK.
- There is no representative picture of the reasons for running away of young people who only run away once or twice.
- Very little knowledge is available about running away in rural areas and there is only limited information for suburban areas. Most of the focus has been on large cities.
- Little is known about the reasons for running away or experiences whilst away for young people of African-Caribbean and Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin.

One of the aims of the current research was to fill these gaps in our understanding of young people running away or being forced to leave where they live.
THE LEGAL POSITION OF YOUNG PEOPLE UNDER 18 WHO ARE AWAY FROM HOME

In this section, we discuss the legal position of young people aged under 18 who are away from home without parental permission. This position is rather complicated and in a state of flux. We therefore attempt only to provide a broad picture to the extent that is necessary for the purposes of the report. We divide the discussion into two age groups – under 16 and 16 to 17 – and discuss, for both groups, their legal status and the options open to them whilst away from home.

THE LEGAL POSITION OF YOUNG PEOPLE AWAY FROM HOME UNDER THE AGE OF 16

Legal status whilst away

It is an offence for someone to ‘harbour’ or to abduct a child under 16 who has left home (Section 49 of the Children Act 1989; Section 83 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995; the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995; Section 71 of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968; Section 32(3) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969; Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984). It is also common practice for the police to return a young runaway to her or his parents or carers.

If a young person wants to leave home under 16, they may under certain circumstances apply through formal court proceedings (under the Children Act 1989 in England and Wales, The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 or the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995) for a Residence Order to substitute parental responsibility with that of another acceptable adult who can take parental responsibility for them.

In general, then, it is not legally possible for a young person under the age of 16 to choose to leave home and they are likely to be returned home if they are found.

There is, however, one key exception to the above principle. There is provision in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland for the setting up of refuges which are exempt from the laws on harbouring and which can accommodate, for a short period, young people under 16 who have run away. The relevant provisions are contained in Section 51 of the Children Act 1989, Section 38 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, and Article 70 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order.
1995. In England and Wales such refuges can accommodate young people for up to 14 days in a continuous period and for no more than 21 days in any three-month period. In Scotland, the time limit is seven days, or 14 days in exceptional circumstances.

Since the introduction of the Children Act 1989, four refuges have been set up in England and Wales (three by The Children’s Society and one by the NSPCC and Centrepoint working in partnership). However, currently only two refuges are in operation, one in Leeds and the other in London, and each can only accommodate a very limited number of young people at any time (six in Leeds and 12 in London). So far, no refuges have been set up in Scotland. Thus whilst there is legal provision for refuges for under-16s, the reality is that, for most young people who run away, this is not an option.

Options open to young people under 16 whilst away

Young people under the age of 16 have no entitlements to any welfare benefits, have only limited ability to work, should be still at school, and cannot enter into contracts to obtain independent accommodation. They therefore have no legitimate means either of supporting themselves or living independently whilst away.

Other notes

In terms of young people under 16 being away from home, ‘being beyond parental control’ is one of the grounds of referral to the Reporter to the Children’s Hearing (Children) Scotland Act 1995, and this can include young people who run away. ‘Any person’, including a police officer or parent, can refer. This is not emergency legislation.

One other noteworthy difference in the legislation for this age group is that it is only in Scotland that there is a general requirement for parents to take into account children’s views in reaching any decisions affecting them (Section 6 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995).

The legal position of young people away from home at 16 and 17

The position of 16- and 17-year-olds who are away from home is much more complex both in terms of their status and the options open to them.
Legal status whilst away

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the legal status of 16- and 17-year-olds regarding being away from home is the same as for the under-16 age group discussed above. Usually they may not leave home without parental permission, the laws on 'harbouring' apply, and police will normally return young runaways to their home if they find them. In practice, however, with the exception of young people being looked after at this age, this law is more a technicality than a reality. It would be extremely unusual for the police to return young people to their parents against their will or for a person or organisation to be prosecuted for 'harbouring' them. For young people being looked after, however, it is not uncommon for the police to use their powers to return young people to their carers, and their situation is more akin to under-16s.

In Scotland, the situation is different. There is no specific legislation in relation to young people being able to leave home at 16. Rather, it stems from the legal definition of a child, who is someone under 16 or subject to statutory supervision in terms of Section 70 of the 1995 Children (Scotland) Act. Anyone who is not a child is an adult, and therefore able to leave home legally.

Options open to young people aged 16 and 17 whilst away

Whilst the options open to 16- and 17-year-olds in terms of income and housing when they are away from home are quite limited in comparison with people aged 18 and over, they are also considerably more extensive than those for under-16s.

First, in terms of income, young people are legally allowed to leave school at or soon after the age of 16 (Section 9 Education Act 1962 as amended by Education (School-leaving Dates) Act 1976) and can work full time if they have left school (Section 58 Education Act 1944). In addition, in some circumstances, young people of this age may obtain welfare benefits in the form of severe hardship payments for limited periods whilst they are away from home, although these payments are discretionary. They may also receive benefits if in education or training. However, even where young people do receive benefits, these are at a lower level than for people aged 18 and over. Entitlement to housing benefit is not discretionary, so any 16- or 17-year-old who is independently accommo-
dated can make a claim, although often this will not cover all of
their housing costs.

Second, in terms of housing, there are additional options available
to this age group. In particular, hostels can accommodate 16– and 17-
year-olds without parental permission without fear of being prosecuted
for 'harbouring' them. An exception to this is in Northern Ireland,
where the usual lower age limit for hostels is 17 rather than 16. In
practice, most large cities and many smaller population centres
throughout the UK have hostels which will accommodate young
people in this age group. Many of these hostels are run by non-
statutory sector organisations and often they cater specifically for the
16 to 21 or to 25 age groups. Thus, there are many more short-term
bed spaces available to 16- and 17-year-olds than the 18 that exist for
young people under the age of 16.

Other accommodation options are still very limited for this age
group, however. Young people aged 16 and 17 are generally not auto-
matically accepted under the homelessness legislation in any of the
four nations, with the exception of young people who are looked after
by a local authority at school-leaving age, or later in Scotland. Local
authorities may accommodate young people of this age who are 'at
risk' without the permission of parents, but again this is a discre-
tionary power and its implementation varies in different areas. Local
authorities also have a duty under the Children Act 1989 Section
20(3) to accommodate 16- to 17-year-olds who are considered to be
children in need. Young people of this age are also generally not
given a tenancy by a local authority unless there is an adult who will
act as guarantor for the rent. Technically, also, young people of this
age may not enter into a legal contract. This would preclude accom-
mmodation in the private-rented sector, although in practice this does
sometimes happen.

**Summary of the Legal Situation**

In summary, the options open to young people under the age of 18 who
are away from home are quite limited. Young people under the age of
16 have no means of housing or supporting themselves independently.
For many 16- and 17-year-olds, a wider range of options is available,
including hostel accommodation and access to some benefits. How-
ever, young people in this age group have far fewer options than adults
and face considerable obstacles in establishing legitimate independent financial and housing status.

The structure of the report

The differences that we have described in the legal position of young people under 16 and those over 16 affected the way that the research was conducted with these two age groups. The analysis of the research and the differences between the two age groups also influenced the structure of this report. The report is divided into four parts.

Part 1 gives the background to the study and consists of this introductory chapter and Chapter 2, which describes the research methodology.

Part 2 has six chapters and presents the research findings on young people running away from or being forced to leave home under the age of 16. Chapter 3 presents evidence on the prevalence of running away and the characteristics of young runaways. Chapter 4 looks at the immediate reasons for young people running away or being forced to leave. Chapters 5 and 6 consider the home and wider contexts which form the backdrop to young people running away from home. Chapter 7 looks at young people’s experiences whilst away from home and examines the question of whether there is a developing pattern of running away. Chapter 8 describes different sub-groups of runaways and provides some illustrative case studies.

Part 3 presents the research findings on young people being away from home at the ages of 16 and 17. It follows a similar format to Part 2. Chapter 9 looks at prevalence and characteristics. Chapter 10 examines the contexts and triggers which lead to young people being away. Chapter 11 describes young people’s experiences whilst away from home. Chapter 12 identifies some sub-groups of young people who spend time away at this age, again making use of case studies.

Part 4 consists of two chapters. Chapter 13 summarises suggestions from young people and from professionals about what should be done to prevent young people from running away or having to leave home. It also discusses what should be done to help young people who are away from home. Chapter 14 concludes the report with a summary of key findings and the identification of social policy issues and potential practice responses.
CHAPTER 2

Research methods

Aims

The aims of the research were agreed as follows:

• to estimate the prevalence and characteristics of young people under 18 running away, being forced to leave home, and/or being on the streets;

• to learn more about patterns of running away and/or being on the streets including reasons, circumstances, events whilst away/on the streets, and returning home;

• to identify the potential needs of the young people in the target group and to explore appropriate responses to these needs.

Broad Methods

A key factor in selecting the most appropriate methods for carrying out the research was the tight timescale, and this led to the selection of methods which had already proved to be feasible in previous research projects with disadvantaged young people.

The two key elements of the research were as follows:

1. A survey with the aim of quantifying the extent of being away from home amongst young people under the age of 16, identifying characteristics of young people who run away, and learning more about their reasons for running away and experiences whilst away.

2. An exploration of the meaning and nature of being 'on the streets' under the age of 18, gathering the experiences and views of young people and professionals who work with them.
When put together, these two elements would enable the research to meet the specified aims.

**Sampling**

It was decided to divide resources equally between the two elements of the research. This meant that it was possible to carry out a survey in around 25 areas of the UK and to conduct qualitative interviewing of young people and professionals in about half of these areas. Within these constraints, a primary consideration in making sampling decisions was the need to reflect the diversity of young people in the four countries which make up the UK.

Given the relative population sizes of the four countries, it was decided to conduct the survey in 16 areas in England, and three areas each in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and to carry out interviews in eight areas of England and two areas each in the other three countries.

**The Sample in England**

In England, stratified random sampling was used to select the areas for the research. In order to be able to arrive at accurate estimates of the incidence of running away by means of the survey, the country was divided into eight types of area, and two areas were randomly selected from each stratum.

An important factor in selecting the strata was to ensure that young people of different ethnic origins were adequately represented in the final sample. This was an issue both in terms of reflecting diversity and because previous research had suggested that there were significant variations in rates of running away for young people of different origins. A second important consideration was to ensure that rural and suburban areas were adequately represented. As noted earlier, previous research had tended to focus mainly on cities.

Data from the 1991 Census (OPCS, 1994) indicated that the bulk of the population of people of ethnic minority origin was concentrated in a relatively small number of areas of England. Two strata were constructed solely from these areas. Stratum 1 consisted of those areas where the proportion of people of African-Caribbean origin was greater than 10%. This stratum made up around 5% of the total
population of England. Stratum 2 consisted of those areas not already allocated to Stratum 1 where the proportion of people of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin was greater than 10%. This stratum made up a further 10% of the total population of England. The remaining areas were divided into three groups according to population density, and each of these groups was divided into two strata according to indicators of economic prosperity. The resulting six strata were of approximately equal size, each containing around 14% of the total population of England. Two areas were then randomly selected from each of the eight strata with probabilities proportional to the size of the population of young people in the area.

The resulting sample areas are shown in Table 2.1 and Figure 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Areas and strata from which the sample in England was taken**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strata</th>
<th>Areas selected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High %age of young people of African-Caribbean origin</td>
<td>Lambeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High %age of young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin</td>
<td>Blackburn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich city</td>
<td>Plymouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor city</td>
<td>Salford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich suburban</td>
<td>Bromsgrove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor suburban</td>
<td>Ashfield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich rural</td>
<td>Mid Sussex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor rural</td>
<td>Sedgeemoor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The intention was to carry out the survey in all 16 areas and to conduct the interviewing in one area from each pair. The areas for the interviewing were selected within each pair to reflect a geographical spread.

In addition, for the purposes of piloting the interviewing element of the research, an additional area of England was chosen. In view of the
geographical spread of the 16 selected areas, Newcastle-upon-Tyne was chosen for this pilot. However, it was not included in the survey element of the research.

As will be explained later, it was subsequently decided also to undertake some additional data gathering in the Leeds–Bradford area.

Figure 2.1 Areas in England from which the sample was taken.

The sample in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales

With only three areas per country in the three other countries, it was not possible to replicate the sampling method used in England. In conjunction with the partner organisations in Scotland and Northern
Ireland (Aberlour Childcare Trust and the EXTERN Organisation respectively), it was decided to select the largest city in each country, one suburban area and one rural area, as it was felt that there might be considerable diversity in young people’s experience in these different settings. Making use of census data, and taking into account the need for geographical spread, the suburban and rural areas were purposively selected.

This sampling method means that we cannot draw such precise estimates of the incidence of running away in the three countries. However, by making comparisons between similar areas in the different countries and with the larger English sample, it is possible to make a reasonably accurate estimate.

The sample areas selected in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are shown in Table 2.2 and Figures 2.2 to 2.4.

**Table 2.2 Areas from which the sample in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was taken**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of area</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Northern Ireland</th>
<th>Wales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>Belfast</td>
<td>Cardiff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Dunfermline</td>
<td>Carrickfergus</td>
<td>Merthyr Tydfil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Moray</td>
<td>Strabane</td>
<td>Meirionydd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, some piloting of the survey method was carried out in South Wales, including at schools in Cardiff, Merthyr and Barry.

**The survey**

The aim of the survey was to gather information from a representative sample of young people under the age of 16. Because the likelihood of having run away increases with age, the oldest possible age group was selected in order to maximise the information. Given that the survey was carried out towards the end of the school year, it would not have been possible to cover a representative sample of young people aged 15 to 16 due to examination schedules and subsequent school leavers. Therefore, the survey was undertaken with 14- and 15-year-olds.
Figure 2.2 Areas in Scotland from which the sample was taken.

Figure 2.3 Areas in Northern Ireland from which the sample was taken.
**Figure 2.4** Areas in Wales from which the sample was taken.

**Access**

The main means of access to young people for the survey was through secondary schools. Initially, the directors of education were contacted in each area to seek approval for the research and permission to approach schools. Approval was granted in all 25 areas. A random sample of schools within each area was then chosen to select between 500 and 1,000 young people. In most cases, the sampling method used was simple random sampling, but in a few areas which had selective schools or a significant number of single-sex schools, the schools were chosen randomly from two or more groups.

These schools were then approached for consent to carry out the survey. If a school refused, which happened in about 10% of cases, a replacement school was chosen randomly and approached.

A weakness of seeking a representative sample of young people through secondary schools is that it tends to under-represent certain groups – in particular, young people who are regular non-attenders or are excluded from school, and young people with special needs. To compensate for this, additional surveys were carried out through pupil referral units and special schools in 50% of the areas.
Piloting

A pilot of the whole survey process, from approaching directors of education through to analysing the data, was carried out in South Wales in January 1999 with around 1,000 young people in ten schools (eight mainstream, one private and one special needs). The pilot questionnaire included an additional section seeking young people's views on the questionnaire content. This provided valuable feedback, which resulted in modifications to the final questionnaire. Feedback was also gathered from the link teacher in each school.

The resulting modified questionnaire was then piloted in a school in Leeds in February 1999 and some further minor adjustments were made after this process.

Methods

The procedure for administering the survey was usually for a person to visit the school to do a brief presentation to the year group about the research. This was followed by the distribution of questionnaires, either in assemblies or in Personal and Social Education lessons. Supply teachers were employed in each area on a sessional basis to undertake this task and were briefed by a member of the research team.

Content

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section, which was intended to be completed by all young people, gathered information about demographic characteristics, family forms or substitute care arrangements, quality of relationship with carers, school experiences, and personal issues. The second section asked specific questions about any experience the young person had of running away. The third section, again to be completed by all young people, asked for views and ideas about how young people who ran away, or were at risk of running away, could be helped. Some questions were in tick-box format, with room for additional comments where appropriate, whilst others were open-ended.

The intention of this content was threefold:

• to gather descriptive information about experiences of being away;

• to be able to explore links between running away and the key spheres of young people's lives – home, school and personal – aiming to
build on research carried out in the USA (Brennan et al., 1978) which found significant links in all these areas:

- to give young people the opportunity to be involved in the process of formulating responses to the issue of young people running away.

**Ethics**

Careful consideration was given to the ethical issues involved in carrying out a survey into sensitive areas of young people's lives. The aim was to give young people control of the information that they contributed. The following ethical principles were agreed for the survey:

- Information would be provided to young people about the purposes of the research, and the ways in which it would be used, before they were asked to participate.
- The rights of young people to choose not to participate in the research would be emphasised and respected at all times.
- In view of the age of the young people taking part in the survey, it was decided that parental consent would not be sought for young people's participation. (However, it was necessary to seek parental consent in a few schools at the request of the local education authority concerned.)
- The survey would be anonymous, and no information given by young people would be passed on to anyone outside the research team, except within reports about the research findings.
- It was also agreed that individual schools would not be identified in any way.

**Outcomes**

The survey considerably exceeded the target of 5,000 young people. In total, almost 13,000 young people were surveyed in 113 mainstream secondary schools, six selective schools, six special needs schools, and nine pupil referral units. Unfortunately the questionnaires from one school arrived after the deadline for returns and it was not possible to include these in the analysis.

The overall proportion of young people in the schools who took part in the survey was over 80%. The main reason for non-participation was
young people not being present when the survey was administered. The rate of refusal to participate was very low and, even including questionnaires which were defaced or not filled in seriously, was less than 1%.

Inevitably, there was some variation in the numbers of young people surveyed by area. In three areas, it was not possible to reach the minimum target of 500 young people (due to the relatively small size of the school population in these areas and some schools declining to participate). This was taken into account in the data analysis, making use of weighting where appropriate.

**DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS**

The data from the questionnaires was put onto a database. Quantitative data was then transferred to SPSS (Statistical Products and Service Solutions) for statistical analysis, and the answers to open-ended questions were transferred to TextSmart for initial analysis and coding.

The statistical analysis made use of a variety of robust non-parametric tests. Chi-square tests were used for bivariate nominal data. Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used for bivariate data with one ordinal and one nominal variable. Correlations using Kendall's tau-b statistics were calculated for bivariate data involving two ordinal variables. Some multivariate analysis was carried out using logistic regression analysis and log-linear modelling.

Where a result is reported as statistically significant, this means that the p-value of the test was less than 0.01 (i.e. often termed "99% confidence") unless otherwise stated.

**INTERVIEWS WITH PROFESSIONALS**

Professionals interviewed included social workers, police officers, probation officers, youth workers, statutory and non-statutory sector housing workers, advice centre workers, and a variety of workers in other agencies.

There were several purposes in interviewing professionals:

- to gather their views;
- to identify other professionals that might be approached;
- to prepare the ground for visiting the area to interview young people.
Methods
An initial list of people to contact was drawn up from a range of sources, including telephone directories and the internet. People were contacted by telephone and asked to do a short interview, which usually took less than 15 minutes. At the end of the interview, they were asked if they felt there were other professionals in the local area who might have knowledge relevant to the research, and also whether they or their agency would be willing to contribute further to the research. Any additional contacts were added to the list. This process continued until it seemed that no new names were being put forward.

At this stage, a small number of people were selected to be approached a second time for a more in-depth interview. These people were selected on the basis of their having a lot of relevant knowledge, and also in order that there were some perspectives on under-16s and some on 16- to 17-year olds from both statutory and non-statutory sectors. The second telephone interview was tape-recorded, with the consent of the research participant.

In addition, during both stages of the telephone interviewing, any relevant local research reports were identified and obtained where possible.

Content
The content of the short interview was limited. The focus was on any knowledge the interviewee had of young people running away in the area, the numbers involved and the context in which this happened, plus information on what their agency did, and any other local information.

The longer interview went into more detail about the numbers and characteristics of young people who ran away in the area, the reasons for and contexts in which they ran away, what happened while they were away, and what gaps in services there were for this group of young people in the area.

Ethics
Professionals being interviewed were guaranteed confidentiality (excluding very exceptional circumstances) and anonymity. Information on the research was posted to them in advance, and their consent to the interview being tape-recorded was obtained.
OUTCOMES
In total, over 500 professionals were contacted in 14 areas. Short interviews were carried out with over 350 professionals and over 100 of these people also contributed to the research through a longer interview.

DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS
Information from both the long and short interviews, plus any local reports which were obtained, was placed on a database that was used for a thematic analysis of the interview content.

INTERVIEWS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE
ACCESS
In most cases, access to interview young people was arranged through the agencies contacted by telephone. Potentially suitable agencies were identified and recontacted by telephone. A date was then arranged for the visit and written materials were sent to the agency, including leaflets about the research to hand out to young people who might fit the research target group. The agencies that participated in the research in this way included youth advice and drop-in projects, youth and community centres, hostels, street-work projects and children’s homes.

One or two interviewers would then visit the agency, discuss the research with young people who were interested in participating, and interview them if appropriate. Young people were paid £5 for their participation in the research. This payment was made before the interview started and was not dependent on the content of the interview or the length of time it took.

METHODS AND CONTENT
The interview process consisted of three phases. The first phase involved giving young people information about the research and the implications of their participation. This included explaining the ethical principles of the interviewing and in particular the policy on confidentiality. Young people had the opportunity to withdraw from the research after this first phase.

The second phase of the process involved a semi-structured interview covering a number of areas, including the young person’s current
situation, an overview of their life, detailed discussion about any times when they had run away, details about their involvement with school, social services and any other key agencies, and their views on what should be done to help young people who run away.

The third phase of the process involved a debriefing of the young person, checking out how they were feeling, returning to any issues arising out of the interview which the researcher was concerned about (e.g. child protection issues) and providing young people with information about local services where this might be helpful to them.

The interview was tape-recorded if the young person consented.

Following the interview, the interviewer wrote up notes from the interview in a standardised format.

**ETHICS**

The key ethical principles agreed for interviews with young people were as follows:

- Young people would be given as much information as was practical about the research aims and methods and how the findings would be used, in order that they could make an informed decision about whether to participate.

- Young people would be guaranteed confidentiality within certain limits. The limits were that, if any information was received which suggested that a person’s life was in danger or that a person under 18 was at risk of serious harm, then confidentiality might have to be breached. If this were the case, it would happen with the young person’s knowledge.

- Young people would be guaranteed anonymity and this meant that no case-study material would be used which could lead to the identification of an individual.

**OUTCOMES**

The process of engaging young people in the research was more successful than anticipated, and just over 200 interviews were carried out in 15 areas of the UK.

The interview sample consisted of a roughly equal split between females (48%) and males (52%).
Around half of the young people (48%) were aged 16 or 17, 10% were under 16, and 42% were aged 18 and over.

Using young people's own definitions, 12 young people were of black/African/Caribbean origin, five were of Asian origin, and eight were of mixed origin. This means that around 12% of the sample fell into one of these three categories. In the case of Asian young people, the information from individual interviews was supplemented by five group discussions carried out in Salford, Bradford and Leeds.

**Data Processing and Analysis**

As with the interviews with professionals, summarised information and quotes from the interviews were placed on a database which was used as a tool for analysis. Some analysis of every interview was carried out, including drawing up a pen picture of the young person's story, categorising issues experienced by the young person, and looking at their views about what services should be set up. However, we also wished to undertake a much more in-depth chronological analysis of young people's experiences, including the background context to running away, and a detailed breakdown of distinct phases of running away for each young person. In order to do this analysis, we selected a purposive sample of interviews balanced in terms of age of the first incident of running away, and type of area. This sample included 69 interviews. Of the 69 young people, 52 were under 16, and 17 were aged 16 to 17. In addition, we analysed all of the interviews with black young people in order to identify similarities and differences between young people of different origins.