PART 3

Being away at the age of 16 to 17
CHAPTER 9

Prevalence and characteristics of being away at 16 and 17

For the 16- to 17-year-old age group, the task of estimating the prevalence of being away is difficult. The possibility of surveying a representative sample of this age group is fairly remote, and certainly beyond the resources and timescales of this research project. Studies which have carried out a street census have failed to come up with definitive estimates of young people who are on the streets. Therefore, we decided to gather information from key agencies and professionals, and also to obtain any local research reports in the areas in which we carried out interviews. This method is not wholly satisfactory, and in particular there are definitional issues to surmount. Despite these difficulties, we have been able to build up an overview of evidence and views about prevalence from a wide range of sources. In this chapter, we make use of information from interviews with over 300 professionals and a number of local research reports in 14 areas of the UK.

As stated in the introduction, this research project is not concerned with all youth homelessness in the 16- to 17-year old age group. Many young people who become homeless are accommodated in emergency- and longer-term hostel provision and the needs of this group are outside the scope of this project. We are concerned with young people aged 16 or 17 who spend time away from a stable place to live (whether this is with family, in substitute care, in a hostel, or independent accommodation). This might include young people who are literally 'on the streets' or are sleeping rough, and also young people who have nowhere settled to stay and are moving around from one friend or acquaintance to another.

For this group of young people, unlike the under-16 age group, there
seem to be some significant disparities between types of areas and between different ethnic groups, and we consider the evidence we have gathered under a number of headings below.

RURAL AREAS

We gathered information from agencies and local research reports in four areas with low population density. Three of these areas, Gwynedd in North Wales, Sedgemoor in Somerset, and Strabane in Northern Ireland, would probably fit most people’s definition of ‘rural’. The fourth area, Mid Sussex, is harder to classify as, although it has a low average population density, there are a number of medium to large towns within it and it is also within close proximity to both Brighton and London.

The general impression from the three clearly rural areas is that there are relatively few incidents of rough sleeping amongst any age group, including 16- to 17-year-olds. A survey undertaken by Gwynedd Council (1998), following up on an earlier Shelter Cymru (1997) study, found that over 45 people had been sleeping rough over a ten week period in Bangor and Caernarfon. Amongst this sample, over half were under 25, although it is not clear how many were under 18. There is therefore some evidence of rough sleeping. On the other hand, several workers in the area felt that rough sleeping was far less common in the area than more hidden forms of unstable homelessness, particularly staying with a succession of friends and relatives. There was also a feeling that young people who were not able to rely on the close-knit community for support tended to move out of the area to cities due to a lack of emergency housing options within the area. There was also some suggestion that rough sleeping might be higher in summer when the tourist season was in full swing and accommodation was at a premium.

The situation in Strabane and Sedgemoor would appear to be very similar, based on the comments of professionals in these areas. One difference was that in Sedgemoor there seemed to be a better stock of emergency housing provision for young people in the area. However, according to the hostels providing this accommodation, this was still not sufficient for the demand, which had increased in recent years.

Given this shortage of accommodation in rural areas, it seems
inevitable that young people under 18 who become homeless will have to adopt other strategies: rough sleeping (which seems relatively rare); staying with friends, relatives or acquaintances (which seems more common); or moving out of the area.

In Mid Sussex, despite the different characteristics of the area, the situation seemed similar. One hostel had three emergency beds and a waiting list of 70 young people, more than a third of whom were under the age of 18. These young people were either temporarily staying with friends or in some cases living on the streets.

**Suburban Areas**

Two of the three suburban areas, Merthyr in South Wales and Ashfield in Nottinghamshire, from which we interviewed professionals, were industrial areas formerly associated with coal-mining and relatively poor economically. In common with the rural areas, there were many mentions of hidden homelessness and 'sofa-surfing' in these areas. A number of workers expressed concerns for the welfare of young people in these situations owing to the possibility of their being exploited or caught up in unsafe activities, a point we will return to in Chapter 11. In contrast with the rural areas, however, there was much more evidence of rough sleeping in these areas. In both areas, a recent research study about youth homelessness had identified a significant level of rough sleeping (Wilkinson and Craig, 1998; Hutson and Jones, 1997). The South Wales study of rough sleeping in Rhondda Cynon Taff, an area adjacent to Merthyr and almost identical in character, had found that the level of rough sleeping was comparable to that in large cities and that a significant proportion (43%) of rough sleepers were under the age of 18 (Hutson and Jones, 1997).

The third suburban area, Blackburn, was primarily selected due to the high proportion of young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin in the area, a group which we will discuss separately later in this chapter. However, those workers making comments about youth homelessness in general identified both hidden homelessness and rough sleeping as common in the area, although there are no figures available.

In these suburban areas, there seemed to be more services geared
towards young people and more awareness of homelessness as an issue for under 18-year-olds (including those under 16).

Cities

We interviewed professionals in seven cities: Belfast, Glasgow, Cardiff, Newcastle, Plymouth, Salford and London. The workers in these areas expressed mixed and often conflicting messages. Some said that there was little or no sleeping rough in the area. However, it became clear that this view may well be due to a lack of awareness since specific city centre outreach services, drop-in centres, and emergency hostels show a different picture.

In most of the cities, at least one of the above kind of agencies reported being aware of significant numbers of young people under the age of 18 sleeping on the streets in the city centre, although often this was temporary and sporadic, being interspersed with periods sleeping staying on friends’ floors.

Several research studies confirm this pattern. In Glasgow, a monitoring exercise in 1998 found evidence of at least 83 young people under the age of 18 sleeping rough in the city (Carlin and Bradstreet, 1999). In Salford, researchers (Galvin, Steele and Somerville, undated) found that there were a growing number of young homeless people and that two-thirds of the overall homeless sample of 66 people (not age specific) had slept rough. In Plymouth, a three-week snapshot survey (Gunner et al., 1997) identified 82 young people as homeless, 40% of whom were 16 to 17 years old. A third had slept rough at some time. The study also found that there was a significant incidence of homelessness from surrounding rural areas and that one in five young people had slept rough in the countryside or in the city. In London, Centrepoint (1998) reports that two-fifths of the young people aged 16 to 17 arriving at its central London shelter had slept rough in 1997/8.

Data gathering across 14 Centrepoint projects found a link between running away and later rough sleeping incidence. Two-fifths of the young people surveyed in the projects had run away before the age of 16, and over half of these young people (52%) had slept rough compared to 37% of those who had not run away before the age of 16.

Putting together the information from agencies and local research studies, we would conclude that there is probably a significant inci-
dence of young people aged 16 to 17 sleeping rough in large cities in the UK, although this may not be apparent to non-specialist agencies working with young people in general. In addition, many professionals suggested that, as in rural and suburban areas, there was a substantial amount of hidden homelessness.

African-Caribbean and Asian Young People

The issue of being away amongst African-Caribbean and Asian young people was a specific focus of the interviews with professionals in Lambeth and Blackburn respectively. In addition, information relating to young people from ethnic minority groups was gathered from workers in other areas, particularly Glasgow, Plymouth and Cardiff.

In terms of the prevalence of being away amongst 16- to 17-year-olds, there seems to be a common view for both African-Caribbean and Asian young people. This was that, whilst there is a significant incidence of young people choosing or being forced to leave home amongst these groups, it is less visible than amongst white young people. A number of reasons were suggested for this by professionals.

First, there was a feeling that the streets were a particularly dangerous place to be for African-Caribbean and Asian young people. Traditional street homeless culture was characterised as being white, racist and intolerant. Thus, literally being on the streets may be very much a last resort for black young people.

The homelessness wasn't an issue in terms of them sleeping out because it was very unsafe for them to sleep out. When we set up a resettlement service and specifically started looking at the needs of black and ethnic minority young people, they started using our resettlement service. So there is definitely a need in terms of homelessness, but you have to target your service differently in order to identify where that need is and [how] best to address the needs of those people.

Second, it was felt that hostels for young people were also often unsuitable places for black young people for several reasons. Both the young people and the staff in these hostels were predominantly white and this made living in them a very isolating experience. Young people
often experienced racism if they did move into hostels. In addition, workers felt that many of these were not culturally sensitive to the needs of young people from minority ethnic cultures.

Third, young black people’s self-respect meant that they handled things in a different way:

*I think definitely yeh... being black myself. I realise that black people tend to hide their... all different aspects of their lives, their emotions and what-have-you. If they’re going through the same thing as a white person, they tend to hide it you know... mask it in some way... they’ll do it in a different way so as not to attract attention. That’s what black people are like. And that’s why you don’t see them on the streets. I’m sure there’s loads of them around. But they’re just hidden.*

It seemed far more likely, then, that African-Caribbean and Asian young people would attempt to utilise support within their communities as far as was practical, rather than resort to sleeping rough or moving into a hostel.

This tendency also means that even workers with a good knowledge of these young people found it hard to estimate the numbers who may be homeless and staying temporarily with friends.

**SUMMARY**

Although we cannot come up with estimates for the numbers of 16- and 17-year-olds who spend time away from home in unstable situations, the comments of a large number of professionals, and the case with which we were able to find young people to interview who had experience of these situations, suggests that there is a substantial and often hidden problem. This view is backed up by local research reports which we have gathered.

Whereas, for under-16s, there is little evidence of different rates or characteristics of being away for young people in different kinds of areas or from different cultural backgrounds, for the 16- to 17-year-olds some substantial differences seem to emerge.

In terms of types of areas, there seems to be more sleeping rough in built-up areas than in rural areas, although there may be little difference between suburban areas and cities in this respect. Consequently.
in rural areas there may be more hidden homelessness or migration out of the area amongst young people.

Amongst African-Caribbean young people and Asian young people also, most of the incidence of being away seems to be hidden due to fear of racism and lack of appropriate services.

Perhaps the differences between under-16s and 16- to 17-year-olds in the above respects arise because the legal situation for under-16s means that young people who run away need to attempt to remain hidden, whereas for certain groups of 16- to 17-year-olds, particularly white young people in urban areas, the availability of some services means that there is more visible evidence of a problem.
Chapter 10

Contexts of running away at 16 and 17

As outlined in the introduction, the legal situation of 16- and 17-year-olds is quite different from that of under-16s in several respects which are relevant to the issue of running away. It is hardly surprising, then, that we found an emphasis on different contextual factors in terms of running away for this older age group. In this chapter, we will look at the context of running away at the ages of 16 and 17, paying particular attention to the factors which are different for this age group, and then consider the triggers that led to young people leaving home.

We will examine the views of professionals (which represent a much more extensive body of data than in relation to the under-16 age group) and the experiences of young people. In terms of the young people, we will make a distinction and draw comparisons between those young people who had run away under the age of 16 and those who had not. Some of the context for the former group has already been presented in Chapters 5 and 6 and is not reproduced here. Out of the purposive sample of 69 young people (see Chapter 2), only 17 had no experience of being away before the age of 16.

The Family Context

There was evidence of a substantially different family context for those young people who had first run away after the age of 16, compared to the family context outlined in Chapter 5 for young people under the age of 16. Only three out of the 17 young people in the purposive sample who first ran away at 16 or 17 were living with both birth parents, and the majority had experienced a parental separation. At least seven had also lived with a step-parent at some point in their lives. Although most of these changes in family form happened before
the age of 16, repercussions of these events often contributed to the young person running away after the age of 16:

They were fighting all the time that I was growing up [from age 10].

In most of these cases, relationships with step-parents were a major issue for the young person:

It was when I started to get older and my step-dad didn’t like it. I was starting to wear make-up and short skirts and he didn’t like it. And one day, I came in and I had love bites on my neck and that’s when it all started and he kicked us out.

This view was backed up by many of the professionals we spoke to:

A big area where we do find a problem is where mum either remarries or gets into a relationship with another bloke. That frequently leads to tension which causes the 16-year-old to feel that they can either no longer live at home or mum to have to make a choice between relationship and the daughter.

In contrast to the under-16s who had run away, for this older age group the incidence of overt abuse was relatively rare. Only three young people mentioned it as part of their family context in interviews – one case of sexual abuse, one case of physical abuse, and one case of neglect.

On the other hand, a major issue for seven young people was parents’ reactions towards their behaviour or lives, with sexuality, drug-related theft and relationships with boyfriends all being sources of conflict between the young person and their parents, which formed the backdrop to the young person running away. In addition, two young people raised issues about over-restrictive parenting. Clashes of perception over what was acceptable behaviour for a young person were usually the root of these tensions, as indicated by one young person who said he was doing:

Normal teenage things like drugs, like cannabis. Stuff like that upset my family. They didn’t like it so I had to move out. My mum thought I was a bad example [to younger siblings].

The family context of these young people who run away at older ages is therefore somewhat different to that presented in Chapter 5,
with more cases of difficult relationships but less cases of overt abuse.

These findings from the young people’s interviews differ from the views of professionals. The workers interviewed identified family breakdown and new family forms as the most common factor, but also put a high emphasis on abuse (both physical and sexual). This is not necessarily contradictory, however, because the professionals were commenting on young people running away at 16 and 17 as a whole, whereas the above analysis makes a distinction between young people in this category on the basis of whether they had or had not run away before the age of 16. The analysis from the young people’s interviews (and the survey, for that matter) suggests that, where issues of abuse are present within the family, it is likely that young people will start running away before they reach the age of 16.

Professionals put a strong emphasis also on parents not being able to cope with or control young people’s behaviour for this age group:

*Parenting skills are sometimes virtually non-existent and the child runs wild and then the parent just can’t cope.*

This is consonant with the findings from the young people’s interviews.

**The Substitute Care Context**

We have already seen in an earlier chapter that a majority of the purposive sample of young people who had run away under the age of 16 had spent some time in substitute care, although this was most commonly after they began running away.

However, for the group of young people who only started running away at 16 or 17, relatively few (four out of 17) had been in care. This is hardly surprising, given the high rate of running away under 16 amongst young people who are in substitute care. Three of these four young people ran away after being returned to their family from care. This suggests that, for young people who have had relatively stable experiences of substitute care and have never run away, the transition to family life at 16 may be problematic and lead to homelessness. The other young person was thrown out of home at 16, placed in foster care and left a week later.
A large number of the professionals interviewed mentioned the importance of care backgrounds as a context to young people running away over the age of 16. Specific concerns voiced by a number of people were perceived inadequate preparation for leaving care, premature age of leaving care and inadequate support after leaving care. As one social worker said:

Most young people, even if they are at home with both parents [who are very supportive] at sixteen, would not be able to manage on their own. We expect so much more of these young people and they haven’t got that safety net. Once they’re discharged from the children’s homes, they can’t actually go back every Sunday and take their bag of dirty laundry and have a nice meal and a bath and someone to say, ‘Come on, it’s alright, bring your bills and we’ll sort those out’.

It was also felt that the tendency for young people who had left care to act as host to other young people could lead to the breakdown of tenancies. On top of these factors, the damaging nature of the substitute care experience, particularly where there had been a lot of movement between placements, was seen as contributing to instability after leaving care. The consequence of these factors was often the breakdown of the leaving care placement, and, as one worker for a nightstop scheme pointed out:

Usually, there’s a planned move on from leaving care, but if that then breaks down we see young people who’ve come to the end of the line and really haven’t got anywhere else to go.

THE PEER CONTEXT

Earlier, we noted the influence of peer relationships on running away for those young people aged 11 to 15, drawing on information from the interviews with both young people and professionals. This issue does not seem to be anywhere near as important for the 16- to 17-year-old age group, especially amongst young people who had not run away under the age of 16. Peer influences were only evident in two out of the 17 interviews with this age group. In addition, peer factors are rarely mentioned by professionals in connection with this age group.
SEXUALITY
A number of professionals cited parents’ reactions to young people being gay as a potential trigger for homelessness amongst 16- to 17-year-olds. The purposive interview sample included one young person for whom this was the case.

SPECIAL NEEDS
This was also an issue cited by a small number of professionals, for which we have fairly limited evidence. Again, it applies to one or two of the interview sample.

OVERVIEW OF PERSONAL ISSUES
To conclude this sub-section, we would comment that most of the above issues were only mentioned by a minority of professionals. Each is likely to have relevance for some young people who run away at the ages of 16 and 17, but none seems to be prevalent in the majority of cases. However, when we considered all these issues as a group, we found that the majority of young people who ran away at 16 or 17 had experienced problems in at least one of the above areas before running away.

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT
This is primarily an issue in terms of young people under 16, and we have already covered professionals’ views on this in Chapter 6. However, we briefly note here the school experience of those young people who first ran away over the age of 16. In general, whilst many of these young people had had some problems at school, there were lower levels of regular truancy and less occurrence of fixed-term and permanent exclusions than for young people who first ran away at younger ages. Only a third of the older age group could be categorised as having had serious problems at school and only two or three had become detached from the education system before the age of 16.

STRUCTURAL ISSUES
Comments on structural issues for the 16- to 17-year-old age group were very common in the interviews with professionals. There were four key issues here. First, there were difficulties in relation to the
changes in housing benefit outlined in the introduction, which can lead to a shortfall in income to cover their rent. A number of professionals felt that this contributed to homelessness for young people. Second, there was the exclusion from benefits of some young people in this age group, again as outlined in the introduction. Third, a number of professionals mentioned the tensions arising in families when young people left school and became a financial burden on their parents. Again, access to benefits is a problem for this group, and the tensions often led to young people being forced to leave home by their parents. Finally, there was the lack of access to local authority housing for this age group. Commonly, local authorities will not give a tenancy to an under 18-year-old unless the young person has a guarantor for the rent.

As one worker from a homelessness project put it, the result of all these problems is:

_A lot of them live from hand to mouth .... They might qualify for some form of benefit but it would be very, very low._

And as the manager of another project said:

_We see a lot of young people living on benefits, those who are entitled to benefits – £29, £36 a week – and trying to live independently on that sort of income is a task that a number of adults with a lot of experience of budgeting wouldn’t be able to do, and yet we have the expectation that these young people with very little life experience and life skills should be able to manage._

Additionally, we would note that in Northern Ireland the position of 16-year-olds differs from that in the rest of the UK. Young people of this age are in practice generally not able to access hostel accommodation and this problem was mentioned by a number of the professionals interviewed.

The structural issues mentioned by professionals are evident in around a quarter of the interviews with young people who ran away at age 16 or 17, both as a reason for running away (tensions with parents and overcrowding) or as a difficulty once they had run away.

In general, it seems that issues in relation to benefits and housing policy are particularly difficult for this age group, who are in many ways caught between two systems, neither young enough to access services for children and adolescents, nor old enough to have full adult rights.
Where they are mentioned, they are usually in connection with relationships with boyfriends/girlfriends and with involvement in drugs. The influence of these on tensions between young people and parents has been noted for a few of the young people in this age group under 'Family context' above.

It seems, therefore, that peer influences leading to running away peak amongst the 11- to 15-year-old age group and then decline for 16- to 17-year-olds.

**PERSONAL CONTEXTS**

**MENTAL HEALTH**

A far larger number of workers mentioned mental health problems in connection with homeless 16- and 17-year-olds than in connection with under 16-year-olds. In Plymouth, a local study found that 40% of young people with mental health problems using a drop-in centre also had issues with homelessness (Adams 1996, cited in Gunner et al. (1997)).

As the manager of a nightstop scheme said:

*I think there is a lot of work that needs to be done around young people and the relationship between mental health and homelessness ... I would say that most, if not all, of the young people who come to us have a level of mental health issues simply by being homeless and going through whatever traumas they’ve been through to end up in that situation. We are trying to increase our knowledge of the issues because we see it as being very pertinent to our work at the moment.*

Specific mental health issues mentioned by workers were depression, self-harm and psychosis.

It should be remembered that there is a disinclination amongst agencies to define young people as having mental health problems and therefore there is some ambiguity over this issue. As one social worker put it:

*Here, sensibly, you have to be pretty bad to be taken on by the mental health team and that’s right because you don’t want to be labelling people when it’s not right to be doing that.*
As with other issues already discussed, the sample of young people's interviews suggested that, where mental health was an issue, many young people had started running away before the age of 16 and these issues have already been covered in Chapter 6. However, in addition, a third of those young people who had first run away at 16 or 17 reported having mental health issues, predominantly depression.

**Alcohol and Drugs Issues**

Again, there were many comments about these by professionals. In particular, for this older age group, a few workers talked of an increasing availability of heroin in rural areas. However, it is hard to know how much emphasis to place on the views of a very small number of workers.

Amongst the young people interviewed, drugs and alcohol problems were roughly as common for those who ran away at 16 or 17 as for the young people who had begun running away at a younger age. For most of these young people, these problems had begun before they started running away.

**Offending**

In contrast with the under-16 group, those who had run away at 16 or 17 rarely mentioned issues with offending. However, bearing in mind that a substantial amount of the offending under 16 was a survival strategy after running away had started, this difference is perhaps indicative of the somewhat wider survival options for the 16- to 17-year-old age group, as well as the kinds of situations which they were in whilst away (see Chapter 11).

Professionals spoke of offending for this older age group largely in terms of a potential source of conflict between young people and parents which could lead to the young person having to leave home.

**Pregnancy and Parenthood**

Professionals made relatively few comments about these issues in connection with young people running away. Our interview sample shows a more mixed picture. There was only one example of a young person running away for the first time due to a pregnancy, but a number of other young women said that a pregnancy had led to their being asked to leave home on a subsequent occasion.
SEXUALITY
A number of professionals cited parents' reactions to young people being gay as a potential trigger for homelessness amongst 16- to 17-year-olds. The purposive interview sample included one young person for whom this was the case.

SPECIAL NEEDS
This was also an issue cited by a small number of professionals, for which we have fairly limited evidence. Again, it applies to one or two of the interview sample.

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Additionally, we would note that in Northern Ireland the position of 16-year-olds differs from that in the rest of the UK. Young people of this age are in practice generally not able to access hostel accommodation and this problem was mentioned by a number of the professionals interviewed.

The structural issues mentioned by professionals are evident in around a quarter of the interviews with young people who ran away at age 16 or 17, both as a reason for running away (tensions with parents and overcrowding) or as a difficulty once they had run away.

In general, it seems that issues in relation to benefits and housing policy are particularly difficult for this age group, who are in many ways caught between two systems, neither young enough to access services for children and adolescents, nor old enough to have full adult rights.
COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL ISSUES

The community and cultural issues outlined for under-16s in Chapter 6 are equally relevant to the 16- to 17-year-old age group, and it would be superfluous to reproduce them here. However, one issue which came across strongly from the interviews with professionals about this age group related to the specific tensions between young Asian people (especially women) and their families.

One interviewee commented on the different gender cultural expectations for Muslim Asian boys and girls. For girls, things may be more difficult due to the concept of 'izzat' (respect), which places an extra burden on them. The interviewee felt that this is also present for Hindu and Sikh young people, but possibly in a more dilute form.

An Asian community worker described the issues as follows:

*The girl might feel very repressed in the family atmosphere. In certain family culture or environments, the girls are not seen as fully formed members or fully formed individuals. It's those sorts of issues, which I believe are cultural issues, which cause that. Where the family atmosphere is not very open, it's not very flexible, it's not very welcoming, so in that kind of atmosphere the girls might not see a future. . . . A lot of the times there is a trigger and something happens within her life and that just makes her think that she has to go. It's not necessarily the family life, that might be okay. The trigger happens, for example, and I've known this because a very close friend of mine ran away. She was a girl where her auntie saw her with a boy, that was the truth, she was happy, but she could not think of going back to her family with the knowledge that they know [that she had a boyfriend] so she ran away, it's that sort of thing.*

Although there are barriers to Asian young people using general services for young people, as discussed in Chapter 6, some agencies were engaging with this group:

*Most of the young Asian people that we've worked with have left because of disputes about boyfriends and girlfriends and parents not approving, especially not approving if they are not an Asian boyfriend or girlfriend, about young people becoming pregnant or*
girlfriend gets pregnant and it's seen as very shameful. Also those kind of things are more cultural problems really and I know that the young people in Blackburn now who are Asian who perhaps kick against the culture a little bit, that is definitely the main reason why we get young Asian people coming [here]. And we have a high success rate of them going home, definitely.

**Agency Interventions**

There was evidence of a wider range of agency interventions for young people in this age group, including statutory workers and a variety of non-statutory agencies. Most young people at this age were in contact with at least one agency.

**Statutory Agencies**

Young people's experience of social workers and probation workers at age 16 and 17 seemed relatively positive:

*He [social worker] is excellent. He got me out of hospital in two weeks. I'd been there three months and I was homeless for a month so that's why they kept me in there so I wasn't on the streets; the social worker wouldn't have me on the streets.*

*They [the probation service] have got me in here [hostel] and stopped me going to jail.*

**Counsellor**

Five of the young people in this age group were currently receiving counselling, and this was generally received positively:

*They don't tell you what to do with your life; they advise you and help you to open up and you know everything is confidential; they've got a way of opening you up... you just tell the truth and spill out all your problems. It does help a lot.*

**Drop-in Centres**

Drop-in centres were the most commonly mentioned agencies by young people in this age group, and mostly their view of these services was positive:
It's open in the evenings and you can come here. If you need to talk to someone you can.

Everyone's friendly, they'll give you advice, and you can see counsellors and whatever else you need. My self-confidence went up a lot as soon as I started coming in here.

I don't think they were very good 'cos they just gave me this list of places to call for flats and I don't like talking on the phone.

I actually quite enjoy it, but my friends are against mixing with protestants - but why not - protestant is the same person as me - I don't believe in religion at all.

TRIGGERS FOR BEING AWAY

Having considered the context in which being away at the age of 16 and 17 takes place, we end this chapter with an examination of the triggers that led to young people choosing or being forced to leave home.

There was a total of 74 incidents of being away at 16 and 17 years of age amongst the purposive sample.

The most common trigger for being away was conflict at home, which was the principal reason for 27 of the young people. The other key identifiable reasons were abuse (seven young people), unhappiness at home (seven young people) and pressure to leave from outside the household (five young people).

Around half the sample were forced to leave on at least one occasion at 16 or 17, confirming the pattern already observed earlier in the report for this phenomenon to increase with age.

COMPARISON OF TRIGGERS ACCORDING TO AGE

Earlier in this chapter, we described the family context of the young people who first went missing at 16 or 17. These young people usually lived in disrupted or reconstituted families, there was less evidence of overt abuse than for young people who ran away or were forced to leave before the age of 16, and there was an increased level of conflict over the young person's behaviour. Relatively few young people in this older age group had any experience of living in substitute care.
Not surprisingly, this context is reflected in the triggers for young people being away, which were identifiable for 16 of the 17 young people who first spent time away at 16 or 17. The sample divides broadly into two groups: those who chose to leave and those who were forced to leave. All of these young people were living with their family before the first incident of running away.

Seven young people chose to leave. For three of these young people, all female, the triggers for leaving were linked to abusive family environments – one instance of sexual abuse, one instance of physical abuse, and one instance of having witnessed a long pattern of domestic violence. For the first two of these cases, the young people also experienced their parents as over-restrictive. For the other four, the main trigger was family conflict or very poor quality of relationships, including arguments over boyfriends and not having a job.

*I met this man who was 24. He was on smack and my mum didn't like it. Then she found out I was pregnant and wouldn't get rid of it and the rows started and I moved out.*

Nine young people were forced to leave by parents. There was no apparent history of physical or sexual abuse amongst this group, although one young person had been neglected. The triggers for being thrown out were primarily arguments linked to parents' disapproval of the young person's behaviour (including being pregnant, having a boyfriend, offending, getting involved in drugs and stealing from parents).

In the other cases, there was evidence of declining relationships which sometimes included conflict linked to economic stresses where the young person had left school and did not have an income.

*I'd have put up with it but it were getting to the stage where we couldn't even be in the same room. So in the end he just kicked me out.*

The triggers for running away appear to be substantially different with less overt abuse and more disharmony for the over-16 group. There is also an increasing incidence of young people being forced to leave home.

Thus, we can tentatively suggest that perhaps the key difference between those who first ran away at 16 or 17 and those who first ran
away before is in terms of the relative prevalence of young people being thrown out due to family conflict, and those who chose to leave abusive contexts, with the former pattern appearing to be more common amongst the older age group. This observation fits in with the views of many professionals interviewed, who commented on the increased tendency for parents to eject young people once they had reached the age of 16. For example, a housing officer reported that:

Parents say, 'It's not my responsibility any more, she's sixteen, she's moved out and she can't come back and we want no more to do with her.'

**Summary**

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 and more evidence of family conflict and breakdown, often leading to young people being forced to leave home.

Some contextual issues which were important for the under-16 age group had less significance for this older group. Relatively few of the young people who had not run away before the age of 16 had spent any time in substitute care, a history of serious problems at school was less common, and the significance of peer relationships as a contributory factor to leaving home was less pronounced.

Issues relating to mental health, alcohol, and drugs were as prevalent amongst young people who first left home at 16 or 17 as those who had run away at a younger age, although offending was perhaps less of an issue.

Economic factors were more important for this age group. The impact of current benefits policies relating to 16- and 17-year-olds seems to be an important contributory factor for some young people in this age group being forced to leave home.
Experiences of being away at 16 and 17

In this chapter, we will explore the experience of being away from a stable place to live at 16 and 17. All in all, we consider the experiences of 48 young people – 11 who had first run away before the age of 11, 20 who had first run away or been forced to leave between the ages of 11 and 15, and 17 who had spent time away at 16 to 17 years of age.

In reading the findings, it is important to be aware that we have not sought to provide an overall picture of young people leaving home and becoming ‘homeless’ at 16 or 17. The young people we spoke to were specifically selected due to their having some experience of running away and being in unstable situations. There will be many other young people who leave home and find stable accommodation (a partner, other relatives, a hostel or a flat) without having these experiences. Thus, whilst for the under-16s we have described a representative picture based on a large survey as well as almost 200 interviews, here we are looking at the experiences of a specific sub-sample of young people.

Lengths of Time Away

It is not easy to establish the length of absence on the first occasion for some of the interviewees. However, where we were able to be clear about this, it seemed that young people were away for longer periods than for under-16s, with the minimum being one week. Some young people never returned home after the first incident of being away at 16 or 17.

Levels of Detachment

Despite the conflicts which had often given rise to young people running away, only seven young people were completely detached from
their family during this period, although for a further 11 there was a repetitive pattern of turning to family for support, sometimes including a return home, only for the relationship to break down again. It is notable, for example, that all the young people who returned to their family after first being away at 16 or 17 soon left again, usually because the issues that led them to leave the first time recurred or worsened. For example, one young woman who had suffered physical abuse for many years described how she realised things were never going to change:

*It changed for a day or two, everyone tiptoed around me. Then everything went back to the same. No matter how many times they say sorry, they'll always do it again. I realised this isn't for me, it's bound to be wrong. I've had to run away twice. Something isn't right. I realised this house isn't for me. It didn't change the first time, so why should it change the second time? So I didn't go back.*

**Sources of support**

All of the young people were receiving support from others during the periods when they were away. In most cases, this involved a mixture of informal support from friends and family and formal support from agencies. There was substantial evidence that these young people had access to a much wider range of services than under 16-year-olds who run away. This included the possibility of independent supported accommodation in hostels and housing projects – an option which is only exceptionally open to young people under the age of 16 for the legal reasons outlined in the introduction. Additionally, there seemed to be a wider use of advice, drop-in and information services than for the under-16 age group. A likely explanation for this is that young people who run away at 16 and 17 are rarely returned home by the police and therefore are much freer to approach agencies for support. Young people in this age group often commented positively on the support they had received from both statutory and non-statutory services, including advice and counselling agencies run by national and local non-statutory organisations:
In Blackpool, I went to a drop-in day centre. There we could have a game of pool, toast, coffee, biscuits, food. The soup run was good. They were nice people to go out of their way to help people like I was. They used to talk to us and were friendly.

WHERE THE YOUNG PEOPLE SLEPT

Over a third of the young people slept rough at some point whilst away, even though there were wider emergency accommodation options for this age group. However, one should bear in mind that we targeted young people who had spent time away from a stable place to live, so it is hardly surprising that some slept rough and is not necessarily representative of all young people who leave home at 16 or 17.

GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY

In general, young people were more geographically mobile in this age group. Twenty-one young people moved out of their local area, some travelling hundreds of miles (e.g. Glasgow to London and then to Cardiff). At the time of the interview, nine of these young people were still living away from their area, whilst 12 had returned to it.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

In addition to the possibility of agency support, young people aged 16 and 17 are to a limited extent more able to access legitimate financial support through work or claiming benefits. Nevertheless, there was still evidence of a heavy reliance on other survival strategies. At least 15 of the young people were dependent on friends or relatives whilst they were away, and a further 14 survived through illegal activities (stealing, begging, etc.). As for the under-16 age group, we found very limited evidence of them using sex as a means of survival, although it is always possible that this was a strategy young people were reluctant to disclose.

RISKS

As with the younger age group, there was considerable evidence of the risk involved in running away. Three young people were physically
assaulted whilst away, another was harassed by older people on the streets and a further two spoke of their fears of being attacked:

I got hassled sometimes by druggies and old tramps and that. I just said to go away. It was not easy to relax – you have to keep an eye on other people when you're sleeping rough – always look over your shoulders or through the corner of your eyes.

Also in common with the younger group, whilst sleeping rough appeared the most risky strategy, young people staying with friends were not necessarily risk-free as two of the physical assaults occurred in this context – one where the young person had had to move with her baby to the house of a female friend.

Three days after she was born, I moved to [friend's name]. Her boyfriend, [name], hit me. He spit in my face and slapped me across the face. He kicked me and he was calling me everything [Friend] did a statement – he keeps hitting her too .... It was scary there.

In addition to this overt evidence of danger, reliance on drugs and alcohol to cope whilst away was evident for some of the young people, and a number described feeling cold whilst sleeping rough and missing their family, including one young woman who said:

I slept under a bridge and in the park. It was a really bad experience. I was freezing. I was starving. All I wanted was to go to a nice loving home.

In stark contrast, one young person felt that the experience had been broadly positive, having enjoyed the freedom of three years mostly on the road:

I was very happy travelling .... Getting my independence [was] one of the best things. I had a pretty good life. I was on the go all the time. I used to get up in the morning and look at the map and see Preston and that's it. I was off to Preston!

There was some evidence of differences between those who chose to leave and those who were forced to leave, with some of the former group sleeping rough and consequently using illegal survival strategies.
PROBLEMS WITH DRUGS AND OFFENDING

Issues related to drugs and offending were, in general, very prevalent amongst this group of young people. At least 22 young people used or sold drugs and at least 21 committed criminal offences.

HOW THE INCIDENTS ENDED

Of the young people who first left home at this age, six of the young people returned to the place they had left (family); five went to live temporarily with a sibling, girlfriend/boyfriend, or friend; four moved into other kinds of accommodation (hostel, mother and baby unit, or bed and breakfast); and one (the last quoted above) remained homeless for three years until returning home when his father died. Thus, for most of the young people, the first incident was resolved fairly positively, although this resolution was often only temporary.

Eventually, most of the 48 young people in the sample left home permanently. At the time of the interview, just over half (25) of the young people were living in a hostel. Of the remainder, seven were living in their own independent accommodation, three with family, three with friends, three in substitute care, two with a boyfriend, and one in a night shelter. The remaining four young people were in unstable or unclear situations.

COMPARISON WITH THE UNDER-16 AGE GROUP

It is interesting to compare experiences of being away at 16 or 17 with those of young people away under the age of 16. There are both similarities and contrasts between experiences of being away under and over the age of 16.

Similarities included where young people slept, how they survived, and the risks that they faced whilst away. There were similar levels of sleeping rough, with around half of both age groups having resorted to this at some point. There was also evidence of similar risky survival strategies, despite the increased possibility of some young people in the 16 to 17 age group having the means to support themselves through work, savings or benefits.
The key differences relate to lengths of time away, geographical mobility and the options the young person had open to her or him. To the extent that we were able to ascertain lengths of time away, these seem to be considerably longer for those young people over 16. Young people in this older age group also seemed to be more geographically mobile than under 16-year-olds. Moreover, there was evidence of young people at 16 and 17 having more options due to their different legal situation. Some were able to claim benefits to support themselves whilst away from home, and there were more emergency and longer-term accommodation options available for this age group.

**SUMMARY**

This chapter has looked at the experience of young people who spend time away from a stable place to live at the ages of 16 and 17, based on 48 interviews with young people.

There is evidence of young people spending significant amounts of time in unstable situations, in some cases never returning home. Whilst the majority of those interviewed had eventually found a stable place to live, this was often not a simple process. Many of the interviews illustrate the vulnerability of young people who are away from home at this age. Over a third of the young people slept rough, and a similar proportion relied on risky survival strategies such as begging or stealing in order to survive. Young people who depended on friends or acquaintances for support could also find themselves in vulnerable situations.
In this chapter, we look at sub-groups of young people who are away from home at 16 and 17 years of age. We make use of case studies, as we did in Chapter 8.

Our analysis suggests that there were some important differences in several aspects of running-away patterns at 16 or 17 for young people who first ran away at different ages. Whilst we do not have a representative sample here, we have employed statistical tests to ensure that the differences we note have met the usually acceptable standards of significance (here, we use a confidence level of 95%).

Young people who first ran away before the age of 11 and were still running away after the age of 16 appeared to be much the most likely to travel outside the area. Nine out of 11 young people had done so, and this pattern seems less prevalent as the age of the first running-away incident increases. None of the young people who first ran away at 16 or 17 had yet permanently moved out of their local area, although six had spent some time away and then returned.

Fitting in with this pattern, there were also higher levels of detachment from family for those young people who had first run away at a young age. The majority of these young people were now completely detached from their family, whilst two-thirds of those who had first run away at 16 or 17 were still relatively attached.

Partly as a result of the above tendencies, those young people who first ran away young were more likely to be reliant solely on formal support from agencies, whilst generally, the young people who had started running away from the age of 11 onwards also had informal sources of support through either friends or family.

The above differences were statistically significant. At face value, there appeared to be higher levels of drug usage and offending amongst the young people who had first run away before the
age of 16. Similarly, there appeared to be some tendency for the
these young people to be more reliant on illegal means of survival.
However, these differences did not meet the criteria for statistical
significance.

Based on those differences which were significant, however, we can
say with some confidence that young people who start running away at
a younger age show, by the age of 16, higher levels of detachment and
mobility than those who start running away at a later stage.

In order to illustrate the points coming out of the above analysis, we
provide four case studies. Two of these (Wayne and Sian) are continuations
of case studies presented in Chapter 8, relating to young people
under the age of 16. The other two (Sandeep and Sinead) are new case
studies, illustrating some of the patterns of being away for young
people who had not run away under the age of 16.

Wayne’s story is illustrative of some of the tendencies highlighted
in the above analysis. Wayne first ran away at the age of 8, and went
on to run away more than ten times. He was thrown out of home at 15
and placed in foster care (see Chapter 8 for further details). Wayne’s
experience at 16 reflects some of the common themes for young
people who run away repeatedly from a young age: a lack of family
support networks, geographical mobility, and a reliance on agencies
for support.

Case Study 5: Wayne at 16 plus (continued from p. 119)
Because the foster placement had been successful, it was
thought it would be a good idea for Wayne to progress to living
in independent accommodation. This did not work out too well
as he was inundated by friends and acquaintances who had
nowhere to go. There was a lot of drug taking going on and
some of the friends were sleeping on the floor. Wayne got into
debt over his drug use. He was also in arrears with his rent.
These debts made Wayne decide to leave the area. He ‘jumped’
a train to Cardiff.

When I got to Cardiff, I used to sleep around on the streets like.
I used to sleep in bus shelters, in an arcade by the steps. I was
woken up a couple of times by the police because I was in the
way of the cleaners. I slept wherever I could really, sometimes
in the car parks. Once I got to know some people, I was sleeping with a couple of people, I felt a lot safer then.

The people he hung around with on the streets were of a mixed age group. These people all looked out for one another. He went to the Big Issue for help.

That was when I started selling the Big Issue. They bade me up straight away and that's when I started making some money then so I could feed myself.

Wayne is living in a hostel at present and is still selling the Big Issue. Wayne feels that he is beginning to get on his feet again and hopes to get a council flat in the near future.

Sian first ran away at the age of 13 due to deteriorating relationships at home, and after running away numerous times she went to live with an aunt. In contrast to Wayne, Sian maintained some links with her family, remained in her local area, and also had a close network of friends on which to rely.

**Case Study 6: Sian at 16 plus (continued from p.121)**

At 16, Sian became pregnant. She and her boyfriend split up. She lives in an area with a high level of empty properties and the local authority was able to offer her the tenancy of a flat. Sian found living on her own a traumatic experience. The council flat she lived in was broken into a number of times. Her door was kicked down on four occasions. She became depressed and unable to sleep. She attributes the miscarriage she suffered to the upset she experienced.

I'm staying round friends' houses at the moment. Quite a few friends really. It been like this for two months now. I had a flat. I had a lot of trouble up there because I was young and living on my own. I had a lot of break-ins and my nerves were so bad I had to get out. So I've just been staying around here.

Sian is glad to be away from the flat, but she says:

It's hard having nowhere to live, nowhere to have a long bath or
Sian sees a counsellor weekly and is taking Prozac. She gets some support from her aunt and she is on a housing association waiting list. She hopes to be housed in more suitable accommodation in the future.

The final two case studies illustrate some of the common features amongst young people who first leave home at the age of 16 and 17. These include in Sandeep's case being forced to leave and having problems with drugs, and in Sinead's case the build-up of pressure once she reached the age of 16 and a reliance on family support networks.

**Case Study 8: Sandeep**
Sandeep lived with his father, mother and younger sister. They moved from Scotland to London. He had problems at school: truanting, getting suspended and finally expelled. This was largely to do with drug use. He started stealing from his parents and they threw him out when he was 16. He slept rough for a month. He slept in parks - 'anywhere'.

I didn't know of anywhere to go. I was coming off crack cocaine and I wasn't thinking straight. I got jumped, had fights, was beaten up and robbed while I was sleeping. It was depressing. I had suicidal thoughts. I knew I had screwed myself up.

He survived by shoplifting, begging and went to soup kitchens and day centres. After a month, he went to a cold weather shelter and later on to a hostel. He has never returned home.

I was kicked out once and I have never returned because they told me not to. I don't speak to them anymore.

Sandeep is regretful. He feels that things might have been different had he been able to live in a different area and had a different choice of friends. He says:

I now realise who my friends are and where I screwed up.
Case Study 9: Sinead

Sinead lived with her mother and father until they split up when she was six years old. She lived in various places with her father until she was 14, when she moved in with her mother in Belfast. At 16, her mother threw her out. Sinead’s mother has a night job and Sinead was expected to look after her young sister and brother.

She goes to work at seven in the evening and returns at seven the next morning. I’ve always complained about it because I could never see my friends or do my school work.

One weekend, she trailed the quilt off me and told me to get out of bed. She’s always like that, in moods. I thought nothing of it. When I was in the kitchen, she told me she’ll quicken me up and took a black bin bag and put all my stuff into it. She told me to go.

Sinead left without any possessions or money and did not know where to go.

I walked around for a bit but I’d no money. I was going to go to my granny’s but my mum said she interfered too much so I didn’t go there. I went to my cousins’ house but they weren’t in. I saw my aunt and she lent me 50p to go down to my mate’s house. I spent the first few nights at my mate’s house, then stayed at my granda’s house, then I moved into hostels. I was used to it because I had always been passed around different places. I was never settled anywhere.

I knew she [mum] was going to throw me out some day because the same thing happened to my big sisters when they were 16 or 17. It was still unexpected. Now she keeps threatening to my brother and sister that they are the next to go.

Summary

In this chapter, we have identified differences in experiences and patterns of being away at 16 and 17, depending on the age when the
young person first ran away or was forced to leave home. There are some aspects of being away which vary little across the different subgroups. However, young people who first ran away at a younger age were more detached at this age than young people who first ran away at an older age. This finding points to the long-term effects of running away under 16 on young people’s lives and suggests the possibility that young people with extensive experience of running away at a young age are likely to remain a marginalised group as they move into adulthood.