Working with Young Runaways
Learning from Practice Summary

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This is a summary report on the key findings from a report carried out in 2001, which aimed to provide an overview of the issues involved in initiating, developing and managing projects and services that work with young runaways.

Introduction

The phenomenon of children and young people running away from home or care has, over the past two decades, gradually become recognised as an important social policy issue in the UK. This recognition had been due to the development of projects working with this target group and the publication of research findings into their needs. This report was the first to present an overview of the models of practice that have been developed in the UK in recent years to work specifically with these young people. Its primary intention was to draw together the learning from these practice models in order to inform the future development of work with this target group. The report was commissioned by The Children's Society. Although there had been a number of research-based publications on this topic in the UK over the previous 20 years, there had been no substantial detailed account of the way in which projects had been working with this target group. All known projects working specifically with these young people, outside The Children's Society, were invited to contribute their views and experiences to the report and, ultimately, five external projects and six internal projects participated in this piece of work.

Aims

The publication focused on the views and experiences of managers and practitioners who had worked in projects targeted specifically at young runaways. The intention was to summarise the considerable expertise that had been developed within these projects and to make this expertise accessible to a wide audience. The aim was to provide an overview of the issues involved in initiating, developing and managing projects and services that work with this target group.

Methods

The primary source of information for the report were the expertise and views gathered from managers and practitioners who work or had worked in projects aimed at children and young people who run away. A total of 32 practitioners and managers within the 11 projects contributed their views by means of audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. The contributors had worked extensively with this target group as well as having had a wide range of previous
experience of work with children and young people in the statutory and voluntary sectors.

**Refuges- key learning points**

- Refuges have proved a successful model in providing a safety net for young people who run away and who might otherwise have ended up on the streets or sleeping rough.

- Independent inspection has validated the refuge model and verified the potential for providing high-quality emergency accommodation for young people in this target group.

- The refuge model can be the platform for an effective short-term intervention to help young people to resolve the difficulties that led to them run away, and can often facilitate a speedy return to the place from which they ran away.

- The models of refuge, which have been utilized to date, have been relatively costly. They are also highly resource-intensive in terms of staffing and this can have an impact on the senior staff who are responsible for supervising and supporting staff, and maintaining a continuous service.

- There may be less difference between the costs of the centralised and dispersed models than might be imagined. The models have counterbalancing strengths and weaknesses in other respects, concerning practical operational issues and benefits for young people.

- It appears that there is a relatively small need for a confidential refuge among young people who run away. However, the sense of security provided by refuges may be of benefit to a larger number of young people. Refuge managers need to be alert to the risks of insularity, which seem to be inherent in refuge provision.

- In general, contributors felt that it was preferable in most cases to limit the length of time that young people spent in refuge to much less than the 14 nights allowed in law.

- There is a tendency towards lack of flexibility in the refuge model, but it may be particularly suitable for a particular sub-group of the overall population of young people who run away. These are young people who would otherwise have nowhere safe to sleep, for whom a quick return home is relatively likely, who
are not engaged in a repetitive cycle of running away, and have not experienced lengthy periods of detachment or living on the streets.

- It seems to be legally acceptable, with parental consent, to accommodate young people under the age of 16 who run away, without recourse to Section 51 of the Childrens Act. This potentially opens up more flexible forms of emergency accommodation for young people.

- The crisis intervention model usually employed by refuges can run into problems with young people who run away repeatedly. There is a need to consider the most effective ways of meeting these young people's longer-term needs, as there is a danger of cyclical use of refuge.

**Street work – Key learning points**

- The street-work model has proved highly successful at engaging with young people who have become detached from mainstream society and may be particularly mistrustful of adults.

- Successful street work requires a careful engagement with the street environment, which is largely beyond the control of the project, and thoughtful and sensitive methods of making contact with young people within this environment.

- The street environment can change over time, and therefore street-work projects also need to be flexible in order to cope with a shifting basis for their work.

- Street work with young runaways was originally seen as an outreach activity, but methods of carrying out significant pieces of work in the street environment have gradually been developed.

- However, many young people on the streets will not want to move off the streets and so projects need to focus on harm minimisation and on patiently developing a long-term relationship with young people, so that if they encounter a crisis and do wish to move off the streets, they will feel able to trust the project.

- City-centre-based street work will not reach all groups of detached young people who run away. In particular, it is unlikely to reach black young people, and may also tend to be focused more on young people running away from substitute care than
those from families. There is therefore a need to pilot alternative forms of detached work.

**Missing Persons Schemes – Key learning points**

- Appropriate methods of contact are key to the success of missing persons schemes. Passive models which rely on young people taking the initiative have proved unsuccessful, and there is a need to be more active, through letters and through visiting young people and/or their families.

- Parents and carers have generally responded positively to the interventions of missing persons schemes, viewing them as a service which can help the young person. There has been surprisingly little hostility towards workers.

- However, since not all young runaways are reported as missing to the police, projects relying solely on police referrals will, by definition, only reach a proportion of all young runaways, and therefore do not constitute a universal intervention.

- In developing a missing persons scheme, a fairly fundamental decision needs to be made about the extent to which the scheme focuses on the young person, or on the whole family. This will have implications both for the initial reception of the scheme’s intervention and also for its ability to carry our ongoing work to prevent further running away incidents.

- Missing persons schemes may need to develop a slightly different model of working with young people in residential care, given the high volume of reported missing incidents, many of which are essentially ‘unauthorised absences’ rather than incidents of ‘running away’. Nevertheless, they can play an important role as a safety net.

- The perceived independence of missing persons schemes from social services and the police is believed by contributors to be an important ingredient in their ability to engage with young people and families.

- Initiating a rapid response when the young person returns home is also regarded as important.

- Missing persons schemes may not be as effective at engaging with young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, as it seems that these young people may well be less likely to be reported as missing when they run away.
• Good inter-agency working seems particularly important for an effective missing persons scheme, and evidently the support of the police is an essential requirement.

**Centre-Based Services – Key learning points**

• Centre-based services, being partly reliant on self-referral by young people, need to pay particular attention to publicity and awareness-raising, as there is evidence that young people who run away are not always aware of services available to them in their locality.

• However, both projects considered in this chapter have been successful in engaging with young people who are not already in contact with other helping agencies.

• Situating services for runaways within a centre providing a range of services for young people offers the possibility of an integrated approach to work which can meet a diverse range of needs both in the short and the longer term.

• There is a need, among a significant minority of young people using centre-based projects, for short-term emergency accommodation, and it may be that such projects are best located as one component within a network of services for young people who run away.

• In common with the missing persons schemes discussed in Chapter 5, the projects in this chapter have undertaken a considerable amount of work with families and report a positive reception to their work from parents and carers.

• The short-term interventions of the centre-based projects can be effective in resolving immediate issues, but some young people and their families will require a more substantial longer-term intervention and, therefore, projects adopting this model will need either to cater for these needs or to establish good links with other specialist services in the locality, such as family therapy services.

**Other Practice Models- key learning points**

• Preventive strategies in relation to running away have really only just begun to be developed in the UK. Schemes have been piloted in schools and via the Internet. At this it is too early to say how effective these strategies might be, and there is a need for evaluation of these initiatives and for more consideration to be given to the development of other preventive models.
There has been relatively little family-focused work done specifically with young runaways in the UK. This is surprising, given the central importance of family relationships as a factor influencing running away. This is a key area for development in this field.

There are very high rates of running away from residential care and there is scope for targeted initiatives aimed at this group of young people. One example is the potential for engaging with young people and staff in residential units to prevent repeat running away and to ensure that young people who do run away have access to services.

There is also a strong link between sexual exploitation and running away, and several initiatives have been developed to work specifically with young people who are being, or who are at risk of being, sexually exploited on the streets. These projects can have positive outcomes in terms of harm minimisation, preventing entrenchment on the streets, providing a continuity of contact with young people with chaotic and mobile lifestyles, and facilitating co-ordination with other services to meet their needs.

**Approaches to Working with Young People – Key learning points**

- A young-person-centred approach has proved effective in engaging with young people who run away. However, it needs to be realistic rather than 'evangelical' in order to effectively move work forward and it needs to work in partnership with other agencies.

- Techniques for making contact with young people who run away require an emphasis on clarity, directness and the independence of the service, in order to establish some trust with young people who have often felt let down by adults.

- An advocacy approach can in certain circumstances be a vital element of working with young people who run away - for example, where there are child protection issues or issues relating to the quality of statutory service provision. However, projects need to guard against the indiscriminate use of advocacy combined with an over-zealous advocacy style, which created problems for the early projects working with young runaways.
The issue of confidentiality is vital to the development of work with young people who run away. Traditionally, projects in this field have worked to a high threshold of confidentiality and this approach has recently been endorsed in official guidance. Effort needs to be put into ensuring that young people and other professionals are clear about the approach to confidentiality.

Projects working with young runaways will regularly have to deal with child protection concerns. Existing projects have developed a high level of expertise in this area and it is vital that any new projects that are developed give this issue priority consideration. This should include the development of understandings and agreements with statutory agencies concerning the approach to handling child protection issues.

A more flexible range of models of intervention needs to be developed to work with young people and their families. Existing models have primarily focused on individual work with young people, yet most of the reasons for running away relate to problems within the family.

Many young people who run away have long-standing problems in one or more areas of their lives. The short-term crisis intervention undertaken by most existing projects can be effective in resolving immediate issues, but there is also a need to attend to the longer-term support needs of young people and families, either the provision of ongoing support or through effective referral to other agencies. If this is not achieved there is a danger of projects becoming caught up in a cyclical crisis-driven pattern of working with some young people.

**Inter-Agency Working – Key learning points**

Projects working with young people who run away face an inherently difficult task in establishing and maintaining positive and constructive relationships with other agencies. These difficulties stem from several factors:

- The establishment of a project for runaways can be perceived by statutory services as a criticism of service provision.
- The young-person-centred and advocacy approaches often adopted by projects are, in the view of many contributors, an inevitable source of conflict.
- The approach to confidentiality can be perceived as maverick or irresponsible.
- For refuges, the legal exemptions granted to projects can be a source of frustration and resentment within social services.
• The resource shortage faced by statutory services can often lead to conflict with projects attempting to get access to services for young people.

Projects working with young runaways therefore will need to put considerable energy into inter-agency relationships. The experience of contributing projects suggests that if there is a commitment to this, then it is possible to have positive, or at least workable relationships with other agencies. The key elements which contributors identified as being helpful in this respect are:

• Informing and consulting agencies in the early developmental stages of a project.
• Developing services on the basis of locally-held concerns or local evidence of need.
• Involving agencies in a steering group.
• Clarifying project philosophy and policies.
• Developing a pragmatic approach with realistic expectations of other agencies.
• Sharing knowledge and expertise with others.

Working with Diversity – Key learning points

• Research suggests that while there are many similarities in reasons for running away among young people from different ethnic groups, there are also some key differences in terms of the cultural context, particularly for young people of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin.

• Research also indicates that young people from black and ethnic minority groups are less likely to be visible when they run away.

• The above factors mean that services need to be sensitive to cultural differences, and that more inclusive practice models should be developed in order to meet the needs of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Approaches that are effective in working with white young people who run away are often not easily transferable to different cultural contexts.

• The development of practice in relation to lesbian, gay and bisexual young people who run away has been limited to date, and more attention should be paid to this issue in future.

• A similar remark applies to working with disabled young people, where issues such as access to services have not been extensively addressed to date.
There is also a need to carefully consider anti-discriminatory issues in terms of the general development and management of projects working with young people who run away. This includes the need to keep issues of diversity and cultural competence at the forefront in terms of the recruitment and training of staff, and the need to consider the anti-discriminatory implication of policies and practice in relation to areas such as child protection and general service delivery.

**Staffing and Management – Key learning points**

- In recruiting practitioners and managers for projects working with young people who run away, a balance needs to be struck within the team between skills in engaging with detached young people and the skills needed to work on issues such as child protection in conjunction with other agencies.
- If projects are to provide a range of services to meet young people's diverse needs, there may be a case for the creation of multi-disciplinary teams with specialist posts for different styles of work such as advocacy and family mediation.
- Careful thought needs to be given to policies, practices and procedures that can maximise staff safety, particularly for refuge and street-work projects.
- Work with young people who run away is often emotionally draining for staff. High-quality supervision is vital and there is also a need for the creation of a mutually supportive environment where staff can talk openly about their feelings regarding the work. There is also a case for external individual consultancy to be made available to staff.
- The management of projects for young runaways is a difficult and challenging task. The work is extremely unpredictable and a high degree of responsibility is placed on senior practitioners and managers in terms of decision-making, often including being instantly available out-of-office hours. The impact of the work on practitioners may also have knock-on effects on line managers who may face a high degree of challenge from the staff team.

**Developmental Issues – Key Issues**

- Efforts to publicise projects for young runaways amongst young people have met with mixed success, and it seems that the main source of publicity is word-of-mouth recommendation by other young people.
• There are large differences in costs of the different models so far utilised in the UK. Refuge projects have been the most expensive, but street-work projects also require a substantial investment. Missing persons' schemes and initiatives integrated into centre-based services are less expensive options.

• Where a runaway project is run by a large organisation, the tailor-made policies and practice needed to work effectively with young runaways will require a high degree of flexibility and a certain amount of risk-taking on the part of the organisation, if the initiatives are to be successful.

• Projects attempting to involve young people actively in their development have often encountered difficulties in view of the nature of young runaways' lives and the issues they face. The successful achievement of participation of young people in this target group is likely to require dedicated resources and an ongoing commitment on the part of projects.

• People considering embarking on research with young runaways should be aware of the range of methodological difficulties which have been encountered in this field, and the need to prepare thorough approaches to ethical issues such as confidentiality and the handling of disclosures of information by young people.

Conclusions

This report has provided an overview of a significant programme of work which, through practice and research, has explored the needs of a vulnerable group of young people and has gradually developed and refined ways of working with these young people which offer them help with the problems they are facing. The work so far carried out with young runaways in the UK provides evidence of the ability of social welfare organisations to identify and tackle key issues of social justice and produce significant and positive change.

Despite the considerable successes so far achieved in this field of work, significant challenges still remain before there can be said to be a comprehensive response to the needs of young people who run away or are at risk of running away. There are still many gaps and under-explored areas of working with this target group and minority populations whose particular needs and issues have not been fully explored or addressed. At a more general level, there is a need for work with runaways to be brought into the mainstream and to be embedded within existing structures and frameworks which aim to meet the needs of disadvantaged children and young people. Given
the evidence on the nature of the problems faced by young people who run away, this task is an important aspect of promoting the social inclusion of all children and young people.