STILL RUNNING 3

Summary of findings from our third national survey of young runaways

Help us build a safety net for children who run away from home

makerunawayssafe.org.uk

A better childhood. For every child.
Foreword

Children from all backgrounds and communities run away, in response to situations where they are in danger, unhappy or simply do not know where to get help.

In 1999, The Children’s Society produced the first UK study into the problem of running away. We had been working with young runaways for many years, yet we were still shocked by what we found – 100,000 children running away or forced to leave home in the UK. Still Running 3 is the third set of findings from this long-term study and shows that little has improved for these children.

This report confirms that the scale of running away has not changed since our first study into this issue. It provides new insights into the causes of running away, as well as some of the consequences, and indicates that family change and conflict play a significant part in children’s decisions to run. Poor family relationships and neglectful parenting can leave children feeling isolated with nowhere to turn. In addition, there are particularly vulnerable groups of children who are more likely to run away such as disabled children, those with learning difficulties and children in care.

While they are away from home, many children remain hidden from professionals, with only three in ten children reported missing to the police. A quarter of child runaways are forced to leave home, and the majority of children do not seek help, either because they do not know how to get it, or because they are worried about the consequences.

As a result, young runaways are placing themselves in risky situations. One quarter will be at significant risk of being hurt or harmed, sleep rough or beg and steal to survive. Children who run away are in as much danger as ever.

Never has the need for a national safety net of help for young runaways been greater. Government and local authorities cannot ignore this powerful new evidence; urgent action must be taken to protect children who run away. We will continue to campaign to Make Runaways Safe until every child who runs away is kept safe.

Bob Reitemeier
Chief Executive
The Children’s Society
Liam’s story

Liam was only 10 when his father left home and his family started to fall apart.

‘My oldest sister became pregnant and she kept kicking off. There were constant arguments making it really hard for the rest of us. I was always really close to my sister so I was surprised that things got so bad so quickly. I was scared and didn’t want to go to school. I did later discover that my sister was schizophrenic.

‘I felt I could cope but soon realised that things were getting worse so I turned to my dad for help. I was worried about how things would be but at first he was OK. His girlfriend didn’t like me though and things started to unwind. It was soon clear they both didn’t want me.

‘I ran away to my friend’s house, dad didn’t know where I had gone and I don’t think he cared. I started to find things a lot calmer.’

But after a few months, the friend decided to move to another city, leaving Liam homeless.

‘I had been in touch with social services but every time we had a meeting things just didn’t get sorted, either my mum would kick off or I’d end up angry, that they weren’t helping. Finally I was pleading with them to help me. I was on a bus just going around I only had a little bit of money on me but couldn’t find a hotel. It was getting later and I was getting more desperate.

‘Finally they sent me somewhere I could stay but they just left me there and didn’t call or see how I was afterwards, I felt they just didn’t care.

‘So I got in touch with The Children’s Society and they started to help - I finally felt someone was listening to me and doing something positive in my life.’

Liam’s problems aren’t completely resolved yet, but he has started to make contact with his mum and sister and things are slowly starting to get back on track.

‘Before I was getting so stressed and angry, I would self harm and have to stay in hospital. I still can’t understand how social services could let a young person down so badly.’
Background

In 1999, The Children’s Society produced *Still Running*, the first definitive study into the problem of children running away under the age of 16 in the UK. *Still Running 3* is the third set of findings from this long-term study and shows that little has improved for children who run away in this country. Commissioned as part of our Make Runaways Safe campaign, we surveyed over 7,300 children aged 14 to 16 from a representative sample of mainstream schools in England.

The report provides an updated picture of the scale of running away and the experiences of children while they are away from home, and compares findings with those of the previous two surveys. It also presents new insights into the links between running away, children’s family relationships, their friendships, school life and happiness with their lives as a whole.

Key findings

- Over 70,000 children aged 14 and 15 run away overnight in England each year. From this, we estimate that 100,000 children and young people under the age of 16 run away in the UK each year. These numbers have not changed over the last decade.

- Family conflict and change in family structure are significant factors in children’s decisions to run away.

- A quarter of children who run away are at high risk of harm, as they may be hurt or harmed, sleep rough or beg and steal to survive.

- Most children are not known to professional agencies while away from home. Fewer than 30% are reported as missing to the police by their parents and guardians.

- Only a small minority (5%) will seek professional help while they are away – either because they do not know what is available for them, or they are worried about the consequences of asking for help.

Who runs away?

Children who run away come from all sections of society. However, some children are more likely to run away than others:

- A substantial number of children run away at younger ages. Over a third of children run away before the age of 13.

- Around 10% of girls run away, more than the numbers of boys (8%).

- Children who are disabled and who have difficulties with learning are twice as likely to run away than other children with respectively 19% and 18% of the total numbers doing so.

- Around 40%-50% of children not living with family – including children living in residential care, foster care and other settings – have run away at some point in their lives.

- Children are equally likely to run away in all types of geographical area – whether these areas are urban or rural, deprived or more prosperous.

- Children from Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic backgrounds are less likely to run away.

1. *Still Running* (1999) was undertaken in partnership with the University of York, Aberlour Childcare Trust in Scotland and Extern in Northern Ireland and covered the whole of the UK. *Still Running 2* (2005) was undertaken in partnership with the University of York and covered England only.
Why do children run away?
Although children not living with family are more likely to run away, most children who run away are living with their families.

- Children living with both birth parents have the lowest rates of running away. However, this study suggests that recent changes in family structure, such as parents separating or a step parent moving into the home, are more important than family structure in understanding why children are likely to run away.

- The quality of family relationships are more important than economic factors. Children who had recently run away reported less positive relationships with parents and higher levels of family conflict. One in five children living in these types of situations had run away in the past 12 months.

Other aspects of children’s lives that impact on rates of running away include their friendships, their school experiences and their happiness with their lives as a whole. Children who had recently run away experienced:

- Poorer quality friendships compared to other children.

- Unhappier school life. They may also be disengaged from education, which is likely to affect their future life chances.

- Low levels of subjective well-being. They are four times as likely to be unhappy with their lives as other children.

What happens while children are away from home?
The experiences of children while they are away from home are diverse and wide-ranging:

- Most children only run away on one occasion (at least 55%) but two-fifths (42%) ran away more than once in the past year.

- Almost two-fifths (38%) of children stayed away for one night – while at the other end of the scale, 16% stayed away for four weeks or more.

- Children are at significant risk of being harmed while away from home. One in nine (11%) children said that they had been hurt or harmed while away from home on the only or most recent occasion. One in six (18%) children said that they had slept rough, or stayed with someone they just met, for at least some of the time they were away.

- Many children turn to risky survival strategies while away from home. One in eight (12%) of children said that they had stolen while away and one in 11 (9%) said that they had begged.

- In total a quarter (26%) of the children who had run away in the survey said that they had had at least one of the above harmful or risky experiences while away from home. This proportion is almost exactly the same as in the 2005 survey (25%) and indicates that children who run away in England are no safer now than they were six years ago.

- Most children who run away go under the radar of professional agencies while away. Seven out of ten of children are not reported as missing to the police by their parents and only around 5% actively seek help from agencies such as social services, police, teachers and health services while they are away.

- Children are more likely to seek help from informal sources of support. Nearly half (45%) stay with or seek help from adults in their communities, such as relatives, friends and their parents, or neighbours.
SCARPA opened in November 2007 and is delivered in partnership with Barnardo’s.

The project aims to identify and support children and young people who run away, go missing, or who are sexually exploited. It also offers a service to parents/carers where this is appropriate, to help to reduce the risk of children running away in the future.

Children can self-refer but most referrals come from the police, social care and other agencies. Young people are encouraged to drop in so that children can speak to someone immediately if they need to. Since it began, SCARPA has worked intensively with over 100 children, mainly between the ages of 11 and 15, and with 25 families.

Project worker Beth describes how it works:

‘The police tell us about young people who have been reported missing and who don’t have social care involvement, but show a variety of risk indicators. They rank them as one or two, with one being missing for over 24 hours, and two missing more than once. The young person may be at risk of sexual exploitation or have mental health issues. We then write to the young person and go out and visit them. We want to find out why they went missing and what happened. We regard the missing incident as an indicator and we then assess whether that young person needs help.’

The project offers an independent return interview to the young person, which can be a one-off session of support, or develop into longer-term intensive support if needed. In this way, the project worker can talk to young people and give them advice on how to keep safe, reduce the number of times they run away and help them to understand and reduce the risks they are taking. This can be through weekly contact (but can be more depending on the young person’s needs) and takes place either in school, at the project or another location, either face-to-face, by phone, email or text.

Beth says: ‘The quality of the work is maintained through low caseload numbers which allow the workers to engage fully with the families and complete the support required. We are able to build and maintain excellent working relationships with parents, carers and young people.’

The work helps to turn around the lives of children, young people and their families. Young people feel calmer and more settled. They also increase their school attendance and improve their self-esteem and ability to make safe choices. Young people have told us that they feel listened to, not judged or criticised, and like being given advice that makes sense to them. One young person said:

‘Since I’ve started (at SCARPA) I’ve not gone missing…I’m not having arguments, not wanting my own way anymore... I don’t argue, instead of shouting I talk to her (mother) now... I don’t run away, I’ve settled down...it helped speaking to people...since then I’ve been calm...I stay in the house now and have calmed down, I don’t spend time out wandering around the streets...I don’t think that’s good enough (behaviour) I talk to my mum now...the safety work helped.’

Locally, SCARPA has been instrumental in forming and facilitating ‘The M-SET Group’ (Missing, Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking), which was established as a sub group of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The project also hosts a meeting every two months with the police and social services in Newcastle, to pinpoint the 10 most vulnerable young people who have been running away, so that all agencies are working together to actively support each child.
What needs to change?

This research clearly demonstrates that over the last decade there is little or no evidence of improving trends in relation to the numbers of children who run away, or the risks that they face.

Central government and some local areas have made progress in recognising the risks that children who run away face. However, this research demonstrates that much more needs to be done to identify and respond to the need of these children. There is an urgent need to improve both the access to, and quality of, support for children while they are away from home.

We are calling on central government to work in partnership with local agencies to create a national safety net for child runaways. Running away is often a hidden issue. We think it is everybody’s responsibility to make sure that children get the help they need.

A national safety net

Central government

The government has now published its Missing Persons strategy which includes a specific focus on children who go missing and/or run away. In taking this forward, it is vital that more effort is made to monitor the situation of children who run away and measure change at a national and local level. This should include the following measures:

- The revised statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home and care must clearly set out the key principles and essential requirements for every local area, and include examples of best practice. Local authority compliance with this guidance should be monitored.

- An awareness-raising training programme for all professionals who work with children, such as teachers, police and social care, about the risks associated with running away and the links between substance misuse, offending and missing school.

- Central government should undertake a review of the information collated by local authorities to monitor the size, scale, trends and local response to the issue.
Local authorities
Running away should be seen as a trigger for early help which could prevent long-term problems for children. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to safeguard all children in their area. They need to take the lead on responding to this issue locally, to make sure that there are adequate processes and services in place.

- Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards (LSCBs) should conduct a comprehensive assessment of their area’s needs and ensure that they offer the right services to respond accordingly.

- Local or regional forums should be created to oversee the implementation of local strategies and offer a joined up approach across all the relevant agencies. These forums should collect and share information on the issue and coordinate the response to both individual cases and local trends. Agencies should work together to identify children who are not reported as missing, and ensure that friends and family of children who run away are able to refer concerns to them.

- These agencies should also work together to provide or commission a range of services for children who run away, accessed through a variety of referral routes including self-referral. These should include a combination of early help programmes that target children at risk of running away, including independent return interviews for all children who run away, intensive packages of support for those who repeatedly run away, and direct access to emergency accommodation (as defined by Section 51 of The Children Act 1989).

- Local authorities should ensure that an independent return interview is available to every child who runs away. The information gathered should act as a trigger for the intervention of local agencies where necessary. These data should inform the child’s assessment by children’s services, in line with revisions recommended by the Munro Review 2011.

- Local authorities should commission a range of support services targeted at families experiencing difficulties or conflict. These should include areas such as relationships and parenting, family mediation, and advice about how to ensure the best interests of the child during parental relationship breakdown, separation and divorce. These measures could help prevent children running away.

Police
The police have a key role in safeguarding children who run away when either responding to missing person reports or finding vulnerable children on the streets.

- Every police force should implement the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) Missing Person’s Guidance (2010) and the Police Code of Practice on Missing Persons (2009) and make sure that there is a strategic lead in place to oversee both implementation and compliance.

- Police forces should regularly conduct strategic assessments to determine the nature and scale of children running away in their areas. They should share best practice around areas such as conducting missing person’s investigations, working with children’s services and providing support between police forces.

Schools and other agencies
Schools, youth and health services should provide information and support to all children to prevent them from running away, and be able to identify children and families in need of this support.

- Information and education about the risks relating to running away and how children can get help if they are thinking about running away should be included within personal, social, health and economic (PHSE) education.
- Health centres, youth facilities and other services should provide information for children, especially those shown in this report to be at high risk of running away.
- All agencies should provide parents and carers with information about how and where to get help if a child is at risk of, or starts running away. This should include clear and comprehensive information about the importance of reporting your child as missing and what support the police and other agencies can provide.

Children and families
Running away remains a largely hidden issue from professional agencies, who must reach out much more to children and families in need of support.

- Children within the child protection process should be listened to, and have their views taken into account. In addition, children and families should be actively involved in the development of local services, and their experiences should shape how services respond.
- Children and adults should be encouraged to support children who run away to gain access to professional help and be given the information they need to do this.
Conclusion

Still Running 3 presents a substantial challenge to all those involved with children, whether as parents, practitioners or policy makers. The Children’s Society has set out a range of actions that need to be taken to prevent children from running away or to provide support to vulnerable children who do. Until there is a comprehensive response in every area of the country, tens of thousands of children will continue to run away and be at serious risk of harm.
The Children’s Society

The Children’s Society wants to create a world where all children and young people are respected, valued and heard. We believe that childhood should be happy and that young people deserve to reach their full potential.

That’s why we work hard to transform the lives of over 44,000 children and young people in England each year.

Our priority is children who have nowhere else to turn. We protect young runaways from the dangers of life on the street. We give disabled children a voice and more control over their lives. Our work helps young refugees start afresh in new communities, and gives young carers time and energy to enjoy their childhood.

With over 75 programmes and children’s centres throughout England, we offer care, respite, legal support and mentoring schemes that help turn lives around.

Through our campaigns and research, we seek to influence policy and perceptions at all levels so young people have a better chance in life.

To find out more about what we do visit www.childrenssociety.org.uk

Further information

You can download the full Still Running 3 report at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/research/research-areas/children-risk-streets

To find out more about what you can do to help create a national safety net for children who run away please visit our campaign website at: www.makerunawayssafe.org.uk