

**Briefing from The Children's Society
Young Runaways and Child Sexual Exploitation debate
Westminster Hall, 21 June 2011, 11.00am-12.30pm**



"Everything was against me – I had a fight with my family and it was just running through my mind that they didn't want me back – no one wants me" (young person)

1. The Children's Society.

The Children's Society supports nearly 50,000 children and young people every year through our specialist services and children's centres. Our priority is children who have nowhere else to turn, such as young refugees, children at risk on the streets, disabled children and children in trouble with the law. We seek to give a voice to children and young people and influence policy and practice so they have a better chance in life.

The Children's Society has campaigned to safeguard and protect young runaways for over 25 years. Through our groundbreaking research, policy and practice in this field we have provided evidence and solutions to ensure that young people receive a safeguarding response for statutory agencies. We deliver nine projects working with children who run away or are at risk of being sexual exploited, supporting more than 1,000 children every year. The services provide a safe haven where children can go for independent and confidential help, advice and support.

All evidence included in this briefing is from our research, evidence from practitioners and young people we have worked with.

2. The nature and scale of the problem

The term 'runaway' refers to a child under the age of 16 who has spent one night or more away from their home without parental permission. Children will run away for many reasons, mainly relating to poor family relationships, conflict and abuse in the home.

Key statistics (Rees et al, 2005 'Still Running II'. London: The Children's Society):

- **100,000 young people in the UK will runaway overnight** on at least one occasion before the age of 16, the equivalent of one child every five minutes.
- **20,000 of which (or 1 in 5) will be at serious risk while they are away**, as they may be hurt or harmed, sleep rough or stay with someone they have just met.
- **A quarter of these children have been thrown out of home – the equivalent of 70 every day.**
- **Most children (two thirds) who run away are not reported as missing to the police by their parents or guardians.**
- **Only a small minority (5%) will seek professional help while they are away**; either because they do not know what help is available for them, or they are worried about the consequences of asking for help.
- Over half of children who ran away were away for one night, a quarter for two to six nights; **one in ten was away between 1 to 4 weeks and one in ten for over four weeks.**

What are the key indicators of risk?

The reality is that any child could decide to run away but we know from our research that some are more likely to do so than others. We have found that girls are more likely to run away than boys and that most children run away when they are between the age of 13 and 15. However, a quarter will run away before they are 13 and one in ten before the age of ten.

We also know that some specific groups of children are more likely to run away than others:

- Children in care – They are three times more likely to run away although they only make up two per cent of the total number of runaways.
- Children who are facing difficulties in school – A third of young people who said that they had problems attending school had run away.
- Children who use drugs and alcohol or are in trouble with the police – Over a third of young people who have problems in these areas run away.
- Children who define themselves as disabled or having learning difficulties – They have higher than average rates of running away.

"I just felt like I didn't want to be in the world. Life wasn't worth living and I just wanted to be on my own. I didn't really think about where I was going." (young person).

When children run away from home or care they will be in great danger of being physically or sexually abused or exploited. This is a common finding from all voluntary sector organisations. For example, Barnardo's services which work with children at risk of, or involved in, sexual exploitation say that more than half of children they support run away on a regular basis.¹ The issue of child sexual exploitation cannot be addressed without focusing on safeguarding children who run away or go missing.

3. What happens when a child runs away?

Statutory guidance² published in 2009 sets out local authority's responsibilities to safeguard children who run away or go missing from home and care. When a child runs away if they are reported as missing to the police they will receive a 'safe and well' check to establish their well-being and find out they were the victim of crime or abuse whilst missing. In addition the child should receive an independent return interview to establish why they ran away and what additional support they need. Through these interventions, if a safeguarding issue is identified a referral can be made to Children's Services can be made. From this intervention a referral can be made for the child to access support by either statutory or voluntary services, for example intensive support, family mediation and emergency accommodation.

Local Safeguarding Children's Boards should co-ordinate the multi agency response. This should include clear protocols to define agencies responsibilities, and procedures for recording and sharing information and data between the police, children's services and the voluntary sector, which should be analysed to inform service provision. Where a young person

¹ Barnardo's (2009) *Whose Child Now?* London: Barnardo's

² Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care.* London: HM Government.

persistently goes missing from care, a multi-agency risk management meeting should be organised, to discuss safeguarding issues and care planning for the child.

However we know from our research and practice that this response does always happen; with a significant variation in the implementation of the guidance with a lack of consistency across local areas.

An example of our practice

Street Safe – Lancashire is part of our Lancashire Children’s Rights Service. It works in partnership with Lancashire Constabulary and Lancashire County Council to support children and young people who are missing from care or home and are victims of or vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

The structure of the work has progressed now to The Children’s Society’s staff being based within three of Lancashire’s child sexual exploitation multi-agency specialist teams Cherish (Southern division), Deter (Preston division) and Freedom (Penine division) which include Police, Children’s Social Care, Health and other organisations. The teams hold weekly and monthly meetings to discuss individual cases that they are working with, to share information and ensure the young people get a safeguarding response. Children can self-refer to the project, but referrals are mainly received from police missing person’s reports, social care or any other services. The project works with over 25 children intensively every year, as well as supporting children in group work or through schools education work. The project provides training and awareness raising to professionals and the local community.

4. Lack of support – need for a national safety net.

There has been important progress in recognising and identifying running away as a key issue for children. Policy makers have provided a clear framework for how agencies should respond when a child runs away from home or care. However, we are acutely aware that the guidance is only as effective as its implementation and over the last year our practitioners have become concerned that it is not resulting in the step change that was intended.

Many children who run away are not seen as being at risk of significant harm, and will not meet children’s services thresholds for intervention. In areas where there is no specialist support, there will be few other interventions and support for young people. Currently there are around 50 services in England with some form of specialist support, however a number are either experiencing cuts in funding or that their funding is at risk over the next year.

In particular there is a lack of data sharing and analysis of how many children run away in a local area to inform service provision. This was happening through National Indicator 71, which was scrapped last year following the decision by the coalition government to remove the entire indicator set for local areas. However, the response from voluntary sector providers and some local authorities suggests that it acted as a vital catalyst for strategic development in sharing information and improving performance. There is widespread concern that removing the target has hindered multi-agency practice development.

We are particularly concerned that children are not being identified and referred on to the support they need. A recent study conducted jointly by The Children’s Society, NSPCC and University of York found that professionals perceived older children to be more competent and resilient in dealing with maltreatment than younger children. This included being able to

escape abusive situations and seek help.³ Disclosing maltreatment was found to be particularly difficult for older children. They are far more reluctant to develop trusting relationships with professionals and are fearful of the consequences.

For the two-thirds of children who are not reported as missing they may not receive any help or support, unless they are identified by a professional or ask for help themselves. The reality is that most children who runaway will not look for help from professional agencies. This indicates that running away remains largely hidden from all agencies – the police, children’s social care, schools, youth services and health services.

Our practitioners find that mainstream services like schools and the police are not sufficiently aware of all of the risks facing children who run away. Instead, if a child runs away regularly there is a tendency for agencies to become complacent about the child’s ability to take care of themselves.

5. What needs to change and questions?

“My advice to anyone who’s thinking of running away is don’t do it. It doesn’t help. You need to find someone you can talk to and let them know how you are feeling.” (young person, 15).

Recently the Government has announced that the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) is to provide a national response to children who go missing and it has made a commitment to develop an action plan on child sexual exploitation⁴.

We are calling for this to focus on the needs of both young runaways and children who are sexually exploited. We are particularly concerned that child sexual exploitation is being addressed in isolation from the issue of running away. Critically, the government needs to consider the needs of these children together with running away being an early indicator of sexual exploitation. Many of the gaps in statutory responses are similar, such as a lack of knowledge about how many children are affected, a lack of local multi-agency working to support them and a lack of identification by professionals.

We believe, for the action plan to provide an effective safety net for both young runaways and children who are sexually exploited, it should focus on:

- **Providing timely advice, guidance and support** to children who run away and their parents and carers.
- **Improving support** for children who run away, such as early intervention programmes, intensive one to one support, family mediation and outreach youth services.
- **Improve the responses of local authorities** to the problem and make sure they have the right procedures in place to meet the needs of runaways.
- **Improving police responses** by sharing good practice so that all forces prioritise the need to protect vulnerable children who run away.

Through our practice, we know that young runaways will only be protected when they are seen as a priority for a child protection response by every local authority and police force. We

³ Rees, G., Gorin, S., Jobe, A., Stein, M., Medforth, R & Goswami, H. (2010) *Safeguarding Young People: Responding to young people aged 11 to 17 who are maltreated*. London, The Children’s Society. Maltreatment refers to the neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse of young people.

⁴ Tim Loughton MP’s speech to Barnardo’s event 17 May 2011, www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a0077355/tim-loughton-to-barnardos-event-on-child-sexual-exploitation

believe the Government needs to make this a mainstream concern of all agencies and professionals working with children, or it will not happen this will not happen.

Possible issues to raise:

- To ask the Minister what steps he is taking to ensure that teachers and social care professionals are trained to recognise the risks associated with children running away from home or care and, critically, how to respond to them?
- To ask the Minister what steps the Government has taken to provide information in schools and through other settings to children and young people about the risks of running away and where to get help if they need it?
- To ask the Minister what steps they have taken to provide information to families and parents about where to get help if they are experiencing problems; and information about how to report their child as missing?
- To ask the Minister how we ensure that local authorities commission early intervention services that meet the needs of young runaways including return interviews, intensive support and emergency accommodation?
- To ask the Minister how we ensure that best practice between local areas is shared to support and improve the development of services for young runaways?
- To ask the Minister how we ensure that local areas gather information on the numbers of children who run away from home and care, to determine patterns and prevalence and to inform local responses?
- To ask the Minister how we ensure that the inspection and accountability mechanisms for local authorities comply with local authorities' statutory duties for children who run away from home and care?
- To ask the Minister how we ensure that local authorities work with the police to share and analyse data collected on how many children run away from home and care?

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