Working with Young Runaways
Learning from practice

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The Children’s Society
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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 has been due to the development of projects working with this target group and the publication of research findings into their needs.

This report is 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 is to draw together the learning from these practice models in order to inform the future development of work with this target group.

Background, aims and methods

Background

The report was commissioned by The Children's Society to fill a gap in publications about the issue of children and young people running away. There have been a number of research-based publications on this topic in the UK over the past 20 years, but no substantial detailed account of the way in which projects have 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. The report incorporates learning from most of the projects that have been in existence in the UK from the early 1980s onwards. The comprehensive nature of the report's coverage has been possible thanks to the co-operation of a number of organisations outside The Children's Society – namely, Barnardo's, the NSPCC, the Catholic Children's Society and the ASTRA Project (Alternative Solutions to Running Away).

This first UK practice-based publication on the issues involved in working with children and young people is published at a time when the Social Exclusion Unit is conducting a consultation exercise on young runaways and the Department of Health is preparing guidance on working with young people who go missing. It is hoped that the information provided here will complement these other initiatives and provide some indications of ways forward in developing a better response to the needs of children and young people who run away from their families or from substitute care.

It is important that this publication is also seen within the context of an ongoing programme of dissemination of practice learning, research and evaluation related to
the issue of children and young people running away that is being undertaken by The Children's Society and partner organisations in Scotland and Northern Ireland, utilising Children's Promise funding. The programme's first product was the publication of the first comprehensive UK report on this issue in 1999 (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999), some of the key findings of which are summarised in Chapter 2. That report presented the results of research involving young people and professionals from the statutory and voluntary sectors working with them in 27 areas of the UK. Individual country reports for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, emanating from the research, are currently being prepared. Another key element of the programme is the first large-scale evaluation to be undertaken in the UK of projects working with this target group. This research project currently involves nine projects operating a range of practice models, and will gather perspectives from young people, project staff, professionals in other agencies, and parents and carers. Results from the evaluation will be disseminated in late 2003.

Aims

The current publication focuses on the views and experiences of managers and practitioners who have worked in projects targeted specifically at young runaways. The intention is not to pre-empt the above multi-perspective evaluation, but to summarise the considerable expertise that has been developed within these projects and to make this expertise accessible to a wide audience.

The main intended audience for the report is managers and policy-makers in the statutory and voluntary sectors who may be considering developing services to meet the needs of young people who run away. The aim is to provide an overview of the issues involved in initiating, developing and managing projects and services that work with this target group.

Although the report does not provide a detailed account of day-to-day practice, it is hoped that the second half (Chapters 8 to 12) will also be of value to practitioners who, as part of their day-to-day work, are engaged with young people who run away.

Methods

The primary source of information for the report has been the expertise and views gathered from managers and practitioners who work or have 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.

This method of information gathering yielded a wealth of material for the publication. However, it is important to acknowledge that the views expressed in this report are almost entirely from the voluntary sector. The relevance of these views stems from the fact that the large majority of practice development aimed specifically at young runaways has taken place within this sector. Clearly, there is also the need to gather views on the work of the projects from statutory sector professionals and this will happen as part of the evaluation programme described earlier.

The interviews were analysed and an initial draft report was prepared. Relevant parts of the draft were circulated to all contributors for comment and to ensure that their views had been accurately and fully represented. A panel of readers, consisting
of internal staff, external representatives from statutory and voluntary sector organisations, and academics, were also invited to comment on the complete draft. Comments from contributors and readers were incorporated into the final draft. All direct quotes have been approved by contributors prior to finalisation of the report.

Structure of the report

This introductory chapter offers a brief recent historical overview of the development of work with children and young people who run away, and a summary of the current situation in terms of services and legislation.

Chapter 2 provides a summary of the key research findings from the UK and elsewhere in relation to the target group.

Chapters 3 to 7 look at the range of practice models that have been developed in the UK to date, including refuges, street work, missing persons schemes, centre-based models and preventive work.

Chapters 8 to 12 explore a number of issues general to all work with the target group: approaches to working with children and young people, inter-agency working, anti-discriminatory practice, staffing and management, and developmental issues.

Chapter 13 summarises the key points of the report and makes suggestions and recommendations for future development.

The Appendix provides examples of alternative practice models that have been developed in other countries to work with children and young people who run away or are on the streets.

Note on terminology

In this report, the term ‘running away’ is used to describe children and young people who spend time away from home without the consent of parents or carers, or because they have been forced to leave by parents or carers. It normally refers to young people who have spent at least one night away from home. The term therefore encapsulates a number of other terms such as ‘going missing’, ‘being thrown out’, ‘absconding’, and so on.

The term ‘young people’ refers, unless clearly specified otherwise, to children and young people under the age of 18. There are substantial legal differences between young people under 16 and those aged 16 to 17 in terms of running away. However, most of the discussion in this report applies equally to young people in both these age groups.

The term ‘contributor’ refers to those people who contributed their views to this report (listed on the title page of the report), mainly by means of face-to-face or telephone interviews.

The term ‘contributing project’ refers to the 11 projects which agreed to contribute to the report (listed on the title page of the report).

A brief history

The recent history of work with young people who run away in the UK can probably be viewed as beginning with the development of the first refuge for young runaways in London in the early 1980s. This development stemmed from the recognition
among agencies working with homeless people in the centre of London that there was a growing number of young people under the age of 16 on the streets. These young people could not legally be accommodated by hostels and night shelters (see the section on the legal framework, below, for an explanation of this).

**The first UK refuge**

The Children's Society convened a number of meetings with representatives from key statutory and voluntary agencies including Centrepoint, Westminster Social Services Department, the police, etc.) and also conducted a visit to a young person's refuge in the Netherlands. After four years of discussion and planning, the Society opened the country's first refuge for runaways – the Central London Teenage Project – in 1985. Initially, and for most of its life span, the refuge was technically acting outside the law in providing short-term accommodation for under-16s, but had the backing of the Metropolitan Police and Westminster Social Services, as well as non-statutory agencies. More details of the early history of this project are to be found in Newman (1989).

Part of the initial brief of the project was also to undertake research to learn more about the issue of young people running away. Monitoring information was gathered from young people using the refuge and in-depth interviews were carried out with some of them. A survey of police authorities was also conducted in order to collate information on reports of missing young people. The results of this research were published in Newman (1989). It was estimated that every year there were 98,000 reported incidents of young people under the age of 18 running away in the UK. This research, and the experience of working with young people at the London refuge, indicated that running away was a widespread phenomenon and that many of the young people on the streets in London had come from outside the capital.

**Early practice developments outside London**

In view of this information, The Children's Society launched its 'Young People Under Pressure' initiative which aimed to set up projects in a variety of locations throughout England and Wales to work with young people who ran away. This initiative eventually produced five additional projects in Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Bournemouth and Newport (Gwent). The Birmingham project, Youth Link, was the first to open, in 1988. Its initial service consisted of detached work (see Chapter 4 for further details) and drop-in centre work with young people on the streets in Birmingham city centre. Safe in the City began work with young people in Manchester a year later, also focusing on detached centre street work.

The other three projects in the initiative provided accommodation for young people along with other services. In 1989 Southside in Bournemouth began providing refuge for young people aged under 18, and also ran a drop-in centre. Leeds Safe House, which opened in 1991, provided a residential refuge along similar lines to the Central London Teenage Project. In 1993 the Porth Project started working with young people in South Wales, providing accommodation through a network of refuge foster carers linked by a central daytime centre-based staff team.

When the Southside refuge and Leeds Safe House opened they also were acting

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1 Detached work is ongoing work with young people wherever they are
outside the legislative framework at that time. However, in the preceding years The Children's Society had spearheaded a campaign to obtain legal recognition for the role of refuges in providing short-term accommodation for young people under 16 who were away from home. This campaign led to the incorporation of provisions in the Children Act 1989. Section 51 of that Act allowed for legitimised refuges to be exempt for short periods from the laws on harbouring young people away from home. This meant that refuges for runaways could, without parental permission, provide accommodation for young people under the age of 16 who had run away from home for a continuous period of up to 14 nights. The Children Act 1989 became law in October 1991, and in the subsequent two years, the four Children's Society projects which provided refuge in London, Leeds, Bournemouth and Newport became certificated under Section 51 of the Act.

Thus by the mid-1990s there was a network of projects providing a variety of accommodation and other services for young people under 16 who had run away from family or substitute care. The early work of four of these services is described in Stein, Rees and Frost (1994).

Research studies in the early 1990s

The early 1990s also saw an increase in research activity in this field. A second survey of police statistics of missing persons was carried out by NCH – Action for Children (Abrahams and Mungall, 1992). The results of this survey broadly confirmed Newman's earlier projections, with estimates of 102,000 incidents a year of missing persons under 18 years of age in England and Scotland. In the following year, the results of the first survey to gather information directly from young people were published by The Children's Society (Rees, 1993). This survey estimated that in Leeds around one in seven young people ran away from home (or were forced to leave) and stayed away for at least one night, before the age of 16. A year later the Society published the findings of research into the work of Youth Link, Safe in the City, Leeds Safe House and the Porth Project (Stein, Rees and Frost, 1994). This study drew attention to the extreme levels of detachment experienced by some young people who ran away. Among a sample of 31 young people using the four projects, the researchers had interviewed seven young people who had spent continuous periods of six months or more away from family or substitute care before the age of 16.

Practice and research developments in the second half of the 1990s

The second half of the 1990s saw the development of new services by other non-statutory agencies and two further research studies. In 1995 Centrepoint, in partnership with the NSPCC, opened a new refuge in London, following the closure of the original London refuge the previous year. This was followed by a research report on young people using the refuge (Barter, 1996).

The issue of young people running away from residential care has had a high profile since the early surveys by Newman (and Abrahams and Mungall) had shown a particularly high prevalence among this small group of young people. In response to this, the Department of Health commissioned a major research study into the issue (Wade et al, 1998).

Also in 1998, the ASTRA project was established in Gloucester by a multi-agency consortium. The project offers support to young people who have been reported
missing to the police and have returned home. Schemes working along similar lines have more recently been developed by Barnardo's in Yorkshire and the Midlands, working with young women who may be at risk of becoming involved in prostitution, and, in several locations, by The Children's Society.

In 1999 The Children's Society published the results of the largest piece of research yet carried out into the issue of young people running away in the UK (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). It consisted of a survey of over 13,000 young people in 25 areas of the UK, and in-depth interviews with over 200 young people who had experience of running away. The results of this and the other research mentioned above are summarised in Chapter 2.

The current situation in the UK

This section provides a brief overview of current service provision for young people who run away in the UK, and a summary of the relevant law.

Current service provision

The current situation is rather fluid, with a number of recent and planned developments. There are now a range of models of working with young people who run away, or are at risk of running away, from primary prevention through to detached street work. The following is a list of known projects working exclusively or primarily with this target group in the UK. (There are, of course, many other projects which provide services for, and may work with, significant numbers of young people who run away as part of a wider target group. These include children's rights services, advocacy services, drop-in centres, family mediation services, and so on.)

In Manchester, Safe in the City (The Children's Society) provides a range of services including street work, an accessible project-base with a range of facilities, specialist teams working with black young people and young people who are being sexually exploited, a missing persons scheme, and preventive group work with young people in residential care.

The Bradford Young Missing Persons Scheme (Barnardo's), which was originally an offshoot of the Streets and Lanes Project (aimed at young women being sexually exploited) runs a missing persons scheme for young women and is developing an independent interview service for young people in residential care.

Safe on the Streets - Leeds (The Children's Society) runs a missing persons scheme and a preventive peer counselling scheme in schools, and is planning to develop a family group conferencing model. It is also carrying out research into the needs of black young people and lesbian, gay and bisexual young people who run away, which will feed into ongoing development of the project.

The Kirklees SOS Scheme (Barnardo's) does missing persons work with young women, with a focus on the prevention of sexual exploitation.

In Birmingham, Youth Link (The Children's Society) provides street work, a drop-in centre, a missing persons scheme, and a website and e-mail Internet service for young people focused on the issue of running away.

In Gloucester, the ASTRA Project (run by a consortium of local agencies) provides a missing persons scheme aimed at reducing repeat incidence of running away.

In London, there are several projects. The London Refuge (St Christopher's
Fellowship/NSPCC) is currently the only refuge in the UK operating under Section 51 of the Children Act. The London Streetwork Project (The Children's Society) is developing missing persons schemes and centre-based work, and is contributing to the development of a city-wide network. The Breaking Free Project (NSPCC) does work with young women on the streets who are being sexually exploited or who are at risk of being in this situation. The Home & Away Project (Catholic Children's Society) has a drop-in advice centre and does family-based work with young people who have run away or are at risk of running away, as part of a project working with 13- to 20-year-olds, and also provides a limited amount of short-term emergency accommodation.

In Weymouth, WAVES (The Children's Society) has a specialist under-16s worker as part of a project working with young people. In Torquay, Checkpoint (The Children's Society) includes the South Coast Runaways Initiative which does centre- and community-based work, is developing an independent interview scheme for young people running away from residential care, and aims to provide emergency accommodation in the near future.

In Wales, Two Way Street (The Children's Society) in Cardiff runs a drop-in centre, does street work and is piloting a missing persons scheme.

In Scotland, the Aberlour Childcare Trust is currently developing the 'Running – Other Choices' project in Glasgow, which will offer a range of services aimed at working with young people who have run away or are at risk of running away.

The legal framework

The legal status of young people away from home or care under the age of 18 can be rather confusing and is, in certain cases, open to interpretation. Basically, the law applies differently to different groups of young people and there are also some variations between countries within the UK.

Looking first at the situation in England and Wales, there are three different groups. The first consists of young people under the age of 18 who are either on a care order, an emergency protection order or in police protection. For this group, Section 49 of the Children Act 1989 states that is an offence to assist them in running away or to keep them away from a responsible person who has legal care of them.

For other young people there is a difference in legal position according to age. Young people under 16 cannot leave home (even with parental consent) unless another adult takes responsibility for them, although it is not clear what sanctions there might be in relation to anyone accommodating a young person in this group while away from home. Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984 states that anyone who 'takes or detains' a young person under the age of 16 who has run away may be prosecuted, but this may be deemed not to apply where a young person has chosen to run away and stay away with someone.

Young people aged 16 and 17, on the other hand, can leave home and live independently with parental consent, and Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984 does not apply.

In practice, the application of the law is clearer. Essentially, anyone in one of the first two above groups who has run away will be returned home if found by the police, but in normal circumstances young people in the third group will not.

The legal situation in Northern Ireland is broadly the same as described above for
England and Wales. In relation to harbouring or abduction, the relevant piece of legislation is the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

In Scotland, the situation is different, particularly because it has a different definition of a 'child'. Legally, a child is someone who is under 16 or is subject to statutory supervision in terms of Section 70 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Anyone not in the above two categories, and therefore the large majority of young people aged 16 and 17 who are not under statutory supervision, can legally leave home without parental permission. For under-16s, the situation remains similar to that for England and Wales, with the relevant legislation on harbouring being contained in Section 71 of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968.

In addition to the technicalities of legal status, there are other practical differences between young people under and over 16 years. There is a limited amount of hostel and emergency accommodation for young homeless people, which is only accessible to young people aged 16 and above, and there may be circumstances in which a young homeless person of 16 or 17 can also gain access to benefits. Neither of these possibilities is open to young people under the age of 16 who run away.

The only emergency accommodation that is legally available to young people under the age of 16 without parental consent is a certificated refuge, as discussed in the historical overview earlier in this chapter. The relevant legislation is contained within Section 51 of the Children Act 1989 (in relation to England and Wales), Section 38 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Article 70 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. There is only one such refuge currently in operation in the UK.

The options open to young people who run away under the age of 16 are therefore extremely limited. They have no legitimate means of earning money in order to survive and there is currently only one accommodation project in the whole country that can legally provide them with accommodation without parental consent.
SUMMARY OF RECENT RESEARCH

This chapter provides a brief overview of the key research findings from published studies regarding young people running away. It draws primarily on recent UK studies, but makes some reference to findings from other countries, as indicated, on areas where current UK knowledge is lacking. All findings not specifically referenced are from Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999).

There are two reasons for providing this overview. First, findings from the research are referred to in various parts in the report. Second, some of the findings have clear implications for working practices with young people, and therefore can in themselves be of use to those seeking to develop services in this field.

Numbers of young people running away

It is estimated that one in nine young people will run away, or be forced to leave home, and stay away for at least one night, before the age of 16. This translates into about 77,000 young people running away for the first time each year in the UK, and about 129,000 incidents of running away.

There is no evidence of significant geographical variation between the countries which make up the UK, or between areas differentiated on the basis of population density or economic prosperity.

Characteristics of young people who run away

Not surprisingly, the likelihood of running away increases with age and most incidents happen between the ages of 13 and 15. However, around one in four young runaways had first run away before the age of 11, and these young people are more likely than average subsequently to run away away repeatedly.

Females are more likely to run away than males but the differences, although significant, are not of any great practical relevance. In any case, males who run away are likely to do so more often than females, so in terms of incidence there is a fairly even gender split.

There are, however, significant differences in running away rates for young people of different ethnic origins. Young white people are more likely to run away than young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. The estimated rates of running away are shown in Figure 1 (see page 10).

Some further findings in relation to young people from minority ethnic backgrounds are presented in Chapter 10.

Young people living in substitute care are far more likely than other young people
to run away. An estimated 45 per cent of these young people have run away at some point in their lives, and there is a high rate of repetitive incidence among this group. However, around half these young people will have started running away before entering the care system.

Reasons for running away

About four in five young people who ran away categorised themselves as having run away, and one in five as having been forced to leave home. For those young people who run away, the primary immediate reasons for running away are located in the home environment, as shown in Figure 2 (see below).

There is substantial evidence that in the case of many young people who run away there are long-term problems both within and outside the home which form the background to their running away. Looking at factors within the home, young people living in step-families and lone-parent families are significantly more likely to run away than young people living with both birth parents. Independent of this link
is the fact that young people with poor-quality relationships are significantly more likely to run away (irrespective of which family form they live in).

In general, factors outside the home play a much less substantial role in causing young people to run away. However, some young people cite personal or school problems as leading to or contributing to their running away.

There is only weak evidence of a link between family economic status and running away and this appears to be a relatively minor factor, compared with family form and the quality of family relationships.

For young people in substitute care there are two broad groups with different reasons for running away (Wade et al, 1998). One group are primarily running away because of ‘pull’ factors outside the care placement – usually running away in order to spend time with friends or family. The other group run away because of factors within the placement or to do with personal difficulties.

**Links with other issues**

There is strong evidence of significant links between running away and many other problems and issues in young people’s lives. Young people who run away have significantly higher rates than other young people of self-reported depression, alcohol and drug problems, offending, and problems with peers. They also have significantly higher rates of problems at school, including truancy, exclusion, being bullied and difficulties with learning (see Figure 3, below).

Notably, despite the evidence that young people who run away have long-term problems at home, and potentially a range of difficulties in other areas of their lives, there is limited evidence of agency involvement before running away starts, with the obvious exception of young people who were living in substitute care.

![Figure 3: Self-reported school and personal issues for runaways and non-runaways](image-url)
Experiences while away

It is clear from young people’s accounts that being away from home can be a liberating and positive experience. Many young people felt that it had given them time to think, provided a respite, and helped them to sort out their problems. (See Figure 4, below.)

On the other hand, running away can be a risky and frightening experience for young people. Around a quarter of young people slept rough while they were away and around one in seven reported being sexually or physically assaulted while away.

Most young people stayed in their locality, slept at friends’ or relatives’ homes and were only away from home for a few nights. At the other end of the scale, research has provided evidence of young people being completely detached from home or care for six months or more, and relying on begging, stealing, dealing in drugs, having sex for money, or support from adult acquaintances in order to survive.

![Figure 4: Experiences while away from home](image)

Sub-groups of young people who run away

Most of the above findings relate to all young people who run away overnight. Inevitably there is considerable diversity within this group of young people. Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) identified four broad sub-groups within the overall population of young people who run away or are forced to leave home under the age of 16.

1. Young people who run away once or twice, but who have not spent a night away from home. From the survey we would estimate that around 6 per cent of the total population of young people have this experience before the age of 16. This amounts to some 45,000 young people per school year.

2. Young people who run away once or twice, including spending one or more nights away from home. There are an estimated 9 per cent of young people in this category, amounting to 65,000 young people per school year.

3. Young people who run away repeatedly (three times or more), but do not become detached. About 2 per cent of all young people have this experience before the age of 16, numbering around 15,000 young people per school year.
4. Young people who become detached from home and substitute care for six months or more. It is not possible to estimate the size of this group of young people, but two UK qualitative studies have identified a number of young people who fit into this category (Stein, Rees and Frost, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

The reasons for running away and experiences of being away vary considerably between these four groups. The following four case studies, drawn from Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999), provide some illustration of these diverse experiences. The first two (Carlton and Anne) relate to young people who have only run away once or twice from family and substitute care; the third (Sian) is illustrative of a young person who has run away repeatedly and the final case study (Debbie) relates to young people who experience detachment.

**CASE STUDY 1**

**Carlton**

Carlton lived with his mother, father and younger brother up to the age of ten. He had suffered repeated sporadic abuse from his father since a young age, and matters came to a head:

‘One day when I came in from school he just started shouting at me for no reason at all. Then he started to beat the hell out of me... My mum said that he didn’t do it, that I did it myself. How could I do it myself on my back? I had to walk out... I ran away and stayed at a friend’s house.’

Carlton stayed away for one night. Then he spoke to his mother and she said that she had asked the father to leave home, so Carlton returned. However, within a year the father moved back in:

‘My dad came back. My mum had him back and he was cruel to me. He started drinking and his violence was unbearable. He was violent towards all of us.’

Eventually, at the age of 14, Carlton could not cope any more and he ran away for the second time:

‘I couldn’t bear his violence, couldn’t forgive mum for letting him stay with us. I slept on a park bench with my jacket – no blanket or nothing. I stole food from shops. Sometimes I went home for food when dad was out.’

Carlton was picked up by the police after about a week away and placed in care, where he remained until he was 16.
CASE STUDY 2

Anne

Anne entered care with her siblings at an early age due to her mother's inability to cope. After several moves she went to live in a foster home with her brother. She was very close to him and felt a sense of responsibility towards him. Both Anne and her brother were physically abused by their foster parent over a period of time. Fear of further punishment prevented her from running away:

"I couldn't run away from foster care [as my foster carer] would have whacked me. I sat back once and watched her break my brother's nose. Probably if I'd run away from there she would have broke my legs so I couldn't run any more."

Despite telling her social worker what was happening, nothing was done until her foster parent decided she would have to leave. When the placement broke down she was separated from her brother and given a placement in a children's home. Anger and anxiety at her past abuse, her separation from her brother and the failure of social services to act combined with dislike of her new surroundings. At 14 she ran away for the first and only time:

"The only time they did something was when I ran away from the [children's home]. I just thought to myself, "Where's my life going?" I didn't even like it there, so I ran away. Everyone used to run away from there. Nobody likes moving out of places and going to new places, not at the age of 14, when you've moved enough. Guinness Book of Records, me, for moving so much!"

She stayed out all night with others from the unit until she was picked up by the police and returned the next day. She felt the reaction of staff when she returned was initially unsympathetic; that, because running away was commonplace, they failed to explore the unhappiness that underpinned her absence:

"You run away and when you go back they don't sympathise with you, they just say to you, "Oh no, you shouldn't." I got grounded for it as well [for running away], just because I was unhappy. It were bad, so I didn't do it again. Because they moved me to another children's home. I loved it there."

However, running away did eventually generate some action. She made a planned move to another children's home where she was to settle. She liked the fact that it felt less institutionalised, each child had their own room, and the staff were friendly and supportive. However, looking back she still felt some anger that she had to run away in order to draw attention to her unhappiness:

"You shouldn't have to run away from somewhere just to make a young child happy."
CASE STUDY 3

Sian

Sian lived with her mother, her father and her younger brother. She has an older brother and sister who already lived away from home. She feels she never got on with her parents and that her brother was always favoured over herself, as her father had been in the army and expected that his son would follow in his footsteps. Sian described her father as 'a control freak'. There was a lack of communication between herself and her mother, to the point where 'it was difficult to sit in the same room'. At 12/13 Sian got into company of which her father didn't approve because they were going out with boys, drinking and taking drugs. There were big arguments.

The first time she left, it was because she had been out drinking with friends when she was 13. Her father grounded her:

'I stormed out the house and didn't go back. I went down the industrial estate and slept in a lorry, a big truck it was, at about 11 at night. I felt frightened. There were noises and it was cold. I went home three in the afternoon. I'd had nothing to eat. They [her parents] just ignored me. After a while we started talking again and started arguing. They just blamed me for everything."

Sian said she had lost count of how many times she had stayed away overnight and that it was 20 or more times between the ages of 13 and 15. Sometimes she and friends would stay with older lads who had the tenancy of a flat on one of the estates. They would drink cider and use whatever drugs were available. Sometimes she would just walk around all night. She hated school and truanted 'nearly every day' from the age of 14.

When she was 15 she and a friend stayed away for a week. They stayed with friends and camped out as it was in the summer. She went home after a week and there was a terrible argument and on this occasion her father became violent and threw her out. After that Sian moved in with her aunt:

'I went to live with my auntie. She gave me more freedom than my parents did. It was easier for me."

Sian said that staying with her auntie, she didn't need to go missing any more. About her parents she said:

'They blame me for everything, and they think that all the things I have done have affected their lives and they think that only they've got problems. When I see them out now they just walk past me and don't speak.'
CASE STUDY 4

Debbie

Debbie was living with her mother, stepfather, brother and two stepsisters. Her stepfather treated Debbie and her brother differently from the stepsisters, who were his biological children. He was violent towards Debbie and her brother. She says she used to get into trouble just to get her mother's attention:

'I didn't get on with my stepdad. It was because he fetched us up differently from the others. He used to give us real hidings, too. I used to be scared to go in the house. And people used to say, "And he's not your real dad anyway" and that would do my head in because my mum would never tell us who our real dad was.

'I didn't get on with my stepfather. I ran away at 14 to stay with friends and wouldn't go to school. My mum didn't even bother to look for me. I don't have any contact with her now.

'At first I slept at friends' houses and once I had to sleep in a shed for three nights.'

Debbie survived through shoplifting, a 'skill' she had learned before she left home when she had felt that she wasn't getting the things she needed. After a period of staying with friends and sleeping rough, she moved in with a heroin dealer whom she didn't even like. She just had nowhere else to go:

'I went and stayed with this lad who was a smack dealer. I didn't know anything about heroin until then. I didn't want to stay with him but I had nowhere else to go and the police were after us. I didn't even like him. Then I started taking it because he was taking it. I've been on it for four years now.

'I was away all the time from when I was 14. I've lived in seven houses with this lad but we were never settled because he was a dealer.'

Debbie phased out her school attendance after she ran away from home at the age of 14:

'I used to go to the teachers and they would give me jobs to do like taking notes. I couldn't do any work. I couldn't concentrate, that's why. So I stopped going to school at all. I don't think I was even on the register after a while.'
Long-term consequences of running away

Research into the long-term consequences of running away is relatively sparse in the UK. There is some evidence of a link between running away under the age of 16 and subsequent homelessness after the age of 16, and of a link with long-term social exclusion for those who run away repeatedly from a young age. It also seems that there is a strong link between running away and subsequently becoming involved in prostitution.

Findings from North America paint a bleak picture of the potential long-term outcomes for young people who run away. Young people who have experience of running away or being on the streets under the age of 18 are more likely to have early pregnancy; to become involved in survival sex; to become HIV-positive; to attempt suicide; to have mental health problems; and to develop problems with drugs, alcohol and other substances.

It cannot be assumed that all these findings will translate to the UK context, but it is notable that most of the findings on running away in the UK summarised earlier in this chapter are very similar to those for the USA and Canada. The samples on which the above North American studies are based were often accessed through projects for runaways and the findings are therefore likely to be most applicable to young people who run away repeatedly and spend extended periods away from home.

Concluding comments

Research indicates that the incidence of running away is widespread in the UK and cuts across geographical, national and ethnic groupings. While for many young people running away may be a relatively minor incident in their lives, there is evidence that it is often an indicator of serious problems in the home environment, often of a long-term nature, together with a potential range of other difficulties and issues in the young person’s life. The research emphasises the need to intervene early in young people’s lives in order to prevent running away or to reduce repeat incidences.

The risks of running away in the short term are not inconsiderable, particularly for those young people who spend extended periods away from home. There is also some tentative evidence of negative long-term outcomes which are associated with running away, including homelessness, social exclusion and involvement in prostitution, together with a potential range of other factors such as ill-health and poor life prospects suggested by US research.

2 e.g., Greene and Ringwalt, 1998; Ensign and Santelli, 1998
3 e.g., Greene, Ennett and Ringwalt, 1999
4 e.g., Booth et al, 1999; Dangelo et al, 1994; Busen and Beech, 1997
5 e.g., Pennbridge, Mackenzie and Swofford, 1991; Molnar et al, 1998; Adlaf and Zdanowicz, 1999
6 e.g., Ensign and Santelli, 1998; Pennbridge, Mackenzie and Swofford, 1991; Unger et al, 1997
7 e.g., Pennbridge, Mackenzie and Swofford, 1991; Ensign and Santelli, 1998; Unger et al, 1997
REFUGES

Introduction

This chapter looks at refuges run under Section 51 of the Children Act 1989. In total, there have been five such refuges in operation since 1991 (see the Introduction for more details). The focus here is mainly on two of these refuges – Leeds Safe House and the Porth Project (which operated in Newport, South Wales) – and the chapter also incorporates some learning from the Southside Refuge in Bournemouth.

Case studies

CASE STUDY 1

Leeds Safe House  The Children’s Society

Leeds Safe House started providing accommodation for young people in February 1991. It was the third refuge to be set up in the UK. For the first eight months of its operation the project technically worked outside the law, until the introduction in October 1991 of the Children Act 1989 made such refuges legal for the first time (see Chapter 1 for details). Two years later the refuge was one of the first in the country to be given a certificate under Section 51 of that Act. The project operated for nearly ten years, closing in October 2000 for financial reasons, as described in Chapter 1.

Leeds Safe House was based at a confidential address. The accommodation was a large four-storey house in a residential area of Leeds, which was adapted to provide accommodation for six to eight young people (some in shared rooms), a living room and kitchen, together with offices, meeting rooms and a sleep-in room for staff. The refuge was staffed 24 hours a day, and there was a minimum of two workers on duty at any one time.

The key elements of the project’s practice were a ‘young-person-centred approach’ and an emphasis on ‘advocacy’ work, both of which are discussed further in Chapter 8.
CASE STUDY 2

The Porth Project  The Children’s Society

The Porth Project, which offered refuge in Newport, South Wales from 1993 to 1999, had many features in common with Leeds Safe House, including its referral process and its methods and approaches to working with young people.

The distinctive aspect of the Porth Project, compared with the other four refuges that have so far operated in the UK, is that it provided accommodation for young people through a pool of foster carers rather than through a central residential unit. Refuge carers were recruited specifically to provide this service, and were subject both to approval as foster carers by The Children’s Society and to certification as a refuge under Section 51 by the Welsh Office. Young people stayed at the refuge carers’ homes except for during office hours on weekdays, when they were brought to a project base where project staff would work with them on the issues that had caused them to run away, as discussed for Leeds Safe House above.

Unfortunately, it seems that the resources required to operate this model were initially under-estimated and the project experienced considerable difficulties in maintaining an adequate pool of refuge carers. The model was shown to be practically effective at times, but ultimately the lack of resources led to a sporadic level of service and eventually the project was closed and redeveloped in Cardiff as Two-Way Street – a drop-in centre and street-work-based model.

Description of work

Target group

Both refuges under discussion in this chapter worked with young people under the age of 16 who had run away or been forced to leave home and were currently at risk. The Porth Project additionally worked with young people over the age of 16 who were running away from substitute care. At Leeds Safe House, as the work developed, the criteria for admission to refuge became slightly more restrictive. Emphasis was placed on accommodating young people who would be at risk if they returned to the place from which they had run away. In the case of young people from substitute care, procedures were put into place to ensure that, in most instances, a safe place was available within the care system rather than through refuge. This latter development was due to high levels of usage and associated difficulties that the project encountered in providing refuge for young people running away from children’s homes:

‘One of the factors that led to refuge being clogged up, if you like, was the high number of re-referrals from the same young people and many of those came from young people running away from local authority care, particularly children’s homes.’

Methods of contact

Due to the confidential location of the two refuges, referrals were only taken by telephone, directly from young people or through agencies and other sources with young people’s active participation. A project worker (or two project workers in the
case of the Porth Project) would then go out to meet the young person in a car, have an initial discussion about the service on offer and, where appropriate, take the young person into refuge. The police were informed of the young person's arrival, and they in turn informed the young person's parent(s) or carers that the young person was in refuge at a confidential location. This was followed up by a letter from the project to the parents/carers.

Models of service delivery

One aspect of service delivery in refuges is the provision of shelter, safety, food and other practical assistance to young people. Beyond this immediate practical support, the work of the projects would initially focus on developing an understanding of the issues which had caused the young person to run away, and drawing up an action plan with the young person to work on the issues they were facing. This would then be followed up by 'advocacy' work with parents, carers or professionals as appropriate. Ultimately the aim was usually either for the young person to return to the place from which they had run away, or to find a suitable alternative place to live (e.g., substitute care or relatives).

Under Section 51 of the Children Act 1989, young people could remain at the refuge for a continuous stay of up to 14 nights and for a maximum of 21 nights in any three-month period, although at Leeds this latter rule was extended by the project to a six-month period in order to limit repeat usage and ensure that the service was accessible to a range of young people (see Discussion below).

Both projects adopted a crisis intervention model and did only a limited amount of follow-up work with young people. Again, some of the issues arising from this approach are discussed below.

Discussion

Contributors who worked in refuges tended to be more self-critical than those working in other settings. There was a great deal of reflection on the difficulties involved in refuge provision. This means there is a risk, in presenting these views of contributors, of painting a predominantly negative picture of the potential for refuges to work effectively with young people who run away.

Therefore, before embarking on a critical appraisal of some of the issues and difficulties experienced by the two projects under discussion, it is worth emphasising the successes of both projects in providing a safety net for young people who run away.

The provision of a safety net

Refuge offers an instantly accessible and tangible service to young people which can prevent their exposure to the difficulties and risks of spending time 'on the streets', while helping them to try to resolve the issues that led to them running away in the first place. Both projects worked with substantial numbers of young people during their operation (Leeds Safe House provided almost 2,000 stays for over 1,000 young people in nine-and-a-half years and the Porth Project accommodated 109 young people over a six-year period).

Leeds Safe House was registered as a children's home as part of the requirements for certification under Section 51 of the Children Act. It subsequently received
twice-yearly inspections by the Social Services Inspectorate and achieved increasingly complimentary inspection reports with regard to its standards of practice in working with young people. In this sense the project was a highly successful example of the potential of providing emergency accommodation for young people who run away.

There seems little doubt in most contributors' minds that the provision of accommodation/refuge is a valuable option to have available when working with young people who run away. What is at issue is the nature of this provision and the extent to which it is an appropriate universal service for these young people.

Operational issues

For both the Leeds Safe House and the Porth Project, the effort entailed in maintaining a 24-hour emergency resource for young people was a major issue. In the case of Leeds it was necessary to maintain a large bank of sessional workers in order to ensure cover for annual leave and for unexpected absences of project staff for sickness and other reasons. Although the project hardly ever had to shut its doors due to staff shortages in the nine years of its existence, the effort of covering the rota took up a considerable amount of management time. The large staff team also placed high line management and supervisory demands on Senior Project Workers.

In the case of the Porth Project, the recruitment and maintenance of a sufficient bank of refuge carers took up considerable resources. The whole process of recruiting a new refuge carer, including approval as a foster carer and certification under Section 51, took at least six months, and usually longer. With a relatively small staff team, and some turnover of foster carers, it proved difficult for the project to maintain a continuous service for young people. At times there were insufficient staff to cover the rota and at other times there were insufficient foster carers to offer refuge for young people.

In addition, for both projects, the continuous, unpredictable and inherently risky nature of the work meant that an out-of-hours on-call rota had to be drawn up for senior staff to support staff and refuge carers. This again had a substantial impact on managers, who sometimes experienced a feeling of being constantly at work for lengthy periods.

Some of the issues for managers of projects working with young people who run away are discussed further in Chapter 11.

A comparison of the strengths and weakness of centralised and dispersed models of refuge

Part of the initial rationale for the Porth Project appears to have been the expectation that it would provide a cost-effective alternative to the centralised refuge model, which might be viable outside major cities where the smaller population base would mean a lower demand for refuge services. Ultimately this does not seem to have been the case. The project had a substantially smaller budget latterly (in the region of £350,000) than Leeds Safe House but was beset by difficulties in terms of simultaneously staffing the project on a 24-hour basis and recruiting and supporting refuge carers. This meant that the project was only sporadically able to provide a full service to young people. It may be that other models of dispersed refuge would work out cheaper, but in the absence of current evidence of substantial financial differences it is interesting to explore the other relative strengths and weaknesses of the two models.
The centralised refuge model is arguably more straightforward to run. Everything takes place at one location, and this avoids some of the complications of the dispersed model, such as the need to ferry young people back and forth to a project base in the daytime to do focused work, and the need to support a separate pool of dedicated carers. For young people a single location provision may give a greater sense of consistency during a period of insecurity and uncertainty.

On the other hand, in a centralised model the fact that young people are living together raises other issues. One of these concerns the drain on staff resources in dealing with group dynamics:

‘The dynamics could change so quickly and I think residential-based refuge is not always right for all young people… I think you’ve got to be fairly bold about establishing what you are going to focus on. You can decide that as a refuge you can’t accommodate young people with a drugs habit, because to do so may be detrimental to the safety of other young people using the refuge – but having done that, are you then turning away very needy young people?’

Another potential drawback relates to the possible diversity of young people using a refuge, and the risk that young people might be introduced to new and risky activities by other young people:

‘The make-up of the young people you have within any one building… it’s the very nature of the work that young people using refuge can be a combination of ages, gender, experiences, family backgrounds; whether it’s the first time that they’ve run away or whether they’ve been on the streets for three months or more. It’s such a huge variety of differences… you have no control over how you manage the intake of that. You don’t know the young people, you don’t have any of their backgrounds. [With other residential services] you would know what were the individual needs and requirements of the young person, what their likes and dislikes were, whether you needed to be aware of any particular issues in staffing – those sorts of things – whereas in refuge you don’t have any of that.’

However, this risk posed by the differences between young people might be counterbalanced by the potential for mutually supportive relationships between young people with common experiences.

In addition to avoiding some of the above problems of communal living, a dispersed model has other potential strengths. It makes a clear distinction between the caring role of refuge carers and the problem-solving role of project workers. Thus project workers do not have to spend time catering for young people’s physical and practical needs, while young people can experience a consistency of care within a community-based environment, which usually can be a positive aspect (although a placement within a family home might not suit all young people who run away).

One of the key drawbacks of the dispersed model is the complexities introduced by the need to recruit, support and manage a dispersed group of foster carers. At the Porth Project this was found to be a resource-intensive aspect of running the service. A large amount of time was invested in the process of approving and certificating foster carers, and a number of structures were put in place, including a dedicated support worker, individual supervision and group sessions, to ensure that the carers were adequately supported. These considerations need to be carefully weighed against some of the evident advantages of the dispersed model already mentioned.
The need for refuge as opposed to emergency accommodation

There is a fair degree of consensus among contributors that while many young people who run away are in need of emergency accommodation, relatively few are being actively pursued and therefore in need of ‘refuge’ in the sense of a confidential location. To an extent, then, it seems that a more open form of accommodation might be suitable for most young people:

‘I think it was something that in the early stages we were, perhaps, over-protective of; the staff were very protective of the location... maybe again that’s because we weren’t sure what the reaction was going to be, and the idea of young people under 16 being away from home without their parents’ permission – the perception was that their parents or carers would come looking for them and therefore they needed to be hidden. I think the reality of it has been... maybe half-a-dozen occasions where young people have been actively pursued, one where I think a parent did actually knock on the door and come running through the house and chase them out of the other end, and occasions where we got people waiting outside the front and back of the house, looking for particular young people. I think those cases are fairly extreme. In the majority of cases I think that, sadly, a lot of the parents and carers hadn’t even reported them missing, so they weren’t that interested in where they were or actively pursuing them to get them back.’

However, some contributors felt that the whole experience and safety of refuge provision was viewed as very important by many of the young people with whom they had worked:

‘What it did give though, I think – and [I don’t know] whether you’d get that without the notion of it being at a confidential location – is the trust from the young people, that when you said “nobody will come here and take you away”, they believed that. Part of that belief was instilled by the fact that its location wasn’t disclosed to anybody, and I think that if you tried to get that same level of trust by just saying “look, they know where we are but we won’t let them in”, there’s a big difference there... I think it’s about demonstrating that what you say is what you mean. So I think giving young people the message is an important aspect.’

Refuge provision therefore may have benefits that are less tangible, and which might not exist in a more functional accommodation-based model:

‘I think it’s really powerful symbolically that you take a young person in. You take them in physically, and by taking them in physically you take them in emotionally. Especially as young people are particularly vulnerable when they’re in crisis. You remember it, don’t you, people who were there for you when you were in real trouble.’

A related question is whether refuge or other accommodation for young people under 16 who run away has to be provided within the framework of Section 51. That framework was specifically designed to protect refuge projects from prosecution for ‘harbouring’ a young runaway. The experience of refuge staff has been that in most cases parents and carers do not object to young people being accommodated in refuge. It is therefore possible for a project to provide accommodation for a young
person with parental consent, and thus without recourse to the provisions of Section 51. The Home & Away Project in London (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6) occasionally accommodates young people on this basis with emergency foster carers for up to three nights. There are plans for the South Coast Runaways Initiative (also discussed in Chapter 6) to accommodate young people in supported bed-and-breakfast accommodation for a few nights in a similar manner:

'When I first heard that [we might have to seek parental consent for refuge] I was quite cynical and sceptical and thought, that won't work. Actually, having done a year's work, of the people that I have identified that would have fitted the criteria for refuge and would have needed it — we're only talking small amounts. Of those 48, 13 would have benefited I think from a refuge; parental consent wouldn't have been a problem, I don't think. And, in fact, I think in many cases parents would have welcomed the fact that there was somewhere safe for their sons or daughters to go while we tried to sort out where to go next.'

Nevertheless, Section 51 remains an important provision for young people who are in need of a safe place to stay for a short period, in cases where there is a risk that parents, carers or other people might pursue them or attempt to force them to return to a situation from which they had run away.

Several contributors commented on the unusual nature of working in a confidential refuge and the effects that this could have on the staff team. In both Leeds and Newport, it was felt that the protected location had at times contributed to a tendency towards insularity. This tendency was perhaps also exacerbated by the lack of a financial relationship with other agencies. There seems to have been little networking with other agencies, with detrimental effects for both the staff (in terms of a narrow perspective) and the young people (in terms of missed opportunities for referral to other suitable services). This is an aspect of refuge work which project managers may need to make conscious efforts to counteract.

The strengths and weaknesses of providing accommodation for young people who run away

One of the key problems of providing accommodation that contributors highlighted is the fact that it can slow down the responsiveness of other agencies. In extreme circumstances, the fact that a young person was accommodated safely in a refuge diminished their priority in the eyes of statutory services, which consequently began to respond only when the 14-day maximum time limit approached.

On occasions when refuge was not available the response could be much quicker. This view was reinforced by contributors who had worked both in refuge and street-work projects; they felt that the latter projects were often able to exert more pressure on statutory services due to the fact that they did not have accommodation to offer. This apparent weakness of refuge projects is particularly relevant in circumstances where the young person is already accommodated by the local authority, or where admission into substitute care seems an appropriate option.

Additionally, some contributors expressed concern that, at times, refuges could be used as an extension of the substitute care system to cover gaps in emergency statutory provision. This seemed to have happened gradually at the Southside Refuge, which was initially set up with the support of the local authority and the
police. As the project became established within the local network, there was some drift away from the original conception of refuge provision. The project continued to provide a valuable breathing space for young people, but did not always do this in the way that had been originally intended:

'Over time it became part of the local system, which I don’t think we had intended when we set it up. So what was happening was that for the 16- and 17-year-olds we were seen as an emergency place [where] those young people could go, and with the under-16s we had become part of the emergency system used by social services. The night duty team were regularly “placing” (not in the legal sense) young people with us who were having rows in the night, as a kind of cooling-off period. So I think in terms of the core work that we had set ourselves up to do, there were only about 15 young people a year who fitted the original brief.'

This move away from the original aims ultimately led to the closure of the refuge and the development of a family intervention service which has been successful in working with broadly the same group of young people using a different model (see also Chapter 7).

There are also some concerns about the suitability of refuge as a service for some young people from minority ethnic groups. As discussed in Chapter 10, the use of refuge can have major repercussions for some young people and it may be that other interventions which are specifically geared to particular cultural contexts will have more positive long-term outcomes.

In contrast to the above points, one of the great strengths of the refuge model is the breathing space for young people and families alike offered by refuges, and the opportunity to cool off and take stock of a situation within relative safety. Some contributors felt that the security of 24-hour provision also increased the potential for young people to ‘open up’ to staff, including making fresh disclosures of abuse.

However, there was a fairly unanimous opinion among contributors that most young people did not usually need to take the 14 days allowed in law:

'Providing accommodation for young people for up to a fortnight doesn't work. Three or four nights I think is about the limit. If you go past there, then it's just not worth it.'

It was felt that a stay away from home of this length of time could create a rift between young people and their family:

'One of the pitfalls of just having the refuge as we had it was that even over a 14-day period it could develop too much of a rift with the family. The majority of times the young person had to go back to the family, and there was work done with the family, but it wasn't the priority. It sort of added to the problems... I had quite a lot of worries about it. Did it create a greater rift and did we do enough to support the family to support the young person?'

For these reasons, most contributors saw a period of three or four days as sufficient to negotiate a return home in the large majority of situations.

Another potential problem with accommodation-based projects is that young people may seek to be accommodated in order to obtain other services offered by the
project (such as information, problem-solving and advocacy) or because they valued the way in which the project worked:

'I think that some young people came into refuge inappropriately because they actually needed to come back to people they knew, and that that ended up sometimes being less helpful to them in terms of resolving their difficulties at home... the emotional needs of the young people we were working with [needed] to be met and they [needed] to be met in an open, agreed way that [was] appropriate, rather than veiled behind other things.'

Although in later years, both Leeds Safe House and the Porth Project attempted to offer services to young people irrespective of whether they came into refuge, it is still true of both projects that the large majority of staff resources were devoted to working with young people in refuge. As shown in Chapter 2, research suggests that around two-thirds of young people who run away sleep at the houses of relatives or friends while away from home. There is clearly a danger of projects accommodating young people who have no need of accommodation, resulting in wasted resources and potentially negative side-effects. This suggests that refuge should be provided as one component of an integrated service for young people who run away, a point that is picked up in later chapters of the report.

An associated problem for both projects was that they did relatively little follow-on work with young people after they had left refuge. This was partly due to the lack of resources, and partly out of a desire to avoid long-term involvement with the young people and the dependency that this might create. The limited amount of follow-on work could, however, sometimes result in a cyclical pattern of refuge usage by young people who were arguably in need of a long-term involvement. This confounded the projects' desires to limit the length of involvement and also, perhaps more worryingly, led to disjointed work which failed to tackle the complex issues that caused these young people to run away repeatedly.

Additionally, the fact that refuge projects, by necessity, have a structured approach to working with young people, including a large number of rules and expectations of behaviour, may limit their attractiveness to some young people. It might even completely put off some of the more detached young people who have become used to less obviously restrictive ways of living.

In the early days of refuge provision there were fears that providing refuge within a particular geographical area might 'encourage' young people to run away in that area, once they knew that there was somewhere to go. There is no evidence that, in general, these fears have been borne out in terms of frivolous or inappropriate use of refuge, although there were some issues at Leeds Safe House about high usage by young people in substitute care, as noted earlier. However, for some young people, it may be that the existence of a refuge in the locality provides a sense of security which enables them to escape from an abusive situation.
Developmental issues

A particular issue to be aware of when initiating projects that provide accommodation for young people who run away is the long lead-in time involved in setting up the service. The complexities of identifying appropriate premises, recruiting staff and/or refuge carers, and obtaining the necessary inspections and certifications to work under Section 51 of the Children Act mean that the period from starting the project to beginning work with young people can be anything from one to two years. This has major resource implications and there is a need to phase the recruitment and employment of staff carefully. At Leeds Safe House it was 18 months from the employment of the project leader before the first young person was accommodated, and this was at a time when it was not necessary to obtain legal approval for refuge. The Porth Project experienced unexpected delays due to legal issues and this meant that staff and carers who had already been recruited were left in limbo for several months. Similarly, Checkpoint’s recent efforts to set up a flexible refuge in Torquay (discussed in Chapter 6) have encountered legal problems, and sessional workers who were recruited to do this work have now moved on.

Key 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 utilised 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 Children 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

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the work of two projects which pioneered detached work with young people under 18 on the streets in major city centres – Youth Link in Birmingham and Safe in the City in Manchester. Both these projects have been carrying out work on the streets with young people in conjunction with a range of other services (including drop-in services and telephone lines) for the past decade.

Case studies

CASE STUDY 1

Youth Link, Birmingham      The Children's Society

Youth Link was the first project working with young people running away to be opened outside London by The Children’s Society, being one of a number of projects set up to respond to the developing awareness of the incidence of young people from around the country ending up on the streets in London.

The project opened in 1988, initially providing detached street work and drop-in services for young people on the streets in Birmingham city centre. Where appropriate, the project would advocate on young people’s behalf. This advocacy work can be done with young people either on the street, or in the drop-in centre.

In recent years the project has also developed other services. It has run a missing persons scheme, as briefly discussed in Chapter 5, and has also developed a website aimed at young people (see Chapter 7).

CASE STUDY 2

Safe in the City, Manchester     The Children's Society

Safe in the City opened in 1989 and was initially conceived rather differently from Youth Link. Three distinct services were envisaged: street work, advocacy and refuge. However, the idea of setting up a refuge was later abandoned, and it became apparent also that the model of advocacy envisaged would not be particularly suitable for the young people with whom the project was working, as discussed later in this chapter.

The project therefore concentrated its efforts on the detached street work, and at some points in its existence has also offered some drop-in facilities to young people. The model of operation is broadly the same as described for Youth Link above.

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CASE STUDY 2 continued

Safe in the City has also diversified its services over the last few years. The project has split into three teams: one working specifically with black young people, one working with young people who are being sexually exploited and one generic street-work team which has widened its brief to cover areas outside Manchester city centre. The project has undertaken preventive work in children's homes (see Chapter 7) and is also developing a missing persons scheme aimed at making contact with missing young people while they are away from home.

Description of work

Target group

Both projects work primarily with under-18-year-olds who spend time on the streets within the city centre. This includes young people who are literally living on the streets, young people who have temporary accommodation but use the streets as part of their survival strategies, and other young people who have stable or semi-stable accommodation but sporadically spend time on the streets. There is some practical difficulty in maintaining an upper age limit, partly because people do not always divulge their age, and partly because an overly rigid approach could reduce the project's credibility.

Methods of contact

The projects make contact with young people either through an active approach to a young person by a project worker or through the young person approaching the worker. The latter often occurs through word-of-mouth recommendation from other young people on the streets, which is dependent on the extent to which the project has been able to establish its credibility amongst the community of people living on the streets.

Models of service delivery

The two projects' model of street-work delivery has remained basically unaltered since its beginning. Project workers operate in pairs, usually at set times, in and around the city centre where young people are known to spend time. On initial contact with young people the workers explain what the project offers, and they are able to offer practical and emotional support and information if the young person wants this. They also publicise the existence of the drop-in service.

The Youth Link drop-in model has varied somewhat over time, as discussed later in this chapter, but is intended as a place to carry out focused pieces of work with young people, rather than to act as an informal place where young people can congregate. The drop-in also offers practical facilities, such as showers and a washing machine. Safe in the City offers similar centre-based work and facilities.

The ongoing work with young people on the streets at both projects can take a variety of forms and is primarily young person led. It includes elements of information-giving, harm minimisation, practical support and the possibility of advocacy in certain circumstances.
Discussion

One of the great achievements of the two projects described in the preceding pages has been their ability to engage with young people who have become marginalised from mainstream society.

This success aside, contributors' comments regarding learning from street work focused on four broad areas: environmental factors, the nature and extent to which it is possible to undertake work on the streets, the concept of crisis intervention when doing street work, and issues of diversity. These four areas are explored in detail in the remainder of this chapter. The reader is also referred to the discussion in Chapter 11 on personal safety issues for workers doing detached street work.

The ability to engage with detached young people

Research and practice experience have shown that young people who run away and spend time on the streets in city centres often have a specific set of characteristics and experiences which distinguish them from other young runaways. They are likely to have come from particularly abusive or damaging backgrounds; to have run away a number of times and/or spent long continuous periods away from home; and to have spent time living in substitute care. In many cases, these experiences will have led them to be mistrustful of adults, including social welfare professionals (Stein, Rees and Frost, 1994).

Environmental factors

Environmental factors are particularly relevant to detached street work in two ways. First, unlike in services based within buildings, street workers are working in an environment over which they have little or no control:

'We don't own the streets, we have very little say on the street – we're visitors.'

This lack of control may put workers at some risk and it has been necessary to develop good strategies for maximising personal safety, as discussed in Chapter 11, but it also has other implications.

Workers are not invited onto the streets and this increases the need for sensitive handling of the process of making contact with young people. Young people may be wary of professionals or adults on the streets and will also have their own priorities (including carving out a survival strategy) upon which street workers may impinge by their presence. On the other hand, there is a need to be active in making initial contact with young people in order to make them aware of what the project can offer them. Both projects have developed strategies for approaching young people sensitively.

It is also vital that workers establish a workable relationship with other people in the 'street community'. This might include homeless adults, the owners of night-clubs and all-night cafés, other outreach workers, and so on. A street-work project needs to establish a certain amount of credibility within this community in order to be successful. If this is achieved, many young people will be referred to, or introduced to, the street workers by other people on the streets. This need for credibility also raises problematic issues, however. A clear confidentiality policy is an essential prerequisite for any project working with young people who run away (see Chapter 8). But for street work, the issue of confidentiality has an added dimension
in that breaches of confidentiality in relation to individual young people can jeopardise the status of the whole project. If the project gains a reputation of not being worthy of trust it can lose its ability to engage with young people.

The second way in which environmental factors are crucial to street work is that the environment can change in unexpected ways over time, again totally outside the control of the project. For example, Manchester city centre has undergone fundamental changes over the last decade. Areas which were quite run down have been modernised and moved up-market, closed-circuit surveillance has increased, and policing strategies have varied. All these changes have had implications for street culture and, consequently, for the work of Safe in the City. At times, the changes have meant that there have been few young people to work with.

Street-work projects therefore need in-built flexibility in order to deal with a changing environment. It is also probably true to say that city-centre-based street-work projects working with young people who run away need, to a far greater extent than the other kinds of services discussed in this report, to be designed for a particular local context. Each city will have its own characteristics in terms of street culture, and models of practice which are effective in one location will not necessarily be transferable to another.

The nature and extent of work on the street

As originally envisaged, the street work at both projects was seen as a form of outreach work: a means by which the project would make contact with young people who would then gain access to other services, such as advocacy and (in the case of Safe in the City) refuge. One of the key learning points for both projects has been the fact that workers have been able to engage actively with young people on the streets to a greater extent than was originally anticipated. In Youth Link this has led to a reassessment of the place of street work within the range of services the project offers:

'What we recognised was that there was a large group of young people who don't want to use the drop-in [centre] or the core time, and they actually want to have the work done with them out on the streets. So a further development of the detached work has actually been daytime detached work, which has come in in the last three years, and again we try very hard to make sure that we do maintain at least two or three of those a week.'

In Manchester, it also became clear that many of the young people would be unlikely to use a refuge facility even if the project set one up, and also that the notion of advocacy was not always particularly attractive to them.

The reasons for the above points related to the nature of young people's existence on the streets. Young people develop survival strategies involving various legitimate (and illegitimate) ways of earning money or obtaining food and basic items, and they often rely on a network of friends and acquaintances for temporary accommodation. While this existence can be stressful and at times dangerous, it is often seen by the young people as preferable to returning to the places from which they have run away. Coupled with this, young people on the streets have often developed a deep-seated mistrust of professionals and their interventions, founded on disappointments and negative experiences in the past. They are therefore reluctant to take the leap of faith that using a refuge or advocacy service would require of them. Because of their
survival strategies their time horizons are also quite short – often focusing on where the next meal is coming from, or where they might sleep that night. Some young people do not envisage being alive in a year's time and, in the experience of contributors, this is not a completely unfounded fear. Others are simply biding their time until they become 16, when they imagine (often unrealistically) that they will be able to secure independent accommodation.

All these factors militate against the likelihood of engagement with professionals and agencies in order to try to find alternative solutions to their current situation. However, both projects have gradually developed ways of working with young people within the street environment. This has been partly facilitated by mobile phone technology. Workers no longer need to take a young person to a central base to undertake advocacy work:

'At one point in the history of Youth Link, the only way a young person could be worked with is if they came into the project. Even on the late evening sessions it would be, “Come into the project tomorrow and we'll sort it out for you.” Whereas now young people will be given the choice. One of the developments is having the technology of a mobile phone which means that if a young person wants to sort out a meeting, or benefits, or social services appointment, or whatever, we can actually do it there and then during the daytime, whip the phone out and off we go. It also means that we are freer to go and accompany young people to significant meetings for support.'

This means that the projects can respond immediately to the issues that young people raise, and this has become an important factor in the project's success in engaging with some of the most mistrustful young people:

'I think we end up working with almost more extremes [i.e., young people in more extreme situations]. I think a lot of young people can be a bit suspicious... if your instant response is “We can help you but you need to come down to the building”, they think, “What's going on?” whereas if we say, “We can help you, would you like us to do it now, or we could meet up tomorrow, somewhere that you've decided”, I think that allows us to work with some of the more “suspicious of agency” type young people. I think the feeling is that “I'll have to do this, this and this to get a service”, and what we really strongly try and promote now is that you don't actually have to do anything to get our service other than say, "Could you help me?"'

Crisis intervention with young people on the streets

The original application of the notion of crisis intervention to young people who run away was in terms of understanding the factors that led to them running away from their home. It was assumed that the running away incident itself was fairly short-lived and was part of this crisis. The role of projects working in this field was therefore seen as using the opportunity presented by the crisis to resolve key issues in young people's lives at the same time as facilitating a return home. For the young people who are worked with by street-work projects this model does not fit particularly well. They may not see themselves as currently being in crisis; they may in fact have a fairly stable set of survival strategies, and they will probably not see the return to the place from which they ran away as particularly desirable. The idea of
offering crisis-intervention work on the basis described above does not therefore fit in with the realities of these young people's lives.

However, a different application of the crisis intervention model has emerged which can guide the model of work undertaken on the streets. To a certain extent, the aims of street-work projects can be seen as establishing and maintaining a basic relationship or credibility with young people. At one level this relationship can form the basis of work aimed at harm reduction. If the relationship can be achieved at that point, when there is a breakdown in the young people's established survival strategies or an event that disturbs the flimsy stability of their lives on the streets, the project may be in a position to intervene in this crisis and enable the young person to move off the streets. Thus street work can be seen as having two aims in terms of direct work with young people: ongoing harm minimisation (e.g., in relation to risky behaviour such as substance misuse and criminal activity), and occasional crisis intervention when the opportunity presents itself. (A third aim of street work is to facilitate young people's access to other service provision.)

This bare outline of the street-work model identifies a key source of stress for project workers. They will often have to walk away from young people on the streets in risky situations because the young person does not want any further intervention. It also means that, when a crisis does arise for a young person, the workers may have a considerable amount of emotional investment in achieving a change in the young person's life. If this proves impossible it can be particularly demoralising for project staff.

**Street work and diversity**

Research indicates that street work undertaken in the centres of large cities tends to engage with a very specific sub-group of young people who run away. These are young people who have become detached, often with extensive experience of living in substitute care, and they are predominantly white (Stein, Rees and Frost, 1994). The reasons for the lack of black young people on the streets have been explored in a recent research study (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) which highlighted the experiences of racism on the streets as a key factor, and indicated that black and Asian young people are less likely than white young people to sleep rough and more likely to rely on informal support within their communities when they are away from home. These findings are supported by a recent research study (not yet published) of black young people running away, which has been conducted in Manchester by Safe in the City:

> 'Black young people do not find Manchester city centre a safe place. So in terms of the way we operate, city centre street work was not necessarily going to meet their needs. From my own personal experience, I've only met one or two [black young people] in the whole of the time I was doing street work.'

This is one of the factors that led Safe in the City to set up a black young people's team, the early work of which is described in Chapter 10.

The limitations of city-centre street work may be more widespread than this, however. Research also indicates that young people running away from families are unlikely to go outside their local area, and there is very little evidence of their migrating to the centres of large cities (several research studies, including Rees, 1993; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). This means that street work may
ultimately engage predominantly with very specific sub-groups of young people who run away, such as young people running away from the substitute care system, young people who have run away from families and have become 'detached', and young people who are being sexually exploited. Therefore it may well be that the kinds of community-based interventions targeted at black young people being devised and piloted by Safe in the City described in Chapter 10 are also applicable to working with detached young white people running away from home and staying within their communities.

Key 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.