Lost Youth

Young Runaways in Northern Ireland

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FOREWORD

I am delighted to support the publication and launch of "Lost Youth: Young Runaways in Northern Ireland". It presents a very comprehensive picture of the lives of some of the most socially excluded young people in Northern Ireland.

On reading the report I was surprised at the extent of the problem of young people running away from home. Overall, 16% of young people surveyed in Northern Ireland said that they had run away or been forced to leave home at some point – in some cases this was just for a few hours. However, one in 11 (9%) had spent at least one night away from home on the last occasion they had run away or been forced to leave. These are quite shocking figures.

This research uncovers a significant social problem which needs to be addressed. It will be of interest to government, statutory providers of services (such as the police and social services), the voluntary sector and, indeed, the general public. The results of the research and its recommendations need to be highlighted and debated.

The Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government 2001 – 2004 places a strong emphasis on reducing social exclusion. The extent of the problem of young people running away from home, and the evidence of their experiences whilst away, supports the case for an urgent response at both the practice and policy levels. This should clearly be delivered in an interagency context. At the local level it might best be addressed by the formation of a specialist sub-group on "Children Missing from Home and Substitute Care" within the Children's Services Planning Committees.

It is also my hope that the creation of a Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner will go a long way towards helping to tackle the problems these young people are facing and giving them a much needed voice.

JANE MORRICE, MLA

Preface

Lost Youth stems from a major research project undertaken jointly between The Children's Society (England and Wales), the Aberlour Child Care Trust (Scotland), Extern (Northern Ireland) and the University of York. Published as *Still Running – Children on the Streets in the UK* in 1999 the report gave the first comprehensive picture of the nature and extent of the issue of children running away from home across the United Kingdom.

Lost Youth now gives a more detailed and up-to-date analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland. Like *Still Running* it makes a number of significant recommendations which identify the need to develop a range of responses and services for young runaways involving statutory, community and voluntary sectors.

In June 2001, The Children's Society made a response to the *Consultation on Youth Runaways* undertaken by the Social Exclusion Unit (England and Wales). It is worth rehearsing some of the key messages contained in that response.

First, we would highlight the need to ensure that children and young people have a say in the decisions that effect them and to have their opinions taken into account. This should be developed within a framework which acknowledges the rights of Children and Young People. There is a need for a centrally resourced strategy which will pull together and co-ordinate initiatives and funds. This should take a long-term approach to the funding of services of young runaways.

There is a body of research and practice that identifies the need to develop a range of responses and services for young runaways. These need to be developed in a locally appropriate manner and will require better joint working and resourcing through multi-agency partnerships. Services should be carefully targeted and should set specific and meaningful performance indicators to be monitored and evaluated through co-ordinated service planning protocols.

Monitoring of need and auditing of services are requirements of children's services planning and must be a first step to tackling any issue. It is a requirement within children's services planning to plan services for children missing from care specifically. However our experience to date is that service planning is not consistent across the United Kingdom. Establishing a specific Young Runaways Plan is the most coherent and appropriate way to ensure the planning and delivery of services to all young runaways.

We welcome the establishment of an inter-departmental working group (including representatives from the Scottish and Northern Ireland Executives) led by the Social Exclusion Unit. However, we believe that the respective Departments of Health in each country have a clear role as the lead departments for children and young people who are at risk of significant harm. Nonetheless, there is a substantial proportion of children who fall below this threshold of harm but for whom a number of government departments have responsibility. A cross-cutting, cross-departmental approach is clearly needed to ensure all children and young people have access to information and resources to make running away less likely. Such an approach enables the provision of holistic child-centred services.

The Children's Society, Extern and Aberlour are committed to continuing research and development in relation to our social justice goals for young runaways. We extend an open invitation to others to join with us in our quest.

PENNY DEAN   BILL LOCKHART
Director for Children and Young People   Chief Executive
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INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

INTRODUCTION

This report seeks to give an accurate portrayal of the phenomenon of young people under 16 who run away or are forced to leave their home in Northern Ireland.

In doing so it leans heavily on a previous study, *Still Running,* which was the first UK-wide exploration of running away. *Still Running* gave a detailed analysis of the situation in all four countries of the United Kingdom. Via additional data collection and analysis with a sharpened focus, we are able to present a comprehensive consideration of the current situation in Northern Ireland. Our findings suggest that it is in some ways the same but in other ways rather different from Wales, Scotland and England.

This report draws on information collected during two phases of fieldwork. The original and substantive work was carried out during early 1999 as part of *Still Running* and a second phase was finished in early 2000. Overall, then, survey questionnaires were completed by over 1,300 14-16-year-olds in 15 schools across Northern Ireland, contact was made with 49 agencies who either worked with runaways, or had practical knowledge of the issue (and detailed interviews undertaken with 21 of the professionals within these agencies) and in-depth interviews were conducted with 34 young people with experience of running.

The research provides clear evidence that running away amongst under-16s is a widespread occurrence in Northern Ireland. We found that the experience of running varied from a brief incident to an abiding, habitual pattern of behaviour. It was clear from the accounts of the young people that running away is always significant and usually psychologically complex. For most the exit from home is prompted by a substantial degree of unhappiness and upset – being away is a mixture of confusion, discomfort, anxiety, regret and danger – and returning, anything from a new beginning to a new ordeal.

If, as could reasonably be suggested, running away provides a peep-hole into the difficult existences of many young people, often those who have not otherwise come to the attention of the helping agencies, then this research throws up questions which merit careful consideration by all of those who purport to champion the needs of children.

It highlights a failure in many instances to deal with the causes of young people's problems and often even to neglect the symptoms – it underlines a persistent deafness to young people's thoughts and feelings – it shows that even those who do fall into the current 'safety net' often fare no better than those outside it.

And, since the family is at the centre of many of these concerns, our findings suggest that, at a basic level, more families need more support, particularly when they encounter breakdown and reconstitution. If we accept that the family is often subject to internal change and (society would appear to have some way to go in coming to terms with the plurality and fluidity of the modern family) then we should also accept that we need to help young people to cope with the complex transitions that they may encounter in early life.

In the conclusion to the report we propose a number of ways in which young people could be prevented from running away and in which better support could be given to those who do

spend time away from home. It rests with parents, practitioners and policy makers to take on the challenge of reducing the risk that many of these young people face – that of drifting into marginalisation and detachment from society.

We should add that we are aware that there is a wider debate to be had about running away in terms of structural issues – politics, economics, social institutions, etc. Given its empirical focus, these areas rest largely outside the remit of this study, but we are confident that, despite this, the research offers a valuable insight into the subject.

THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

To explain the basis upon which this piece of work is grounded it is necessary to elucidate a number of issues.

Definitions

Perhaps the most basic is to clarify the definition of "running away" which we have worked to. A number of terms associated with different facets of running away are in common usage – being thrown out, homeless, roofless, on the streets, absconding, going missing, sofa-surfing. All have significant meaning in this context and serve to amplify what we wish to convey in our use of "running away" – that amongst those who run away there are a broad variety of experiences and, indeed, that many young people are in some way forced to leave home rather than choosing to leave.

For reasons of succinctness in the text we have used "running away" throughout the report as an umbrella phrase to encompass all the differing experiences of being away from home. On occasions where there is need for complete precision we make a distinction between those who run and those who are forced out.

It is also important to be aware that we made a conscious decision not to impose a pre-defined concept of running away during the fieldwork for this study. It was decided to encourage and embrace a diversity of definitions from all who took part to enhance a full understanding of what running away really means to those involved.

The final element in defining our approach to definitions is to add that, in keeping with the premise of the previous paragraph, we did not specify a minimum duration for a running away incident. This meant that we collected some data on brief episodes of running, but the main preoccupation in the report is with those who stay away from their home at least overnight – unless otherwise stated all the reported statistics relate to young people with this experience.

Previous research

As has already been stated, this study builds upon the work done during 1999 which culminated in the *Still Running* report.

Still Running itself was conceived as a response to a number of gaps in previous knowledge from studies of the issue. These key studies in the history of research into running away had provided important insights into the phenomenon. However, they were somewhat limited in their scope in that they focused on sub-groups within the overall population of young people who run away – young people reported as missing to the police, young people making use of a service for runaways, young people missing from care. They were also geographically limited, concentrating on restricted areas of Great Britain. It was, therefore not possible for them to convey a full picture.

We make reference to these studies in the text of the report and it seems appropriate to mention them here – *Young Runaways: Findings from Britain's First Safe House*, Newman, The Children's Society, 1989, [Analysis of missing persons reports and interviews with young people - England and Wales]; *Young Runaways: Exploding the Myths*, Abrahams and Mungall, NCH Action for Children, 1992, [Analysis of missing persons reports from five police authorities in England and Wales]; *Hidden Truths: Young People's Experiences of Running Away*, Rees, The Children's Society, 1993 [Questionnaire survey of young people plus interviews with users of

young person's refuge in Leeds]; *Running the Risk: Young People on the Streets of Britain Today*, Stein *et al.,* The Children's Society, 1994 [Questionnaires and interviews with young people and professionals involved with four projects for runaways in England and Wales]; *Nowhere to Hide: Giving Young Runaways a Voice*, Barter, Centrepoint/NSPCC, 1996 [Interviews with young people staying in refuge in London]; *Going Missing: Young People Absent from Care*, Wade *et al.*, Wiley, 1998 [Questionnaires and interviews with young people who had run from care and with social work professionals and carers involved - England].

These studies of aspects of running away in Britain were preceded by a large body of research in the United States. Although we do not make extensive use of these works there is one primary text which offers a good overview and to which we refer in this report – *The Social Psychology of Runaways*, Brennan *et al.*, Lexington, 1978.

The leads given in these key texts were developed in *Still Running* to provide an exhaustive and thoroughgoing analysis of running away across the UK. The study drew on information from over 13,000 young people and over 400 agencies in 27 different areas selected to ensure a wide and rigorously representative sample. Hence it also seems appropriate to contextualise this country-specific report by giving a very brief overview of the findings in *Still Running* (other findings are referred to in the main body of the report).

Prevalence and characteristics

- One in nine young people in the UK run away from home or are forced to leave and stay away overnight before the age of 16.
- Over half (54%) only run away once, but around one in eight (12%) run away more than three times.
- Around a fifth (19%) of young people said that they were forced to leave home rather than run away.
- More females (11.5%) run away than males (8.5%).
- Young people who start running away before the age of 11 are particularly likely to go on to run away repeatedly.

Triggers

- Problems at home are the primary reason for running away.
- There are a wide range of problems and family conflict is the most common.
- Over a quarter of young people run away due to physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.
- Young people who live in step families or with a lone parent are significantly more likely to run away than those living with both birth parents.

Experiences

- The majority of young people remain in their local area when they run away.
- The experience of being away had negative and positive aspects. Many young people felt that they had time to think and relief from pressure whilst away. However, many felt lonely, hungry or frightened, and a large minority had faced risks such as sleeping rough and being physically or sexually assaulted whilst away.
- The majority of young people rely on friends and relatives for support whilst away, but around one in seven relied solely on more risky strategies including stealing, begging, and 'survival sex' (performing sexual acts in return for money, food, shelter or any other basic need).
- Most young people return home of their own accord.

The legal position of young people under 16 who run away from home

When reading this report one needs to be clear about the status under the law of a young person who has run away, to fully appreciate the vulnerability of their situation.

It is an offence to "harbour" any child under 16 who has left home (the Children [Northern Ireland] Order 1995). Only in certain limited circumstances can a young person apply to the court for a Residence Order (the Children [Northern Ireland] Order 1995) which grants rights of parental responsibility to a new carer. It is common practice for the police to return a young runaway to her/his parents or carers at the earliest opportunity.

For these three reasons it is not legally or practically possible for a young person to choose to leave home under the age of 16.

The only exception to this is legislation which offers sanctioned time out if a young person elects to take refuge. Across the UK there is legal provision for the setting up of refuges which are exempt from the laws on harbouring to enable them to accommodate young people under 16 for a brief period. These provisions are laid down in Article 70 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

As yet no refuges have been set up, so, despite the legal framework being in place, this is not an option for under-16s in Northern Ireland.

[Since the implementation of the Children Act in 1989, five have been set up in England and Wales. Only one now remains in operation in London (run by a consortium of voluntary and statutory sector bodies) after the recent demise of the Leeds Safe House (run by The Children's Society), which means that there are now bed spaces for only 12 young people in one location in the UK].

In addition to this under-16s have no legitimate options to support themselves or find a place to live whilst away from home. They are not entitled to any welfare benefit, have limited ability to work, should legally still be attending school and cannot enter into a contract to obtain independent accommodation.

RESEARCH DESIGN

All our decisions about research design were premised on the main agreed aims of the project and informed by a set of baseline ethical principles.

Aims

- To estimate the prevalence and characteristics of young people under 16 running away or being forced to leave home.
- To learn more about patterns of running away and/or being on the streets, including reasons, circumstances and events whilst away and on returning home.
- To identify the potential needs of the young people in the target group and to explore appropriate responses to these needs.

Ethics

- All participants would be given as much information as was practicable according to the situation. They would also have the opportunity to question the information-provider who would make every reasonable attempt to answer all queries. This would enable fully-informed consent to participation.
- Equally, it would be stressed in all settings that the respondent had the right to refuse to participate and that they retained this right throughout their participation in the process. Any withdrawal at any point would be respected without question.
- With particular reference to the involvement of young people it was decided, given the age-group concerned and the nature of the study, that parental consent to participation would not be sought – young people would be credited with the maturity to give their own informed consent.

- All participants would be offered confidentiality. (The only limit on this was the proviso that in exceptional circumstances it might have to be breached – for example, if an interviewee indicated that any young person was at serious risk of harm or that their life was in danger. Even then the participant would be informed before the issue was taken further).
- All participants would be given anonymity: information would only be shared within the research team and conveyed judiciously in reported findings to prevent the identification of any individual or school.

These principles were applied throughout the research with appropriate fine-tuning as necessary within different components.

Methods

The data contained in this report was collected during two phases of fieldwork and through two complementary methods: a schools survey and interviews (with agency professionals and young people with experience of running away – in three stages, as described below). The pattern of data collection is detailed in the following table:

Table 1: Research phases

PHASE ONE (Spring 1999)	Schools survey (all three areas) 28 agency contacts/short interviews (Strabane and Belfast) 13 detailed agency interviews (Strabane and Belfast) 22 in-depth interviews with young people (Strabane and Belfast)
PHASE TWO (Spring 2000)	15 agency contacts/short interviews (Carrickfergus) 4 detailed agency interviews (Carrickfergus) 12 in-depth interviews with young people (Carrickfergus) 6 (additional) agency contacts (Belfast) 4 (additional) detailed agency interviews (Belfast)

Each research component merits full explanation here, as does the sampling strategy employed.

Sampling

Due to the smaller population of Northern Ireland it was not possible to replicate the sophisticated sampling technique used for England in *Still Running* (where 16 areas were selected according to criteria including population density, economic conditions, and levels of minority ethnic residence). Instead the areas chosen were purposively selected – Belfast, because it is the largest city, and Carrickfergus (to represent a suburban area) and Strabane (rural area) using census data and taking into account the need to include a geographical spread. The Northern Ireland sample could not hope to give as precise a picture as the UK-wide sample, but it is representative enough of the whole population to give reliable and significant findings.

Figure 1: The sample areas in Northern Ireland
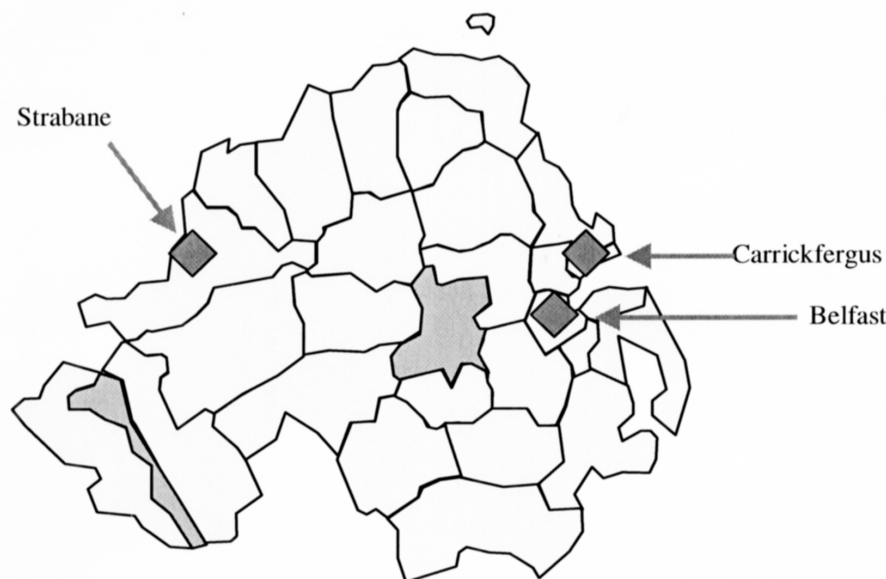
Survey

Once the sample areas had been selected the schools survey was undertaken to achieve an overall picture of the size of the issue – to produce estimates for numbers of under-16s who run away, look at identifying characteristics of this group and acquire some indications of reasons for running and experiences whilst away from home.

Schools were chosen as the most obvious forum for obtaining a captive set of suitable respondents. However, in the nature of the issue of running away, there is an inherent irony in this. It may well be (as previous research has suggested) that runaways are over-represented amongst those who are regular non-attenders or are excluded from school. This approach would also preclude the examination of running away as an issue for young people with special needs who do not attend mainstream schools. In *Still Running* these weaknesses in the main sampling strategy were redressed by administering additional surveys in pupil referral units and in special schools. This did not happen in Northern Ireland and so it is possible that the estimates for overall prevalence slightly underestimate the situation here.

Access to schools necessitated a staged process. The director of the education board in each of the three areas was written to with information about the research and to seek permission to speak to schools. After this headteachers were contacted individually. In Strabane and Carrickfergus all upper schools were approached and all took part. In Belfast a representative sample was compiled of grammar and secondary modern, Catholic and Protestant and schools with single sex intakes, and headteachers were contacted. There were a number of refusals in Belfast, but in each case a similar substitute school was found.

The questionnaire was completed by 14 and 15-year-olds – all those students in Year 11 who were present on the day of the survey. Since our aim was to gather information on running away from young people under 16, and since propensity to run increases with age, we would have preferred to survey those in the year above. However, the fieldwork took place between March and June and the potential logistical difficulties of examination timetables and school leaving for those in Year 12 dictated that this was not sensible.

In order to facilitate the completion of the questionnaires each school in Northern Ireland was visited by a member of the research team. A presentation was given to the year group during which they were offered the opportunity to ask questions of their own. The questionnaires were then completed individually in class.

The survey itself included sections on background information (demographic characteristics, family form, quality of relationships with carers, school experiences and personal issues), actual running away experience (if applicable), and general views on how young people who run, or

are at risk of running, might be helped. Some questions had a tick-box format with room for additional comments, whilst others were open-ended.

Data processing and analysis

The data from the questionnaires was input onto a database. Quantitative data was then transferred to SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for statistical analysis, and the answers to open-ended questions were transferred to TextSmart for initial analysis and coding.

The statistical analysis made use of a variety of robust non-parametric tests. Chi-square tests were used for bivariate nominal data. Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used for bivariate data with one ordinal and one nominal variable. Correlations using Kendall's tau-b statistics were calculated for bivariate data involving two ordinal variables.

Where a result is reported as statistically significant, this means that the p-value of the test was less than 0.05 (i.e. often termed "95% confidence") unless otherwise stated.

Whilst the survey provided a large dataset of quantitative information at the end of phase one, the interviews were an evolving strand during both phases of fieldwork. The first stage was work with agency professionals.

Interviews with professionals

Those professionals who contributed their thoughts included social workers, police officers, youth workers, housing workers, advice centre workers, education workers and various others involved in area-unique projects with differing roles.

Initial contact was made with the more easily identifiable of these workers (primarily those in the statutory sector) and a short interview undertaken over the telephone. In these interviews we gathered basic information about the specific worker's knowledge of young people running away in their area, their estimate of numbers and typical characteristics, and an explanation of what the agency did. This data was then assembled to construct a picture for each area. This served to give an outline of agency views and offered a forum to obtain other useful local contacts. Once all relevant contacts had been made, the group was distilled to those with best knowledge to do full, tape or minidisc-recorded interviews (both face-to-face and over the phone). Through these we were able to acquire a more detailed insight into the problem in each area (including an understanding of the gaps in service provision as perceived by the key players), and to source potential runaway interviewees.

The information from both short and long interviews was entered onto a database and was used for a thematic analysis of the inteview content.

Interviews with young people

The culmination of the process for each area was the in-depth interviews with young people.

As mentioned above, agency contacts were the prime source for young people to interview. The main venues for these interviews included youth advice and drop-in projects, youth and community centres, children's homes and streetwork projects: also, hostels, in the case of some interviewees who were 17 or older at the time of interview but had had a running career that had begun before they were 16.

Potential participants were sent written details about the research before a visit to the venue. The researcher(s) would then call and talk to young people who had expressed an interest in taking part and then conduct interviews as appropriate. All young people were paid £5 expenses for their participation. This payment was not conditional on completing the interview and did not in any way relate to the quality of their story, or the length of the interview.

The young people's interviews were in three parts. The first mainly consisted in the interviewer clarifying the purpose of the research, explaining the ethical principles and the policy on confidentiality, and offering the young person the chance to withdraw in the light of this explanation. (Clearly there was the opportunity for informal, off-the-record discussion at this point in the interview).

The middle part was the semi-structured inteview itself which covered the young person's current situation, an overview of their life, detailed discussion of the times they had run away, a section on their involvement with school, social services and any other relevant agencies, and their views on what could be done to help young people who run away. This part of the inteview was tape or minidisc-recorded with the young person's consent.

The concluding part was flexibly structured to debrief the young person. The interviewer asked the young person how they felt and, if necessary, offered advice and information about ways to deal with any emotional or practical issues that had arisen during the interview. The interviewer also used this period to return to any matters which might relate to the previous discussion on confidentiality (e.g. child protection).

As with the agency workers' interviews, the information from the young people was summarised and stored on a database along with pertinent quotes. The analysis of the data included drawing up a pen picture of each young person's story, categorising issues experienced by the young person and looking at their views on what might be done to help young runaways. It also developed to encompass a more detailed chronological analysis of many areas of the young person's life, most especially in relation to their running career.

Case study 1 – Michael

Michael had never met his father. During his childhood he had become very close to his uncle, who lived nearby. When Michael was 12 his uncle died. Michael was devastated:

> *"He was the only one who ever listened to me … It just made me go mad, I was doing all these strange things … just going out and trying to cut my wrists and stuff … taking drugs and starting up drinking, and all."*

Michael said that his mother had always hit him, but after the death began to beat him severely on a regular basis:

> *"After my uncle died she started hitting me hard, really hard with weapons and stuff … one time she broke a tennis racket over my leg - I had to go to hospital. She threw me down the stairs and I broke my arm … and, you know, just really, really hard beatings."*

Michael began to run away frequently – his mind was in turmoil and he could find no peace at home:

> *"I'd just go to the streets … just to clear my head a bit when I get confused about something."*

He often stayed away for days or weeks at a time, staying secretly in friends' bedrooms or sleeping rough and stole food to feed himself and alcohol to keep warm and blot out his problems.

His running only stopped when he was placed in a secure unit as a result of his offences. He then moved into the residential care. He is beginning to settle and find some stability and is happier in care:

> *"It's better here than it is at home - there's more freedom and they don't hit you."*

2

OVERVIEW

In this chapter we briefly present some key findings, based on the survey of school pupils, looking at:

• How many young people run away
• Which young people run away
• Why young people run away
• What happens when young people run away

We will then go on to explore the latter two categories in much more detail in subsequent chapters, making use of the in-depth interviews carried out with young people as well as the survey.

HOW MANY YOUNG PEOPLE RUN AWAY IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

The survey of over 1,300 young people carried out through schools enables us, for the first time, to estimate the number of young people who run away in Northern Ireland.

Young people in the survey were asked a basic question about whether they had ever run away, and then a number of more detailed questions about their experiences, including how many nights (if any) they had stayed away for. We are therefore able to estimate the proportion of young people who run away, and those who stayed away overnight.

Overall 16% of young people surveyed in Northern Ireland said that they had run away or been forced to leave home at some point. However, this was sometimes only for a few hours.

One in 11 (9%) of those surveyed had spent at least one night away from home on the last occasion they had run away or been forced to leave. Because most of the young people were some way off their sixteenth birthday at the time they were surveyed (with some only being 14 years of age) this is an underestimate of the proportion of young people running away over night in Northern Ireland. Making an allowance for this factor, we estimate that just under one in ten (9.9%) of young people in Northern Ireland will run away or be forced to leave and spend at least one night away from home before their sixteenth birthday. This compares to an estimate of around 11% for the UK as a whole. Although the Northern Ireland estimate is lower than that for the rest of the UK, the difference is not large enough to be statistically significant, so there is a lack of evidence that the rate of running away in Northern Ireland is substantially different from that in England, Scotland or Wales.

We were also able to compare rates of running away in the three areas surveyed in Northern Ireland. Although the rate of running away in Strabane was slightly higher than in Belfast and Carrickfergus, again the differences were not significant. This matches the finding for the UK as a whole that there were no systematic differences in running away rates in city, suburban and rural areas.

In summary then, our key estimates are shown below:

Figure 2: Key estimates of running away in Northern Ireland

- One in ten young people in Northern Ireland run away or are forced to leave home, and spend at least one night away from home before the age of 16.
- There are around 3,500 running away incidents per annum in Northern Ireland.
- Over 2,000 young people under 16 run away from home each year in Northern Ireland.

WHO RUNS AWAY?

Previous research has shown significant differences in rates of running away amongst different sub-groups of young people. It is therefore interesting to explore whether such differences are evident in the Northern Ireland survey.

Gender

The rates of running away for females and males were almost identical in Northern Ireland (slightly higher for males but not significantly so). This is an interesting contrast with the rest of the UK where several research studies have found that females are significantly more likely to run away than males.

Age

Just over half of the young people (52%) who had run away overnight had first done so as teenagers. Just under one in five (19%) had done so before the age of 11.

Household type

In the survey we asked young people about the current state of family form in which they were living. Effectively, since the survey asked retrospectively for details on the last episode of running, this meant that there was a possibility that family form may have subsequently changed. However, given the difficulties of attempting to capture the intricacies of changing family form which occur in some young people lives, we felt this was the best strategy and that it would provide useful broad information on family context and running away. (We were able to redress the issues of developing family context and running behaviour in the young people's interviews, wherein we asked about the chronology of events and the interaction of these with running incidents – these will be considered in the next chapter).

Eight in ten young people in the Northern Ireland survey were living with both birth parents, which is a higher proportion than for the UK survey as whole (seven in ten). Correspondingly fewer were living with a parent and a step-parent (4% in Northern Ireland compared to around 10% for the UK).

There were significant differences in running away rates amongst young people living in different family forms:

Table 2: Running away rates amongst young people living in different family forms

Family form	*% running away overnight*	*No. of people*
Both birth parents	7%	1020
Single parent	13%	195
Parent and step-parent	20%	50

One in five young people living in a household with a parent and step-parent had run away overnight compared to 13% living with a single parent and only 7% living with both parents. These figures are almost identical to those for the UK as a whole (21%, 13% and 7% respectively for the same family types).

To highlight the significance of this relationship one might say that although only one in twenty-five of our sample lived with a step-parent, one in five of them will have run away overnight as compared with less than one in fourteen of those who live with both birth parents. The figures point to family form as being a key factor linked to young people running away.

Economic factors

Earlier research on running away has sought to uncover links between economic disadvantage and running away. Rees (1993) proposed that there was a connection from a study of young people in Leeds.

The schools survey in this study sought to look at household poverty as it might relate to running away behaviour by asking two questions of the respondents: how many people in their household were in paid employment and did they have free school meals. It was felt that these indicators could give some reliable, if rather limited, information on the domestic economic circumstances of each young person.

When the data was analysed there was little evidence of a link between poverty and running away in Northern Ireland. The difference in running away rates amongst young people, according to the two measures described above, were not significant. A full analysis of the data across the UK suggested that there was no clear evidence of a direct link between poverty and running away. It was not the standard of living within a household but rather the quality of relationships that was a strong determinant of running away behaviour.

Other factors

Previous UK research has indicated much higher than average rates of running away amongst young people living in substitute care, and significant differences between young people of different ethnic origins. In the Northern Ireland survey sample there were insufficient numbers of young people in care, and in minority ethnic groups, for us to be able to explore these differences.

WHY YOUNG PEOPLE RUN AWAY

Exploring the issue of why young people run away is a complex task. As other research in the UK and elsewhere has shown, running away is often a response to long term problems which young people have experienced. In this chapter we begin to explore young people's reasons for running away by looking at the information given in the survey by young people about the most recent time they ran away. We will then go on in subsequent chapters to look at the wider context in which running away took place.

Young people were asked two questions about the reasons for running away/being forced to leave on the most recent occasion. First, they were asked to categorise their reasons into one or more of four categories. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 3: Broad reasons for running away (survey questionnaire)

	% selecting this category
Problems at home	73%
Personal problems	51%
Problems at school	30%
Other reasons	12%

As can be seen, most young people selected more than one category. The most common category was problems at home, selected by almost three-quarters of the young people who had run away overnight.

Of those young people who did not say they ran away due to problems at home, 13% said it was due to personal problems only, 5% due to school problems only, and 8% due to personal and school problems. Thus problems classified as 'personal' were clearly the second most important explanation for running away, and school problems alone were relatively rare.

Young people were also asked an open-ended question about why they ran away or were forced to leave. Around half of those who had been away overnight answered this question. Because of this response rate (both in terms of proportions and numbers) it is not possible to come up with estimates of the proportions of young people running away for different reasons. However, the explanations given by young people illustrate the whole range of reasons identified in previous research on running away, with explanations often covering more than one reason.

Family-based reasons

In *Still Running*, the most common family-based reasons given by young people throughout the UK for running away on the most recent occasion were: arguments and conflict (27%); violence or the threat of violence (12%); emotional abuse (scapegoating and differential treatment of siblings) (9%); emotional neglect and rejection (6%); parental disharmony (6%); step-parent issues (4%); and boundaries and control issues (4%).

These reasons were all regularly mentioned by young people in the Northern Ireland survey as the following quotes from eight young people who completed the survey questionnaire illustrate:

Figure 3: Sample reasons for running away (survey questionnaire)

"Because I was having problems with my parents, arguments and too much was said and dad hit me several times."

"My mum was pestering me, blaming me for everything, saying I marked her clothes, she was doing this constantly for two years and she always told lies about me. She used to hit me really hard until one day I hit back in about form 1. By form 2 she learnt other ways to get at me. It got to the stage when I had to leave."

"Because I didn't like it at home. My parents were calling me names - i.e. 'stupid cunt' and 'stupid bastard'."

"I ran away because my mother kept shouting at me for no reason and was treating me different than my other sisters."

"I didn't feel loved and thought my family would be better off without me."

"Fights were going on in the house."

"I hate my mother's boyfriend."

"Because I felt trapped and my family is too strict."

Personal problems

As we have already seen, the second most common set of factors leading to running away were personal problems. Young people's comments indicate a wide range of issues, from relationship troubles (with boyfriends or girlfriends) to problems with alcohol use, but depression and difficulties in coping were the most common themes as illustrated by the following two quotes:

> *"I had just gone through a very bad experience in my life a couple of months beforehand and it all got too much trying to cope with it on my own. I couldn't tell anyone about it as it would only hurt them too much."*

> *"I ran away because I was very depressed. My mother was drinking heavily and my family had found out that I was sexually abused for many years when I was younger."*

School issues

Although school-based problems were not usually a primary reason for running away, there were often school issues which were mentioned as additional or contributory factors. Issues relating to pressure at school and problems with peers were occasionally mentioned as the sole reason for running away:

> *"I was under too much pressure from school."*

> *"Problems with my school friends, they didn't want to know me."*

Issues specific to Northern Ireland

There was almost no mention in the survey of any reasons for running away specifically linked to Northern Ireland sectarianism. One exception was the following:

> *"My parents felt that they couldn't control me any more and they sent me to live with my granny. She lives in a dominant Protestant area and my father thought that it would teach me a lesson. I have had run-ins with the police twice and got caught shop-lifting, drinking and smoking."*

However, there may be limits to the kinds of information that people will disclose in a survey of this kind, and as we shall see later the in-depth interviews give more information on this issue.

In general, the kind of information gathered in the survey must be regarded as no more than a rough indicator of the immediate triggers which led to young people running away. As we will see in the next two chapters the real reasons for running away are usually much more deep-rooted and complex than the above analysis would suggest.

EXPERIENCES OF RUNNING AWAY

We will go on in Chapter 5 to explore young people's experiences of being away from home in some detail. This section briefly presents some of the main basic findings from the survey about running away.

Number of times young people had run away

The majority of young people who said they had run away had done so only once and only one in five of the young people had run three times or more. Looking only at those who had run away overnight, the proportion is slightly higher (25%).

As with the UK study, the Northern Ireland survey showed a strong link between the early onset of running away and repeat running away. Over 30% of those who had run away more than once had started running away before the age of 11, compared to only 10% of those who had only run away once.

How long young people were away for

Just over half of the young people in the survey had only been away for one night on the only or most recent occasion that they were away from home. Around a quarter had been away two to six nights and a quarter for a week or more. There was no difference between males and females in this respect.

Young people who had run away more often also stayed away longer on average. However, as shown in the UK study, this does not necessarily mean that there is a developing pattern to running away. It seems more likely that young people who run away repeatedly display a different pattern from the outset.

Running away or forced to leave?

Of those young people who had stayed away for at least one night, six out of every seven classified themselves as having run away and the remaining one in seven said that they had been forced to leave home.

Where young people slept

More than half the young people went either to friends (33%) or relatives (23%) on the only or most recent occasion that they ran away. Of the remainder, most said that they slept rough, amounting to 36% of all the young people who had been away over night. This is a higher proportion than for the UK as a whole (25%).

The proportion of runaways sleeping rough was not significantly different in the three areas, although it was slightly higher in Belfast.

There were however large differences in behaviour according to sex:

Table 4: Where young people slept by gender

	Female	*Male*
Friends	26%	39%
Relatives	41%	7%
Rough	29%	41%

Males were most likely to sleep rough (41%) and quite unlikely to go to relatives (7%). Females, on the other hand were most likely to go to relatives (41%).

There was also a strong association between the number of times young people had run away and whether they slept rough. 24% of those who had run away once said they had slept rough, compared to 61% of those who had run away more than once.

Similarly, young people who slept rough were also likely to stay away longer than young people who did not. Three-fifths (60%) of those who slept rough stayed away for more than one night, compared to 56% of those who slept at relatives and 34% of those who stayed with friends.

All in all, then there is a group of young people who run away more often, for longer periods, are more likely to sleep rough and consequently face greater risks whilst they are away.

How far young people travelled

In the schools survey, two-thirds of the young people who were away for at least one night said that they did not go outside their local area. Even amongst the other third, it appears that many did not travel very far, and only seven mentioned travelling to a large city (three to Belfast and two each to Dublin and London). This fits with the findings of previous UK research which has indicated that runaways tend to stay local rather than seek "the bright lights".

There were no significant differences in responses to travelling outside the area according to where young people slept, how many times they had run away, or how long they spent away.

SUMMARY

The survey shows that running away is a common phenomenon in Northern Ireland – an estimated one in ten young people run away overnight before the age of 16. This figure is in line with estimates for the UK as a whole. It means that there are around 3,500 overnight running away incidents per year in Northern Ireland, and that over 2,000 young people run away for the first time each year. There is no evidence of differences in running away rates in

the three areas surveyed. However, at a more individual level there are differences in running away rates for young people in different household types, with young people currently living in step-families the most likely to have run away. There was less evidence of an association between poverty and running away, and it appears that it is the quality of family relationships rather than economic factors which affect the likelihood of a young person running away. Indeed, in most cases, young people report that it is problems within the home environment (such as conflict, abuse and neglect) rather than personal or school problems which led to them running away.

Most young runaways in the survey had only run once or twice, but there is some evidence of repetitive running away and this is linked to an early age of onset of running away. Inevitably, there was considerable diversity in young people's experiences of running away, ranging from some young people who run away for one night and stayed with relatives to those who had run away for several weeks or more and had been at considerable risk (see Chapter 5 for further discussion).

Case study 2 – Connor

Connor had been running away from home since he was 9.

Now 14, he first ran because he felt caught between his warring separated parents. He lived with his mother who was continually putting his father down and making allegations that he used to beat her up.

Connor was so upset by this that he ran out of the house and spent the night sitting in a subway with no coat or food. The next day he went to the local library for warmth and shelter. His older brother came in and took him home.

After this he ran frequently; partly, he said, because his mother found a new partner who moved into the house. Connor often fell out with his mother's partner – he said that he treated him unfairly and sometimes hit him.

> *"My mum's boyfriend was hitting me 'n' all…and I wanted to kill him. And my mum started taking his side…and then I thought I wasn't wanted in the family."*

It was easy for him to spend nights away because, even at 9, he had a key to the house and could let himself in and out without his mother knowing.

Connor began to run away regularly and over time his running activities became increasingly dangerous. One episode, when he was 13, escalated from a "jaunt" to Belfast (where he intended to "have a good time" drug-taking with three friends) to boarding a ferry across the Irish Sea. When they landed Connor was not even sure where they were. The group had very little money so they slept in a barn and stole food and cider from local shops. Eventually, after a few nights, the farmer caught them and they fled back to the ferry terminal to catch a boat home.

When he got back his mother initially refused to take him in. Connor spent a brief spell in foster care whilst social services negotiated a return home.

Connor said that he still runs away now, but not so often. Although he made light of it, he said that he had considered suicide on a number of occasions, once even writing a letter to his mother and going with a friend to the place where they intended to drown themselves, before abandoning the idea.

He said that the worst thing about running was going back:

> *"When you say (to yourself) you're gonna do it you don't really think about it that much - you just, like, disappear … it's … say a couple of hours later … that's when you start to think about it … you just run away … and then you're scared to go back … scared of what your family are gonna do when you get back and it makes you stay out."*

3

THE HOME CONTEXT

In next two chapters we will look at the contexts within which young people run away or are forced to leave their home – whether that be the micro-context of their immediate home life, the personal and psychological sphere, or the wider macro-context of issues outside the home and external influences.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the place where a young person lives and the people with whom they live have been shown to be a primary influence on running away, as shown in previous UK and US research (Rees, 1993; Brennan *et al.*, 1978). In this chapter we will show how information from the schools survey, interviews with young people and interviews with professionals in Northern Ireland serves to support this premise.

When considering home context we are generally referring to the family unit in an individual household. We will use the convention of referring to other family members as "extended family". This is not to preclude the fact that there may be a number of different home contexts from which young people run not least that of substitute care; these will be covered later in the chapter.

THE FAMILY CONTEXT

We have already seen in the previous chapter that there are large differences in the rates of running away for young people living in different family forms, with young people in step-families being the most likely to run away, followed by young people living with a lone parent, and then young people living with both birth parents. We will now look at issues of quality of family relationships and how this might affect the likelihood of young people running away. Later in the chapter we will explore the links between quality of relationships and family form.

The quality of relationships with parents and carers

Previous research (Brennan *et al*, 1978) suggested that it was the quality of certain aspects of parent-child relationships within the family that were most closely linked with running away.

Although it was not possible to fully replicate the extensive scales used in the US study within the constraints of our survey, we did attempt to gauge the nature of familial relationships by asking six basic questions. The responses are shown in the tables opposite:

Table 5: Quality of family relationships by whether run away

		% of young people with negative view	
Family form	*Total*	*Had not run away*	*Had run away*
Don't get on with parents	4	3	23
Don't feel treated fairly	12	9	37
Don't feel understood	10	8	27
Don't feel cared about	2	2	7
Think parents are too strict	9	7	27
Parents hit a lot	3	2	13

There were significant differences between runaways and non-runaways, with runaways expressing more negative views of family relationships, on all six questions.

Combining the answers to the six questions illustrates the above point even more clearly:

Table 6: Running away rates by negative responses on quality of family relationships

Number of negative response	*% running away overnight*	*No. of people*
0	5%	943
1 to 2	18%	206
3 to 4	34%	38
5 to 6	64%	14

Almost two-thirds of those young people who felt very negatively about their relationships with their parents had run away overnight, and a third of those with three or four negative responses had done so.

So our survey reinforced the finding that the quality of parent/carer-child relationships (as viewed by the young person) were a strong indicator of the propensity to run.

Links between family forms and the quality of family relationships

Given that family form and quality of relationships would seem to be key determinants of running behaviour we were led to then look at the links between the two.

The evidence from *Still Running* was that those young people who lived in a household which included a step-parent or with a single parent might tend to express more negative views about their domestic relationships. However, a test of the link between family forms and quality of relationships actually showed no significant difference in the number of negative responses for young people living in the different family forms. That is, in Northern Ireland (unlike the UK as a whole) there is no evidence that young people living with a single parent or with a parent and step-parent express more negative views about their relationships with their parents/carers than young people living with both birth parents.

A combined analysis of the influence of family form and quality of relationships on running away rates indicates that both are significant factors in their own right, although the quality of relationships appeared to play a somewhat bigger role than the type of family the young person lived in.

In summary then, we can conclude that young people who are unhappy in their family are much more likely to run away than those who are happy, irrespective of the type of family they live in. In addition, irrespective of the quality of relationships, young people living with a single parent or with a parent and step-parent are somewhat more likely to run away than young people living with both birth parents. However, as will be shown in Chapter 5, there was some evidence of young people not living with both birth parents being more likely to run to a relative, and we could speculate that the existence of a parent in another location might offer young people an additional place to run to.

The interviews with young people allowed the opportunity to explore home context issues in greater depth. Where possible in these interviews we sought to establish a chronology of events to enable a greater focus on how developments within the family might affect running behaviour.

In this section we will firstly look at young people's accounts of family context before they began running away. We will then look at how this might have changed if they continued to run.

The family context before running away

An initial analysis of family context on all the interview sample pointed to four areas of interest: changing family form, parenting issues, sibling relationship issues and parental problems.

The majority of our sample had experienced a change, or often a number of changes in family form – this most often being due to parental separation or divorce, or more rarely, due to bereavement and/or reception into substitute care. At the time of interview only a quarter of the sample were still living with both birth parents. A third were living with a single parent (mostly mother but in one case with father) and another third were living with mother and a step-father. It was sometimes difficult to glean at what point a step-parent had been introduced, but one might reasonably assume, given the ages of the young people interviewed relative to their running behaviour, that in most cases this was before running away began.

The accounts of the young people underline the shifting nature of family context and the difficulty for many young people of recalling exactly when changes had occurred. More than half of the group had experienced changing partnerships for their main carer, whether these had become permanent relationships or were of a more transient nature. Four of the group referred directly to the serial relationships of their mothers before they had first run away and often how damaging these had been to themselves and the family. One young person spoke of his mother's second marriage to a man who he described as a monster, who was violent towards both his mother and himself and three siblings. As he reflected:

> *"It's always stuck in my mind, it's always been there – I don't know if it's influenced any of the things I've done but it's always been there."*

Other young people in single parent households alluded to the frequent presence of "mum's boyfriend" around the house and sometimes referred to attempted "control" of their behaviour by these men:

> *"When I'm watching the TV he'd come in and take it off me. I'd go to him, 'I was watching it first', and he'd grab me arm and twist it round … then he'd take the controller and I'd go upstairs and start shouting swear words 'n' all and trashing my room."*

Parenting issues were often a particularly strong strand in the young people's stories: on a more minor level conflict over what was acceptable behaviour, boundary setting, expectations and so on, and on a more serious level, abuse of different kinds.

Often the arguments were over disagreements as to acceptable behaviour:

> *"She just couldn't get on with me no more and I was doing her head in … not coming in, staying out late, and drinking and all this, that and the other …"*

"I just wanted to live my own way. My mother didn't want me to do half the things I was doing and I was just going on ahead and doing them and ignoring her half the time."

For young women the main contentious issue was often expectations over household chores and/or child care:

"If my mum wants to go out she always gets me to babysit and sometimes I had plans to go somewhere else … if I didn't babysit there'd be a big argument and sometimes the arguments would get really bad and they'd build up for a long time."

"She gets me to do all of the housework if she's not feeling well – she'll go to bed and leave me to do the housework and look after the wee ones."

However, equality of opportunity in terms of domestic drudgery was present in at least one household. One young man was an exception to the pattern:

"My uncle says I'm a glorified babysitter – I always babysit my brother and sister – and … I make a lot of coffee for my mum and dad as well … and I think I just got a bit fed up of it."

A number of the young people alluded to there being a culture of perpetual strife between themselves and one or more of their parents – half of the group spoke of ongoing conflict:

"I can't honestly remember what the argument started over, but it was just arguments constantly … and I just felt like I was being pushed away to one side."

"My ma pisses me off … I just don't like her … full stop … done."

A social worker summed-up the tensions that exist in many homes:

"Mainly it's relationship difficulties, unrealistic expectations by parents in terms of what to expect of a teenager … they expect perfect children and they can't come to terms with children who no longer are (children), who are pushing boundaries. Parents just can't cope with it – they don't want them to grow up."

A substantial proportion of the interviewees in the purposive sample referred to abuse prior to their running away. In most cases this was physical abuse:

"My mum's boyfriend was hitting me 'n' all … and I wanted to kill him. And my mum started taking his side … and then I thought I wasn't wanted in the family."

"My mother blamed me for not going to school for a whole week. She took the poker to me and told me that I was telling lies and she beat me with the poker. That's why I don't live there."

"He (father) used to just throw me out, 'n' all, in the street. Erm … say if it was raining or snowing, he used to throw me out with just a t-shirt on. I mean, I was freezing – really, really cold, and I had no friends or anything out there."

There were also reports of emotional abuse:

"She's always made sure that nobody hears, like, if she threatens me or if she tells me to get out and not bother coming back, or if she's even saying anything, you know, like … really nasty to me, I think she makes sure nobody hears her so she can deny it later – so it's my word against hers."

and of neglect and rejection:

"He (uncle) was the only one that ever listened to me – everyone else just pushed me aside and never talked to me or nothing."

Interestingly, none of the interviewees in the Northern Ireland sample referred to sexual abuse. It is a moot point as to whether this meant that none had actually suffered such abuse – estimates of prevalence amongst the general population have often proved to be problematic

(see The Research Team (Queen's University, Belfast) 1990) – and it is difficult to say definitively whether our runaway sample would be more likely to have been victims of sexual abuse. One might, however, point to the evidence from the UK-wide interviews where a number of young people spoke of sexual abuse as part of their home context prior to running away.

The issue of sibling relationships was spoken of by a number of young people. This was relevant in three different ways, the first being a perception of differential treatment amongst siblings by the adult(s) in the household, the second that of inter-sibling conflicts, and the third of aspirational desire to replicate an older sibling's running behaviour. A quarter of the interviewees referred directly to differential treatment by their parent(s).

> *"It was like one rule for one and one rule for the other, so it wasn't fair. It was horrible."*

> *"My mum wanted all girls, a 'perfect' family."*

In one case it was actually the favouritism bestowed on one child which led to conflict between both the adults and between the siblings and contributed towards the running away of the 'favourite':

> *"Dad doesn't love them … my dad always says when he's drunk that he loves me the best, so he does. And they can't handle that."*

A number of interviewees spoke of the tensions within a household caused by sibling rivalry - many indicated that they were fed up with ongoing rows and fights with siblings,

> *"I despise my mum and I really, really hate my sister."*

and some that they were being bullied or physically abused at home by older siblings:

> *"My sister, she started hitting me as well – sometimes my mum just got so fed up she didn't want to hit me anymore, so my sister came in and she started hitting me."*

The third aspect of sibling relationships which formed part of the context prior to running in a number of cases was that of older siblings who had previously run whom the young person looked up to. One young person said that her older sister had run more than 25 times and another boasted:

> *"My big brother's run away I don't know how many times … I'm trying to break his record! (laughing) His record's 54!"*

The final element of home life which was frequently a part of the context for the young people in the interviews was that of parental problems – physical or mental health problems, domestic violence, alcoholism and parental relationship difficulties. Parental problems were spoken of directly by more than a quarter of the interviewees.

One of the most prevalent problems was domestic violence: one in seven of the young people talked about this. Mostly this was male partner's violence but in one situation it was the young person's mother who was the perpetrator. The other issue most often spoken about was that of alcoholism of parent(s): again one in seven of the young people talked about this. In two cases this had led to young people being moved to alternative care, either with a relative or with the local authority. For those who remained at home the situation became extremely difficult:

> *"My father drank and I was supposed to do everything in the house."*

> *"She's a whole different person if she's drinking. Sometimes that can be a good thing because whenever she's drinking she will come in and give me a big hug … (and be) in a really soppy mood, but there's other times when she's drinking she's in a really bad mood … she's got into fights, she's come home black and blue. She's not been able to get up out of bed next morning, she's fell downstairs, fellen (sic) out of taxis … she's got into a fight with a man and he's actually hit her. She gets in a real state at times."*

The mental health of a number of parents was spoken about by a significant number of the interviewees, sometimes directly, as though there had been a diagnosis at some point:

> *"She suffers from depression ... she's in bed a lot so I'm just left to do stuff … There's been times when she's been in bed … maybe all day … she might get up in the morning and make the wee ones breakfast and make herself breakfast, and go to bed about 11 o'clock in the morning and just stay in bed all day until the next day."*

and sometimes in a more flippant way:

> *"She was a bit of a 'schizo' … moody, vile moody!"*

In two cases the interviewees made reference to physical ill health of their parent(s). Both young people talked about this specifically in terms of the additional tensions it caused at home:

> *"I argue with my mum a lot. She's not very well and I feel guilty about it."*

> *"She takes it out on me and my two sisters."*

Younger incidents of first running away

An additional layer of analysis which we undertook when considering all the aspects of home context was to divide the interviewees into those who had first run away before they were eleven and those who were over that age for the first incident. This was partly to see if there were any differences between the two groups but also to allow us to identify key messages from the younger age group, this being a particular consideration because the UK survey suggested that those who run before secondary school age are more likely to have an extended 'career' of running (i.e. run more than three times).

A quarter of our sample fell into this category, and, without exception, they had all run on a number of occasions – the majority more than ten times and none with less than five incidents in total.

But was there any difference in the early life home context for this group? In some cases there was insufficient detail in the interviews to be able to fully explore these issues. However, it was apparent that of this group there was some commonality of experience in terms of early home context.

Early separation from at least one birth parent was an experience of the majority of the group. Four of the young people had been mostly brought up by a single parent (one being by father, due to mother's mental health problems, the others by mother) and these separations from a birth parent had mostly (3 out of 4) occurred in infancy (in one case before birth). In addition one young person had been taken into care during infancy due to parental alcohol problems.

Abuse was prevalent amongst the group – only one did not report any abuse. This was most often physical abuse by the single parent caring for them (in five out of the six cases) and for some this was combined with rejection and neglect:

> *"… When I was born my ma wanted me up for an adoption … she abandoned me – when I was just one day old she abandoned me. My daddy had to take over. My daddy brung me up until I was eleven or twelve."*

It was interesting that in none of the four cases where there had been a single parent carer at the time of first running interview did the young person make reference to a new, stable relationship for their parent. This would imply that despite the fact that separation of the birth parents had occurred early in the young person's life in the majority of cases the parent had not subsequently formed any lasting adult relationship.

A comparison of the two groups, under-11s and over-11s, certainly seems to suggest that amongst those in the younger age group there was a significant concentration of some of the most notable aspects of a problematic family context – most particularly separation and abuse. It is also worth pointing out that given the relatively young age of first running incident this group of young people must have had these difficult experiences at a relatively younger age.

In general, therefore, it would seem that those who run away early in their lives have had a more disrupted early existence than those whose running is postponed.

There are two further issues which we wish to highlight in referring to age-related first incidents of running away. Unfortunately they were not clearly identifiable in sufficient volume within the Northern Ireland interviews (often because young people could not accurately recall the timescale for all the events during their lives) but were apparent in the UK-wide data. The issues concern the likely differences in home context for those who run later in their childhood.

- A higher prevalence of parental problems as an antecedent to first running (this possibly being because the older first runners were more able to identify and be aware of these problems by the time they ran).
- A higher frequency of reporting of conflict over the behaviour of the young person, often related to offending, drinking, drug-taking and so on. This often linked to problems of control and boundary-setting for the parent(s).

The developing family context

We will now briefly consider the developing family context for those who ran away repeatedly. It would be reasonable to say that in general those aspects of family context which the young people identified as being problematic prior to their first running away continued to be the main causes of their running behaviour. There were isolated incidents of, for example, bereavement, new physical abuse (by a single mother and by a recently-introduced step-father), geographical instability, parental relationship difficulties, and particular conflicts over rebellious behaviour, but no significant patterns amongst these.

Many of the young people indicated that there was an ongoing culture of conflict between themselves and their parent(s) which would boil over at various points. One young person spoke of the incessant triviality of the arguments:

> *"When I look back now it was petty things and the arguments should never have happened – but when you're 14 years old you make these things out to be ten times the size that they really are … It would've been the likes of the time I would've been able to stay out at night, who I was hanging around with, how much money my mum was giving me … things like that."*

Often there was a perpetual power struggle, with parents vainly attempting to assert control:

> *"She tried to ground me all the time and I just walked out. I says, 'I'm not putting up with you.' I used to call her all the names under the sun – just whatever came into my head I'd say it."*

Perhaps more pertinent in examining the development of the family context is that there was frequently evidence of an acceleration, an increase in the intensity of the problems. For example, in one case the level of responsibility for a younger sibling given to a young woman in the sample had been so inappropriately extended over time that the interviewee indicated that she was increasingly taking on the role of being concerned for their psychological wellbeing, in lieu of her mother:

> *"Wee Danny would see this … see different men coming in and out a lot and see me and mum fighting and me having to leave, and I just think it might be affecting him as well – it's not fair on him seeing all of this happening."*

This blurring of appropriate roles was quite shockingly revealed to her:

> *"Whenever I first moved to (place name) one of our neighbours actually thought Danny was mine – I nearly died!"*

In situations where there was abuse it was often the psychological burden in the longer term that underlay a continuation of running behaviour:

> *"He made my life miserable, like, you know, and he tortured my life. He nearly made me rip the life out of me. He hasn't given me a life. It's just recently I've just started getting on my feet again."*

"I'm a typical boy who doesn't have a mother to look after him – I feel sad because your mum holds the spokes of the whole family and without one there's no family. I have tried to be the best son I can be and to show her my love but she keeps on throwing it back in my face."

One noteworthy feature in a number of cases of persistent runaways was planned moves away from the main family unit in response to the problems and conflict at home. These were evident in five of the young people's stories and were either with family or sometimes with friends. In the case of moves to extended family or separated birth parent, these were usually initially regarded as permanent moves (although none of them proved to be so); in the case of moves to friends they were (almost) always viewed as a temporary, respite measure. One young person reflected on how much she had enjoyed being away from home:

"The people I've went to stay with have actually been nicer to me than my mum's ever really been. She's … sometimes she gets in a bad temper and … she can just be really, really cruel at times."

Variations on the theme of moving to a different home as part of a running career, were evident in a number of the interviews. Two of the young people had run to the other parent and stayed with them for a period of a few months in a bid to provoke a successful permanent move. A number of others had run to members of the extended family to seek time out from home.

Hence there is some clear evidence in both the above examples of planned moves (whether that be by the parent(s) or the young person running away) of ongoing instability in terms of family context for those who had an extended running career.

THE SUBSTITUTE CARE CONTEXT

One of the main findings in all previous UK studies of running away is the increased prevalence of running away amongst young people who live in substitute care. We had hoped to consider whether this finding applied equally in Northern Ireland, but, unfortunately, across the whole of our survey sample there were only three people living in foster care and none in residential care. We are therefore restricted to a brief summary of the results from the UK-wide survey to highlight the broad issues of substitute care and running away. (During the interviews we did talk to a number of young people who were either currently living, or had in the past lived, in substitute care – we will reflect on their experiences later in this section).

In terms of the UK-wide survey the findings on running from substitute care were stark and unambiguous:

•   Young people *currently* living in foster or residential care were nearly five times more likely to have run away overnight (around 45% had done this) compared with those living in families (around 9.5%).

•   30% of young people who had *ever* lived in care had run away overnight.

•   Of those who had spent some time in substitute care there was in increased likelihood of frequent running (not necessarily always from care): 32% had run away more than three times. Only 13% of those who had ever run but had never been in care had run as often.

There is a danger in reading too much into the headline figures from the data. The issue is in fact rather complex primarily because young people's care careers are often not straightforward, permanent and unchanging.

One illustration of this was that the survey revealed that of those who had spent some period of their lives in substitute care over half had run from their family on the most recent occasion (and of these over a third had only run once). Further to this, of those currently in care who had experience of running, only around half had run from care on the most recent occasion.

It is also worth remembering that those in care would be much more likely to have experienced the types of home context which might be conducive to running away (as described above) *before* they enter the care system. Hence the propensity for running of those in care would necessarily be higher. And, as suggested in previous research, a large proportion of those who run from care had already started running away while still living with their families.

For all the above reasons it is unjustified to see the high rates of running from care as an indictment of the care system. One might add that despite the focus on running from care, it probably represents a rather small proportion of overall running away - in the UK-wide survey only 3.4% of the sample had run from care on the most recent occasion (2.1% from foster care and 1.3% from children's homes) as compared with 96% who had run from the family.

The main gap in knowledge on running away from substitute care, despite extensive previous research on the subject (most particularly in *Going Missing*, Wade *et al.*, 1998), was the interaction between the changing home contexts of substitute care and family for those (the majority) who move between the two. Information from the interviews with young people in Northern Ireland was somewhat limited so we have included some references to those done across the UK in order to fully consider the issues.

Almost half of the young people we interviewed in Northern Ireland had some experience of living in substitute care (13 out of 28). There would appear to be two identifiable subgroups: those who were already looked after by the local authority before they started to run and those who had run prior to being placed in care.

Being in care before running away began

This group was characterised by the early age at which they had come into care: most during the first three years of life and none later than the age of seven.

With one exception (long term fostering by relatives) these young people had had a number of placements, both fostering and residential and all had gone on to have extensive running careers.

All of the group had experienced severe disruption in their early years – bereavement of a parent or parents, debilitating alcoholism, rejection and/or psychological inability to care for infants. In one case a young person had spent much time coming to terms with the death of her mother from a stigmatised terminal illness:

> *"My mum died of AIDS. There's nothing I can do about it. It's done … but I'm more aware of it now and I'm more understanding. I don't like people cracking jokes about it."*

Just one of this group had run before the age of eleven. It is interesting to note that this would suggest that however disruptive their care and pre-care experiences, the majority conformed to the stereotypical pattern of not running away until adolescence.

Unfortunately there is little information in the Northern Ireland interviews on these young people's feelings about their care career. Just one young man alluded to the burden of being in care:

> *"Sometimes you can't handle being in a home – you got stick because you lived in a home."*

In the UK-wide interviews there was a clearer indication that generally this group tended to have more negative feelings about both the process of being taken into care and of being in care:

> *"I didn't understand. Ran up to the attic and locked myself in. I was thinking, 'Where am I? Where's my mum?' At that age I was too young to understand anything."*

Being in care after running away began

The majority of interviewees in the care group for Northern Ireland had started to run before being placed in care.

There were several pertinent common features of this group. All of them had only entered the care system in adolescence, the youngest being twelve on reception into care. For nearly all, their care experience was either currently or previously a stay in a children's home.

Virtually all of this group had continued to run whilst in care. However, as a number indicated, the reasons for running had usually changed. In most cases it had become running to be with friends (in most situations a peer group in the home community, rather than other residents) or relatives whom the young person wanted to visit. For both types of incident the running tended to be planned, proactive rather than reactive, and usually acknowledged as temporary rather than being an escape from major problems in the home, as had been the case when living with their own family (e.g. there was no mention of conflict with other residents or with staff as a cause of running from care). So, although the running away pattern continued, it tended to ameliorate in terms of being planned and in some ways contained.

Most of this group had a relatively positive view of their children's home (although, interestingly, the young man quoted below indicates his preconceptions of what care is usually like):

> *"It's better than it is at home – more freedom and they don't hit you … they're (other residents) dead on. It's not like any other children's homes that you would see (where) they all pick on new ones, 'n' all. It's not like that."*

In our Northern Ireland interview sample there was extremely limited experience of foster care for those who had run before becoming looked after.

It would be fair to say that, even in the minds of professionals, there is a preconceived idea that the majority of incidents of running away from care are about peer pressure and group escapes:

> *"When they go into care, because there's an atmosphere within the units of running, that, then, just foments it and they continue then, unabated – the residential system is really failing these kids."*

Although the young people in the Northern Ireland sample did mention this as a reason for some of their running behaviour, in most cases, for both of the identifiable subgroups described above, there were more serious underlying causes. This echoed the findings from the UK interviews.

A third group was identified amongst the UK interviews which was not present in the Northern Ireland sample – that of young people who had first run after returning home from substitute care and were then re-admitted to care. However, there was little depth to this data and the main finding was that the main contributory factor for running behaviour was a highly problematic family context.

SUMMARY

Detailed analysis of young people's histories indicates that the quality of family relationships is a, or perhaps the, key determinant of running away. A background of changing family structure (most often through parental separation or divorce and the introduction of step-parents) and significant issues in relationships between the young person and parents (including conflict and various forms of abuse, neglect and rejection) were key aspects of the family context for most of the young people interviewed. Conflict with siblings and problems which parents themselves were having were also sometimes important contextual factors. Young people who started running away at a young age were likely to have had particularly troubled family experiences usually involving separation from a parent and/or abuse.

UK research has shown that young people who have experience of substitute care are much more likely than average to run away. Unfortunately the survey in Northern Ireland did not include enough young people with these experiences to estimate the prevalence of running away amongst this group. However, almost half the interview sample in Northern Ireland had lived in substitute care, and their experiences are similar to those for other UK findings on this issue. Whilst some of these young people had been in care from a young age, those who had

entered as teenagers tended to have already started running away from home before moving into care, and had then continued this pattern.

Case study 3 — Diane

Diane's mother was an alcoholic and had mental health problems. She had never seen her own father, but had a younger brother whose father used to physically assault her mother and both of the children before he moved out when she was 10.

As she got older Diane was often expected to take responsibility for the house and for looking after her brother. By 14 she was frequently babysitting until the early hours and would barely see her mother the next day as she recovered from her drinking binges. She became increasingly concerned about her mother,

> *"She's a whole different person if she's drinking … she's got into fights, she's come home black and blue. She's not been able to get up out of bed next morning, she's fell downstairs, fellen out of taxis … she's got into a fight with a man and he's actually hit her. She gets in a real state at times."*

and about the effect of her mother's behaviour on her brother:

> *"Wee Danny would see this … see different men coming in and out a lot and see me and mum fighting … and I just think it might be affecting him as well – it's not fair on him seeing all of this happening."*

One weekend she refused to babysit (because she had plans herself) and a row erupted. Her mum eventually stormed out claiming that she had called the police. Diane's aunt, who lived close by, took her and her brother in. Her mother came back the next day, but would only allow her brother to return home, so Diane stayed with her aunt. Living in such close proximity to her family was especially difficult because her mother tried to stop her seeing her brother.

> *"I would be walking past and I'd see Danny out in the street and I would go over to him – mum would shout over and say, 'Come on away from her.' … Then there would be an argument in the middle of the street."*

After some months, a reconciliation was achieved and Diane moved back home. But soon the situation got worse again. Her mother became depressed and was drinking heavily, arguing with Diane regularly and sometimes throwing her out. This sometimes forced her to approach friends' families to give her a bed for the night, which proved to be a positive experience:

> *"The people I've went to stay with have actually been nicer to me than my mum's ever really been. She's … sometimes she gets in a bad temper and … she can just be really, really cruel at times."*

Diane now lives in a stressful limbo:

> *"I know it will happen soon again … each day I wonder, you know, 'tonight will I have to leave again and go to stay with somebody else'."*

She feels her social worker does not really take account of what she is going through:

> *"When the problems start again … Simon just says these things are 'normal' and there's nothing they can do – he says it's just 'normal teenage stuff' so I just have to kind of grin and bear it."*

The ongoing problems have so damaged her relationship with her mother that she has made a vow to herself:

"I've promised myself whenever I've turned sixteen I'm just going to move … just somewhere really far away to get away from my mum."

4

THE WIDER CONTEXT

In this chapter we will look at a range of issues within the wider context of a young person's life which might promote running away, or being forced out of home, under sixteen. These could broadly be divided into issues in the personal sphere, related to physiology and psyche – feelings, motivations, drug and alcohol use, offending, mental health – and issues in the external sphere, to do with how the community and its institutions exert influence over the lives of young people – school, peer group, economic factors, sectarianism.

We also consider agency intervention in the lives of young people, whether that be before running started or after, and look at young people's perceptions as to what effect this had had on their behaviour.

THE PERSONAL CONTEXT

The survey contained a checklist of ten items: it divided between those related to a young person's inner feelings and their concerns and anxieties over external issues. The responses for runaways and non-runaways are shown below:

Table 7: Personal issues by whether run away

	% of young people with negative view		
	Total	*Had not run away*	*Had run away*
Feeling fed up/depressed	38	36	62
Feeling under pressure	45	44	54
Feeling lonely	12	10	29
Not feeling good about yourself	28	26	48
Worried about the future	42	41	50
Problems with boy/girlfriends	20	18	35
Problems with drugs	7	5	28
Problems with alcohol	11	9	35
Getting in trouble with the police	9	6	35
Other problems	10	9	20

The results show a strong association between most of the personal issues and the likelihood of running away. Runaways score significantly higher than non-runaways on nine of the ten factors (the exception is "worried about the future" where the difference was marginal).

Particularly notable is the link between running away and problems with drugs, alcohol and offending. Around a third of the young people who identified themselves as having these problems had run away, and similarly around a third of young people who ran away ticked each of these items on the checklist.

Although one might reasonably infer that those with troubled personal lives are more likely to run away overnight, the figures should be regarded with some caution. As indicated previously, the survey was unable to establish a chronology of events in young people's lives and therefore it is not possible to say how these factors interrelate with running incidents. In order to do this we had to look at the evidence from the young people's interviews (with the caveat that sometimes interviewees were unsure about the exact timing of events in their lives).

Substance usage – alcohol, drugs and solvents

When we look at the evidence from the interviews with young people in Northern Ireland there is a clear indication that the use of intoxicating substances is a common factor in their experience. (Unfortunately, due to gaps in the data on personal issues in this sample, we would be hesitant in saying that this truly represents the situation – it is likely that the prevalence of these issues is under-represented here).

The majority of the experiences reported related to drinking at a young age. Although there was some ambiguity in the data, it seemed apparent that in a large proportion of cases this was closely related to peer influences (discussed below) and mostly formed a context for a continuation of running, rather than as an antecedent to the first episode (although some of the interviewees spoke of alcohol use prior to running away).

Most of the young people seemed not to regard their drinking as a problem. Some viewed it rather pragmatically, as a means to an end, that of escaping the psychological pressures of their situation:

> "Last night my head was fried up. I was out with my friends and I just went down and bought drink … and collapsed myself. I drank a 10 glass bottle of Bacardi and four bottles of WKD (Irn Bru and vodka)."

Also, especially for young males, there was often an element of bravado:

> "It gets me poleaxed … a two litre bottle of cider. It gets me way out of it."

From a purely practical perspective, one young person talked about the use of alcohol when on the run:

> "It was how I was keeping warm at night sometimes."

It is worth noting that most of the young people who spoke directly about drinking within the Northern Ireland sample were sixteen and under when interviewed. Not only did this mean that the parameters of 'problem drinking' were perhaps difficult for them to conceptualise, it also meant that very few of them had (yet) developed lifestyles which might allow serious, heavy drinking: they were too young to have become alcohol dependent. For the UK-wide sample around one sixth spoke of alcohol use as a serious problem for them, often starting prior to their first running away episode.

The use of illegal drugs was common amongst the Northern Ireland interviewees. Just under a third of the sample talked about using drugs, usually on a regular basis. A number of the young people spoke of the availability of drugs:

> "My friends would go and get them off dealers … they're everywhere around here, it's really easy to get them."

There was little indication that drugs use related to a pre-running context for any of the group – most often it was the use of cannabis (occasionally ecstasy or LSD) and in a recreational context. As indicated with alcohol use, the main link to running was perhaps that peer group use helped to perpetuate ongoing episodes of running after the initial incident (i.e. young people would run away to be with a group who were using drugs).

In the UK-wide data drug use was also mentioned in terms of being a cause of conflict between young people and their parents and thence leading to running away. This was an issue which professionals also alluded to:

> *"They can't cope with what their children are getting involved with and that basically they have no control."*

There was also more evidence of harder drugs: crack cocaine and heroin. Professionals in Northern Ireland frequently acknowledged that the presence of hard drugs was minimal. However, there was a strong feeling that it was just a matter of time before they became a more regular feature of daily life in the province, exacerbating the problems for young people in difficult situations:

> *"You wouldn't as readily get the heavy drugs in Belfast as you would in other places … because things have been quite controlled by the paramilitaries – but that is changing, almost as we speak."*

Solvent abuse was mentioned by a number of the group – around one in five had misused aerosols or glue, some recreationally,

> *"When I was about 14 I used to do it all the time, just as a laugh … a whole gang of us, relaxing."*

some to a serious extent:

> *"I ended up taking it in my room, I got that addicted to it, and then I knocked myself out and then my mum found me."*

In most cases, as with drug and alcohol use, there was a degree of vagueness as to the age at which this activity took place. However, in contrast to the other substances, most of the young people clearly indicated that solvent abuse was something that they had done when younger and given up some time ago. One might reasonably suggest, therefore, that solvent abuse does often form part of the context prior to first running away.

It is worth noting that there was substantial evidence from the interviews of alcohol, drugs and solvent use leading to other problematic behaviours which might contribute to an unsettled existence: stealing to acquire the substance or finance its acquisition, disruption of education and conflict at home.

Therefore, in a general sense the usage of these substances was contextually significant for running away behaviour. Although it was sometimes difficult to precisely determine the chronology of a young person's substance usage, one could confidently say that it is a factor in a substantial number of cases, particularly in the perpetuation of a running career.

Offending

When referring to 'offending' in this section we are talking about offences other than the criminal acts referred to above in the section of drug and alcohol use, such as buying alcohol under 18, the use of illegal substances, etc.

More than a third of the young people interviewed in Northern Ireland spoke of offending behaviour in relating their stories. In the majority of cases this was theft, usually from shops, and in most cases the young person concerned said that they had not (yet) been caught.

The relationship between offending and running away was not explored in great depth in the interviews. One issue identified in the UK-wide young people's interviews (but not in those in Northern Ireland) was that of the friction caused at home as a consequence of the young person's offending and how this could be an important factor in the build up to running away for the first time:

> *"When I was 14/15 I used to get in trouble a lot. I got in with the wrong crowd and me and me dad had a big argument and started fist fighting. I were really badly beaten up and I left that night and I didn't come back for two week."*

Amongst the Northern Ireland sample, for a number of those who ran for an extended period of a few nights or more there were indications that stealing to survive became an issue.

However, the main feeling was that petty offending contributed to an insidious culture of ongoing minor delinquency. Most of the offending was relatively insignificant and often cultivated within a peer group, and none of the interviewees in Northern Ireland, even the minority who had had formal involvement in the criminal justice system (for example, those on probation), mentioned it as a major factor preceding or coinciding with their running away.

Mental health issues

When considering the subject of mental health and young people one encounters a number of difficulties, not least problems of definition and professional reticence over labelling young people as having mental health problems.

In writing this section we have adopted a loose definition, encompassing a general recognition that young people's relating of happenings – such as suicide attempts, self harm incidents, destructive rages and feelings of depression – are all tangible indicators of a deeper mental ill health.

The most commonly reported issue was suicide attempts. Almost a quarter of the interviewees said that they had made serious efforts to take their own lives.

> *"… I tried to commit suicide and I tried to jump off a bridge and throw myself in front of a train and everything."*

Significantly, in more than half of these cases the young person had tried to commit suicide on more than one occasion. However, there was insufficient detail in most cases to rigorously determine whether the suicide attempts preceded first running away. Often it seemed they were part of a general ongoing unhappiness and had come after less serious running away episodes.

Self harm was mentioned by two of the interviewees, in both cases some time after they had begun an extended running career:

> *"When I was in the hostel … (I) just cut myself … sliced myself with a razor. It's better to hurt yourself than hurt somebody else."*

Anger as a contributory factor in running behaviour was directly spoken of by a number of young people. Two interviewees specifically said that it was an uncontrollable surge of rage, after a slower accumulation of anger, that was the trigger to the first time that they ran away:

> *"It was just … pressure … see, I used to get name calling at school and instead of saying something I'd just let it build up inside me … I just bottle it up. Something small sparked it off and I just sort of said to myself, 'To hell with it, I'll leave!'."*

> *"I just got so angry … I kept on getting angrier and angrier and I just says to myself, 'Right, I'm not going home tonight!'."*

Another interviewee spoke of the need to get away to displace her fury:

> *"If I'd have stayed I probably would've hurt somebody or hurt myself – it was an escape."*

Whether one should classify these examples of anger under mental health is debatable: however, they do show significant inner turmoil for the young people concerned.

Four of our interview sample in Northern Ireland spoke of more significant difficulties with anger. All had had professional help with managing their anger: one had a diagnosed behavioural disorder, caused by a chemical imbalance in his brain, which was treated with psychiatric drugs; the others had undertaken 'talking cures', with psychologists, psychiatrists

or youth workers. All of them indicated that this problem had preceded their running and in most cases that it had disrupted their childhood.

Others in the sample spoke of different manifestations of mental health problems. One interviewee spoke of his 'mania' (in response to the death of a significant family member) during a phase of frequent running:

> *"I felt out of control. I felt like I was going crazy."*

Another pondered her 'broodiness', an ongoing sadness and preoccupation with difficulties at home:

> *"I know it will happen again soon … each day I wonder, you know, 'Tonight will I have to leave and go to stay with somebody else?'."*

Aside from the specific incidents which the interviewees referred to, one often got a feeling, either when interviewing a young person or when listening to a recording during analysis, that there was a deep sense of psychological unease for some: from phrases such as, "my head was fried up", to what were clearly hurtful revelations about feelings of rejection that would last a lifetime:

> *"Sure I feel sad … that's the only way I can tell you how I feel. I feel sad because your mother's the important part of your family you need. I mean, your mother holds the spokes of the whole family … I'm a typical boy, hey? … who doesn't have a mother to look after him."*

There were frequent indicators that many of the young people carried a burden of depression and/or confusion about their lives which formed a significant part of the context for their running away.

There are two other personal issues which are considered as part of the wider context for running away in *Still Running*: sexuality and special needs. There were no specific references made to sexuality as a contextual factor for running away by the Northern Ireland interview sample. Special needs were mentioned only once. We would suggest that more specific and focused research needs to be done to establish whether these issues are linked to running away amongst under-16s in Northern Ireland.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

The significance of peer relationships as a primary influence on young people's behaviour as they grow into maturity is widely acknowledged. Previous research (e.g. Brennan *et al*, 1978) has underlined the importance of peer relationships in contributing to running away.

In a general sense the relevance of running away as an issue in young people's lives was demonstrated by indicators from the survey: 40% of young people said they had a friend who had run away. Amongst young people who had themselves run away overnight the proportion was much higher (86%) than for those who had not themselves run away (35%).

It is possible to identify from our data five ways in which the influence of peers might come into play in the context of running away:

- *Peer pressure* to run away.
- Running away to *accompany a friend*.
- *Being drawn to a bad peer group* – causing the young person to choose to leave or being forced out because of the negative impact on relationships with parents.
- *Escape* from a situation of *poor relationships with peers*.
- *Use of friends as secondary support* – facilitators providing food, shelter, companionship whilst they themselves remain at home.

These factors are clearly identifiable in the interviews with young people, with more than two thirds of the interviewees speaking about one or more of them.

It was interesting to note the differences in prevalence of reporting. One of the most mentioned issues was that of the 'pull' of the peer group: the strength of attraction to a bad

peer group causing friction at home and leading to running from home to the group, who were often mainly older with their own resources (especially accommodation) and access to the prohibited pleasures of alcohol and drugs:

> "I was drinking a lot and I was taking drugs, because everybody else around me … because it was always older people, I never used to hang about with people me own age … my mum sort of got sick of it."

Equally frequently reported was the issue of young people obtaining constructive support from their peers. Around a third of those who mentioned peer issues talked about friends supplying them with secondary support (i.e. without running away themselves) whilst away from home – from an occasional meal, to somewhere to go for a chat in the day, to, in one case, a hiding place under a bed for a few nights, to convincing their own parents to give temporary shelter to the runaway. This type of support was even evident amongst the youngest of runaways, as one interviewee indicated when talking about an experience at the age of nine, when she hid under a bush for two nights in the army camp where her family lived:

> "One of them (my mates) used to come out and see me before she went in at night, to make sure I was alright … she brought pillows down for me."

The importance of close individuals, "best mates", as co-runners was often reported by the young people. More than a quarter of those who talked about their peers had run as a couple (or, in one case, a threesome), in most cases as co-conspirators, escaping from problems at home, but in the accounts of two interviewees with the other party acting as the expert, with confidence borne of previous experience:

> "My friend, Stewart, suggested running away with me, 'cos he'd done it an awful lot before."

The other two types of peer influence were much less reported: only two of the young people put forward peer pressure as a significant factor in causing them to run. One of them spoke of his experience of care:

> "I was forced to go by the rest of my friends in there. They said, 'Look, do you want to run away, this is getting too much?' I thought I was being 'one of the boys' and said yes."

In contrast to the importance of peers as an influence promoting running away, one reformed career runner talked about the need for peers as a support in re-acclimatising back into normal life: when asked what had most helped her to stop running she said:

> "Getting back into school and being around people me own age."

It is worth noting that, with one exception, in all instances where peer influence was reported as relevant to the context for running, the young people concerned were between the ages of eleven and fifteen (where details of age were accessible). This clearly underlines that peer relationships are not of significance in relation to running away during first school but are of burgeoning importance during secondary school and adolescence.

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

School is widely acknowledged to be a defining experience in the lives of young people. Previous research on running away has highlighted the significance of a young person's relationship with school (or the lack of it) as a factor affecting running away behaviour. Rees (1993) found that those young people who reported frequent truancy were more likely to run away and Stein *et al.* (1994) found that many young people who were on the streets had become detached from school at an early age.

The schools survey in Northern Ireland found that young people who had run away were much more likely to have a negative view of school, to have truanted, been excluded and been bullied. They were also much more likely to categorise themselves as having difficulties with learning.

Table 8: School issues by whether run away

	% of young people with negative view		
	Total	*Had not run away*	*Had run away*
Don't like school	23	21	39
Often truant	4	3	18
Often bullied	4	4	12
Have been excluded	9	8	24
Have difficulties with learning	9	8	23

The interviews with young people confirmed these findings. The majority of interviewees who talked about their experiences at school said that they viewed it negatively. More than two thirds expressed feelings from irritation and frustration to outright hatred of school. For many this was encapsulated in a poor relationship with teachers – a strong sense of "them and us" was communicated by a number of the young people:

> "It's mainly the teachers, like – I don't mind doing the work."

> "… they just had no respect for me and I had no respect for them."

There were also a number of interviewees who experienced difficulties with their peers in the school context. A number of the young people talked about bullying, in two more severe cases as a direct cause of running away:

> "I was getting bullied an awful lot and I was mitching a lot and my mum was getting depressed … I'd get hit and get name-calling and stuff stole off me and just annoying and being cruel to me."

There was a high degree of time away from school, whether chosen or imposed by others. Many of the interviewees shared a sense of boredom and alienation and often they voted with their feet:

> "I just walked out one day and never came back."

More than three quarters of our sample had truanted regularly and over 40% had been suspended from secondary school. Four of the group had been permanently excluded from school.

In the light of these findings it is not surprising that, amongst those who were old enough at interview to have been eligible, there was a lack of educational qualifications (interviewees were asked specifically about GCSEs). Less than half had any GCSEs, and perhaps as significantly, those who had seemed to attach little importance to their achievement: most could not recall how many passes they had despite having relatively recently done the exams. Other issues in their lives tended to assume more relevance than whether they had some exams under their belt. However, one young man spoke of his pride at having passed some GCSEs despite his circumstances at the time:

> "I was on the street when I was actually doing me exams, me GCSE's – and I still passed them."

It should be noted that there was a contrastingly positive view of school expressed by others amongst the group. A third of those who talked about school made positive statements and one young woman indicated that in fact school was something of a haven from the horrors of home:

> *"It's kind of like an escape – if there's something wrong at home I can go to school, I can get on with my mates and just forget about it."*

In most cases it was impossible to establish a chronology of events relating to negative experiences at school and incidences of running away. As with other context issues young people's experiences of school become so enmeshed in day-to-day existence that unless they were of extraordinary significance it was difficult to divorce them from the overall flow of life. Hence, in most cases a negative experience of school accompanied a generally negative experience of life and was one of a number of contributory factors towards running away.

We should also mention that in the UK-wide study a sub-sample of young people attending pupil referral units was surveyed. It was found that 40% of them had experience of running away.

THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT

There are two senses in which the community provides a context for young people's running away behaviour in Northern Ireland. The first is that of close-knitted communities providing, mutual inter-familial support (i.e. by offering respite care to young people when there are problems at home). The second is the social control exercised by self-appointed "protectors of the community", the paramilitaries, within the areas studied.

Community Support

The interviews with young people and professionals provided ample evidence of the existence of an informal support network within communities. It was apparent that the extended family and close friends often acted as a safety net for young people at risk of running, as two project workers reflected:

> *"… the norm in local communities for a lot of young people … when there would be regular conflict within the family and they would be out of the house for two or three nights … there certainly would be a tendency for them to go to another member of the extended family."*

> *"The networks that young people have means that they can do a circuit of friends and extended family and that keeps young people off the streets."*

It was felt that this applied across the whole of Northern Ireland, in contrast to the rest of the UK:

> *"Belfast or Northern Ireland would be different … to Great Britain, in the fact that because it's a small community-like province, young people who find themselves homeless are much more likely to go to family or friends – grannies are very (popular) … and more extended family rather than sleeping on the streets."*

One worker spoke about why he felt that some particular communities had a strong tradition of self care:

> *"When we were focusing on that area (West Belfast) people were saying to us that they always could find somewhere to stay … that's a fairly politicised, with a small 'p', energetic, vibrant place to live and work, and that has a lot to do with 'The Troubles' and the ghettoisation of that and people pulling back their own power. Within that scenario what tended to happen was that they look after themselves, they look after each other … and they will look after their own young people and they're a very proud people to do that."*

This idea was underlined by the experiences of the young people whom we interviewed. Around a third spoke directly of spending time away with relatives, whether for occasional nights or for pre-planned extended stays.

Other young people had had stays with friends whilst away from home. For the majority there was a general impression that this involved an agreement with the friend's parents: the

stay was 'officially sanctioned' (although there was sometimes an ambiguity over whether they were informed that the young person was on the run). In fact in at least two of the interviews young people indicated that because their parents wanted them out of the house, arrangements were made so that they could go to stay with local friends of the family. In one case, almost immediately after the young person had come home from his first incident of running away, the situation had become so bad that the mum sought alternative care for her son (for what was to be the first of two extended stays with the same family):

> *"I went to stay with him (friend) for a while, but my mum knew about that … she actually phoned to confirm where I would be going and staying … it was brilliant … I stayed there for a few months."*

This community care network has a number of wider effects on relationships within and beyond the family. One might assume that the network is entirely positive, that fundamentally it serves to bolster and support the family and to protect young people. This may be the case in the long term but in the immediate circumstances it may in fact cause tensions within the extended family. When a young person has run away they will often be seeking an ally against their parents. For example, one young person spoke of how he had run to an aunt's house and stayed there for a few nights without his parents' knowledge, and how she then acted as his advocate in delicate negotiations to get him back into his own home:

> *"We made the agreement that I would go into the back hall if my mum and dad came, and my aunty would say that I wasn't there … so I ended up staying there for four days without my mum and dad knowing where I was besides my aunty saying, 'I've seen him and he's alright, but I'm not telling you where he is' … It worked out that mum and dad came down to my aunty's and I said to my aunty that I wanted her to sit in and we came to an agreement …"*

A further aspect of community support was the difficulties it might cause in a close-knit community: those who took in runaways could be seen to be undermining another family. In some cases this prompted a contradictory response in parents who harboured their children's friends:

> *"… Even though they're staying in somebody's home it doesn't actually mean that they will eat there … They might get breakfast there but they rarely are welcome at the family table at teatime. You know, teatime is seen as the time when everybody gets together as a family."*

> *"It's like, 'Well, he's staying in my son's room. As long as I don't see him, then he's not really here,' sort of thing. And that way his parents can't come round and accuse me of doing anything. It's like, 'Well, it's nothing to do with me, it's my son that's looking after him'."*

Paramilitary activities

The second issue, that of social control and paramilitary activities, is somewhat more complex. Many of the young people who we talked to indicated the pernicious effect on their lives of existing in communities where they felt monitored, inhibited and fearful. Many of the professionals were especially loquacious about the effects of paramilitary control on young people's existences.

In order to fully appreciate the omnipresent nature of the social control exercised by paramilitary groups one needs to briefly explain the social context which they have defined and within which they operate. A project worker reflected on his long experience of working with young people in Northern Ireland:

> *"(In) all the stories that young people tell there are elements that are touched by, if you want, euphemistically, 'The Troubles' – and often if they are into acting out behaviour, which in other cultures is just ordinary adolescent behaviour, probably the most*

conservative people and the most ruthless people are the paramilitaries, who don't tolerate young people experimenting."

As a project manager explained, the paramilitary groups on both sides of the divide have for some time allocated themselves the role of community police, exercising a power over various elements of the community which they consider to be undesirable. This self-defined and self-ascribed role was evidenced by one project worker, who referred to the wording on a poster which he had photographed,

"This was a public notice that was put up around (the estate). It said – PUBLIC NOTICE – It has been brought to the attention of the local active service units of the (paramilitary group) that many young people in this area have been involved in constant harassment and intimidation of pensioners and local loyalist families. They have also been involved in other anti social behaviour i.e. joyriding, graffiti, criminal damage, burglary. We, the (paramilitary group), now demand that these activities cease immediately, or we will be forced to take action against those responsible. There will be no second warning. By order of …"

and he added:

"That's the nature of the area - you can't really go against these here boys because they rule the estate."

As indicated in the notice, for young people the most obvious element of paramilitary control is the restrictions placed on what is labelled "anti-social behaviour". According to one worker this could be:

"Anything from … joyriding to theft, break-ins to indecent assault."

However, the definition is 'flexible':

"It's very subjective … my own personal view is that a lot comes down to the amount of power the individual families have. A family, for example, that is known to support particular paramilitary groups might be treated far more leniently than others who have less connections and less power."

The response will vary, sometimes according to gender,

"Generally speaking there has been a tradition of dealing with young women's behaviour at a local community level differently than they would with young men … for paramilitaries to be more inclined to put young men out."

and always according to the type of rule-breaking:

"… the paramilitaries make a decision, supposedly on the basis of community demand, that a young person is either punished in a particular way, knee-capped or beaten or whatever, and are actually put out of the community, depending on the severity of their anti social activity – sometimes that can be a lifetime demand … In some instances they're asked to leave Northern Ireland or Ireland – in other instances they would just be put out of their own community and they could basically go anywhere else in Northern Ireland for a number of months. It varies depending on how their activities are viewed."

For the less severe punishments it will be the young person's peers in the local community who do the punishing:

"It's the older ones, 16, 17 and 18-year-olds who would be the ones who do the punishment – they get sent out to deal out whatever punishment needs dealt, you know. They're the eyes and the ears for what's going on on the estate and they will then filter the information back to higher above."

And the punishment is, on occasion, intentionally humiliating and as public as possible:

"They even go as far as breaking into the house to bring the person out and give them their beating if they have went too far over the line … I've worked with a youngster who's actually been told, 'We will come for you at 6 o'clock'. At 6 o'clock they took him

> *out, they tied him to a lamp post, they poured paint over him and they poured a bag of feathers over him and left him."*

A number of the professionals interviewed indicated that there was sometimes room for manoeuvre once a young person was under threat:

> *"You can go to the local (paramilitary group) guy and say, 'Listen, I know my son's in trouble. We're doing this, we're doing that, we're doing the other. Will you give him a fortnight to see if he can change?' And they will actually work with you."*

> *"If they see that this youngster's being worked with by Probation, by other youth groups or whatever … they will actually hold off and they will meet you half way."*

> *"But obviously they will only give you a certain length of time and if that youngster's showing that he's not willing to change, they will step back in and say, 'I'm sorry, he's had his chance, we have to teach him a lesson'."*

One young person spoke of two occasions when it had been deemed that he had stepped out of line and suffered the consequences, despite protesting his innocence:

> *"Once I was punched … for something I didn't even do, but I was blamed for it 'cos one of the Top Man's sons said it was me … and then, the second time, I was just threatened, just cautioned."*

Specifically, in terms of effects on running away, one young person explained how he had been targeted whilst on the run because he had entered the wrong area:

> *"I was beat up once by Protestants ... at Somerton … I was hanging about. A couple of them come up to me and started hitting me, so they did, and I got up and run. I got two black eyes and a big scar down the back of my neck."*

This underlines the geographical restrictions that some young people feel – they are unwilling to run to 'alien' places because the consequences may be severe. As one young woman said:

> *"When you come over here you have to watch where you're going. In Carrick it's not as bad, but in the likes of Belfast you can't really walk about too far if you don't know your way around."*

There are also perceived limits on where one can go within one's own community:

> *"I just thought, because it's paramilitaries that runs the estate, that 'cos we'd gone into the empty houses we'd get hit."*

One young person spoke about a conflict that he became caught up in whilst on the run when he was fifteen. He was sheltering in the grounds of a hospital but was threatened by the paramilitaries due to the criminal acts he was committing to survive:

> *"I started getting involved in a lot of trouble … got involved with the paramilitaries … If I hadn't've got out of there I was gonna get shot."*

In contrast one young woman said that she felt safe on the streets because of the presence of paramilitaries:

> *"I have a lot of friends in paramilitary groups … I've always been looked out for by them … on the run especially."*

However, she subsequently revealed that this support came at a cost, when her friend and sometime co-runner fell foul of the paramilitaries:

> *"There was one point where Denise got into trouble with the (paramilitary group) and I got told if I kept on hanging around with Denise that they were going to have to do something about it 'cos I was getting myself into trouble. They were doing it more on a friendly basis, if you know what I mean. They were trying to say to me they don't want to have to do anything, but if I went on hanging about with her, whatever happens to her would have to happen to me to make it fair … God knows what they*

would've done, probably nothing too serious, like, but sure they would've shooken us up a bit! They started following Denise about and then, whenever I was with her I would notice, 'cos I would know them, hanging about and watching us."

Several professionals reflected on the geographical paralysis that this culture imposes on young people:

"The nature of life here is that you learn the skills of surviving within (your community) – you don't move easily outside it, both geographically and in terms of your mental capacity to adjust outside … young people don't move easily out of their own communities."

"The kids are territorialised – they will not go out of their own area because they know that if they go down into the town centre they could be a target for other kids that are hanging about … so rather than going down there to try and find somewhere to sleep or whatever, they'll just move around their friends' homes."

A number also talked of how, in extreme cases, it can cause young people to flee:

"Recently we had a punishment shooting here and the child couldn't cope with knowing paramilitaries and knowing the ones that done it – being their friend he just couldn't cope with the situation of still living here … he ran because he just didn't want to stay in the home … nervous at night, saying like, 'If they done it to my parent will they come to me next?'"

As one worker said:

" … although you can dodge the police, and that's what a lot of teenagers get into, it's very hard to dodge the paramilitaries if they're living in your community. And once you start to break the rules, their rules, then they also have long memories and some young people run from that."

Generally, then, young people were either straight-jacketed within their communities or, for those who came up against the system, were forced out.

Interestingly some professionals indicated that there was a rejection of the status quo by some young people, who chose to socialize away from their communities in order to mix:

"Some of the kids collect in a park (name) …and you go to them and say,

'What are yous doing, guys?'

'Oh, we're just all hanging down round here together.'

'Well why don't yous hang round up in your estates?'

'Because when we're up there we have to be seen to be staying away from these people because they support different factions, whereas if we all come down here we can mix and nobody's giving us any hassle.'"

However, one got the impression that this was a minority activity.

AGENCY INTERVENTIONS

The last element of context which we will look at is young people's experiences of 'helping' agencies before and after running away.

It was decided that it would be unrealistic to expect to obtain useful data on agency intervention via the survey for a variety of reasons – lack of space, difficulty in formulating appropriate questions, etc. – so this section is entirely premised on the information gathered in the interviews with young people. Therefore one should not regard this section as being conclusive but more as giving an indication of the types of intervention young people might experience and how they might tend to regard the agencies and their roles.

We will focus on agency intervention as a context after running away has started. Aside from those who had first run from substitute care (five of the sample) or who had first run

after returning home from a spell in care (eight of the sample) – and who must therefore have had at least some contact with a social worker – there was little evidence of social work involvement in the lives of the young people before they had run away. Of the other young people only three had had a social worker before running, one for a brief period due to problems at school when he was much younger. Just one other agency was mentioned: a mental health organisation who provided practical support to one young woman's mother when she was suffering a bout of depression.

This suggests that there is a strong possibility that the majority of first time runaways (who will not have had contact with the care system) are unlikely to have had any agency involvement prior to running away.

Interventions after running away started

The picture changed radically when information was sought about agency interventions after starting to run away. More than three quarters of the group had had involvement with a social worker and all had had contact with at least one agency in the wake of running away.

Social workers were by far the most encountered agency professionals for the young people interviewed – as mentioned above, the majority of the sample had contact with social services under the age of 16.

Interviewees reported mixed views on social workers – perhaps not surprisingly, given the roles and responsibilities which social workers have to undertake in their professional relationship with a young person.

Half of those who registered a view had had positive experiences,

> "I've liked all the social workers I've had … they always do their best for me, I've found."

although those who had not felt happy tended to be vociferous in their condemnation:

> "Social workers promise you the world but you don't get it. They lull you into a false sense of security, telling you that everything is OK and that they will be there for you … when you get into the big, bad world and you have to cope with loneliness, they don't want to know."

> "When the problems start again … Barry just says these things are 'normal' and there's nothing they can do – he says it's just 'normal teenage stuff' so we just have to kind of grin and bear it."

A number of the young people had had lots of different social workers and some indicated that they resented having to deal with the changes:

> "They are always moving on to better jobs … They act as if they know me just because they've read my file."

Across the interviews one got the impression that often the most important factor in young peoples' assessments of the usefulness of social workers was whether they liked the individuals who were working with them:

> "I liked her (first social worker) because if I needed anything she'd take it out of her pocket and say, 'There'. I don't like my social worker now … He doesn't listen to me or care."

> "I didn't get on with your man, John, and I didn't like him. He gave me the creeps, so he did, so I told him to get out."

> "They don't really help … I think they make the situation worse – they make you want to mess up just to annoy them, 'cos you don't want to please them."

Interestingly, despite the large proportion of young people who had experience of substitute care in residential homes, only one spoke directly about residential staff:

> *"You'd get the odd one or two that were dead on … some of them treated you like an idiot. They'd sit and they'd put you down … There was one of them I hated … he used to start on me … he used to try to wind me up when he was on shift … and then he'd try to sanction me, you know, give me a punishment for it – usually it would be 'You're not allowed out this weekend.' I made a lot of complaints and eventually he got the sack."*

The next most often mentioned agencies were youth work initiatives. More than half of the group had been involved with some form of youth work programme (possibly because this was one of the routes used when recruiting a sample to interview in the first place). All said that their experience had been positive:

> *"It's a cracker … They take you out and stuff and they're honest with you and … listen to you."*

> *"Since I started this here, (name of organisation), like, the programme, it's been really good, so it has."*

> *"This project helps me too – I get a lot out of it. You get to be yourself … don't have to have a 'hard man' face on."*

The other agency which many young people had encountered was the police. The majority talked about them only in passing, as a brief reference when explaining how an episode of running away had ended with the police returning them home. Those who spoke in detail talked variously of rough treatment,

> *"… Because I was in trouble before they know me, type of thing … just stopping me, asking me questions, shoving me about and if I say the wrong thing the batons come out or else (I get) a dig in the side of the head, away you go, type of thing."*

> *"The police picked me up then and they knew I could run away that time 'cos I was older, and they'd grab you by the throat and threw you into the car and stuff like that there, calling you names 'n' all … then they take you home and they get all nice."*

and of the ineffectiveness of the police response to running away:

> *"There would be loads of times when the police wouldn't pick me up. They'd drive up and ask, 'Are you (interviewee's name)?' and I would say, 'No.' and they'd just drive off."*

> *"They're stupid. They can't run either … they're all too old."*

> *"My mum phones the police and tells them I'm back and then the police come out to have a talk to me. They says, 'You can't do it again or else you'll be in serious trouble', and then they go … they (always) say the same thing."*

For the older age group – eleven of the sample who were 16 or older at the time of the interview (whose running careers had begun before they were 16) – five were currently living in a hostel and three more had previously stayed in one (or more). Some of them reflected on life in the hostels:

> *"There's people here for you, to teach you what's right and wrong. They teach you how to cook. They've activities for you … They teach you to stand on your own two feet."*

> *"Some of the staff they act like prison officers, honestly … they forget that this is our home and we have to live here. And sometimes you get the impression that they're looking down their nose at you … it's not a nice feeling 'cos it makes you feel low when you're treated that way … Some of them are absolutely brilliant – they make you feel better about yourself the minute they walk in the door … they treat you with respect – it's who you are now and what you're trying to do with your life … anything you've done, they forget about it."*

The young people in our sample had limited experience of other agencies. A few of the older age group had dealt with housing executive staff and advice staff, but gave little information about these encounters. Of the younger interviewees, three spoke of therapy sessions with psychiatrists/psychologists. However, none indicated that this had been especially worthwhile from their perspectives:

> *"I used to sit there with my feet up on the desk … they just make you feel as if you're thick and you've been really, really bad. They wind you up the way they talk … I hate them."*

SUMMARY

This chapter has presented findings on the context of young people's lives outside their home environment, and how this context links with running away. In terms of personal issues, there is a strong association between running away and self-reported problems with depression, low self-esteem, drug and alcohol use, and offending. To some extent, running away appears to be clustered, with young people who run away also more likely to have friends with this experience. Finally, running away is strongly associated with a range of problems at school, including truancy, exclusion, bullying and difficulties with learning. Thus, in summary, young people who run away will often have one or more significant problems in their lives relating to personal or school issues, in addition to the likelihood of difficulties within the family as outlined in the previous chapter.

In terms of wider community issues, there are indications from the interview sample of informal support networks within communities in Northern Ireland which can often act as a safety net for young people at risk of running away. On the other hand, the high degree of social control in some communities, sometimes linked with paramilitary activities, could also form a context which left young people feeling that they were forced to leave their communities.

Finally, in terms of professional interventions with young people who run away, it seems from young people's accounts that there is often little or no agency intervention in young people's lives before they run away, even though the problems that lead to running away are commonly long-standing ones. Once young people had begun to run away the likelihood of agency involvement, particularly by social services, increased. This points to a potentially positive consequence of running away for young people – drawing attention to issues – but it also suggests that more emphasis could be given to early interventions which might prevent problems reaching the stage where young people feel they have to run away.

Case study 4 — Andrew

Andrew was living in a children's home some distance from his hometown. At 15 he had been there a year because he was under threat from paramilitaries if he tried to return home.

Andrew said that he has always had severe problems with his anger. This had led to frequent conflict at home – often he would "completely lose it" and punch walls and smash ornaments – and to difficulties at school. He went to a psychologist to attempt to deal with it, but felt this did not really help much.

The first time Andrew ran away was during a confrontation with a teacher. He said he had to get away to avoid a situation where he knew he might do something he would regret. He fled from the school and went for a long walk to cool down, returning home late in the evening. He was 10 at the time.

Andrew's mother and father had separated when he was very young. Andrew lived with his mother and never saw his father. As he got older he found it difficult to get on

with his mother and the increasing problems with his temper led to her deciding to try a different approach. At 12, Andrew moved away to live with his grandparents in Wales. He stayed there for over a year but there was little change in his behaviour and his grandparents could no longer cope.

He returned to Northern Ireland and said he pretty much stopped going to school at this point. He became involved in drinking, gambling and offending – including acts of criminal damage. He spent some time in a secure unit as a result of this. It also led to threats from the local paramilitaries and eventually to an exclusion from his estate:

> *"Cos I wasn't allowed on my estate, really, 'cos it's all (paramilitary group name) run and I wasn't getting on with anybody … so they phoned my ma and told her I had to get out."*

This precipitated his move into the children's home. Since he has lived there he has sometimes run away overnight to spend time with friends and relatives at home. He says that the residential staff worry about him when he is away because of the paramilitary threats against him.

Andrew is convinced that he is safe, but recognises that other runaways are putting themselves in danger:

> *"I'm safe when I'm on the run … The way I see it is it depends on what age you run at. If I run at the age I am now I wouldn't expect people to bother just so long as I kept in touch, like, but wee Stevie, (another resident of the home), he's only 12, and he was on the run last night, like, and I don't think they should go 'cos they've nowhere to stay. Sometime they might just walk down the wrong alley."*

5

Experiences of being away

In this chapter we attempt to paint a picture of young people's experiences of running away. In doing so, we will illustrate the diversity of experiences which fall under the general heading of running away or being on the streets.

It is plausible to imagine that running away is a pattern of behaviour which intensifies over time (e.g. more extended periods of being away from home, more risky patterns of survival, and so on). Whilst this is certainly true for some young people, the research evidence indicates that this there is no stereotypical running away career. Some young people's first running away experiences involve high risks and lengthy periods away from home. Some young people who go on to run away many times gradually develop safer means of survival whilst away from home. Across the UK, *Still Running* found no evidence of a developing pattern of running away: although repeat runaways sometimes faced higher risks than one-off runaways, these risks were often present from the very first running away episode.

Viewed as a whole, the evidence we have gathered in Northern Ireland illustrates the wide range of feelings and experiences which being away from home can encompass. Running away can be simultaneously a frightening, liberating and confusing experience for young people:

> *"You can't really describe what feelings go through you whenever you do run away because you're hit from all directions with feelings – one minute you're scared, next minute, you're fine, you're happy 'cos you're free … they just like all hit you at once. It's very confusing."*

Young people who run away need to be viewed as more than passive victims of their situation. Whilst their age and the options open to them mean that they will often be in highly vulnerable situations, it also true that by choosing to leave home they are taking active control of their lives and often making a stand against abuse and mistreatment by adults.

We hope that the evidence presented in this chapter will do justice to this complexity and to the young people who contributed to the research. We will organise young people's accounts under four general headings: making the decision to leave; survival strategies; thoughts and feelings whilst away; and returning home.

MAKING THE DECISION TO LEAVE

> *"I just got so angry … I kept on getting angrier and angrier and I just says to myself, 'Right, I'm not going home tonight!' … then, because I knew I could do it, I kept doing it more and more."*

As the quote above indicates, the first experience of running away can represent a major watershed for young people who go on to run away repeatedly. For this reason it is interesting to explore young people's accounts of making the decision to first run away. Although every story is slightly different, there appear to be four different patterns of decision-making. First, there are those young people who literally run away, usually following a major row in the family home:

> *"I can't honestly remember what the argument started over, but it was just arguments constantly … and I just felt like I was being pushed away to one side. It was a cry for help, really … I wasn't getting the attention that I needed and wanted."*

Usually these young people left on the spur of the moment, but a few planned their departure, packing a bag before they left:

> *"I planned it … I went that night when everyone was in bed … I opened my window, took two bags with me … snuck into the kitchen and took food and that as well and off I went."*

Second, there were young people who went out of the house following an argument and then decided not to return. This could happen with the intervention and support of friends.

Third, there were young people who did not so much leave, as choose not to return home. This included two young people who stayed away rather than returning from school, due to getting into trouble at school.

Finally, there were young people who were forced to leave home:

> *"My daddy used to beat me and he threatened one time to kill me. He said, 'You get out of my house and don't ever come back!'"*

Interestingly, in the interview sample, none of the young people who had been forced to leave ended up sleeping rough on this occasion, a pattern which was also observed in the UK survey.

This brief analysis illustrates the diversity of circumstances in which young people under 16 may first leave home, and particularly points to the inadequacy of the term "running away" in describing these circumstances.

Ongoing patterns of running away

There is relatively little data from the interviews about young people's decision-making on subsequent occasions when they ran away. However, one quote illustrates the way in which running away can become a coping strategy for young people:

> *"I always thought to myself if I went out and I was on the run things cleared up and when I came home I didn't have to deal with them … so it was a kind of a way of pushing everything away because I didn't want to know about it."*

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Where young people slept

We saw in Chapter 2 that information from the survey suggested that most commonly young people went to friends when they ran away, followed by those who slept rough, and then those who went to relatives. There is a danger, however, in taking this information at face value: it represents an oversimplification of the chaotic reality of running away episodes, since it implies that there is a consistency of sleeping place for each incident. In fact many of the young people who had run for extended periods of more than a few nights ended up mixing their sleeping venues according to availability and opportunity. One young man, for example, as part of a three week episode, secretly stayed at a friend's,

> *"I asked Jason if I could stay at his house and I was staying underneath his bed for two weeks … he's got a lock on his (bedroom) door and when someone knocks at the door I jumps under the bed …"*

until the friend's sister noticed:

> *"She dropped something and went under and seen my feet. She shit herself … it was funny!"*

This meant that he had to leave:

> "*She didn't mind for a few days until she needed money to go out … she wants to go out to bars 'n' all so then she was blackmailing him for money, so here's me, 'Jason, that's not fair on you so I'm going on' – that's when I went out.*"

This led to a week of sleeping rough before he returned home.

There were also a number of young people who, despite being away overnight, did not sleep at all:

> "*I was too scared (to sleep) … we just sat in the (derelict) houses.*"

How young people coped and survived whilst away

Young people under 16 have no legitimate means of survival whilst they are away from home. For many young people who run away and have support from relatives and friends, staying away for perhaps only a few nights, this does not necessarily present a huge problem.

Of those young people who had the more extreme experiences of being away – travelling long distances, sleeping rough, staying away for extended periods – there were a variety of survival strategies employed. Many turned to drugs or drink to pass the time, take them out of themselves, or just to stave off the cold:

> "*It's not good – except when you're 'topped up' (stoned) … you didn't really think about it then – you were seeing things 'n' all.*"

> "*It was how I was keeping warm at night sometimes.*"

Often the young people had to steal food:

> "*(In the day) I went down to Tony's house and Robert's house and I went out stealing with them … we went down Tesco's and stuff.*"

One young person became part of a group who were begging to survive and felt a need to to disguise herself to preserve her anonymity:

> "*We were out every night. We were always down the Underground begging.*"

> "*The day I got there I stole hair dye so I could dye my hair so nobody would know it was me.*"

Although none of the young people we interviewed said that they themselves had been involved in survival sex there was some indication that they were aware of others who employed this strategy:

> "*There was a lot of other kids … they were doing all sorts just to get money – there was prostitutes, 15-year-old prostitutes, they'd be stealing out of the shops – they'd be doing anything.*"

THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS WHILST AWAY

The survey questionnaire included ten questions about young people's feelings and experiences whilst away, five relating to positive aspects and five to negative aspects. The interviews with young people enabled us to explore in much more depth the thoughts and feelings that young people remembered from the times they were away from home.

Positive aspects

Looking at the positive aspects first, the responses to the five questions are summarised in the Table 9:

Table 9: Positive aspects of running away

	% who said yes
Did being away give you time to think?	85%
Did it give you relief from pressure?	67%
Did being away help you sort out your problems?	63%
Were you happier than before?	52%
Did you make friends?	39%

The results of the survey, then, indicate some fairly common positive aspects of running away. To some extent these are backed up by information from the interviews with young people, although the positive evaluation comes over much less strongly here.

The main positive aspect of being away mentioned by young people in the interviews was the sense of freedom that it provided:

"I got away – I felt like I was in control."

"The first day I ran away I felt … I got, like a 'buzz' out of it … it was strange really. At the time I felt like I was doing my own thing and nobody could stop what I was doing – nobody could tell me what to do anymore."

"You felt free … you felt like you could do your own thing."

For one young person interviewed, the experience of running away was generally very positive:

"It was fun – you've no worries when you're out there, except for the police … I made a lot of new friends …'Cos I was away I could settle my head more – I had time to think about things … It was generally just fun … and you get a buzz out of it … I used to get butterflies in my stomach just before I went … It ends up with you wanting to do it – you just have to get away from everything for a while."

However, this kind of description was relatively rare, and the positive views which most young people expressed were usually counterbalanced or outweighed by negative aspects, to which we now turn.

Negative aspects

Again we begin with results from the survey. Three questions relating to negative feelings or experiences were included on the survey questionnaire (as well as the two relating to physical and sexual assault already discussed). The responses to these questions are shown below:

Table 10: Negative aspects of running away

	% who said yes
Were you frightened?	43%
Did you feel lonely?	38%
Were you hungry/thirsty?	24%
While you were away were you physically hurt?	10%
While you were away, were you sexually assaulted?	8%

In contrast to the positive checklist, only a minority of young people identified with the negative aspects of being away. However, it is these negative aspects which come over much more strongly from the interviews with young people:

> *"Really bad – I wished I had a time machine or something. I wished I hadn't done it."*

This difference is perhaps partly to do with the fact that the young people we interviewed had on average much more extensive experience of running away than the young runaways in the survey.

The primary negative aspects emphasised by the young people interviewed were an awareness of their vulnerability and the fear that this often engendered:

> *"I was dead scared and I wanted to go home – I kept saying to myself 'I want to go home but I can't'."* (This young person says he hid in bushes in a park for two days).

> *"Anything could happen to you. People take advantage of you and hurt you. You think they're friendly but they're not … you're very vulnerable."*

> *"When you're sleeping out on your own there's a lot of things go through your head."*

> *"Sitting on the streets – I would sit outside the library and there's still people walking about at 4 o'clock in the morning. You get very, very scared, but you think, 'Well, I can't turn back now'."*

> *"At that time of night there's no-one about, only drunks coming out of nightclubs, and you're dodging about, going down subways, so that you don't have to go near them."*

Another strong negative aspect was the physical discomfort associated with being away from home, particularly for those young people who did not have friends to rely on for support:

> *"FOOD! … I was starving the first time I ran away."*

> *"It was cold; trying to find somewhere I could make something to eat – I was starving most of the time; I was dirty – I had nowhere to get washed. It was terrible."*

> *"Sometimes you wished you'd never done it and then there's times you just, like, think you're dreaming 'n' all … what could you say? I dunno … you just feel like all funny 'n' all, and cold and hungry and you're tired, really tired 'n' all, and then you feel bad about what you're doing to your parents and your family."*

Finally, young people also felt a sense of isolation and regret at having cut themselves off from family:

> *"Knowing that you can't trust your family, 'cos if you phone them you know they're gonna have the police straight out after you and that's something you don't want, the police sniffing everywhere."*

> *"I was cold and I was missing my mum, and I was worried about what would happen when I come back and I was worried that my family wouldn't want to talk to me again – which they didn't."*

Other thoughts and feelings

The interviews also reveal other emotional aspects to being away from home which do not fall neatly into a positive/negative classification.

Some young people describe feelings of not being able to go back home:

> *"The hard thing about running away is, after a few days, you don't think you can go back."*

Others tried to ensure that they were not found and returned home:

> *"If I go back he's only going to start shouting at me again ... and all that."*

> *"When you say (to yourself) you're gonna do it you don't really think about it that much – you just, like, disappear … It's … say a couple of hours later … that's when you start to think about it … you just run away … and then you're scared to go back … scared of what your family are gonna do when you get back and it makes you stay out."*

Finally, some young people recalled feelings of being confused or out of control whilst away from home:

> *"Nothing – felt out of control – I felt like I was going crazy"*

> *"All I did was think … but it was one thought on top of the other – you didn't have time to think about anything in particular, it was just, er, … you wanted to know where you were getting your head down next … I just wanted somewhere warm. That was what I was mostly thinking of, survival, I suppose."*

> *"I suppose whenever I went away what's always going through my head is what my mum and dad's going to say or do … 'What am I going to say whenever I go back?' or, 'Should I go back?' or, 'What happens if I'm found?' – I think there's more thoughts than you can say going through your head."*

RETURNING HOME

The reasons why the young people whom we interviewed said they went home could basically be categorised into two types: running out of motivation/stamina or being caught. Of the seventeen young people who had been away for one night or less on their first episode, ten were caught either by the police or a relative and seven returned home of their own accord, mostly because they wanted food or shelter from the elements:

> *"We only stayed out for one night … (we were) hungry, cold … so we decided to go back, 'cos there was nowhere else to go."*

Interviewees reported a wide variation in receptions when they returned home.

> *"My mum just didn't want to know me. She says, 'You can get in the house but we'll not be as close as we were' … and she just started crying and all with my dad … I felt guilty. I went up to my room and just cried all night."*

For some young people the reception was warm enough the first time they ran,

> *"My mum just put her arms around me and started crying. She said she was very worried, 'n' all."*

but by the second time this had altered radically:

> *"My mum said she didn't want me back to the house … she said (to girlfriend's mum) 'If you're so worried about him why don't you keep him?'"*

The reception seemed to be rather different if the young person was returning to substitute care. One young woman said that her foster mother was a little cool towards her, simply remarking, "Oh, you're back", but not being either angry or upset and not giving her any punishments. A young man who ran with a group from a children's home said:

> *"We got a serious lecture and a curfew imposed on us."*

SUMMARY

Young people's experiences of being away are diverse and multi-faceted. Young people's accounts suggest that running away tends to be an action taken on the spur of the moment in response to a specific event even though, as we have seen, there are usually major underlying issues. Looking at the period which young people spent away from home, around two-thirds of young people stayed with relatives or friends and obtained some degree of support from

them whilst away. The other third of young people principally slept rough and these young people had few legitimate ways of supporting themselves whilst away and were therefore particularly vulnerable.

All in all, it is clear from the survey that there are both positive and negative aspects to running away for young people. Certainly it offered young people a respite from problems, time to think, and at least in the short term could trigger a resolution to some of the problems that had caused running away. On the negative side there was some evidence of young people being vulnerable to physical and sexual assault, as well as more common practical and emotional issues such as hunger, fear and loneliness.

Case study 5 — Kathy

From a young age Kathy heard and watched her parents frequent arguments at home. She became increasingly troubled and, at 8, she ran away from home, taking just a bag of toys, soap, a face cloth and a few clothes. She only stayed away a few hours because she got hungry. Her parents never knew it had happened.

The parental conflict continued and her father's temper became worse. Once, when he hit and kicked her, she ran away again. This time she stayed out overnight sleeping under a bush near to the house. She was found the next day. Soon afterwards her parents separated.

After the separation her father moved away to Scotland and she had little contact with him. As a young adolescent she began to mix with a group of older young people who drank and took drugs. She started to run away often to be with them, staying out overnight and missing school.

Her relationship with her mother deteriorated;

> *"She tried to ground me all the time and I just walked out. I says, 'I'm not putting up with you.' I used to call her all the names under the sun – just whatever came into my head I'd say it."*

All the time Kathy was plotting to escape to her father's (whom she had idolised in his absence). When she was thirteen she embarked on the long trip to his home, but had to telephone him when she ran out of money, a day into the journey. Her father was shocked when she called, but agreed that she could stay with him.

At first things went fine, but gradually a tension developed between Kathy and her father's wife. Eventually she felt like the "odd one out" with her father and step-mother always "ganging up" on her. After one particularly bad argument, when her father teased her and pulled her hair, she ran away again, this time having no idea what to do.

She caught a train to the nearest big city and contacted her uncle who lived there. He negotiated with her mother and she returned home. She felt depressed at the prospect of having to build her life again, but at 14 she went back to her old school and began to establish herself with a different group of friends.

With hindsight she can see that she put herself at risk, but at the time Kathy enjoyed her running away:

> *"It was generally just fun … and you get a buzz out of it. You do get a buzz out of running away … I used to get butterflies in my stomach just before I went. I used to scare myself into doing it. It ends up with you wanting to do it, you just have to get away from everything for a while."*

6

SOLUTIONS? THE VIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND PROFESSIONALS

A primary concern of this research was to make useful suggestions as to how to develop a better informed response to the problem of running away.

In piecing together these suggestions a key element was to canvass the thoughts of potential users and providers of such responsive services. Therefore, in all our interviews we gave interviewees the opportunity to say not just how the current situation might be improved, but also to put forward their own ideas as to how more innovative future developments might be shaped.

The young people and professionals we spoke to gave useful indicators of the main priorities in developing sensitive services to address the needs of potential and actual runaways. Their views are presented as a broad discussion in this chapter and then amalgamated with some of our own thoughts to give a more focussed description of possible types of service provision in the conclusion which follows.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS

Towards the end of each young person's interview we asked a number of questions on what might have helped. Although we sought to define a range of areas – the specifics of how the young person thought they themselves might have been helped not to run in the first place, or not to continue running, plus their ideas as to how young people generally might be helped not to have to run and how those who did could be helped – there was in fact significant blurring of the themes in the responses to the different questions. Hence, we have grouped them into the two sections which follow.

What might help prevent young people running away/continuing to run away?

Across the age range and despite the variation in experiences, the young people spoke with a remarkable degree of unanimity on this issue. The fundamental need which they highlighted was simple and straightforward: they wanted someone to talk to:

> "Just talk, just share, get your problems out, tell somebody. Get the help you need."

> "If I had've had the courage to go and talk to somebody - I suppose that would've helped."

and they wanted to feel that they were really being paid attention to and believed, whether by parents or professionals:

> "If me mum and dad was to sit and talk to me, if they were, probably, to believe me more often, like."

> "They need to talk about things without people laughing at them. You're worried …
> I'm worried that you might laugh at me now, the way I'm talking 'n' all, I dunno,

being taken serious, because people think kids just don't know what they're talking about, don't know what they're doing, because they're just kids, like. Being taken serious that would help an awful lot."

"More people to listen and actually take in what young people are saying … not just turn around and say 'That's a teenage thing', but actually help you with stuff."

In addition to the feeling that there was no-one to talk to, a number of the young people felt barriers to talking about their problems. For some the failures of known adults had led to a fear of seeking support from all but their peers:

"The only people I talked to usually were people the same age as me – I didn't really trust any adults 'cos I thought they were all the same as my parents … so I wouldn't talk to them."

Others felt extremely inhibited about talking to anyone:

"I was too ashamed to talk to any of my mates about it. I didn't want to tell any of my schoolteachers 'cos they maybe would've went to somebody else about it and I didn't want that - I wanted as few people to know as possible."

Overall, then, the young people wanted a listener who was readily available, dedicated and active in their listening and completely trustworthy. This person could not be linked to home or family since for the vast majority of young people who run away the problem is located at home. This would suggest that there is a need for independent, non-threatening listeners, who can give non-judgemental support to enable young people to relax and reflect in a safe environment. Clearly this may lead to other subsequent roles – counsellor, information-giver, advocate, mediator – but also it may just give a brief opportunity to take time out to think, if that was all the young person wanted.

It was particularly emphasised by some young people that this role could not be fulfilled by their social worker. One young woman indicated that she had given up seeking such support from her social worker,

"I've just found now that there's no point in telling him … it's not going to help."

another that social workers were tainted by their divided loyalties:

"She doesn't do nothing for me, it's always for my mam."

In addition, although the majority of those in substitute care reported that they were adequately supported by residential staff or foster carers, others felt isolated and unable to talk:

"I thought it was none of their business … It was just a job for them."

What help should there be for young people who run away or have to be away from home?

Over three quarters of those who talked about it said that there should be a specific place (or places) for young people to go when on the run. How much detail they gave as to the nature of this place often depended on their age and amount of previous running experience. The younger interviewees tended to say that all that was necessary was a place to stay for a night (maybe with parental consultation the next day):

"I always said to myself, 'I wish there was somewhere people could go, just for one night when they're on the run, to sort their head out and talk to someone'."

"Just like a hostel … somewhere for kids to stay and then the next day the counsellors would ring up the parents, or even they could ring up their parents and tell them they were there … and then they would bring them over and have a talk with them the next day – talking through it 'n' all, and then they would get them back home."

"I think a big place where they can go, as long as their parents knew about it – somewhere they could go and just settle their heads 'cos that's all they need, time away."

Those who were older and/or had had a more extensive running career, sometimes added more detail as to how such a place should be set up. They indicated that it should not have links to social services and that for some runaways it might have to be a stopgap measure, without a demand that the young person enter into negotiations with home:

"Like a drop-in centre for younger people where they can go, get a feed, get a wash, put their head down for a night – something like that."

There were particular concerns that the staff should be carefully selected and empathic towards the young people in their care:

"People who have been through most of the stuff 'cos that's what I don't like about social workers – half of them haven't been through half of the stuff … they don't know what you're going through."

"Just normal people who have their own kids and all that … just (doing it) voluntarily, I'd say – they could help young people … they've probably been through it when they were younger and they realised how bad it was and they want to help people that's doing it now – they want to tell them what it's like, you know, when you're out on the street and on all sorts of drugs."

To underline his concern that the service should be solely for young runaways, one young man reflected at some length on his experience of hostel life as a 16 year old. He said that he had been exposed to frightening situations:

"It was pretty weird – when I first came it was full of alcoholics, drug addicts, you name it, they were in here. You had to watch your back at night, walking around the project. It was bad, like … I found a fella in his bedroom up there. He'd cut his wrists and he was just lying, bleeding to death – I'd never come across anything like this before."

He added that the regime was too strict and impersonal and that the hostel was not at all "homely":

"You feel like you're constantly being watched … you can't relax for a minute 'cos they're constantly watching you to see what you're up to. You're not allowed to eat in the living rooms, you have to do that in the kitchen – you're not even allowed to eat in your bedroom. You want to bring your own TV in you have to go through the authorities to get that electronically checked … and my bedsheets are pink (laughs), which isn't much good … and the decoration of the place, it's very official."

Overall, then the young people's responses suggest a need for dedicated, short term, intensively (and suitably) staffed, crisis units/hostels for under 16s.

There was one additional important issue that some of the interviewees related to both the categories described above: that of the dearth of information-giving services about what help was available to potential or actual runners.

"It would've been good if there was actually somewhere you could go and somebody you could talk to … I suppose that would've helped – if you knew where to go."

As a coda to this section it seems appropriate to add that although the majority of young people responded during the interview in a relatively pragmatic manner to these questions, there were others who were aware that they had been at such a point of crisis in their lives when they decided to run, that there may have been little opportunity or merit in any attempt at intervention:

"I needed to do it to clear my head."

> *"I don't think I would've listened to anybody or tried to get help from anybody at the time … I don't think I would've done it."*

One young man offered a vivid recollection of the confusion and despair that many feel either when on the verge of running or when they have removed themselves from home:

> *"(I wanted) someone to guide me … someone to pull my strings and I'll do what they say … but nobody'd done that … I had to do everything for myself."*

PROFESSIONALS' VIEWS

In this section we will consider the views expressed by professionals under two headings: preventative work and work with runaways. We can only give an overview of the issues here – the ideas on service development are more fully discussed in the next chapter.

Preventative work

A broad spectrum of ideas on preventative work were put forward by interviewees, ranging from relatively low-key, general, issue-based education initiatives in schools to intensive support for vulnerable families or individuals.

On a basic level it was suggested that there was a need for all young people to be more fully informed about the issues around youth homelessness. A number of those who worked with agencies (especially The Simon Community and the Council for the Homeless) indicated that there were education programmes being developed involving visits to schools to talk to groups of students directly and encourage them to think around the subject. However, it was apparent that such presentations needed to be tailored for and targeted at a younger age group if they were to deal effectively with the problem of running away.

In the sense that school might be the primary forum for initial low level preventative work, some professionals suggested that young people should be given general information on services, rights, etc. in school:

> *"There is a lack of awareness amongst young people – for example, social services are not much discussed in school."*

Many professionals acknowledged that communication with young people in school could be a problem and suggested 'peer education' as a possible solution:

> *"It's all very well for social services or the Executive, or even the voluntary sector to go around saying, 'Oh, we know what's right for young people and we'll tell them what we think they need', but at the end of the day, young people, in my experience, will listen to other young people who've been through experiences and who have 'street cred' … Sometimes, if they have to, they will listen to adults, but they're more likely to take into account what someone from a similar age or background is saying to them."*

A number of professionals spoke about education in a wider sense. They felt that there was a general need for consciousness raising across the community on the problems that young people face:

> *"The public needs to be educated about how tough it is for children."*

> *"Parents need to be educated along with young people, possibly the whole community. Awareness … needs to be raised with everyone so that issues can be tackled effectively."*

Others talked about the educational needs of more detached and vulnerable young people. They said that often schools had damaged some groups of young people by prejudging them at an early age on the basis of questionable preconceptions:

> *"Education is failing them. Some of them desperately want to get on at school but the system has failed them … You are labelled at school by where you come from – it's assumed you'll end up in the factory or be a failure."*

For these young people therefore, who had become marginalised from the school setting, it might be necessary to undertake work to re-educate them over their life choices and enhance their self esteem, as well as doing specific work on issues such as running away:

> *"Every young person has potential and they should be supported to enable them to maximise that potential both physically and emotionally."*

Many interviewees felt that one measure which could be effective was to develop youth work provision. At one level this might mean having youth 'clubs' more widely available and run on a more flexible basis – open to those who are 14 and over on a daily basis and with sessions lasting later into the evening to offer a safe environment:

> *"Somewhere for youngsters to hang out at night time that's gonna take them off the street corners, particularly from 9 o'clock onwards. The youth centres really only cater for kids up to age 14 and they all close at 10 o'clock, plus they're not open seven days a week. Somewhere particularly on a Friday or a Saturday night, a disco aimed at their age group … just somewhere to go … (and) socialise with their mates – these are the type of things that the youngsters have been asking us (for) when we have gone to Youth Days."* [Consultation events involving young people, the youth service and local councils].

Workers reported that for young people there was a 'twilight age' in the mid-teens – too old to go to the youth club, too young to go to the pub/club. One youth worker reported the statement of a young person during an exchange with a councillor at a consultation event:

> *"Excuse me … I am not 13 years of age, I am 15 years of age – I don't want to go into a bar to drink but I do want to go somewhere where I can have music, I can disco, I can dance, without having the threat of drink, without having the threat of drugs pushed down my throat … (somewhere) that I can have a good time."*

For other more detached or vulnerable young people there might be a need for somewhere accessible during the day – a drop-in type facility maybe with pool table, a canteen, etc. – which would take them off the streets and possibly enable a route into talking about issues relevant to their lives.

It was proposed that this type of service could include detached youth workers to engage with young people on the streets in a bid to build constructive and protective relationships which might draw them into other preventative services.

The need for more counselling services aimed at young people was also highlighted. One project manager indicated that it was equally important to educate young people as to the possible benefits:

> *"Obviously counselling services need to be supported more but also the whole information and communication with young people, even on what counselling is all about. I've even found young people who you know could benefit from a counselling process yet they don't see it as a need, it's 'not their problem', there's no way they're going to engage in that process – so I think that interventions prior to that, to engage with them in a positive way so that they know what supports are there, they know what they're about and it demystifies them."*

Another worker talked of the need to develop mediation services to operate in family disputes. They underlined that this would often mean challenging the young person as well as the parents:

> *"That isn't to say all the time that the young person is always right – a lot of our work in the immediate term is mediation and family mediation … negotiating with families and with the young person in terms of having some type of compromise on the situation."*

In the case of families where more intensive intervention is required one manager suggested a need for respite schemes for families in difficulty. He spoke about a scheme currently in its infancy in Belfast whereby host families are recruited who will offer temporary stays to young people on a regular basis. This allows intensive work to be done with both the young person

and the parents whilst giving breaks for both parties to try to avoid a troubled situation becoming a crisis. The scheme is currently aimed at preventing reception into care but might equally offer assistance to those at risk of running.

All of these suggestions came with a common rider – that such services must be seen to be free of links to the statutory sector. If they were stigmatised by being associated with social services, the police, etc., there was little hope that they could be successful in gaining the necessary trust from the community to do effective preventative work. One social services manager expressed the concern felt by many interviewees when she stated:

> *"I don't think we're very good at meeting the needs of these young people in terms of knowing what to do with them, I really don't … If you're looking at preventative work I think a statutory agency is probably not the best bet because I don't think parents approach statutory agencies very easily or very well. If there were other resources out there that were 'normalized' agencies, if you like, rather than seen as, 'that agency's for troubled kids', parents or young people are more likely to approach at those early, preventative stages."*

Services for runaways

Almost all the agency professionals who talked about provision for runaways who were under 16 spoke of the need for crisis units. They portrayed this type of provision in a number of different ways. The main element would be a place to go:

> *"It's almost too obvious to say somewhere for them to stay. Some of the young people chose not to have a place to go … but others would've wanted a bed for the night, somewhere safe to be."*

There was some variation of opinion as to the how the unit should be used. Most workers felt that parents should immediately be informed of the young person's whereabouts. They said that this would be necessary to allay parental fears (and also, if it was widely known that this was the policy, to encourage them to be generally supportive of such schemes).

> *"If the parents know they're safe, if the parents know 'Okay, well I know he's not coming home tonight and I know that that place is there and that's where he'll go to, I'm not worried too much'."*

This would also logically lead to a negotiation with the parents the next day over how the young person could be re-integrated back at home.

In contrast some professionals, particularly those who worked with older young people, proposed that young people should be able to access the unit immediately with no expectation of extended contact:

> *"Just a place to crash as opposed to something that was going to offer them long term support … That was a feature of the young people we came across generally – their lives were often in chaos and it was about moving from one crisis to the next … any expression of what they needed was in terms of a bed for tonight and 'I need money for food now'."*

They felt that the best approach would be to allow young people to stay for a night with no questions asked (at least initially), with a hope that once some trust had been built then the young person would volunteer information and a productive relationship with staff could evolve:

> *"I think that something has to happen on a number of levels. I think that their immediate needs have to be met; that might be about a crash unit where young people can go into and nothing is demanded of them. It's just a basic provision. It's securing their immediate health and safety. And that might be also a mechanism whereby you're able to introduce them to other services – not necessarily say this is a condition of you coming here and getting access to this service but you're able at least to enlighten them and make them aware of something."*

Interestingly, one project worker framed his response in terms of respite rather than refuge:

> *"I would love to see a respite area for potential runaways. If they needed somewhere to go, to have a chat with confidence to a person, to actually talk through their agonies, and if they wanted to actually stay the night there instead of being a risk outside … the centre would be able to phone up the parents. I really think that sometimes the kids cry out for a person to sit there with a listening ear … just to be there for them."*

Many of the professionals stated that crisis units would have to be small and with strict entry criteria – only young people admitted:

> *"Small units are necessary; for a lot of young people running away they are already in the cycle of institutions, going from children's homes to young offenders centres, etc and then to a hostel."*

> *"Places that are specifically designed for young people that age, not hostels that are also bringing in adult males and females who … it would be inappropriate to place young people with, because they then are being exposed to a level of contamination (sic) that they probably shouldn't be exposed to."*

A number specified that the units should have a 24 hour helpline, with a freephone number, as first point of contact.

As with suggestions on preventative services many of the professionals felt that the basic scheme could be expanded to encompass additional linked elements. Some said that the crisis unit should also develop outreach work with young people:

> *"Places like that can build their programme to do outreach work on drink, on drugs, on sexual issues … particularly teenage pregnancies, the figures are absolutely sky high, the kids who we know are sexually active at 13 and 14 … We could be doing outreach work from that type of a centre on all the issues that are affecting young people – it would be just great."*

> *"For us a big, big part of any kind of facility would be that kind of provision alongside a detached or streetwork element, certainly in the city centres … One of the things we've consistently said is that a lot of young people will not access services, the services will have to come to them – even a 'crash unit' – workers on the street will have to go out and actually tap into where these young people are and make them aware of what's available and re-direct them."*

Others suggested that additional services should be accessible at the same venue - especially social services and health:

> *"I think in terms of another level of provision there has to be something that is like a one-stop-shop whereby all the agencies that can offer services do so in a way that is not just co-ordinated but is done so fairly quickly … one place with a multi-disciplinary team, operating together in one room and taking a case study approach … and delivering services as they are needed."*

Another worker, speaking on the same theme, proposed that a one-stop-shop could be enhanced by having a café facility, which would encourage informal peer education as well as peer participation:

> *"Maybe a one-stop-shop is what I'm talking about – a safe place, a young person-friendly one-stop-shop … where they can just go in for a cup of tea, a cheap meal and … a lot of user-participation within it, maybe peer education within it, and access to all elements of life, all types of service, so that it's not labelled – they're not going to social services, they're not going to Probation – they're going to their place."*

It was a clear underpinning of this proposal that agencies would be forced to respond in a more integrated way, not something that was happening with any consistency at the present time, according to a project manager in Belfast:

> *"It's all bitty – everyone seems to be doing their own wee bit and it's not very well co-ordinated in my experience. It's about how experienced you are and how well you know the network … it's to do with the personal experience of the workers … it shouldn't really matter. If it takes me twenty-odd years to get to know what I know in the system then that's not fair if you're a young person coming into it … in fact, I think under the Children Order we have the responsibility to deliver that … the information that the young people need to know."*

Finally, as with the young people who were interviewed, there was a degree of realism expressed by some professionals who were willing to acknowledge that some young people were unreachable:

> *"There has to be an acceptance by all parties that some young people will not access services and do not want to tap into them and basically choose to do certain things and choose their own road … That's gonna happen sometimes … and you accept that you can't do anything, you accept that no matter what you offer, it isn't going to work."*

Case study 6 — Jane

Jane was 18 and living in a hostel. Before she was 16 she had run away four or five times, whilst living at home with her mother, step-father and younger step-sisters.

She said that the pattern was always the same – she would have a blazing row with her step-father and leave the house.

> *"When I look back now it was petty things and the arguments should never have happened but when you're 14 years old you make these things out to be ten times the size that they really are … It would've been the likes of the time I would've been able to stay out at night, who I was hanging around with, how much money my mum was giving me … things like that."*

Her best friend would offer her a place to stay for the night and listen to her while she moaned about things at home. Then, when she had cooled down, she would return to the house and try to talk to her mother and avoid her step-father.

Jane was very unhappy during this period and began sniffing solvents to "get off her face":

> *"I ended up taking it in my room, I got that addicted to it, and then I knocked myself out with it and then my mum found me."*

She also often truanted from school and was suspended for consistently failing to do homework and missing lessons. Jane increasingly felt that she was coming a poor second to the rest of the family:

> *"I thought that nobody had the time for me and that nobody would want to listen to me so I kept it all to myself."*

This became even more clear to her once she had turned 16. Her mother then forced her to leave a number of times saying that she could not cope with the conflict between Jane and her step-father.

Fortunately she could go and stay with the same friend who had helped her before and eventually her mother would relent and let her return home. Each time she left it became more difficult to go there because her friend's parents were beginning to show some reticence at having her to stay.

Things became even worse when she found out she had got pregnant by a man she had only been out with a few times. (She had not seen him since she told him about the pregnancy). When her parents found out they were angry and upset. Within days her mother had asked her to leave again and she felt it was not worth attempting to go back this time.

She travelled to the nearest city and found a bed in an emergency hostel, after a night of wandering the streets. When she told the staff that she was pregnant they negotiated with the council to provide her with a flat. She is now excited at the prospect of moving into her own place but realises that it will not be easy when the baby is born.

7

CONCLUSION

KEY FINDINGS

Prevalence and characteristics

- Almost one in ten young people in Northern Ireland will run away or be forced to leave home overnight before they are sixteen.
- One in five of overnight runaways had first run when under the age of eleven (and this group are more likely to run away repeatedly after the first incident).
- Over 2,000 young people under 16 run away from home each year in Northern Ireland.
- Prevalence rates are similar for different areas of the province – urban, suburban and rural.
- There is no difference in running away rates between males and females, in contrast to the UK as a whole where young women are more likely to run.
- One in seven of those away for at least one night said that they had been forced to leave home.

Contexts/triggers

- The main reason for running away is problems at home – mostly arguments and conflict (27%) – often aggravated by personal problems or problems at school.
- More than a quarter of young runaways said they left because of physical abuse (or the threat of it), emotional abuse or neglect.
- Young people who do not live in the traditional family form are more likely to run away – 13% of those who lived with a single parent had run away and 20% who lived in a family with a step-parent, as compared to 7% from two birth-parent families.
- The survey found no clear evidence of a direct link between economic factors and running away.
- The young people who had run away viewed the quality of their relationship with their parent(s) as being significantly worse than those who had never run.
- Young people who run away repeatedly have particularly high levels of family disruption and problems.
- Running away from substitute care is a significant and complex phenomenon. Most young people who go missing from care are *continuing* to run *within* care rather than *starting* to *run* from care.

Experiences of being away

- Being away could be both positive and negative. Young people reported that they had time to think (85%), and relief from pressure (67%) – however many also felt frightened (43%), lonely (38%) and hungry/thirsty (24%). Around one in twelve said that they had been sexually assaulted while they were away from home.

- Most young people only run away once but one in five go on to run three times or more.
- The majority of young people stay away for just one night but around a quarter had spent a week or more away from home.
- Most young people had a place to stay whilst away from home – either with friends (33%) or relatives (25%). But 36% said that they slept rough. This figure is significantly higher than that found for the UK as a whole (25%).
- There is an identifiable high-risk group of young people who run away more frequently, for longer periods and are more likely to sleep rough than average runaways.
- Most young people remain in their local area when they run away.
- Across the UK there was no discernible 'career' for those who ran more than once: no coherent, consistent or developing pattern of experiences. Young people who run away repeatedly do face more risks, but this was apparent in their experiences from the first time they ran.

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

We would identify two main strands of practice which should be developed in response to the findings of the research:

- Preventative work

- Responsive work

Most of the recommendations made in this section relate to the findings of the research but some are informed by a wider consideration of running away. Many of the recommendations are already beginning to take shape with pilot projects in England and Wales. However, it is not possible to say conclusively for all these ideas that they are the final say on the matter: proper piloting and evaluation would be required to test, adapt and fine-tune a fully formed practice response to the problem.

PREVENTATIVE WORK

Clearly, in the ideal situation, running away from home would not happen. The inherent risks are such that it would (almost) always be better for young people to seek an alternative means of coping with their problems.

The findings in this report on the sheer scale of the problem must engender a wide debate about how to develop a co-ordinated educative programme to reach all children. Our evidence of the prevalence of running across the spectrum of socio-economic class and by children as young as seven should underline the need to make all young people aware of the issue and promote informed discussion of risks, consequences and alternatives.

The development of local or national initiatives, with project workers visiting schools to deliver presentations, would seem to be the most logical approach to reaching a broad audience. Clearly the content and style would need to be appropriate to the targeted age group. At primary school level the use of fictional accounts and/or video to facilitate debate and allow transmission of important messages about safety (in the same way as previous initiatives on 'Stranger Danger' or road safety) would perhaps be most appropriate. For secondary school students there are two options: inclusion of running away as a topic within the Personal and Social Education curriculum, or a 'presentations model' similar to the one used for primary school children. (Clearly the additional benefit of inclusion within PSE would be that the issues would be consistently covered over time rather than perhaps becoming neglected after a one-off campaign).

There is debate about the overall efficacy of schools-based programmes (for example, see Gough (1993) for a consideration of this approach in relation to prevention of sexual abuse) but it is not immediately apparent what feasible alternatives exist to deliver a message to all young people. The work for this report has highlighted an idea to enhance the productiveness of attempts to convey information to young people – the use of peer education. Both young

people and professionals indicated that this could be an effective method to make programmes meaningful, particularly to an adolescent audience. Initial indications from work in Canada are that 'speaks' (presentations where young people who have been on the street tell their stories directly to the school audience) are particularly effective in conveying a message that is understood and retained (Caputo, Weiler and Green, 1996).

Given what we have found about the causes of running away – physical abuse, neglect, irresolvable conflicts with parents, emotional abuse – it would seem apparent that discussion around running away in schools may have some foreseeable consequences. The major side effect for some young people might be upset and, potentially, a need or desire to disclose about problems at home. This would mean that schools would have to be confident in creating an atmosphere which was conducive to, and appropriately responsive towards, the outing of pupils' problems.

For primary school children this might necessitate additional training for teachers as the likely 'first absorbers' of any upset. At secondary level, we would suggest that a possible additional arm of this could be the development of peer support and counselling schemes. Such schemes are currently being piloted by The Children's Society but it is difficult to say conclusively at this stage how effective they are.

The need highlighted for a safety net within schools to support all pupils is reinforced by the responses of the young people we interviewed. They made it quite apparent that the one thing they felt might have helped prevent them from running in the first place was having someone to talk to about their problems.

Clearly in more serious situations – when a young person has made a disclosure which requires further action – the school would have to make a referral to social services. The statutory response might entail temporary family support work (perhaps with an onus on reinforcing a message to the children within the family about alternatives to running away) or child protection intervention as appropriate. For those young people who already had a social worker, their self-referral could prompt additional focused work on coping strategies (as alternatives to running away), based on the social worker's existing knowledge of the young person's circumstances and resources.

The practice recommendations made so far relate solely to specific programmes of issue-based work with school pupils and the necessity of being equipped to deal with any potential consequences of such programmes. However, given our finding that running away is frequently located within a context of the additional stresses for young people experiencing changes at home, we should add that there is an overall need for a better reflection of this in the messages conveyed to young people about the family. The culture within schools and the curriculum should more openly and positively acknowledge that a significant proportion of young people do not reside within the traditional two birth-parent family unit. Only by fostering a non-judgemental attitude towards all family forms, and allowing for the pressures experienced by those whose personal circumstances might be in transition, can schools truly promote the emotional wellbeing of all the young people in their care. Perhaps by facilitating more open and frank discussion on the variety of the modern family within the classroom, the stigma borne by many could be lifted and their ability to cope be enhanced. This would certainly aid the bid to ensure that less young people put themselves at risk by fleeing a difficult home situation.

A further recommendation for preventative measures that flows from the findings is the need to undertake targeted work with groups who seem particularly vulnerable to running away. Indicators of an increased propensity to run were especially apparent for young people who were having problems at school and/or showing signs of becoming detached from school – those who were victims of bullying, those who truanted regularly, those who were suspended. This should prompt the development of focused initiatives, which could be delivered to these specific groups, providing suitable information on the potential dangers of running away and allowing the young people (whether in groups or individually) to discuss the issues for themselves. Again peer education would seem to be appropriate in these situations.

Perhaps the most vulnerable group of all is those who are ostensibly detached from mainstream schooling – those who rarely attend or who have been excluded. Since this group is not the same captive audience that a school situation allows and, since they have already indicated their reticence about formalised settings for learning, perhaps the best way to reach this group with messages about running away and its dangers (and potentially other important issues such as substance abuse and offending) would be for youth workers to do outreach work complemented by readily available information and advice within community/youth centres.

In the course of doing the fieldwork for the report we came across some model examples of how this might be undertaken. In each case there was a unit within a community where individual workers had actively cultivated positive relationships with the more socially excluded young people in the area (usually via activities arranged for evenings and weekends). There had also been the natural development of good relationships with parents since the workers encouraged them to become involved in the administration of the activities and have contact with the centre. These workers were then in an ideal position to filter appropriate information in understandable and relevant ways to individual young people at pertinent times in their lives. In fact the young people often came to the centre themselves to seek help and advice from the workers. Clearly, the ideal is for those who are vulnerable to identify with a trustworthy and suitable adult who can give guidance, assistance and perhaps even mediate for the young person if a difficult situation develops at home.

Additionally, for those who already have a social worker, evidence of increasing detachment from school during adolescence could be regarded as a trigger to undertaking specific work on the potential dangers of running away from home.

Finally, in terms of prevention there is a need to do targeted work with those in substitute care, although, as detailed in Chapter 3, it is likely that many of this group will have run before being admitted to care, there is clearly merit in preventing further episodes. It would perhaps be especially powerful in this setting to recruit, train and employ (even if only on a limited sessional basis) young people who themselves have run from care. This would enable extremely direct peer education, enhanced by live storytelling on real experiences and expert contributions to discussions.

RESPONSIVE WORK

The issue of responses to actual incidents of running away is a complex one. When one considers the potential range of causes and the range of intensity of factors within these, one cannot help but feel the keyword for any response must be *flexibility*. We have suggested a number of potential elements of responsive services here – it may be that these functions could be undertaken by a variety of workers in either statutory or voluntary sector settings and this may vary according to local conditions.

Independent interviews

To deal with the majority of situations – those where a young person is reported missing but returns home of their own volition – the first point of intervention should be a light-handed one. Since all the indicators are that running away is premised on a 'something' with which most runners would benefit from some assistance, there ought to be the offer of an independent interview to all young people who run away, to find out their reason for running.

In order to preserve the credibility and integrity of a service offering independent interviews, the tasks of contact and then interviewing would have to be done by workers outside the statutory sector, although in most cases the referral information would have to come via the police MISPER system.

As well as being administered and conducted by an independent organisation, the interviews would need to be carefully planned, in terms of procedures and content, to work effectively in this context:

- Careful thought would need to be given as to an appropriate venue. In some cases, for example, this might be at home, with a supportive adult or friend, or perhaps at the home of a member of the extended family. However, in other situations a neutral venue would need to be identified in order to guard against the potential for interference or contamination, possibly from those who are the cause of the problem. In all cases the decision as to where and when to conduct the interview should be led by the young person.
- There would need to be a strict policy on confidentiality, with a rigorous definition of circumstances in which this might be broken, and with an undertaking that all interviewees have this fully explained to them at the outset of the interview. The clarity of this would be vital in establishing a conducive atmosphere of trust and respect within which the interview could flourish.
- The interviewer would also need to clearly define their role (and the potential limits inherent in this role) in terms which are easily understandable to the young person. Again, this would have to be part of the lead-in to the full interview.
- The interview content should be primarily dictated by the young person with the worker making appropriate probes to elicit information when necessary.
- Given that interviews are only likely to take place where a young person is highly motivated to obtain a tangible outcome, the worker would have to focus on either identifying and conveying suitable alternative coping strategies for the young person (i.e. within their own resources) or on quick service responses to the young person's problems.
- The interview should also include an element which illustrates to the young person the potential dangers of continuing to run away.

The interview would effectively then become a two-way assessment tool. From the young person's perspective, it may enable them to reappraise their situation, perhaps focusing on how they might better utilise existing internal or external support mechanisms that they already have access to. For the worker, the interview would allow a proper insight into the circumstances around the running away episode and thence inform a second tier of response where necessary (which we go on to consider below).

An independent interview system could set in motion a varied and appropriate response for those who were receptive to help. However, in more complex situations, where the young person is not initially willing to engage with this process (perhaps due to parental pressure), there would need to be a procedure to trigger a statutory response after a specified number of MISPER incidents where follow-up is resisted. In one area of Scotland, Dunfermline (Fife), such a system is already being piloted. An 'Alarm Bell' procedure operates whereby, after the third episode, an automatic response is triggered by a dedicated police/social services child protection team. (In fact, in many instances, a social worker is already working with the family, in which case the information is passed on to them. However, the system does provide a safety net for the situations where young people have not previously had any involvement with social services).

This proposed system for responding to those who are reported missing is laid out in Figure 4 (on page 65).

Independent interview schemes linked to MISPER reports are currently being developed by The Children's Society and Barnardos across England and Wales, and by the ASTRA project in Gloucester, but have not yet been evaluated.

Response to those who are harder to reach

In terms of a basic response to the majority of running away incidents an independent interview system with, where necessary, some follow-on services (as discussed below) would be sufficient.

However, our research suggests that there is a significant group of young people who may be in greater danger and not reachable via a MISPER-based scheme. This group consists

mainly of young people who are in crisis situations – staying temporarily in unsafe, inappropriate accommodation, sleeping rough, unable or unwilling to return home.

There is clearly a need to establish a service response to this extremely vulnerable group. There may be a number of possible ways to construct such a service, but it would need to perform three core functions:

- Crisis assessment

- Refuge

- Gateway to follow-on services

However young people arrive at this service (we discuss referral routes overleaf) it would need to have an initially highly responsive role – to be in a position to consider and act quickly. Hence there would be a need for a duty system with ready availability of workers to do an initial, crisis assessment. Often the young person will require rapid access to crisis accommodation so this service would have to incorporate, or have close links with, some type of refuge resource (the potential form this might take are further discussed below). And, to deal with the aftermath of crisis response, the service would have to foster and maintain relationships with follow-on services.
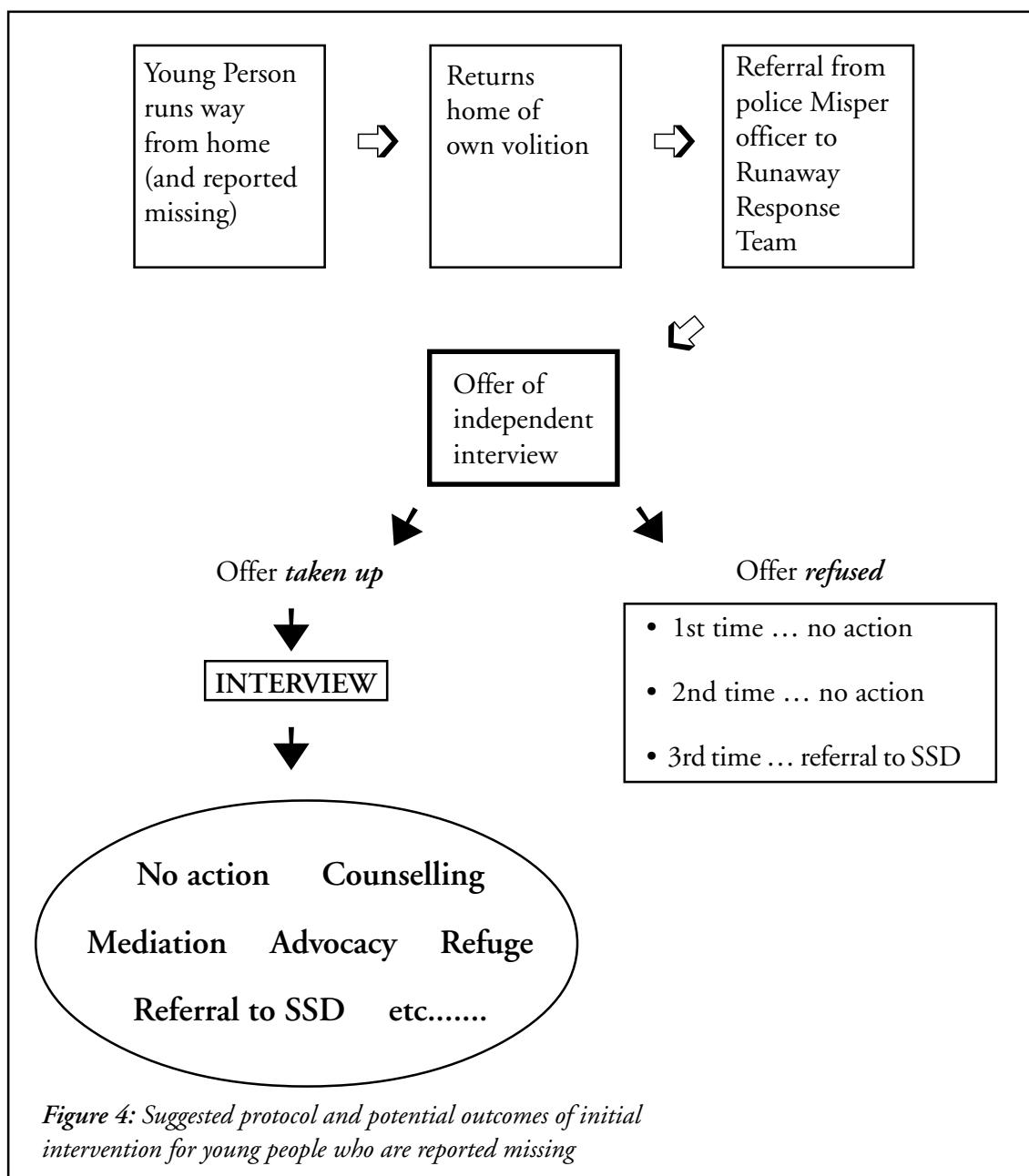

Figure 4: Suggested protocol and potential outcomes of initial intervention for young people who are reported missing

Referral routes

- Frontline agency protocols
- Via outreach work
- Self-referral

There are two potential methods to draw in those young people who would be the target of this service. The first would be to develop agreed protocols with frontline agencies who come into direct contact with young runaways on a regular basis – principally the police but also social services or sometimes other agencies. In essence a first contact by a frontline agency with a young person should trigger a referral to the duty crisis assessment workers in the runaway response service. (Our research has highlighted the fact that currently, the usual first choice of taking a young person home at the earliest opportunity often merely serves to re-expose them to the danger from which they had fled – perhaps further exacerbated in the light of their having run away).

The second approach would be to develop outreach work. There would clearly need to be extensive thought as to the feasibility and usefulness of this in individual areas, but in theory it would entail streetworkers identifying popular locations for young runaways, where they would regularly patrol to make contact and seek to engage with the young people that they came across. This might provide a route to greater contact and the possibility of making a positive intervention (elements of this approach are currently used by Children's Society projects in England and Wales – for a consideration of their work see Stein *et al* (1994)).

These proposals about how to engage with more detached young runaways are a response to the situation as we perceive it now. In the longer term a fundamental aim of developing services for young runaways and more 'global' work to raise the profile of the issues, would be to seek to change the culture of runaways, towards a more proactive seeking of assistance – to re-attach those young people who currently become detached.

Clearly, this would require widespread knowledge of the existence and nature of a dedicated runaway response service amongst all young people. Additionally, to promote self-referral, contactability and flexibility of response would be vital ingredients of a runaway response service. Hence, there would need to be a widely publicised freephone number for contacting the duty crisis workers and a capability for them to travel to wherever the young person was, whether on the street or at a location to suit the young person, to undertake an initial assessment. This would perhaps need to be complemented by a drop-in facility where young people might present themselves for advice, information and help (possibly incorporating practical assistance such as hot food/kitchen, clothes dispensary and washing and laundry provision).

Thus far we have essentially focused on routes to opening professional communication with young runaways and acknowledged the variety of these, but only alluded to the service responses which would flow from this. We have also referred only to responses to runaways, rather than those forced to leave their home; however, we feel that these measures could, with certain re-emphases, be equally well used to help young people in this situation.

The key to what happens next (if anything) is the outcome of the interview or crisis assessment. In some cases the young person, with some advice and information, may be in a position to cope with the situation her/himself. In more extreme situations, where a young person is clearly in significant danger, the next stage would be to offer refuge to the young person. We discuss the issue of the lack of any refuge provision in Northern Ireland in the policy section which follows this one, but it seems appropriate here to consider what a refuge might look like.

Refuge

Currently there is a wide-ranging debate about what works best, what is feasible, what is affordable and what different approaches could be adopted to fulfil this function.

Previous and existing service provision has been based primarily on a dedicated hostel model. This has worked successfully for a number of years in two locations in England (as mentioned in the Introduction). However, the high cost of such a model has caused some difficulties – the Leeds refuge has recently closed and the London refuge has also recently undergone radical changes in its funding structure (moving from voluntary sector funding to statutory funding via Department of Health grants, allocated with the agreement of the Greater London Association of Directors of Social Services).

This has led to some rethinking and actual or planned piloting of alternative models by Children's Society projects: 'refuge foster placements' and the 'invisible/flexible hostel' (where the workers *are* the refuge and the physical venue could be pre-vetted bed and breakfast hotels or even a crash pad at the office premises of the project, according to circumstances) are currently being investigated. However, it is impossible to say at this time whether these alternative models are able to safely, consistently and effectively meet the need for refuge for under-16s.

It should perhaps be borne in mind when debating the possible structure for a refuge service that young people clearly identified a desire for a "place to go" in their interviews – this might mean that they envisaged a hostel-type model. However, it might be equally valid to provide some sort of live presence (shopfront in a city centre) as the place to go where a drop-in facility allows access to information and advice and, after due assessment, access to a refuge elsewhere. If necessary, in rural areas for example, this could focus around a mobile drop-in (already in use in North Yorkshire in a project run by Craven YMCA: Franks, 2000) as the first point of contact and potential avenue to a centralised refuge.

A slightly different approach to refuge might include the instigation of negotiations within larger, extended families for an intermediate/crisis/respite stay with another safe relative, or perhaps a friend. The role of a worker within this might extend to an advocacy or mediation task in easing the young person back into their own home via a planned and staged re-integration with their immediate family (hopefully with the assistance of an ally or allies within the extended family – both to aid this process and provide ongoing support to the young person once home). Given that we found extensive evidence of this already happening to some extent within the communities studied in Northern Ireland, it would seem logical to try to tap into it and, with the necessary tact, exploit a pre-existing resource.

This formalised system of encouraging intra-familial self support has its roots in family group conferencing as discussed by Burford and Pennel (1994) and Marsh and Crow (1997).

Follow-on services

Some young runaways who come through the independent interview system, and many who experience a crisis intervention and/or refuge, will need ongoing input to resolve their problems. The possible follow-on services required may include:

- Counselling
- Befriending
- Advocacy
- Issue-based group or individual work
- Mediation
- Family group conference facilitation
- Health services – physical and mental

Local availability of such services may dictate what form a follow-on package might take. A number of agency professionals interviewed for this study put forward a new service model, which could be appropriate in large conurbations. It was suggested that a holistic, multidisciplinary team could be established in one venue, consisting of a health worker, social services worker, youth worker, and possibly substance misuse specialist, counsellors, probation

worker, etc. These individual specialists could then effectively combine their services to work together as a generic young person's team – a "one stop shop" as one worker put it.

The main benefit for young people would be easy access to all the services they might need without having to venue-hop. The main benefit to professionals would be the facilitation of integrated working relationships. In theory this should lead to more rounded and consistent outcomes for service users.

Despite its obvious merits, we would like to sound one note of caution over this idea. A clear message that came across from both young people and some agency workers was the fundamental need to de-stigmatise services which aspired to reach the most disaffected. Overt links to social services and perhaps also to probation may have a strong deterrent effect on those whom the service might most wish to help. (It may also be that such close ties to the statutory sector would undermine a flexible, child-centred approach in initial assessments of runaways – there could be too much pressure over adopting a more child protection-focused agenda which social services might wish to institute). Should such a venture be tried, it would have to pay particular attention to public relations work to establish and maintain a reputation which disassociated it from the statutory sector; this could foreseeably lead to tensions both within the team and amongst its funders.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings raise a number of issues which need to be addressed at the level of national and local social policy.

Family policy

Our main finding in relation to family form was that young people who live in non-traditional family forms (i.e. where both birth parents are not resident in the household) have a significantly higher propensity to run away from home. This is most pronounced where the family has undergone a reconstitution – the introduction of a new (step) parent – when it was almost three times more likely that young people would have run away.

The picture is somewhat complicated by the finding that these young people did not report being any less happy (in terms of the indicators that we offered for selection in the questionnaire) than their counterparts in traditional families.

It is not possible to say conclusively from this research why this might be. Whether young people are less attached to reconstituted families, feel that they have less of a stake in them, are driven by the more pragmatic consideration that they have the facility (in some cases) to run to their other birth parent, or feel some sort of stigma as a result of not being a member of an 'ideal' family – all are potentially part of the reason as are any number of other factors. There is clearly a need for further research on this subject.

In terms of a policy response by local/national government this is perhaps not helpful. What our findings do suggest, however, is that we should strive to better understand the problems which young people might be encountering during the transition from a two birth parent family to a different form. A recognition of this should be accompanied by a full acknowledgement of the dynamic nature of 'family' and of the plurality of family forms as they now exist. This implies an acceptance of the burgeoning and irreversible trend of family change and a proper allowance for this in the formation of future policy.

There is some indication that this is already beginning to happen. The bid to prioritise the needs of children and young people when parents separate, via the introduction of mediation services, should be welcomed. However, given our findings, perhaps this should be augmented by a new onus on listening to the views of the young people in the family – making concerted efforts to consult with them, include them and offer support and advice to them during the process of separation and transition to a new family form. Hopefully, the sensitive involvement of young people, alongside an acceptance of their upset and fears at an extremely difficult time in their lives, would lessen the fallout of family transitions for them and thereby prevent extreme reactions such as running away.

Whatever the family context we found that the major cause of running away was problems at home – often focused around family conflict, relationship difficulties, parenting issues (differential treatment, neglect, scapegoating) and physical abuse. For those cases where abuse is an issue, the current child protection system could be enhanced to could include focused work to prevent running away.

In families where the problems are less serious issues, a lower level of intervention may be effective in enabling families to become better equipped to deal with their differences. Government policy in terms of legislative intent for those identified as being in need has already moved in the direction of increasing preventative family support work – the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 has introduced a new spirit of equality between prevention and protection in terms of practice priorities for Health and Social Services Trusts. The effect of the Order is currently being studied across Northern Ireland (see McCrystal, 2000). Initial indications are that the message is getting across but it is as yet unclear whether a proper balance between family support and child protection can be achieved in the long term.

We would endorse the need for increased emphasis on family support and urge that an element of focused preventative work on the risks of running be included to reduce the numbers of vulnerable young people running away from home.

Undermining the detachment process for under-16s

We have written at various times in this report of the issue of detachment, a process whereby a young person both consciously and subconsciously severs their links with normal primary sources of support – parents, extended family, school, community. As with the fieldwork for the UK-wide study, in Northern Ireland we came across a small, but highly significant number of young people who had spent extended periods (of weeks or months) missing from home and without any safe help.

Given their ages, these young people were completely isolated from the system, with no rights to services, income or accommodation. This 'zero status' necessarily led them into potentially extremely risky strategies to obtain food, shelter and human contact.

Although heightened attentiveness to streetwork provision would seem to be the most obvious response to dealing with this problem (a proposal which we would support for certain areas), it is perhaps more crucial to consider the failure of earlier attempts at intervention in these young people's lives. This is partly because young people on the streets tend to be elusive (by definition they are avoiding being caught), but also because this is a painful example of a situation where prevention is better than cure.

The experiences of these young people testified to the need to enhance our facility to really listen to, and give equal weight to, the voices of children and young people in all the fora in which they may become involved through problems at home. Most of these young people simply felt that they were not listened to when it had mattered.

Perhaps what is needed is a culture shift to a more child-centred atmosphere for all important decisions about the lives and welfare of young people. This could include a revision of the current legal situation which makes no requirement for parents in Northern Ireland (or England or Wales) to consider children's views in coming to decisions which affect them – in contrast to the situation in Scotland (see the Children (Scotland) Act, 1995 - section 6). Such a positive change – to legislate that parents should give due thought to their children's wishes (taking account of their age and maturity) – would also comply more fully with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Schools also have a clear part to play in reducing the risk of detachment. We have already discussed this to some extent in the 'Preventative work' section above. We could add that current guidance on promoting the full participation and involvement of all pupils at school is a positive move: see *Social Inclusion: Pupil Support* (Department for Education and Employment, 1999) and *The 1996/97 Northern Ireland Suspension and Expulsion Study* (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1997). Some of the recommendations include the recruitment of pupils to school councils, and facilitating their participation in the preparation and development of

anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies. Early intervention when there are problems such as truancy and/or behaviour difficulties is also advocated, as is a call to work with parents to address these issues.

Inter-agency working

The clarion call for better co-operation between caring agencies when working with service users of every type is one that appears frequently in research recommendations.

We hope that the reader will indulge us in repeating this message as it applies to young runaways. Police, social services, education, the youth service, voluntary sector projects, probation, health – the number of agencies who might come into contact to varying degrees with a young runaway during their career is complex and often "bitty" (to quote a project manager in Belfast). A number of agency professionals made a plea for more effective inter-agency co-ordination and this is a request that we would echo. Because of the high vulnerability of young runaways, particularly those who spend time on the streets, and because of the need for early, preventative intervention whenever possible, we would underline this message – productive sharing of information and working constructively together is vital.

This co-operation should manifest itself in the development of joint strategies between police, social services and voluntary agencies to respond when young people run away from home or care, as prescribed in England in the joint guidance from the Local Government Association and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, 1997) and in the forthcoming *Safeguarding Children And Young People Who Go Missing From Home And Substitute Care* (Department of Health). It should also be facilitated by universally agreed systematic recording and monitoring of running away.

Refuge provision

We have spoken already about the need to develop refuge provision as a basic response to running away by under-16s in Northern Ireland. We would conclude that this is an urgent need, since we found very little evidence of anything available currently which could be described as a refuge. At the level of national policy the legislation is already in place, in Article 70 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order (1995).

In addition the Government has given clear indications that it is supportive of such ventures:

> *"The Government also recognises the importance of refuges which cater for young people. It will work constructively with local government and voluntary bodes to strengthen their role and financial basis." (The Government's Response to the Children's Safeguards Review, Department of Health, 1998).*

It would seem that the will of decision-makers, in both local government and the voluntary sector, needs to catch up with the law (and the publicly voiced sentiments of our political masters/mistresses) in this respect. There can be no effective response to running away until such provision is in place.

Substitute care

A consistent finding from previous research has been that young people who are looked after by local authorities are over-represented among young runaways, in particular those from residential care (Newman, 1989; Abrahams and Mungall, 1992; Rees, 1993; Stein *et al*, 1994; Barter, 1996).

Whilst we did not aspire to make this study a comprehensive exploration of running from care (particularly with the limited numbers present in the survey sample), we did hope that our methodology would allow some further exposition of the complexity of running from care, particularly by cross-referencing with the data from the UK study.

In the wake of residential care scandals – such as the Kincora Boys' Home case in Northern Ireland, the Beck case and the 'pindown' regime in England and, most recently, the institutionalised abuse uncovered in North Wales leading to the Waterhouse Inquiry – it is

worth always considering the possibility that running from care may be partly predicated on problems within a residential unit. Episodes of running, perhaps especially if they are continual, should always be regarded as significant and seen as a potential indicator of the need for full investigation.

However, it would be wrong to offer this as a complete and representative picture and thereby see running from care as an indictment of the system. Although our sample was limited, one benefit of exploring the long term context of our interviewees' running behaviour, was that we were able to confidently say that for the majority running away was already a pattern of reactive or proactive behaviour before entry into care. In this sense, young people are *continuing* to run *within* care rather than running *from* care. We would also add (as detailed in Chapter 3) that we found in many cases that running away behaviour was ameliorated by young people's experiences within the care system.

We would not regard this, however, as cause for complacency. In order to continue to refine the knowledge of this problem, and unify the agency response to it, there needs to be development at a strategic level.

Firstly, better national and local monitoring of running incidents to identify placements or areas with significantly higher rates of running (a considerable variation in numbers for different areas has already been identified in previous research – Wade *et al.*, 1998). This would allow for both a re-appraisal of practice in individual areas and for different types of placement. This would be particularly pertinent since there is relatively little information on running away from foster care.

New statutory guidance on this has been promised in *The Government's Response to the Children's Safeguards Review* (Department of Health, 1998). This publication states:

> "*It is particularly important that, whenever a child returns, or is returned by others, a full assessment should be made of the reasons why the incident occurred and whether the child's current placement remains suitable. Accurate records must be maintained of every incident, and senior managers should examine the reasons why children have gone missing and any variations in the rate at which they run away from different children's homes and foster carers.*"

In addition, improvements in monitoring should be complemented by clear guidance and advice to staff (and foster carers) and work towards improved inter-agency co-ordination over running from care.

Allied to this strategic response, there also needs to be changes on the ground. Firstly, and specifically, a targeted preventative programme with this group (see 'Preventative work' section above), possibly underlined by the creation of a statutory responsibility for local authorities to ensure this happens.

Secondly, and more generally, there is a need to improve the overall experience of substitute care. The obligation to seek to provide security, consistency and stability of care placements for all young people in care cannot be understated as the only logical means to improving the quality of outcomes for young people who traverse the care system. Hopefully the proposed initiative in Northern Ireland which will replicate the *Quality Protects Programme* (Department of Health, 1998) in England will institute positive developments in this direction.

One additional point that we wish to raise briefly here (which results from our earlier suggestions on practice responses to running away) is the specific need to carefully consider the case for the professionalisation of foster care, most particularly as it relates to the potential need to provide refuge foster placements. Clearly those foster parents who wish to put themselves forward to undertake this work will need extra training and it is open to debate as to whether this (and other degrees of specialisation for different caring situations within the fostering role) should merit a formalised, salaried career as a foster carer.

Sectarianism

We wrote at some length in Chapter 4 about the issue of sectarianism and how the activities of paramilitary groups affect the lives of many young people in Northern Ireland. It was apparent that this was a two-edged sword, in some ways inhibiting running away behaviour (at some psychological cost to the young people concerned) by restricting geographical mobility and in other ways causing it by making young people flee because of the fear of reprisals (after behaving "in an anti-social manner"). In addition, paramilitary exclusion orders, where young people are ordered to leave an area, overtly and deliberately contribute to the numbers of young people in Northern Ireland being forced out of their homes.

We cannot hope to offer a solution to these problems here. The increasing normalisation of young people's lives through the ongoing peace process should have a positive effect but quite how this might manifest itself in terms of running away is difficult to predict.

16 plus

We readily acknowledge the artificiality of a cut-off point at 16 for recommendations for young people who run away from their home. There is clear evidence of an association between running away or being forced out of home under 16 and youth homelessness from 16 onwards. We found this amongst the older interviewees in our sample and it has been highlighted elsewhere (not least in *Still Running* and by Craig *et al* (1996) in the UK and by Simons and Whitbeck (1991) in the USA).

We hesitate at offering an exposition of all the issues for older young people but, at a basic and unrefined level, would propose the need for the following:

- Improvements in dedicated crisis accommodation for the under 18 age group.
- A re-thinking on the longer term accommodation options available to under 18s who cannot remain at home.
- An urgent review of the system of welfare benefits for this age group.
- The development of better support services and systems to prevent young people under 18 drifting into homelessness and becoming detached and unreachable.

We have restricted our thoughts here to those under 18 – in many ways, once a person reaches 18, and young adulthood, their situation improves markedly in terms of ability to find accommodation, access the benefits system, etc. This is not to preclude the fact of some young adults experiencing difficulties if unable to live at home after 18, perhaps most particularly those who need ongoing support to establish independence – e.g. those leaving substitute care.

CODA

Perhaps the most fundamental finding which should be drawn from the report is that running away is a *symptom* of a greater problem. Young people always run for a reason and that reason is almost always, at its most basic level, rooted in the home.

Inevitably, in a full discussion of running away and its causes and putative cures, some of society's rawest nerves will be exposed – physical and sexual abuse, neglect and emotional abuse, domestic violence, the psychological hardships that traumatise and stunt the development of many young lives. It must therefore follow that, in attempting to properly construct a response to the problem of running away, one will be grappling with some of our most difficult taboos.

This is not to overdramatize the situation – to deny that for some young people there will be relatively straightforward remedies to their problems – but it is to acknowledge that any response that aims to deal comprehensively with the realities of running away must be forewarned and forearmed to cope with all that it provokes. A significant proportion of young people *will* bring difficult issues.

The primary message of this report must be that we should not shirk our responsibility to fully engage in listening, understanding and then responding to the voices of children and young people. This responsibility remains no matter how troubling the message.

Encouragingly, since the writing of this report, there have been indicators that there is the political will to begin to address the issue of young runaways.

The Social Exclusion Unit, based within the Cabinet Office, is undertaking a far-reaching consultation exercise with a view to developing "a national service framework for young runaways" (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). The findings of this consultation are due to be reported in the autumn.

It is to be hoped that these machinations will ultimately result in concrete service developments which are effective in alleviating the situation in England – and that the rumblings in England will have an impact on politicians and policymakers in Northern Ireland and the other countries of the United Kingdom.

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