MISSING OUT
Young Runaways in Scotland

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Missing Out is the most extensive piece of research yet undertaken into young people under 16 who run away or are forced to leave home in Scotland. It is the first research that gives an overall picture of the scale and extent of the problem and suggests strategies for responding to the needs of this very vulnerable group of young people. The research was commissioned by the Aberlour Child Care Trust and the Children's Society and was carried out in partnership with the University of York.

Methodology and definitions

Missing Out is based on research carried out in 1999/2000 with over 3000 children and young people and more than 40 agencies that are involved with runaways in six contrasting areas of Scotland – Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dunfermline, Inverclyde, Borders and Moray. A survey of a representative sample of school pupils was conducted to establish the prevalence of running away amongst those under 16 and the characteristics, experiences and needs of young people who run away. Depth interviews were also conducted with 37 young people and with 42 agency professionals in three of these areas. *Missing Out* is part of a wider study of young people who run away or are forced to leave home throughout the UK.[1]

By 'runaways' we mean children and young people under 16 who run away from or are forced to leave the family home or substitute care. Statistics in this summary relate to those young people who have spent at least one night away.

How many run away?

One in nine children (11%) in Scotland run away or are forced to leave home before the age of 16 due to difficulties in their lives. It is very rare for young people to run away for excitement. The main reasons young people gave included family conflict and instability, violence, emotional abuse and neglect. *Missing Out* estimates that:

- 6000-7000 children under 16 run away every year in Scotland for the first time.
- 9000 children run away each year, including those who have run away more than once.
- Each year there are likely to be 11000-12000 incidents of running away across Scotland.
- Although most young people reported having run away, one in seven had been forced to leave before the age of 16.
- Three quarters of the young people had run away once or twice but a quarter had run away three times or more.
- Over half of those who had run away more than three times had first run away before the age of 11.

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[1] Findings from the UK study have been published as: Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK*, London, The Children's Society.

Who runs away?

The UK wide study found very little difference in rates of running away across all four countries of the UK. There was no evidence of a significant difference in running away rates between urban, town and rural areas in Scotland. Running away is therefore a national phenomenon.

Although the rate of running away was slightly higher in poorer families in Scotland, especially in poorer step-family households, the link between poverty and running away is at best indirect. Where disharmony in families is quite severe, young people are as likely to run from more affluent families as they are from less affluent families.

- Running away is mostly a teenage phenomenon but around one in five first run away before the age of 11.
- Females are more likely to run away than males. However, males are more likely to start running away at an earlier age.
- Running away rates for young people from different ethnic groups are broadly similar.
- Young people in substitute care are over-represented amongst runaways in Scotland. Over two fifths (40%) of those who had been in care at some point in their lives had run away compared to 9% of those who had never been accommodated. However, running away was not always directly linked to young people's experiences of being looked after nor to the quality of care they received.

The risks of running

The large majority of young people either stayed in their local area or went to a nearby town on the last occasion they ran away. Only a few travelled further afield to cities like Glasgow or Edinburgh or, even more rarely, to cities in England. On the whole, then, there is little evidence of young people running away to the "bright lights". In addition, most young people said that running away gave them time to think and relief from pressure, and a majority also felt that it had helped them to sort out their problems.

However, around one in six of the young people who had run away overnight reported having either been physically or sexually assaulted whilst away from home. Young people who slept rough or with someone they had just met were particularly at risk.

More than a quarter of the young people had slept rough on at least one occasion whilst away from home. Many of these young people would not have been visible, sleeping in parks, back gardens, outhouses, closes and so on. Males were more likely to sleep rough than females. On the other hand, the most common place to stay while away was with friends (over a third of runaways) and a further quarter stayed with relatives.

Most young people had only been away for one or two nights on the most recent occasion that they had run away, but around one in eleven young people (9%) had been away for a week or more. Most of those who were away for more than one night received help from friends or relatives. A smaller number survived through their own means - for example taking money or food with them when they ran away. However around one in seven young people, especially those who slept rough or were away for a longer period, had to resort to other means to survive, including begging and stealing.

Over two fifths (43%) of the young people who had run away overnight reported that their most recent absence contained at least one of the following risks - rough sleeping or staying with a stranger, the use of risky survival strategies or physical/sexual assault.

Running away from home

Young people are more likely to run away from problems they are experiencing in step families and lone parent families than is the case for those living with both birth parents. Running away is also closely linked to relationship issues within families. Where young people are unhappy with these relationships they are likely to run away from any type of family. While there is nothing intrinsic about living in any particular family form that would lead young people to feel more unhappy, where they do, they are more likely to run away from step and lone parent families.

- Amongst those who had run away overnight, almost four out of five young people (78%) ran away from problems at home.
- Most commonly young people referred to arguments and conflict, often quite persistent, with parents or step-parents as underpinning their decision to run away. Conflict was a major factor for 39% of the young people.
- However, emotional and physical abuse and feelings of neglect and rejection were major reasons for almost one in five (19%) of those who ran away.
- The need to escape or gain respite from conflict between parents (involving conflict around separation or divorce or domestic violence) or to escape their parents own personal problems (such as drug/alcohol dependence or mental health problems) was the main reason identified by a significant minority of the young people (11%).
- Personal reasons included depression (5%), coping with bereavement (2%), peer influences (5%), trouble with the police (1%) or their own alcohol or drugs use (4%).

Problems at school

One in four of the young people (25%) reported that problems at school had been an ingredient in their decision to run away. Despite this, it was rare for school difficulties alone to be the deciding factor for young people. Most were also experiencing problems at home and only 6% mentioned specific school issues as a main reason for running. These included being bullied, truancy and fear of parental reaction to trouble they had got into at school. However, even if only a small minority of young people run away *because* of problems at school, running away is closely associated with difficulties at school.

- 30% of runaways had been excluded from school compared to 10% of those who had never run away.
- 13% of runaways had often truanted compared to 2% of other young people.
- 33% of runaways were unhappy at school compared to 16% of those who had never run.

Running away and personal problems

The research also illustrates the links between running away and the incidence of other self-reported issues and problems in young people's lives. Even those young people who had only run away during the day felt more negatively about their lives and family relationships than those who had never run away. Negative feelings increased amongst those who had run away more often.

- Young people who ran away were much more likely to report feelings of depression, loneliness, worry about the future, and low self-esteem than were non-runaways.
- 29% of runaways reported having problems with drugs compared to 7% of non-runaways
- 28% of runaways reported having problems with alcohol compared to 6% of non-runaways
- 21% of runaways reported having been in trouble with the police compared to 8% of non-runaways.

What would have helped?

Depth interviews were undertaken with 37 young people. During these interviews, which explored young people's lives and experiences of being away from home, the young people were asked what might have prevented them running away in the first place and what might have helped them once they had.

- In general, young people identified a lack of information about the local services that might be available to help them. Publicity ought to be widely available in schools, youth centres and other venues where young people gather.
- Opportunities for advice, counselling and family mediation prior to or at the time of running away were valued by young people when, and if, they were available. The kinds of help young people would have appreciated reflect the kinds of issues that underpin running away. These include: help during parental separation, divorce and family re-constitution; support for parents with drug and alcohol problems; help to limit their mistreatment by parents and to resolve persistent family conflicts.
- School based preventive services would also have helped. Suggestions included discussions about problems in family life, peer and professional counselling initiatives and information about helpful services.
- A need for respite accommodation was identified to prevent those under 16 who do run away from exposure to the streets. Many young people felt that this kind of 'refuge' ought to be small, homely, well supported and offer young people the space to plan a supported next step.
- More and better supported emergency accommodation options are needed for those aged 16/17 and lacking a stable home base.

Recommendations

- A co-ordinated strategy to meet the needs of young people who run away from home and substitute care is required. Joint strategies involving the police, local authorities and the voluntary sector will be needed at a local level to develop a range of dedicated services. Reporters could also have an important role to play in the operation of local multi-agency agreements designed to monitor running away and co-ordinate service responses.
- Further policy and practice guidance from central Government would help to stimulate these developments and promote a national framework for services.
- All incidents of running away from home and substitute care need to be carefully recorded and collated. Such a strategic overview is necessary to plan and resource appropriate services.
- Young people need better information about the local services that exist to help them both before and after they have run away.
- Preventive initiatives in schools and other youth settings to help young people with difficulties at home or school may have a beneficial effect on running away.

These may include professional and peer counselling and opportunities to discuss running away and the problems that underpin it.

- Every young person that runs away should be offered an independent interview to ascertain their reasons for running and to identify any further support they may need.

- Family mediation services should be available to help resolve family difficulties at an early point and to ensure that young people are not simply returned to an unchanged set of circumstances.

- There is an urgent need to develop refuge provision in Scotland for under 16s away from home to prevent their exposure to the streets. Although the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 makes provision for independent refuges and for local authorities to provide designated 'refuge' foster carers, developments in response to these powers have been very limited. Evaluation of the cost effectiveness of different models of provision is likely to be necessary.

- Services for young people from minority ethnic communities should be better targeted and delivered with greater sensitivity. Although young people from these communities run away for similar reasons, they may be less visible and less likely to access mainstream city centre based services.

- Improvements are required in the quality of residential and foster care and clear strategies are needed to reduce running away amongst those looked after. Further improvement to throughcare and aftercare services would also be helpful.

- More supported accommodation options are needed for those aged 16/17 without a home base. A review of existing homelessness legislation is required to ensure that all homeless young people aged 16/17 are considered vulnerable and in priority need by reason of their age. Access to benefits for this vulnerable group also requires review to limit the need for risky survival strategies.