

Still Running

Children on the Streets in the UK

Still Running is the most extensive piece of research ever carried out in the UK on young people under 18 who run away or are forced to leave home. It is the first report that gives an overall picture of the scale and extent of the issue. The research has been commissioned by three charities – The Children’s Society (England and Wales), Aberlour Childcare Trust (Scotland), EXTERN Organisation (Northern Ireland) – and has been undertaken in partnership with the University of York.

What the research aimed to do

The aims of the research were:

- To estimate the prevalence and characteristics of young people under 18 running away, being forced to leave home and/or being on the streets
- To learn more about patterns of running away and/or being on the streets including reasons, circumstances, experiences and returning home
- To identify the needs of these young people and to evaluate the way projects respond to their needs

How the research was done

The research was carried out by:

- A large scale representative survey of over 13,000 young people aged 14 to 15 in over 120 schools and other educational establishments
- Tape recorded interviews with 200 young people who had run away or been on the streets, and interviews with 500 professionals who worked with them.

Where the research was done

A sample of areas was selected in order to be representative of the four countries which make up the UK. In particular, attention was paid to gaining a representative sample of areas in terms of ethnicity, population density, and economic prosperity.



The research was carried out in the following areas:

England	Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Lambeth, Hackney, Hounslow, Blackburn, Plymouth, Trafford, Salford, Doncaster, Chelmsford, Bromsgrove, Blackpool, Ashfield, Mid Sussex, Kennet, Sedgemoor, Chichester, Leeds
Wales	Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Gwynedd
Scotland	Glasgow, Dunfermline, Moray
N. Ireland	Belfast, Carrickfergus, Strabane

Summary of Findings

UNDER 16 YEAR OLDS

How many run away?

The research estimates that:

- One in nine young people (11%) run away or are forced to leave home and stay away overnight under the age of 16.
- 77,000 young people run away for the first time each year.
- There are at least 129,000 running away incidents overnight per year in the UK.

There is very little difference in running away rates, between the four countries of the UK, or between areas of different kinds (i.e. rural/suburban/city and rich/poor).

Who runs away?

- Running away is mostly a teenage phenomenon but a quarter of runaways start before the age of 11.
- More females run away than males
- White young people are the most likely to run away (10%), followed by young people of African-Caribbean origin (7.5%) and then those of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin (5.5%).

Why do young people run away?

‘My father beat me with a bat because I dropped my mum’s photo and it smashed. He bruised my whole body and cut my face.’

This is the first research which has been able to gather data on reasons for running away for a representative sample of runaways.

The most common reason for running away (80%) mentioned by young people was problems at home. Under this heading, family conflict, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect were the most common specific reasons given.

Running away and families

An analysis of the family context from which young people run away showed that:

- Young people living in step families and lone parent families are more likely to run away (21% and 13% respectively) than those living with both birth parents (7%).
- Young people are much more likely to run away if they have poor family relationships, whichever type of family they live in.

‘If I stayed out I wouldn’t have to listen to all the arguments. I just needed to get out and just clear my mind.’

- There does not seem to be a strong direct link between poverty and running away - i.e. young people living in a particular kind of family form (e.g. with both birth parents) are just as likely to run away whatever the family’s economic status.

Running away and care

Young people in substitute care are much more likely than average to run away. However this needs to be seen in context – many of these young people started running away due to family problems before ever living in care.

Running away and other issues

There are links between running away and a range of other problems in young people’s lives, including:

- Depression
- Alcohol and drug problems
- Offending
- Problems at school (e.g. truancy, exclusion and being bullied)

‘In school all the teachers knew I had been abused. All the other kids knew too and boys shouted at me. I used to get tripped up. So I left in the third year.’

Getting help

Most of the young people interviewed had had no professional help with the problems they were facing before they started running away.

What happens when young people run away?

Although many young people who run away are able to turn to friends or relatives whilst they are away, the research shows some of the risks of being away from home:

- 32% of young people felt frightened
- A quarter of young people slept rough whilst they were away
- One in seven young people were physically or sexually assaulted
- 10% of young people away for two nights or more stole or begged to survive.

'We got picked up by two blokes and we stayed with them. My friend got involved with one of them. The other tried it on with me. I couldn't handle it so I left there and slept on the beach at night under the pier.'

Becoming detached

The research also found that some young people become completely detached from home or care for periods of six months or more, before the age of 16.

Usually these young people had had no help with the problems they were having before becoming detached. Often, they became detached on the first or second occasion that they ran away.

These young people are particularly at risk while away from home, having no legitimate independent means of survival.

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

16- TO 17-YEAR-OLDS

Numbers and characteristics

There is a substantial prevalence of young people of 16 and 17 away from home in unstable situations in all types of areas.

However young people in this situation tend to be less visible (i.e. "on the streets") in rural areas. This is also the case in general for young people of African-Caribbean and Asian origin.

Why young people leave home?

Young people who leave home for the first time at this age have a lot in common with those who run away under 16, but there are some important differences:

- There is less incidence of overt abuse as a reason for leaving home and more family conflict and poor relationships.
- A lot of young people are forced to leave home by their parents or carers.
- Economic factors are more important in leading to young people having to leave where they live (both family and independent accommodation).

Being away

At 16 and 17 the young people we spoke to had a much higher use of statutory and voluntary agencies for support. They also had a greater, but still limited, range of options in terms of income and housing. However, many still had nowhere to live and no legitimate income, and found themselves in risky situations.

Patterns

- Most of the 16- and 17-year-olds interviewed who had recently had nowhere to live had also run away before the age of 16.
- Young people who started running away at a young age were more likely to have lost contact with family, friends and community by the time they were 16 and were more reliant on formal support from professionals.

Messages from the research

Young people's views on what could be different

Young people's suggestions for preventative work included

- Family support and mediation services
- Advice and counselling services and
- School based services

Young people suggested the following things would have helped them whilst away:

- More emergency accommodation for under 16s
- More and better supported accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds

In general, young people also identified the need for improved information about what services are available.

'I didn't know at first that help existed. You need advertising to let young people know what is available.'

Professionals' views on what could be different

Professionals suggested:

- The need for early interventions involving more support for parents, family mediation services and youth counselling
- The need for quick response facilities when young people start running away
- Better range and availability of supported accommodation, plus ongoing support for 16- to 17-year-olds
- Changes to the benefits rules
- The need for more ethnically sensitive services
- The need for improved services for young people in rural areas

Recommendations

The report recommends:

- Early interventions are needed, where there are problems at home or at school, to prevent young people running away.
- Support and mediation are needed for parents and children where families have divorced, separated or re-formed.
- Police and social services need to develop joint strategies alongside education, health and the voluntary sector to respond to young runaways
- Every young runaway should be offered an interview in order to assess his/her reasons for running and needs
- Mediation services and family group work are needed to ensure that young people are not simply returned to the circumstances which led to them running away in the first place
- There is a need for more refuges and outreach services for young people who run away repeatedly
- More ethnically sensitive services are needed for young people who run away or are at risk of running away
- There is an urgent need to improve the quality of substitute care
- The housing and benefits options available to estranged 16- and 17-year-olds need to be reviewed
- The Government must implement the recommendations of the Social Exclusion Unit (1998) to allow housing authorities to accept as vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds who have no family support under the homeless legislation.

The research team would like to acknowledge the contributions of young people and professionals which made this research possible.

Still Running: children on the streets in the UK is available from The Children's Society at a price of £10.95 plus postage and packing. Ring 020 7841 4415