

Running away in Wales: patterns, needs and services

Executive summary – May 2002

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Introduction

This summary reports on the findings of a study commissioned by the National Assembly for Wales into the current extent of services for young runaways in Wales. It also provides reliable evidence on the incidence of running away and on the circumstances, experiences and needs of young people who run away or are forced to leave their homes before the age of 16.

Methodology

The report builds upon information collected in Wales in 1999 as part of the first UK-wide study into running away and which had not previously been analysed as a single dataset.¹ New information was collected by undertaking interviews with relevant agency professionals in six areas of Wales.

- A survey of 1706 young people aged 14 to 16 was conducted in a representative sample of schools in five areas - Cardiff, Barry, Cwmbran, Merthyr Tydfil and Meirionydd.
- Interviews were carried out with 30 young people in three of these areas.
- Telephone interviews were conducted with 107 agency professionals in six sample areas - Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Gwynedd, Wrexham, Cwmbran and Carmarthenshire.

The scale of running away

Rates of running away in towns and cities in Wales are comparable to those in similar areas elsewhere in the UK. In Cardiff, 8.2% of young people reported that they had run away overnight at least once. This was the case for around one in ten (10%) of those living in towns (Barry, Merthyr, Cwmbran). The rate of running away in the one rural area surveyed (Meirionydd), at 3.1%, was considerably lower than that for other rural areas in the UK (which averaged 10.2%). In overall terms, this suggests that:

- between 8.2% and 11.2% of young people will run away overnight before the age of 16;
- between 2,900 and 4,000 young people will run away overnight for the first time each year;
- and account for 4,900 to 6,700 running away incidents each year across Wales.

Who runs away

- A majority of young people first ran away between the ages of 12 and 14. However, almost one quarter (23%) first ran before the age of 11.
- Females were more likely to have run away than males.

¹ This research was published as: Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK*, London, The Children's Society.

- African-Caribbean and white young people reported running away in similar numbers. Asian young people were less likely to have run away.
- Young people in substitute care are over-represented amongst those who run away.
- Most young people reported that they had run away, although around one in five (19%) said that they had been forced to leave.
- Most young people had run away once or twice but almost one third (31%) had run away three times or more. More than half of those who had run away more than three times had first run away before the age of 11.

Running away from home

Young people are more likely to run away from difficulties they experience in step-parent and lone parent families than is the case for those living with both birth parents. Running away is more closely linked to emotional and relationship issues within families than it is to levels of economic prosperity.

- Almost four out of five (78%) young people that had run away overnight had done so due to problems at home.
- The most common cluster of reasons was rooted in conflict and arguments with parents, step-parents or siblings.
- However, a minority of young people were escaping abusive family environments, including experiences of physical abuse, neglect or rejection.
- Some young people were seeking respite from conflicts between parents (including domestic violence) or from problems parents themselves were experiencing (including mental health problems or problems associated with alcohol or drug use).
- Personal reasons for running away included depression, peer influences and problems associated with offending or the use of drugs or alcohol. Those who had run away overnight were significantly more likely to report problems in these areas of their lives compared to those who had never run away.

I ran away because I had a big argument with my mum. I can't even remember what the fight was over.

As I was being badly beaten at the time and (was) told to leave in the next week or my bags would be packed and I'd be chucked out.

My mum fell out with my dad and stopped me seeing him.

I couldn't stop getting into trouble. It was bringing my mum down. I couldn't handle it at home anymore.

Problems at school

Almost one in five (19%) of young people identified problems at school as part of the context for them running away. However, these usually overlapped with problems they were experiencing at home. Only a small minority mentioned specific school issues such as bullying, social isolation or parental pressure to attain. Nonetheless running away, especially where it becomes more frequent, is associated with difficulties at school.

- 51% of runaways had truanted sometimes or often compared to 24% of non-runaways;
- 31% of runaways had been excluded from school compared to 16% of other young people;
- and 40% reported not liking school compared to 19% of non-runaways.

Experiences of being away

Young people's experiences of being away from home are quite diverse. Some stay away for just a short period in relatively safe circumstances while the absences of others are marked by considerable risk and uncertainty.

- Most young people who run away are away for only a short time. Almost three quarters (73%) were away for one night or less but around one in six (17%) were away for a week or more.
- Most young people do not travel far and a majority return of their own accord.
- On the last occasion they were away, around one third (36%) of the young people stayed with friends, around one quarter (26%) stayed with relatives and well over one quarter (29%) slept rough.
- Although the large majority of young people survive through informal support from friends or family or through their own means while they are away, some young people resort to more risky survival strategies (including stealing, begging or survival sex) and some report being physically or sexually assaulted while they are away. Strategies are therefore needed to help young people avoid exposure to the streets.

What would have helped?

Young people were asked to consider what might have prevented them running away and what kinds of services had or might have assisted them once they had.

- Young people identified a lack of information about local services that might be available to help them.
- Opportunities for advice, counselling and family mediation prior to or at the time of running away would be valued by many young people. The kind of help envisaged would address the broad range of issues that underpin running away - help to improve communication and resolve conflicts with their parents; help at times of parental separation and family re-constitution and support for parents to manage their problems more effectively.
- The use of peers with past experience of running away could help to generate greater awareness of running away and the problems associated with it in schools, youth centres and children's homes.
- Amongst those under 16 a pressing concern was the need for access to a safe place to stay. Young people felt that this kind of 'refuge' should be small, homely and provide them with space to gather their thoughts, obtain advice and counselling and plan their next steps.

The need for a targeted response to running away?

Specialist services or projects in Wales that target the needs of young people under the age of 16 who run away or are forced to leave home are limited at present. We were unable to identify any services in the six sample areas that worked primarily with this group nor were we made aware of others nationally.

A number of police authorities and social services departments had developed joint protocols to co-ordinate reporting procedures and service responses to young runaways, although these often only addressed young people missing from substitute care. Some also included arrangements for local patterns of running away to be regularly monitored and reviewed. Formal protocols are an important first step in developing a co-ordinated response.

There was a broad consensus amongst practitioners that young runaways had particular service needs. In similar vein to the young people themselves, workers most often suggested a need to provide:

- young people with opportunities to explore difficulties they are experiencing both before running away becomes necessary and once it has;
- professional and peer education initiatives to raise awareness about running away;
- better publicity about services that can help;
- safe places for young people to stay if they are unable or unwilling to return home immediately;
- initial crisis response services and follow up support tailored to the needs of individual young people.

Mainstream services and running away under 16

A range of agencies and projects make contact with young people who run away as part of the broader services provided to young people. Social services and the police have a statutory responsibility regarding the welfare of young people who are under the age of 16 and away from home. Youth offending teams, youth services, advocacy services, drop-in centres, outreach and street-based projects, education welfare services, housing and homelessness projects, and help-lines working with young people were also identified as services in touch with young runaways. These agencies may provide a series of access points for young runaways seeking assistance.

The responses made by agencies varied and were influenced by a number of factors:

- the context in which a young person makes contact with an agency (i.e. whether or not they are an existing client of an agency);
- the needs and circumstances of an individual young person;
- the role of the agency (i.e. how far they are able to respond within their remit).

A direct referral to social services usually constituted the response of agencies unable to respond within their own remit - especially where accommodation was required. Other agencies tried to offer young runaways the opportunity to discuss their reasons for going with a practitioner who could provide them with advice and information. Some workers acted as mediators on behalf of young people experiencing difficulties at home and others worked as advocates to assist young people to identify and access the services they needed

Issues for mainstream services

Many young runaways are likely to form part of the population of children 'in need' under the Children Act 1989 and should therefore be entitled to receive advice, guidance and counselling under the family support provisions of the Act. Social services should have

lead responsibility for responding to the needs of many young people missing from home as well as to those missing from substitute care.

The response provided by social services to young runaways appeared to be variable. The procedures and guidance laid out in joint protocols, where these existed, appeared to be helping to shape a more consistent response - including provision for follow up interviews for looked after children. Some social workers also felt that the new *Framework for Assessment* provided a helpful basis for responding to the needs of these young people and for linking in with other service providers to meet their needs.

However, several factors were highlighted by social workers that tended to inhibit their work. They pointed to the need for:

- an increase in the availability of early preventive support to families, especially to families with teenagers;
- an increase in the number and range of emergency foster placements;
- and a general need to raise awareness of the risks associated with running away (and how to respond to it) amongst social workers and looked after young people.

Professionals from other agencies highlighted difficulties in securing a crisis response from social services out of hours and a need for appropriate accommodation placements for young people at the point they needed them. Practitioners suggested that there was a need for additional specialist services both to increase the coverage and range of services and to provide young people with a choice, as some were reluctant to approach social services.

As a whole, practitioners identified a number of limitations to the existing network of services:

- There is a need to promote greater awareness of the issue of running away amongst practitioners. No agencies, with the exception of police and social services, had any guidance or procedures to help staff respond to young people who had run away.
- Information about services needs to be more visible and accessible to young people.
- Access to services is likely to be further inhibited by the absence of formal arrangements in local authority areas to encourage agencies to work together to respond to young people who have run away or who are at risk of doing so.
- The lack of a co-ordinated response is likely to result in an inconsistent approach to service delivery. Responses are likely to vary both geographically and for individuals approaching the same service. A number of practitioners mentioned that responses tended to depend upon the dedication and resourcefulness of individual workers and others stressed the limitations of their role.

Messages for policy and practice

Running away is a national phenomenon in Wales. Between 8% and 11% of young people will run away overnight at least once before the age of 16, although the rate may be somewhat lower in rural areas. At present, there are few specialist services and the response of mainstream agencies lacks consistency.

The development of a more integrated national framework for services is likely to require four broad elements:

- The Welsh Assembly Government should consider the scope for taking a lead with local authorities and partner agencies to provide further guidance and to help stimulate the development of services in this area.
- Strategies are needed to improve the co-ordination of services at the local level - involving the police, local authorities and the voluntary sector. New partnership planning arrangements (such as the *Children and Young People's Framework*) could help to integrate the needs of runaways into the planning of children's services. Formal protocols that clarify reporting arrangements, response procedures and the respective roles of local agencies should enhance inter-agency working.
- Improvements are necessary in recording and monitoring local patterns of running away from home and substitute care. A strategic overview of the problem is necessary to plan and resource appropriate services.
- Finally, the development of procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of services that address the needs of young runaways would contribute to an understanding of 'what works'.

Young people need better information (using both virtual and physical media) about the services that are available to help them both before and after they have run away.

Preventative initiatives in schools and other youth settings to help young people with difficulties at home or school may also help to reduce the need for running away. These may include professional and peer led discussions about the problems associated with running away.

Young people need opportunities to talk, to have their feelings taken seriously and to explore alternatives to running away. Independent interviews should be available to every young person that runs away to identify their reasons, risks and further support needs. Family mediation may help to resolve difficulties at an early point or, where young people have run away, help to negotiate a more successful return home. Family group conferencing may also have potential for identifying solutions to conflict within families.

A small proportion of runaways will require short-term emergency refuge to avoid exposure to the streets. Some evaluation of the cost effectiveness of different models of provision will be necessary.

There is a case for the development of other specialist services to support young runaways. A number of models could be adopted. For example, potential exists to attach a specialist runaway worker to existing outreach, centre based or drop-in services. Such a worker could provide a first link for young people, undertake short-term crisis work with them and their families (or carers) and, where necessary, provide links to other services.

The responsiveness of mainstream services could be improved by raising awareness of the issues and risks associated with running away amongst practitioners. Information exchange between practitioners and explicit reference to running away in the strategic plans produced within each service sector would help to place the issue at the centre of agency thinking. Additional resources will also be required to fund new service developments.

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 improvements to throughcare and aftercare services, in line with the principles of the Children (Leaving Care) Act, would also be helpful.