

Young Runaways

Summary of the
Social Exclusion Unit report



SUMMARY

Background

The Prime Minister asked the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) to develop recommendations designed to “make running away less likely and to ensure that runaways’ short- and long-term needs are safely met.”

In March 2001, the SEU published a consultation paper on young people running away from home or care. It outlined the characteristics of runaways and of running away incidents, and asked a number of questions about how services for runaways should be developed and managed in the future.

Over 180 individuals and organisations responded to the SEU consultation. Responses were broadly positive. Many felt that the issue of running away was a significant problem that had not been previously recognised or addressed adequately.

This report was prepared in consultation with an advisory group consisting of all the relevant government departments and organisations from the public, voluntary and community sectors. The SEU also consulted with parents, children, young people and runaways themselves. It visited over 30 local projects across the UK, commissioned additional pieces of research from Parentline plus and Barnardo’s and conducted surveys of the police and social services.

Definitions

‘Running away’ is difficult to define and means different things to different people. A parent, for example, may say that their child has run away, while the child themselves may think that they were forced to leave. The police may see a child as a missing person, social services as a child ‘at risk’, a children’s home as someone who is ‘absent without permission’, benefits staff as an ‘estranged young person’. To an outreach service, a runaway may be homeless, while a drop-in centre may not know that they have run away at all.

This report uses a broad definition of ‘running away’ to mean ‘a child or young person under the age of 18 who spends one night or more away from the family home or care without permission, or has been forced to leave by their parents or carers’.

The definition of a runaway used in this report does not include unaccompanied asylum seekers arriving from overseas.

The problem

Running away is a dangerous activity that puts children and young people at risk. It is a problem that affects approximately one in nine young people before the age of 16 years, from a broad range of backgrounds. Children and young people, male and female, from rural and urban areas, from white, black and minority ethnic communities, and from wealthy and poor areas, all run away. Approximately 20,000 runaways a year (around a quarter) are under the age of 11.

Running away is an important signal that something is seriously wrong in a young person’s life. Children and young people who run away, or are forced out of home, are often struggling with problems. The majority of runaways have experienced family conflict or family break-up, whilst some young people are running away because they are depressed, or because they are being bullied at school. Children in care may run away because they are unhappy in their care placement, or because they want to return to their families.

Runaways are young people with a range of problems. They are:

- five times more likely than their peers to have drug problems;
- three times more likely to say they are in trouble with the police;
- three times more likely to be truanting; and
- seven times more likely to have been physically abused.

Most children and young people who run away do not stay away for a long time. Most remain in their local area and end up with extended family or friends. For these young people, advice, counselling or support services should help them to return home. Some runaways, however, are more likely to experience serious problems. These are:

- younger children;
- repeat runaways; and
- young people running from care.

Why running away matters

One quarter of runaways will sleep in unsafe places, putting themselves at serious risk of harm. As many as 1 in 14 children and young people who run away, around 5,000 a year, survive through stealing, begging, drug dealing and prostitution. Runaways with the most problems are likely to run to city centres and spend time on the streets, sleep outside, or stay in other unsafe places, such as with adults who may exploit them. These young people will need more intensive support – services that can locate and make contact with them, and then either help from social services, a safe place to sleep and/or help negotiating a return to home or care.

Adults with serious problems have often run away as children. If they had received help when they had run away, or they had not run away at all, their later problems may not have developed. For example:

- young people who run once are nearly three times more likely and repeat runaways are six times more likely to use solvents in their life than those who never run;
- nearly half of sentenced prisoners report having run away as children; and
- nearly half of homeless young people at Centrepoin ran away as children.

Preventing running away

Not all children and young people who experience problems in their lives end up running away. Children and young people are more likely to run away when:

- they have no one to talk to;
- they don't know what else to do;
- they don't know where to go for help; or
- the help they need is not available.

There is a broad range of services designed to provide young people with information and the opportunity to talk about their problems in confidence – including helplines, school counselling services and new Connexions Personal Advisers. But many young people are not aware of these services, or are not being referred for help. Most young people who run away have had no contact with services before

they run. Young people and families are not getting access to support services before, and even when, they hit crisis point. Most young people who are at risk of running away need general preventive services and need mainstream services to work better. The forthcoming Green Paper on Children at Risk will focus on these wider issues, including the identification, referral and tracking of children at risk and the provision of mainstream and specialist services to them.

To address the problems which can lead to running away the following action will take place:

- planning for runaways as part of new local preventive strategies;
- more effective early identification of young people with problems, including those at risk of running away;
- better monitoring and management of incidences of young people running away from care; and
- better care planning which meets the individual needs of children in care;
- better family support to prevent family breakdown;

To reduce running away the action to follow from this report will be:

- the development of a schools pack on running away;
- more information and support for teachers to enable them to talk about running away; and
- local information campaigns focused on running away.

Ensuring the immediate safety of runaways

Runaways need help to meet their immediate needs and ensure that they are safe when they are away from home, and to identify whether there are longer-term support needs if they do go home or back to care. They need services that can:

- locate and make contact with them, or which they can access easily while they are away;
- help them negotiate a way home;
- provide a safe place to stay overnight;
- get access to social services if they are at serious risk; and
- link them into longer-term support if needs are identified.

However, it can be difficult for services to respond effectively to runaways. Runaways generally need help at unusual times and out of hours. Services may only have a very short window of opportunity to respond, and the young people may be very mistrustful of the police or social services.

Responsibilities and responses for runaways are also not clearly defined and planned, and services do not provide a strong enough safety net. Runaways fall through the gaps between services and find themselves in danger. Many runaways find:

- they are unable to access help when they need it;
- they do not know which agencies to contact when they have run away;

- they are not being referred effectively between organisations; and
- they can receive an inconsistent and confusing response.

To improve runaways' immediate safety needs when away from home or care the action to follow from this report will be:

- better use of foster carers to provide emergency accommodation for runaways;
- a pilot programme to develop and test out community-based emergency accommodation options for runaways;
- an increase in the capacity of helplines to respond to runaways;
- a clear police lead at local level on runaways;
- named lead individuals in every local authority to lead on runaways;
- fewer unnecessary calls to the police about young people missing from care because of better risk assessments; and
- improved access to electronic information records for local police forces.

Reducing repeat running and improving longer-term safety

Most runaways receive little or no help and support once they return to home or care. One consequence of this is a high incidence of repeat running. It is estimated that around one in eight of all runaways (approximately 10,000 a year) run at least three times. Follow-up schemes provide runaways with an opportunity to talk about their reasons for running away, and can link runaways and their families into longer-term help if they need it. The ASTRA project has shown that such help can effectively reduce the numbers of young people who run away repeatedly by up to two-thirds and has also achieved a 21 per cent reduction in the number of runaways arrested.

To reduce repeat running and improve the longer-term safety of runaways, the action to follow from this report will be:

- better access for all young runaways to appropriate and timely follow-up interviews, and particularly for the most vulnerable. Co-ordination to be led by the Connexions Service for runaways aged 13 and over and by local authorities for younger runaways; and
- common approaches and systems for assessment agreed locally, to ensure that runaways with serious problems get appropriate and timely access to local authority services.

Making the transition to independent living

For some 16–17-year-olds, running away is the first step in the transition to independent living, particularly since older runaways are more likely to have been forced to leave home by their parents or carers. Runaways over the age of 16 have more options than younger children. They can access accommodation and limited benefits in their own right, and they are able to live independently. However, many young people who leave home suddenly, even if they are eligible for services, lack skills or support, and find procedures complex and difficult to understand. This report is focused mainly on under 16-year-olds but highlights a number of wider initiatives which will ensure a more appropriate response to the needs of 16–17-year-olds.

To assist 16–17-year-olds who have run away or been forced out of home, the report has identified the need for:

- more appropriate supported accommodation;
- better access to information about financial support; and
- improved access to learning or training.

Making change happen for runaways

Responsibilities for runaways currently fall across a range of government departments. In future, action will be co-ordinated nationally by the Department of Health, to ensure that the immediate safety needs of runaways are met.

The recommendations in this report add up to a package of specific measures for runaways, and highlight some of the gaps in wider prevention approaches which need to be filled. The most effective response to runaways will be to ensure that at a local level:

- a safety net is in place;
- that there is better joint working; and
- there are clearer responsibilities.

There are currently very few services for runaways in England. This report clearly identifies the need to build expertise on how to develop, manage and run services for runaways in the future. A start will be made with funding from the Children and Young People's Unit for over 25 runaways' development projects which will test out innovative approaches to working with runaways. The development projects will run until the end of 2003/04, and will enable us to learn what works best.

This report outlines how responses to runaways will be improved with:

- Department of Health having national responsibility for runaways;
- local agreements in place between agencies to cover children running away from home and care;
- development funding to test out, evaluate and disseminate learning about working with the most vulnerable runaways; and
- an established advisory group to develop monitoring and evaluation.

Further information

This summary is available in the following languages; Bengali, Gujarati, Cantonese, Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi, from the address below. Copies of the summary in these languages can also be downloaded from the SEU website: www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk

Braille and audio tape versions of the summary are also available from the address below.

The full report and further copies of this document are available from the website, or from the address below.

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Publication date November 2002