

A series of reports on issues facing children today

Calls to ChildLine about running away and homelessness

Key findings

- In 2006/07, 2,304 children and young people called ChildLine to talk specifically about running away. A third mentioned physical abuse.
- The most common reason given for running away was the inability to get along with parents or carers.
- Sixty-five per cent (1,507) of calls about running away were from girls and 35 per cent (797) were from boys.
- About one in eight children (12 per cent) calling ChildLine in 2006/07 about running away was under the age of 12.
- The most common ages for calls about running away were 14 and 15.
- Many teenagers said they had run away because of disagreements with their parents over boundaries and rules.
- In 2006/07, 2,724 children and young people called ChildLine to speak about homelessness. Around half said they had been thrown out by their parents or carers.
- Sixty-five per cent (1,759) of calls about homelessness were from girls and 35 per cent (965) were from boys. They very often spoke of bad parenting.
- Young people calling about homelessness were, on average, older than those who called about other problems, including running away.
- In the majority of calls about homelessness, young people spoke about their parents' inability to control their tempers.

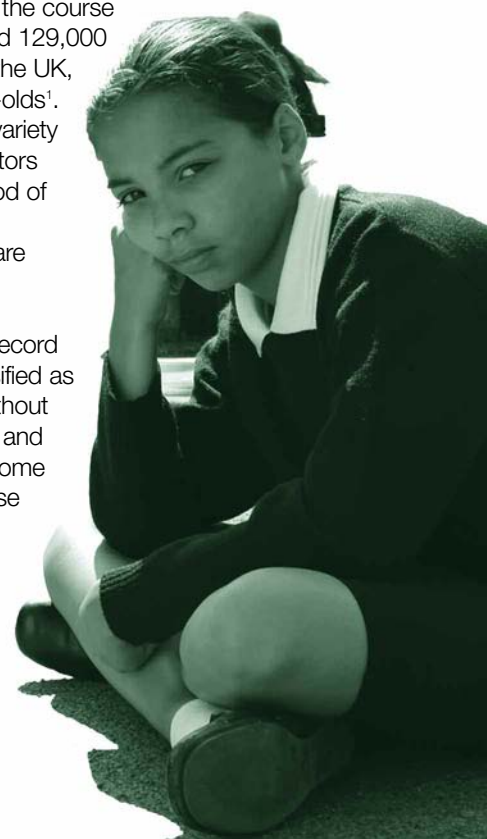
1. Evidence: what children tell ChildLine

1.1 Definitions

Runaways are children and young people under 18 who absent themselves from home or substitute care without the permission of parents or legal guardians, or who are forced to leave their home. Most young people under 16 who run away only do so once or twice, and spend just a night away from home. However, around 15 per cent are repeat runaways who run away more than three times, and one in seven is a long-stay runaway who spends a week or more away from home. Some of these children are particularly vulnerable; approximately 20,000 runaways a year (around a quarter of all runaways) are under the age of 11.

By the age of 16, one in nine young people has run away from home. Over the course of a year this amounts to around 129,000 overnight runaway incidents in the UK, involving 77,000 under 16-year-olds¹. Young runaways come from a variety of backgrounds, but certain factors have an impact on their likelihood of running away, including family background, poverty, living in care and detachment from school.

According to ChildLine's caller record system, young people are classified as *homeless* if they are over 16 without somewhere to live, or under 16 and have been thrown out of their home and do not have somewhere else to stay.



2. Calls about running away: statistics

Since ChildLine was founded in 1986, more than 34,000 children and young people (34,906) have called the helpline to talk about running away – enough children to fill more than 1,200 classrooms. This figure includes young people who have run away and those who ring to say that they are thinking of running away.

In 2006/07, over 2,000 children and young people (2,304) called ChildLine to talk specifically about running away. Of these callers, 65 per cent (1,507) were girls and 35 per cent (797) were boys. An additional 2,061 (1,503 girls and 558 boys) called primarily to talk about another problem, but

also mentioned running away; thus a total of 4,365 children and young people spoke to ChildLine in 2006/07 about running away.

2.1 Age

About one in eight children (12 per cent) calling ChildLine in 2006/07 about running away was under the age of 12. Most young people calling about running away were 12–15 (74 per cent), with 14 and 15 being the most common ages for these calls.

2.2 Gender differences

Boys appear more likely to call about running away than they are to call about most other issues ChildLine hears about. Although males accounted for 32 per cent of all calls to ChildLine in 2006/07 (52,423 callers out of a total of 165,780), they accounted for 35 per cent of calls about running away.

2.3 Calls to ChildLine about running away, April 2006 – March 2007

Where age given	Girls	%	Boys	%	Total	%
5–11 years	148	11	108	15	256	12
12–15 years	1,010	74	522	73	1,532	74
16–18 years	211	15	85	12	296	14
Total where age given	1,369		715		2,084	

3. Calls about homelessness: statistics

ChildLine began keeping records of calls about homelessness in 1991. Since then, 21,482 children and young people have called the helpline about homelessness – enough to fill 750 classrooms.

In ChildLine’s caller record system, young people are classified as homeless if they are over 16 without somewhere to live, or under 16 and have been thrown out of their home and do not have somewhere else to stay. In 2006/07, more than 2,700 children and young people (2,724) called ChildLine to speak about homelessness. Sixty-five per cent (1,759) were girls and 35 per cent (905) were boys. An additional 904 children and young people (611 girls and 293 boys) called ChildLine to talk

about another problem, but also mentioned homelessness. In total, more than 3,500 children and young people (3,628) spoke to ChildLine in 2006/07 about homelessness.

3.1 Age

Young people calling about homelessness were, on average, older than those who called about other problems, including running away. Whereas only 20 per cent of all ChildLine callers in 2006/07 (among young people who stated their age) were 16–18, 49 per cent of those calling about homelessness were in this age range.

3.2 Gender

Boys appear more likely to call about homelessness than they are to call about most other issues ChildLine hears about. Although males accounted for 32 per cent of all calls to ChildLine in 2006/07, they accounted for 35 per cent of calls about homelessness.

3.3 Calls to ChildLine about homelessness, April 2006 – March 2007

Where age given	Girls	%	Boys	%	Total	%
5–11 years	100	6	62	7	162	6
12–15 years	782	47	370	41	1,152	45
16–18 years	766	46	476	52	1,242	49
Total where age given	1,648		908		2,556	

4. Key issues: running away

4.1 Triggers/why children and young people run away

In calls to ChildLine, young people speak of a variety of events that trigger their running away. By and large, these triggers can be divided into two areas: family problems and personal problems.

Family problems

These include abuse, neglect, and regular conflict.

Abuse in the family

- A third (33 per cent) of young people calling about running away mentioned physical abuse. For example, 12-year-old Marc said: "Mum's been slapping me and throwing me around, so I've run away. But I don't have anywhere to go."

Arguments with parents

- The most frequently cited reason for running away was an inability to get along with parents/carers. In almost all such cases, young people said that they were leaving because of frequent, intense arguments with parents, rather than because of one episode. For example, 14-year-old Samantha said: "I hate my dad. I can't stand being in the same house with him, so I've left."

Boundaries and rules

- Many teenage callers said that they had run away because of disagreements with their parents over boundaries and rules. For example, 14-year-old Jasmine said: "I stayed out last night until one. When I came back, Dad wouldn't stop shouting at me, so I left. He thinks I'm still a little kid."
- In some cases, a conflict over boundaries led to physical violence. For instance, 13-year-old Dwight said: "Mum caught me smoking cannabis and started hitting me. I'm scared she'll do it again if I go back home. Can you help me find somewhere else to go?"

Personal problems

While family conflict was the most frequently cited reason for running away, some young people spoke of personal problems that precipitated or contributed to conflict and running away.

Pregnancy

- Forty callers (38 girls and two boys) called about running away and also mentioned pregnancy. For most of these callers, getting pregnant had led to being rejected by their parents, or led to an overwhelming fear of being punished. "Yesterday I found out I'm pregnant," said 14-year-old Natalie. "My parents will kill me, so I've left. I'm sad and lonely, but can't go home. Right now I'm in a bus shelter."

Getting into trouble

- Some young people, such as 14-year-old Ashley, spoke about breaking the law or otherwise getting into trouble, and then running away after their parents reacted strongly. She said: "I took money out of Mum's account. When she caught me she slapped me in the face and I left. I want to go into care."
- In most cases, where the young person mentioned bad behaviour on their own part, they expressed a mixture of contrition and fear, and were often clear that, regardless of their behaviour, they had a far from ideal home life because of a violent parent, for example. "Mum and I were arguing over the trouble I get into," said 12-year-old Danni. "So I left. I know my friends are a bad influence, but I get sick of my mum yelling at me and hitting me. My auntie says I could be a good kid if I only let myself. I'm not sure what to do tomorrow – I don't want to go home and get hit again."

Emotional health issues

- Some young people felt that they were largely at fault for their problems at home, and expressed regret over their behaviour or inability to control their temper. A number of these callers spoke of not feeling in control of their

moods, emotions and actions. "I've run away," said 15-year-old Lily. "I'm at a friend's house now. I had a terrible row with Mum. She thinks I need anti-depressants – I think maybe she's right. I want to apologise." Milton, 18, said: "I tried to kill myself last week – I'm so miserable." Sixteen-year-old Tom said: "I've been clean for eight months, but last night I got made homeless again. I'm worried I'll start using like last time."

A multiplicity of problems

- Many of the young people who called ChildLine about running away spoke not of one problem (such as an abusive parent), but of a multiplicity of problems, all feeding on each other, which precipitated their leaving. For example, 12-year-old Joe spoke of problems at school, at home, and with other relatives. He said: "Mum hits me when I get in trouble at school, so I ran away. I've been living with my gran for three days, but her flat is too small, so she says I have to leave. My dad lives around the corner, but he's always drunk and doesn't want me. I've got nowhere to go, so I'll have to stay on the streets like I did before coming to Gran's."

4.2 When do young people contact ChildLine about running away?

Young people who are thinking of running away sometimes call ChildLine beforehand to ask about or discuss their options. "I'm thinking of running away from my foster carers," said 15-year-old Alan. "Nothing in my life is any good – my parents are both alive, but I don't have contact with them. It's not right." In the majority of cases, however, runaways call ChildLine soon after leaving. Many of these callers leave home after a heated argument and/or abusive behaviour by their parents/carers, and find themselves on the street with no money and nowhere to go. Many are fearful of returning home and receiving more mental, physical or sexual abuse. "I've got nowhere to go and am really scared," said 14-year-old Julie, "but I'd rather die than go back home. Can you help me?"

4.3 Where do runaways go?

Nowhere to go

- Many young runaways, such as Alan, above, report having nowhere to go when they run away. These callers often find themselves in an impossible situation: they do not want to or cannot return home, but do not have anywhere safe to go. "Dad and I always argue," said 14-year-old Liz. "He said he wants to put me into care. I don't want to go home, but I don't have any money and I don't know what to do." Other runaways say they know where they want to go, but lack the resources to get there. "My sister and I have left home," said 11-year-old Keith. "Mum drinks too much and hits us. We want to go to our dad's, but don't have any money."
- Some runaways have nowhere to go and fear returning home, but say they do not want the "nuclear option" of getting social services or the police involved. For instance, 16-year-old Holly said: "I need somewhere to stay – can you help me? I don't want social services getting involved, but I don't want to go home, either. There's too much fighting there."

Staying with friends

- Most young people staying with a friend or relative say they fear that they are in the way or are overstaying their welcome. "I ran away two days ago," said 15-year-old Lucy. "I'm staying with a friend, but can only stay here another day or two. My mum and I argue all the time – that's why I left. She's called the police and they've been ringing to ask where I am. I want to talk to social services. I don't want to go home."
- Pete, 13, said: "I asked my mate if I could stay with him. His mum said maybe, but first she's going to go round and talk to my mum and see if she can sort things out."

Sleeping rough

- Gemma, 16, said: "I've been kicked out again. Last time I slept on the streets for a week before Mum took me back."



4.4 Repeat runaways

- UK research indicates that children who repeatedly run away have a much higher likelihood of going on to become homeless. "This is like the fifth time I've run," said 15-year-old Gary, a repeat runaway. "Before, I always called my mum and she came and got me. But I'm not calling her this time – I don't want to live with her any more."

4.5 Running away from care

- Almost 12 per cent of the children who called ChildLine about running away also mentioned being in care. Some were running away from care, while others had been in care and then returned home, or had gone to live somewhere else, but had run away. For some callers, being in care was part of a complex tapestry of often chaotic living situations. For instance, young people might say that they had been placed in care because of a parent's drug addiction, then gone back home, then been moved back into care, then returned home again – with these episodes often punctuated by running away and/or bouts of homelessness.
- It is important to remember that even though the figures for running away from care are high, care is not to blame for all incidents of running away. Young people in care have had troubled home lives, and many will have run away from home several times before going into care. When in care, some run away in order to return to their parental home, or because of problems with their parents. For instance, 12-year-old Amber said: "I ran away from care today after having an argument over the phone with my mum."
- In some cases, runaways said that their parents threatened to put them in care. "My mum freaked out on me because she found out I was cutting myself," 13-year-old Katie told ChildLine. "She shouted at me, I shouted at her, and she said she would put me in care."

4.6 Resources/services

Of the 2,304 children and young people who called ChildLine in 2006/07 about running away, 214 (9 per cent) spoke of the involvement of social services, and

88 (4 per cent) mentioned contact with the police.

With children's permission, ChildLine counsellors sometimes refer young people to social services. In 2006/07, ChildLine referred 139 young people who called about running away to social services – 6 per cent of all callers on this topic. Running away is the third most common reason for ChildLine to refer young people to social services, accounting for 18 per cent of the 1,323 referrals made by ChildLine in 2006/07. Only homelessness (second) and physical abuse (first) accounted for more.

Police

- UK research into running away has found that the police spend a disproportionate amount of time searching for and returning a relatively small number of frequent, repeat runaways. While this helps get young people off the streets more quickly, it does little if anything to address the underlying reasons for running away, and leads to frustration on the part of the police and others. "I ran away from foster care yesterday," said 14-year-old Dipesh. "I went to the police, but they say I go missing so much they won't contact my foster carers."
- "Dad and I fight, I run away, the police take me home. Then a month later the same thing happens again," said 12-year-old Alex.

Help contacting social services and/or finding a place to stay

- In many cases, young people ask ChildLine to contact social services for them, or ask for help in finding a place to stay. For instance, 12-year-old Gill said: "My mum hit me and threw me against a wall. I've been away for five days. I don't want to go home – I'm fed up with being hit. Can you call social services for me?"
- "I ran away from the respite care home – I'd been there about a month. I won't go back. I want to live with my mum, but I haven't done that since I was a little kid. Could you call my social worker for me?"

5. Key issues: homelessness

5.1 Triggers/why children and young people become homeless

Living in a homeless family

- A small number of young people called ChildLine to discuss the troubles they were having because they described their household situation as “homeless”. For instance, 11-year-old Lindsay said: “Mum and I don’t have a place to stay. It’s terrible.” Fourteen-year-old Jamaal spoke of both homelessness and abandonment. He said: “I was living in a shelter with my mum, but she did a disappearing act last week, so I’ve been staying with my brother, but he and his girlfriend have got two kids and there’s no room for me.”
- However, the vast majority of young people who called ChildLine about homelessness spoke of being thrown out of home or leaving it.

Thrown out

- Of the 2,724 young people who called ChildLine about homelessness in 2006/07, a little over half (1,480 or 54 per cent) said that they had been thrown out by their parents or carers.
- In many cases, young people over the age of 16 said their parents presented them with an ultimatum: follow the parents’ rules or leave home for good. For example, 17-year-old Lacy said: “My parents said I had to quit seeing my boyfriend because he’s Asian. I told them they were racist and said I wouldn’t stop seeing him, so they packed my bags and chucked me out.”
- Many of the young people who had been thrown out were under 16. David, 14, said: “I’ve been chucked out – I’ve got nowhere to go. The last time Dad threw me out I spent four months in foster care. Then I went home. Three months later he started hitting me again and now he’s locked the doors and taken my keys. I’ve got nothing – no money, no credit on my phone, no food, nowhere to stay.”

Poor parenting

- Homeless young people frequently spoke of bad parenting, such as parents who were physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive, or who were neglectful, unloving, or addicted to drugs or alcohol. More often than not, children spoke about a combination of two or more of these factors, such as living with a parent who became physically abusive when drunk. Twelve-year-old Nikki said: “Mum beat me up and chucked me out last week. My friends take the mick because she’s so shite.”
- “My mum and her boyfriend are both junkies,” said 13-year-old Amy. “I told Mum she had to choose between me and her boyfriend. She chose him. I want to talk to social services.” Fifteen-year-old Monica said: “I’m homeless ’cos my mum’s a freak. Last week she threatened to knife me, so I left. There’s no point in calling the police – they can’t do anything.”

Conflict with parents

- Some young people spoke of not getting along with their parents, and finding themselves thrown out because of this. “I was in care till I was 16, then I went to live with Mum and Dad,” said Marty. “I thought everything was going to be like I always wanted, but instead they couldn’t handle it and chucked me out.”
- “Mum chucked me out,” said 14-year-old Serena. “She says she wishes I hadn’t been born and that it was my fault she and Dad split up. She’s insane – I was only seven when he left. She threw all my stuff out into the street and was screaming at me in front of everybody. I was really ashamed.”
- In some cases, young people spoke of being thrown out because they were unable to get along with a parent’s new partner. “Mum’s got a new boyfriend and says I’m in the way,” said 11-year-old Jada. “He and I fight all the time, so she’s chucked me out.” Seventeen-year-old James said: “I feel completely desperate.”

Mum threw me out 'cos I don't get on with her boyfriend, and social services said there was nothing they could do. Now I'm living on the streets."

Arguments over boundaries and rules

- For teenagers and parents, disputes over boundaries and rules are frequent. In most families, such disputes lead to friction and arguments, but no more. In some families, however, disputes over boundaries lead to far worse outcomes. "I stayed out all night. When I came home, my bags were packed and Mum told me to leave," said 13-year-old Camilla. Stacy, 16, said: "I went clubbing on Thursday and didn't come home till Sunday. When I did, my bags were packed. Mum said she couldn't cope. I've done it before. I can't think of anywhere to stay – none of my relatives would have me."

Getting into trouble – parents fed up

- In most calls about homelessness, young people spoke of parents who were unable to control their tempers or cope with normal teenage behaviour. However, in some calls, young people spoke of their own current or past behaviour that had pushed their parents over the edge. "Mum's kicked me out because I've been in trouble again," said 16-year-old Curtis. "She said she's sick of having the police at the door. She threw me out before, but said she'd give me one more chance. Now I've had it." Fourteen-year-old Tasha said: "I used to nick stuff from Mum, but now I've stopped. But some of her stuff has gone missing and she thinks I took it, so she's chucked me out."

School problems

- In some cases, young people spoke of problems at school that contributed to their parents throwing them out. However, it was implicit in these calls that school problems alone were not at the root of the problem, but rather were the trigger or final straw. "Mum kicked me out for bunking off school," said 14-year-old Dawn. "I used to be in foster care – I've only been back home for a month." Thirteen-year-old Dennis said: "I got suspended from school so Mum chucked me out."

- Thirteen-year-old Nigel said: "I've been homeless for the last week. I've still been going to school, but it's hard. I don't want to tell anyone that I've got nowhere to go – I don't want the sympathy." Rosie, 17, said: "Mum's chucked me out and I've got nowhere to stay. I'm in college – I want to finish, but now I need to get a job."

Pregnancy

- A total of 121 young people spoke of homelessness and pregnancy. In most cases, callers were teenage girls who said that their parents had thrown them out for becoming pregnant. For example, 15-year-old Linda said: "I'm pregnant. Mum threw me out. My boyfriend's trying to find somewhere I can stay or where we can stay together. Can you help?" Thirteen-year-old Shelagh said: "I'm scared. Mum told me to leave home. I'm eight weeks pregnant and don't have anywhere to go." Young people spoke of working hard to smooth things out with their parents, to no avail. "When I told Mum I was pregnant," said 15-year-old Serena, "she threw me out. I'm staying with a friend, but I want to go back home, but Mum won't answer her phone. When I knock on the door she pretends she isn't in."

Homophobia

- UK-wide research indicates that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) teens are more likely to be made homeless². In calls to ChildLine, young people spoke of being thrown out of the family home for being LGBT. For instance, 17-year-old Trevor said: "My parents found out I was gay and chucked me out. I've been walking the streets all night. I've got no one I can stay with and it's freezing out."

Repeatedly thrown out

- Some young people reported that their parents regularly threw them out, leaving them homeless on a short-term and semi-regular basis. For example, 15-year-old Ricky said: "This is like the fifth time Mum's thrown me out."

Preparing for being thrown out

- In some cases, young people called ChildLine before they were made

homeless, in order to find out what to do once the inevitable happened. "My dad's a drunk," said 15-year-old Darren. "He doesn't want me around. He's always said he's chucking me out the day I turn 16. That's in three weeks. I need advice about what to do."

Because of problems with parents

- While a large number of homeless young people said they had been thrown out by unreasonable parents, others said they had left of their own accord in response to parental misbehaviour. Freddie, 16, said: "I couldn't take it no more. My mum and dad treated me like dirt. I had to do all the cleaning and stuff – if I don't do it, Dad beat me up. I even had to take care of my little brother and sister. I just don't want the aggro no more, so I'm on the streets."

Bridges burnt

- In some cases, young people spoke of leaving a troubled home, finding alternative living arrangements, but then having that arrangement fall through and ending up on the streets. These were tales of bridges being burnt repeatedly. For example, 17-year-old Heather said: "I left home at 16. Lately I've been living with my boyfriend, but now he's chucked me out and I've got nowhere to go. We moved from the country to the city and I don't know anyone here."

From running away to homelessness

- "I ran away seven weeks ago," said 16-year-old Leah. "Sometimes I sleep on the streets, but mostly I've been staying with guys I've met. I meet them out drinking and stay the night with them. I don't want to go home – Mum beats me."

5.2 Issues faced by older teens

Disputes over work and rent

- Helen, 17, said: "Mum says I have to move out – she says I'm not trying hard enough to find a job."

Too old to be helped?

- "I'm staying with a friend, but I have to leave soon," said 17-year-old Karen. "I told social services, but they said I'm too old so there's nothing they can do."
- Rita said: "Mum threw me out. I turn

16 in a few weeks – does that make a difference?" ChildLine gave her the number of the social services department.

5.3 Where young homeless people stay

Almost all young people spoke of extreme difficulties finding somewhere to stay. Even when callers had somewhere to stay for a few nights, they were inevitably conscious that this was only a short-term solution, and that they were perilously close to living on the streets.

Staying with friends or family

- Many young people said they were staying with friends. "My mum locked me out, so I'm staying with a friend," said Fiona, 17. "My friend's mum said she would talk to my mum for me tonight."

Overstaying welcome with friends

- The vast majority of such callers, however, said that they could only stay with friends or family for a short period of time, and had nowhere else to go. Some were calling because they had to leave soon; others had already been thrown out into the street. "I was sleeping in a friend's shed," said 16-year-old Mark, "but his mum found out and now I'm on the streets."

Staying with family

- Some callers were able to stay with other family members. However, for most young people, this was not an option, often because of the chaotic lives of relatives.

Dysfunctional family members

- Debbie, 15, said: "I don't want to go back to Mum's – she's got a mental illness. I want to live with my dad, but I'm not allowed to 'cos he's violent. So I'm sleeping rough,". Fifteen-year-old Tracy said. "I don't want to stay with Mum 'cos she beats me, but I can't stay with Dad 'cos he's just gone to prison." ChildLine was able to give her the number for the refuge.

Overstaying welcome with family

- Just like young people who were staying with friends, those who were staying with family members frequently spoke of overstaying their welcome and having no

other options. Nicki, 14, said: "Mum threw me out in last month. I went to live with Dad, but then he got sent to prison, so now I'm at my cousin's, but I know I'm in the way. I want to offer to leave, but I've got nowhere to go."

B&Bs

- Others were in bed and breakfast accommodation. In some cases, their chaotic lives – or the chaotic lives of those around them – made it difficult to keep a regular place. "I live in a B&B, but they say I have to leave 'cos last night my boyfriend got drunk and hit the landlord," said Ella, 17.

Sleeping rough

- Some young people who contacted ChildLine were sleeping rough. "I spent last night in the park – I don't know where I'm sleeping tonight," said Tony, 15. Sixteen-year-old Stephanie said: "My boyfriend and I live together in a tent, but he got drunk and threw me out. I've got nowhere to go."

Dangerous places

- Young people spoke of having to sleep in places that were frightening and dangerous. Marcus, 14, said: "Mum's chucked me out and won't let me come back home. I've been sleeping in a shed – it's scary. So cold and damp."
- Many young people were faced with a catch-22 situation: they did not want to or could not go home, but did not have anywhere safe to stay. Polly, 12, said: "I'm scared to be on the streets, but I've got nowhere else to go. Sleeping rough is bad, but home is worse." Fourteen-year-old Lizzie said: "I'd rather die than go back home. Can you get me put into care?"

5.4 Social services, police, and other resources

Of the 2,724 children and young people who called ChildLine about homelessness in 2006/07, 283 (10 per cent) spoke about the involvement of social services, and 82 (3 per cent) mentioned contact with the police.

With their permission, ChildLine counsellors sometimes refer young people to social services. In 2006/07, ChildLine referred 241

callers about homelessness to social services – 9 per cent of all callers on this topic. Homelessness, which accounts for 20 per cent of all the referrals made by ChildLine, is the second most common reason for ChildLine counsellors to refer young people to social services – just ahead of running away and behind physical abuse.

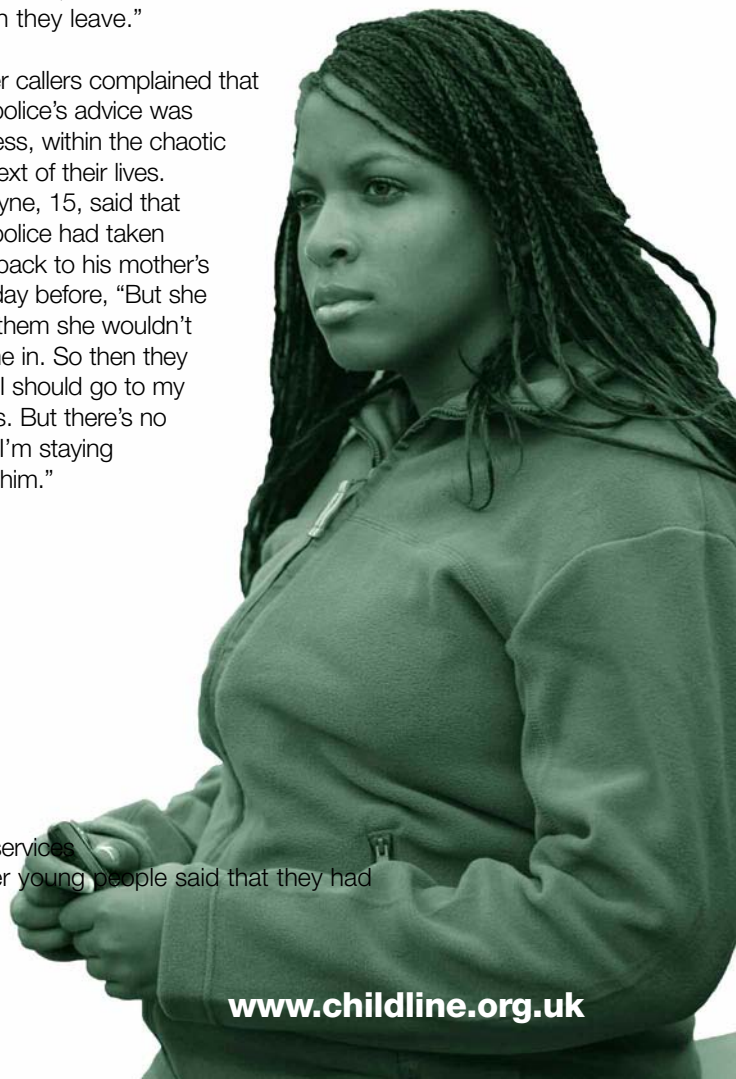
Police

- Callers who referred to the police tended to view their assistance as well-meaning, but said they were unable to address the real issues. For instance, some young people said that their parents behaved one way to the police, but completely differently to them. "Last night I stayed at a friend's," said 14-year-old Tina. "But tonight I've got nowhere to go. I went to the police and they called my mum. She told them she'd let me back in, but when I got home she told me to piss off."
- "The worst thing that could happen is for the police to take me home," said 13-year-old Jess. "Mum'll pretend to be nice, then she'll beat me when they leave."

- Other callers complained that the police's advice was useless, within the chaotic context of their lives. Dwayne, 15, said that the police had taken him back to his mother's the day before, "But she told them she wouldn't let me in. So then they said I should go to my dad's. But there's no way I'm staying with him."

Social services

- Other young people said that they had



been in contact with social services before, and did not want them to be involved again. For instance, when 15-year-old Adena said, "I've got nowhere to live," ChildLine suggested she get in touch with the police or social services. "I don't trust social services," she replied. "I used to be in foster care and they were useless."

- "Dad threw me out last week. I've been staying with friends, but I've worn out my welcome – tonight I'm sleeping rough. There's no point in calling social services. I did that once before, but they were useless," said Alan, 13.
- Other callers told ChildLine that, while they wanted help for themselves and thought that social services might be able to provide it, they did not want disruption for other members of their family. Seventeen-year-old Yemi said: "How do I get put in care? I'm between homes at the moment. Mum hits me, but I don't want to tell social services 'cos then they'll take away my younger brother – Mum doesn't hit him, only me." ChildLine gave her the number for social services and Shelter Line, and she said she would call them immediately.
- "Mum got drunk and kicked me out a few days ago," said 15-year-old Devlin. "I've been sleeping rough." Devlin refused ChildLine's offer to contact social services on his behalf, however, saying: "I'm afraid they'll take my little brother into care."
- Other callers complained that social services gave advice that did not suit their particular situation. "Social services say I should go back to Dad's 'cos he has custody," said 14-year-old Jacob. "But he'll just hit me again."
- Some young people said they had a social worker, but could not reach him/her. "My social worker is on holiday," said 13-year-old Leslie. "I don't know who to talk to."

Refuges, hostels and other resources

- Numerous callers asked if ChildLine

could put them in contact with a homeless refuge or provide information about where they could stay. For instance, 14-year-old Oliver asked: "Can you give me the number of somewhere I can go? My mum chucked me out, and it's raining and cold."

- Some callers highlighted the seemingly minor but important hurdles young people face when seeking accommodation. "I've been kicked out," said 17-year-old Kathy. "The homeless office gave me the name of a B&B, but I don't have any credit on my phone or any money to get there, so I don't know what to do."
- Other homeless callers complained that they were not receiving the help they had been promised. "I went to the homeless person's unit about three months ago," said 17-year-old Milly, "but they haven't come back to me yet."
- Some callers had been placed in hostels or B&Bs, but had since been evicted and had nowhere else to go. "Both my parents got arrested last week," said 16-year-old Samantha. "I've been in a hostel since. But last night they chucked me out 'cos I had someone in my room."

ChildLine as information and advice service

- ChildLine was frequently used as an information hotline by callers seeking phone numbers. For instance, 15-year-old Connor said: "My mum is a terrible mother – now she's kicked me out. I want to go into care." Connor then asked for information about other resources, and ChildLine gave him the number of Shelter Line.
- Other callers sought clarification of their rights or legal matters. "My mum's kicked me out twice before," said 15-year-old Chrissie, "but I'm nearly 16 now, so don't have to live with her any more if I don't want to, right?"

6. Counsellors' views

ChildLine counsellors have a unique insight into the feelings and experiences of children and young people. In this section, some of these counsellors discuss what children tell them about running away and homelessness.

6.1 Classifying running away and homelessness

- "If a child or young person has been kicked out, then we would use the term 'homeless'," says one counsellor, "because they've actually been made homeless. But if they've chosen to run away from home, then that's a different scenario."

6.2 Reasons for running away

- "Often it's an argument, or children might say that they've been hit for the first time. That can be a big shock to them, so they immediately run, but then they calm down and realise they want to return home," a counsellor says. "Or it could be the culmination of a long period of abuse, but I don't think I've heard of that many young people who've been abused for a long time and then decided to run away."
- Another counsellor adds: "Usually they're 15, 16 or 17. They might have run away with a boyfriend or something, and they've broken up, and they can't go back home."

6.3 Age-related issues

- A counsellor says: "You explore with the children any resources they're aware of in their area. We would offer resources that we know about, but the young people are between 16–18, and then we have to have a conversation about what a difficult situation that is to be in."
- Another counsellor says: "We can't normally refer young people to social services after the age of 16, unless they've been involved with social services before. If the family is known to social services, however, then we are more likely to be able to refer them. For instance, if the child has been known to suffer abuse in the past, then we can refer them; social services are more likely to take an interest."

But as a fresh referral, then they don't normally deal with anybody over 16, so we can only give them the number for Shelter Line, or perhaps suggest that they visit a police station."

6.4 Unrealistic expectations

- "In my experience, you get two categories," says one counsellor. "Some of the young people have really thought about it, and they are determined to run away. Others just do it in a rush, and haven't really given it any thought. I've discovered that, at the end of the day, the children have unrealistic expectations. Because they are in a situation that appears hopeless, anything else seems better. But they haven't really thought about the long term. This is a tricky situation for us, and we usually have to talk them through the situation until there's a realisation on the children's part that running away is not an ideal solution."
- "Some of the young people do have unrealistic expectations," a counsellor notes. "They want to be referred to social services. Many of them say: 'I don't want to live at home any more. They'll take me away, won't they?'"
- Another counsellor adds: "A lot of young people think that if you run away, social services will take you in. Maybe it should be highlighted that the first thing social services *will* do is try and take you back home."
- "Or they ask why you can't place them in a B&B," says another counsellor. "They just want you to find them a hostel."
- "Sometimes they'll say outright that they want to go into care," says a counsellor. "That's quite a regular occurrence. And then you explore what that means to them, this idea of care. If they don't have a history of being in care, they often have this notion that being in care means living with a family that really cares for them – a family better than theirs. Recently, a young person said to me: 'I just want to be living with people who care for me.' So you've got to explore with them what that means and you have to explain that even if they

were placed in a care situation – with another family – they may not actually feel cared for. You really have to make everything very clear to them.”

6.5 Learning to communicate

- “Generally, I think it’s just a massive expressive thing to do isn’t it – running away,” says one counsellor. “Regardless of whether you’re a young person who’s never done it before, or has done it many times over. It’s a big plea for something, isn’t it?”
- Another counsellor says: “It’s a way to prove your point, isn’t it? Using action rather than words, which means communication is at the heart of the problem. The young people can act, by running away, but they can’t talk about it, other than to someone else, like us.”
- “It’s all about communication, isn’t it?” a counsellor explains. “One of the problems with a lot of the young people we talk to is that their parents are quite young as well, and often they don’t know how to be parents. There’s such a breakdown of communication; a lot of these families just don’t know how to communicate.”
- “Very often, families don’t know that mediation exists,” one counsellor says. “They have a fear of authorities coming in and delving into their business. It’s often an issue of pride, people not wanting to admit to anyone else that there’s a problem.”

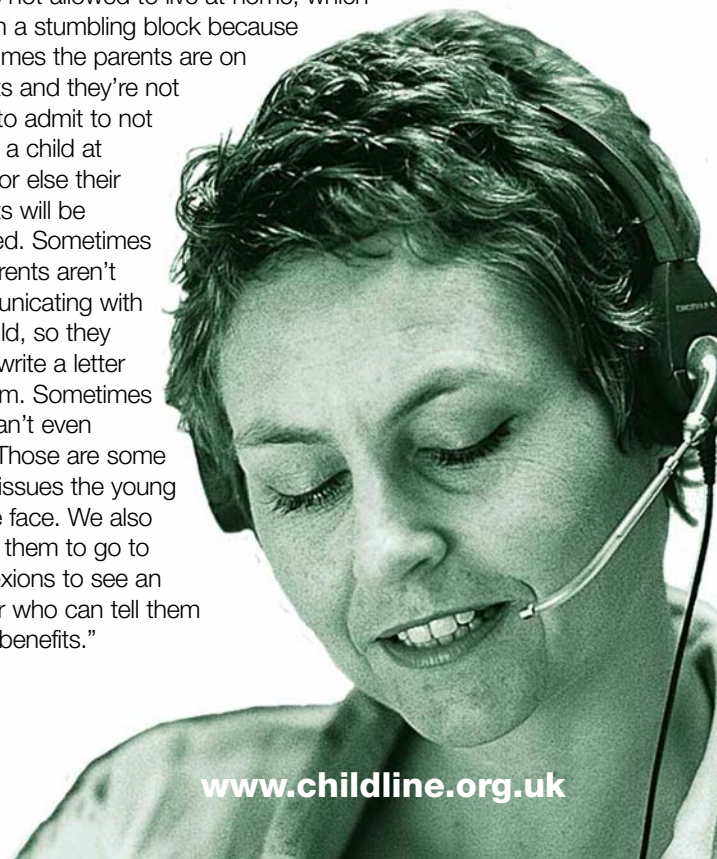
6.6 Repeat runaways and the loss of hope

- “Obviously when you run away, when anyone runs away in life – or they do anything, such as retreating or going away – the hope is that someone will come after you,” a counsellor says. “Whether you’ve gone into another room because you’ve had a row with your partner, deep down you want someone to follow you and ask: ‘Are you all right?’ or whatever. Well, it’s the same with runaways. Sometimes you talk to young people who say: ‘I’ve run away before, and nobody came for me. They don’t care.’ And often that’s the truth – they really *don’t* care.”

- Another counsellor says: “I think it’s sometimes a coping mechanism for when the pressure gets too much. The child leaves for a few days, and then a parent apologises. They say they love each other, the young person comes back, and it’s fine and dandy at home for a couple of months. Then the pressure builds up and they run away again. It’s an ongoing cycle.”
- One counsellor explains: “Sometimes you talk to young people who come across as being really streetwise. They might be in a phone box; you can tell they’ve run away before. But in some ways, I think, they’re *more* at risk, because they’re the ones who are more likely to kip in a shop doorway because they say: ‘They don’t care about me. I’ll hang out on the streets. I can handle it.’ They sound tough, but in fact they’re the ones who, I sense, are more at risk.”

6.7 Alleviating homelessness

- “We refer them to Shelter Line, which helps young people locate a short-term refuge in their area,” says one counsellor. “Because they’re homeless we tell them that they need to go to the local housing department and get themselves on the housing list. However, they often need a letter from their parents telling them they’re not allowed to live at home, which is often a stumbling block because sometimes the parents are on benefits and they’re not going to admit to not having a child at home or else their benefits will be stopped. Sometimes the parents aren’t communicating with the child, so they won’t write a letter for them. Sometimes they can’t even write. Those are some of the issues the young people face. We also advise them to go to Connexions to see an adviser who can tell them about benefits.”



7. Recommendations

7.1 Strengthened information between agencies at a local level

Local resources need to be supported by information sharing at a local level. A multi-agency plan for the area should be based on local baseline data about running away, with funding commensurate to need. Key agencies, such as the police, social services, doctor's surgeries and schools need to be fully informed about early intervention and family mediation/support services in their area, targeted at older children, so that appropriate referrals can be made in the earlier stages of running away when these services are more effective. There is a need to develop a coordinated approach between agencies, such as refuges, doctor's surgeries, schools, police and social services, to facilitate the communication of information about available support services for the parents of young runaways.

7.2 Local support services targeted at vulnerable children

Schools must be enabled to provide support services targeted at vulnerable children, including counselling and listening services, and peer mentoring services. This must accord with current government policy in each UK jurisdiction relating to proposals for extended schools and full-service schools to provide a holistic range of support services for children experiencing maltreatment, mental health problems, emotional and behavioural difficulties, or other disadvantages or risks. A comprehensive range of services offering children and young people opportunities to speak to someone in confidence is needed for children at home, and in care, both before and after the young person runs away. Many children do not trust agencies and feel that their views are not taken into account. It is, therefore, important to involve children and young people in the audit, design and delivery of services, and to ensure that they retain control over their lives when they do seek help. Confidentiality and a non-judgemental approach to support are essential.

All returning runaways should be provided with the opportunity of confidential return

interviews, and should then be referred to local services, which must be geared up for the assessment of children who run away, as well as being able to provide family mediation to enable a young person to return to their family and receive the care and support they need. In each local area, there should also be a named person in charge of coordinating services for runaways. These services need to provide mediation between young runaways and their families. There needs to be greater availability and use of advocacy, mentoring and befriending schemes for young people. These services enable those who lack secure and reliable adult relationships in their own families to build one-to-one relationships with other trusted adults.

7.3 Refuges, emergency care for young runaways and safe accommodation beyond emergency refuge

It is essential that a commitment is made by the Government to dedicate financial resources towards increasing emergency refuge accommodation for young runaways in the UK, to ensure that there are safe places to stay for all runaways. There must also be opportunities for runaways to access other forms of short-term accommodation, such as emergency foster care or residential care, where it is clear that returning to their home is not in their best interests. This will enable young people and their families to overcome family conflict and rebuild family relationships. It is also necessary for there to be a flexible range of longer-term community-based accommodation, including specialist foster care, where young people can live safely for several months after leaving short-term accommodation and where they have time to work (with professionals) towards resolving their family conflicts. The government in each jurisdiction must commit funds to specialist schemes for young runaways, schemes that are underpinned by high-quality training and intensive professional support for these services.

7.4 Child protection and adolescents

Child protection policies and procedures should be redefined in relation to the

needs of adolescents living in situations of intense family conflict, where rigid thresholds for intervention may not be met. Social workers must give greater credence to adolescents' views and perceptions about their situation and not just to the views of their parents. The training and practice of social workers in each UK jurisdiction needs to reflect this. This is particularly relevant for higher-risk runaways, who are experienced in running away and street life – they may be misusing drugs or being commercially sexually exploited – as they require a specific type of assessment and will also require specific therapeutic interventions, which should be provided in another setting to that offered to first time runaways.

7.5 A National Service Framework

A National Service Framework or equivalent should set out what services should be developed to respond to runaways in each jurisdiction. It should establish a UK-wide information system on runaways to ensure that those who have run across boundaries or who have moved home or care placement, receive an effective response. The framework should also create a UK directory of services to which national helplines could refer young runaways. Young people also need to be directed to initiatives such as the ChildLine telephone helpline service, the NSPCC's There4me.com online counselling service, and other national sources of advice and support.

References

- ¹ Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK*. The Children's Society, p.38.
- ² Gold, D (2005) *Sexual exclusion: issues and best practice in lesbian, gay and bisexual housing and homelessness*. London, Shelter and Stonewall Housing

About the information in this report

The findings in this report are based on detailed analysis of calls to ChildLine from 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007. Children and young people often talk to ChildLine because they know they will receive a confidential service and that what they say will not go any further unless they wish. ChildLine will always make an informed judgement as to whether the child can give realistic consent to act on his/her behalf. On rare occasions this contract of confidentiality can be broken if the child is assessed to be in a dangerous or life-threatening situation. The majority of children do not identify their whereabouts and maintain their own anonymity.

The counsellor will listen and take the child or young person seriously when they call. ChildLine will help the child to talk through their concerns, exploring what might make a difference, and whether there are supportive adults in their lives. Sometimes the child will practice what they would say to increase their confidence in speaking to such an adult. The counsellor will also give the child information on how other agencies can help. If the child wants ChildLine to make contact on their behalf, or this is assessed as necessary, ChildLine will mediate, advocate or refer the child to a relevant agency or person, such as social services, the police, the ambulance service, or a parent or teacher.

ChildLine's data is not comprehensive, as the main priority for helpline counsellors is to provide comfort, advice and protection to the caller, not to gather demographic or other information for research purposes.

The content of ChildLine counselling conversations is captured through written records. Every time a counsellor speaks to a young person, the counsellor notes the main reason the child called, any other concerns raised, and details of family and living circumstances revealed by the child, and a narrative of the discussion. Conversations are child-led, and not conducted for the purposes of research; but it is for precisely these reasons that they often reveal information that formal research might not uncover.

ChildLine provides a confidential telephone counselling service for any child with any problem, 24 hours a day, every day. In February 2006, ChildLine joined the NSPCC as a dedicated service, in order to help, support and protect even more children. ChildLine continues to use its own name, and the 0800 1111 phone number remains unchanged. Volunteer counsellors continue to provide a free 24-hour service for any child or young person with a problem.

For more information, please contact the NSPCC Library and Information Service on: **020 7825 2775** or email: **info@nspcc.org.uk** or contact the NSPCC Media Team on: **020 7825 2500**, email: **media@childline.org.uk** or visit: **www.childline.org.uk/casenotes.asp**

Photographs posed by models. Photography by Larry Bray Photography. All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of the callers.

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