



NSPCC

Policy Practice Research Series

**Executive
Summary**

Beyond refuge

Supporting young runaways

St Christopher's
FELLOWSHIP
Housing and care for young people

by Catherine Macaskill

NSPCC 
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.™

Executive summary

Background

This study is concerned with the issue of supporting young people who run away from home. Each year in Britain it is estimated that approximately 100,000 young people under the age of 16 run away overnight, a quarter of these being aged under 11 years old (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). It is crucial that this problem is more fully understood since it is known that repeated running is especially destructive and likely to lead to increased risks of abuse and exploitation, involvement in criminal activity, prostitution or substance misuse (Rees, 1993; Stein, Rees and Frost, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Pearce et al., 2002). Studies also suggest that running away at a young age is a strong predictor of homelessness and social exclusion as adults (Simons and Whitbeck, 1991; Craig and Hodson, 1998; Ravenhill, 2000).

The research project

Against this background, the Government's Children and Young People's Unit (CYPU) funded this research project through St Christopher's Fellowship with day-to-day support provided by the NSPCC Research Department. The London Refuge, which has played a pivotal part in this research, is a partnership project of St Christopher's Fellowship and the NSPCC. It is a safe house which can provide temporary care for a maximum of six young runaways, mostly under the age of 16.

This 13 month study explored the views of those people most closely affected by the problem of running away – young people, their parents and a range of professionals responsible for providing support.

The aim of the project was:

- to track and monitor the progress of young runaways discharged from the London Refuge, exploring the support needs of those who return to their families and the availability of services to assist them.

A four month period of the life of the Refuge, extending from August to November 2003, was selected as the basis for this study. There were 89 admissions during this period. A total of 31 cases were studied, 23 of them girls, with three-quarters being young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. In-depth interviews were undertaken with 22 young people, 19 parents and 17 professionals (who worked with 21 of the cases). These were conducted using semi-structured interview schedules and they took place both by telephone and face-to-face. We paid careful attention to research ethics.

Main findings

Reasons why young people run away or are forced to leave home

In common with other studies this project highlights that young runaways experience problems within their families and that this is the primary reason why running away occurs (Rees, 1993; Stein *et al.*, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Derby City Council, 2001).

Adolescents and child protection

This study raises serious concerns about adolescents and child protection. The Children Act 1989 and 2004 focused principally on the needs of younger children and was written less with teenagers in mind. This study therefore seeks to redress the balance portrayed in the legislation and re-focus professional attention on *adolescents*. The recommendation by Rees and Stein (1999) to consider alternative child protection approaches which may be more applicable to working with adolescents is fully endorsed.

Assessment of need

Statutory assessment of child protection concerns in relation to teenagers needs to be thorough and to give greater credence to young people's perception of what it means to be "at risk". The young people in this study depicted social services' assessments of their needs as cursory. In many cases they described how their parents presented professionals with a picture of reduced risk in contrast to their own descriptions of enhanced risk. The quality of statutory assessments left the young people feeling that their viewpoint was discounted compared with that of their parents. This resulted in them feeling disempowered and unable to influence professional decision making about their welfare. This study raises questions about who defines what it means for a young person to be "at risk" and what part should a young person's own assessment of their situation play in determining this?

The extended family: a source of tension rather than support

Rehabilitation options through the wider family may be severely limited for young people running away, as their family networks are likely to be marked by conflicting relationships. Social workers therefore need carefully to reassess their usual strategies as this group of young people are not likely to fit easily with conventional ways of working.

School and early triggers

Other research studies have highlighted the importance of school-based preventative work (Rees, 2001; Smeaton and Rees, 2004). Smeaton (2005) expresses the view that, when young people begin to drop-out from universal education services, this should present an early warning signal to schools to be proactive by collaborating with other appropriate agencies that can offer support to young people and their families. Most young people in this study were positive about support provided through the school, especially the school mentor. Those who experienced long-term absence from school, sometimes extending over years, were especially prone to repeated episodes of running away with its inherent risks. The potential for schools to act promptly on behalf of young people is therefore endorsed through this study.

Government proposals for extended schools will hopefully make additional resources available to support young people. However, extended schools need to respond to the situation of all children and young people, not just younger pupils where families have child care problems.

Cultural issues

There was little evidence of professionals being culturally insensitive to the needs of families from minority ethnic backgrounds. However, some parents who had immigrated were of the view that British society was “*too liberal*” and they therefore hesitated to use professional services.

Early separation problems between parent and child, which often left a legacy of unhappiness for the young person, were most forcefully expressed in this study by those from minority ethnic backgrounds. There was evidence from young people and parents alike, as you might expect, that the transition from another country to life in Britain was often stressful. Family tensions were exacerbated because eager and impressionable young people quickly adopted the values and attitudes of their peer group, while parents exercised greater caution and more closely adhered to the norms associated with their country of origin.

The potential usefulness of family mediation

On browsing through any report dealing with the topic of supporting young runaways and their parents, there are usually references to the need for mediation. In principle, such a response seems sensible because the link between family conflict and running away is now well documented. Numbers in this study are small but the evidence suggests that this service may have less potential than is often thought and is most likely to be useful for those who are in the early stages of their running away careers. The study illustrates that, after repeated episodes of running away, parents and young people may become resistant to the idea of resolving their conflicts and consequently decline offers of mediation. It is therefore important for professionals to be realistic about what family mediation is able to achieve.

Another way in which this theme emerged was through examining the impact of the new mediation service provided by the Refuge family support worker. The young people and parents who opted to use this type of support were largely those newly experiencing running away problems, rather than those who had struggled repeatedly with this intractable issue. There were positive indicators that when this type of support was provided for the former group, both young people and parents were able to benefit from it.

Vulnerable stages/ targeted services

The majority of the young people in this study reported the onset of problems commencing before adolescence, usually around nine years of age. The work of Sure Start is now well established for families with younger children, while Connexions has targeted its services mainly at teenagers. However, there are fewer resources targeted at young people mid-way through primary school and yet this seemed to be a pivotal juncture for many of the young people in this study.

There was also evidence that young people find the period of transition from primary to secondary education difficult to manage. Additional support is therefore imperative at this critical time.

Preventing child abuse and repeated running: “Someone to turn to”

At the time of writing the NSPCC is running a campaign entitled “*Someone to turn to*”, which aims to provide every child in the UK with someone to talk to about their concerns, especially about abuse. This campaign has immediate relevance for the teenagers

in this study, whose family lives were often so disrupted that there was rarely a reliable adult to whom they could turn. The optimistic message from this study is that when the young people did find someone reliable they were ready to use that person to help them manage the many complex issues affecting their lives. On the other hand, when such support was not in place, they were vulnerable to exploitation by predatory male adults who were ready to abuse them and involve them in drug misuse.

A more fully resourced outreach service from the London Refuge could result in a detailed assessment being made of each young person's support network at the point of discharge. Where young people's family networks are devoid of support, such a role might be filled through the Refuge family support worker, an organisation like Connexions, a volunteers' scheme, trained mentors based in schools or the youth service.

A gap in service provision

There is a clear need for a range of short-term accommodation provision beyond the Refuge, such as specialist foster care, where young people can recover from family conflict and gradually begin to rebuild family relationships. The expectation that problems could be solved quickly was disproved. Indeed, the study illustrates that, usually, problems were of a long-standing nature, complex and often interwoven with parents' own unresolved difficulties. Forcing young people to return home because no alternative living situation existed did not produce good outcomes and simply resulted in repeated episodes of running away.

Younger siblings

There may be some hidden risks for younger children in families where teenagers are running away. Most parents who participated in this study were already experiencing problems with younger children. The majority expressed concern about younger children being liable to imitate the runaway behaviour of their older brothers or sisters. Running away is a signal to professionals to be alert to the situation of younger siblings before they place themselves at risk.

Support forums for parents of teenagers

There were no opportunities for parents of runaway teenagers to meet and derive mutual support. The development of such forums could be a means of reducing parental isolation.

Visible or invisible support services for parents of young runaways

The fact that running away is often associated with a constellation of interrelated problems made it difficult for parents to know exactly how to categorise and understand their problem. Consequently, parents were often uncertain about how to describe their difficulties in such a way that doors to professional support would be opened. Some parents recommended that agencies such as the Refuge, GPs' surgeries, schools and police could be channels through which information about support could be passed to them.

Recommendations

Refuges and emergency care for young runaways

It is essential that a commitment is made by Central Government to dedicate financial resources towards increasing emergency refuge accommodation for young runaways in Britain.

Safe accommodation beyond the refuge

A flexible range of longer term community based accommodation options is required, including specialist foster care, where young people can live safely for a number of months after leaving the refuge and have time to work with professionals towards resolving their family conflicts.

Central Government must commit funds towards specialist schemes for young runaways that are underpinned by high quality training and intensive professional support for foster carers and for staff teams.

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. Social workers must give greater credence to adolescents' own views and perceptions about their situation and not just to those of their parents. The training and practice of social workers needs to reflect this.

Support services targeted at vulnerable children

Schools must be enabled to provide support services targeted at vulnerable children in primary school. This must accord with current Government proposals for extended schools to provide a holistic range of support services for children experiencing disadvantage.

Mediation services for young runaways and their families

Key agencies such as police, social services and schools need to be fully informed about mediation services in their geographical area so that appropriate referrals can be made in the earlier stages of running away when mediation services are more effective.

Long term individual support for young people

There needs to be greater availability and use of advocacy, mentoring and befriending schemes for young people. These enable those who lack secure and reliable adult relationships in their own families to build one-to-one relationships with other trusted adults.

Young people also need to be directed to initiatives such as the NSPCC's '*Someone to turn to*' which can provide additional support and advice.

The vulnerability of younger siblings

Professionals such as teachers, social workers, youth workers and others involved in multi-agency safeguarding, need to be aware of the increased likelihood of imitative behaviour amongst siblings of runaways and must develop a systematic approach to providing targeted preventive support.

Visible or invisible support services for parents

There is a need to develop a co-ordinated approach between agencies such as refuges, GPs surgeries, schools and police to facilitate the communication of information about available support services for parents of young runaways.

The full version of this report is available, price £20.00 from

NSPCC Publications
Weston House
42 Curtain Road
London EC2A 3NH
Tel: 020 7825 7422
Fax: 020 7825 2763
Email: publications@nspcc.org.uk
Website: www.nspcc.org.uk/inform